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Sign Me MABI? Women Athletes’ Brand Images in the NIL Era

Cara Hawkins-Jedlicka  
Washington State University

Shannon Scovel  
University of Maryland

Scott R. Jedlicka  
Washington State University

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Sign Me MABI? Women Athletes’ Brand Images in the NIL Era

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Washington State University

Shannon Scovel  
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Recent state-level legislation and NCAA rule changes have created new opportunities for college athletes to be compensated (typically by private sector firms) for the use of their names, images and likenesses (NIL). In light of this recent development, this study uses qualitative content analysis to assess how elite women athletes competing in swimming and track and field construct and communicate their personal brands. Using a modified version of the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), athlete branding elements were identified in social media content produced by champion athletes in these sports. The results indicate that most of the sampled athletes across both sports are comfortable with and capable of promoting their athletic identities, but relatively few have leveraged their status to develop more holistic personal brands that would be attractive to NIL sponsors. The study also identifies interesting between-sport disparities in athletes’ approach to personal branding. The findings suggest that while some athletes have proven adept at navigating the changing NIL landscape, more education and institutional support is needed to enable athletes in these and similar sports to adequately develop their brand identities and market themselves to potential NIL partners.

Keywords: women’s sport, branding, NIL
When the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) announced changes to its name, image and likeness (NIL) policy on July 1, 2021, athletes across all sports gained the ability to profit from their personal brands and build corporate relationships without sacrificing their status as collegiate competitors. This new policy, defined by the NCAA as the “right to publicity,” created new opportunities for athletes to tell their story and build a growing audience (Jessop & Sabin, 2021, p. 253). For women athletes in particular, NIL serves as a useful avenue to promote their achievements, as they are often vastly underrepresented in traditional media (Cooky et al., 2021). Building on both recent and established scholarship in sport management, sport communication, and public relations, (Arai et al., 2014; Wakefield et al., 2021), this research evaluates how NCAA Division I women athletes in two sports—swimming and track and field—represent themselves in this new era of intercollegiate athletics.

In the first year of NIL, football and men’s basketball accounted for nearly 70% of all compensation across sports, whereas women’s swimming and diving accounted for 1.8% and women’s track and field accounted for 1.2% (Opendorse, 2022). Despite this disparity, NIL opportunities are a potentially lucrative avenue for women athletes in swimming and track and field to monetize and grow their popularity during their NCAA careers, potentially bringing more viewers to the pool and the track and creating more excitement around these sports. Nisar et al. (2018) found that social media engagement and content has the potential to increase fandom, and while these researchers focused primarily on social media engagement and fandom at the team level, particularly on Facebook, the general conclusion that “fans are more inclined to become a spectator to the sport” when exposed to increased information is notable at both the individual and team level (p. 190). Moreover, brands that engage with an audience and provide content and insight to followers find success (Nisar et al., 2018). Consequently, we examine athletes’ brand image development via social media. In the social media age, athletes are brands (Darlow, 2018), and their ability to tell their story has the potential to impact future fandom. The ways in which athletes, specifically women athletes, present themselves in an effort to grow their brand is the focus of this research.

Swimming and track and field generate great hype, especially around the Olympics, but have varying degrees of popularity in the United States outside of the Olympics. Running is a highly participatory sport in the U.S.: a 2019 participation survey conducted by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reported that over 1,000,000 athletes participated in track and field and a little over 488,000 ran cross country. These numbers make track and field the second most popular boys sport program and the most popular girls sport program (NFHS, 2019). Further, in 2018 there were 7.9 million race results worldwide, indicating high adult participation in races (Andersen, 2019). Swimming and diving—distinct aquatics disciplines that are treated as a single sport at the high school and college levels—ranks as the eighth most popular high school sport for girls, and a total of 173,088 athletes competed in the sport across 8,007 schools, according to the most recent NFHS survey assessment of the sport (NFHS, 2022). With 65,000 athletes registered as master’s swimmers eligible to race in local and national events, swimming (much like running) also provides adults with competitive and recreational opportunities (U.S. Masters Swimming, n.d). The popularity of these two sports demonstrates that there is a large potential fanbase when focusing on these athletes.

Collegiate swimmers and track and field athletes have the distinct benefit of competing in sports that are traditionally popular during the Summer Olympic cycle, giving them the potential for increased attention and fame (Billings et al., 2014). While both sports experience a dip in viewership during their respective collegiate seasons (Grenon, 2022), NIL provides these athletes
a way to capitalize on their collegiate success, as well as their sports’ Olympic visibility and general popularity as participatory options, while maintaining their eligibility. Swimmers and track and field athletes have been mostly left out of the national conversation around NIL. Reporters have instead heavily focused on the ways in which football players and men’s basketball players can profit from NIL (Steinbach, 2022). Yet, the business growth potential and self-representation of athletes in other sports (as part of their personal brand) in this new era remains critically important in understanding athlete branding within the collegiate sporting space.

The goal of this research is to explore how women swimmers and track and field athletes presented their personal brands on their social media posts during the first season of NIL (2021-2022). More precisely, the research question that motivates this study is: what aspects of brand image did swimmers and track and field athletes use in their individual self-representation on Instagram during the 2021-2022 NCAA swim and indoor track seasons? While previous research has focused heavily on male athlete branding and evaluated the ways in which men brand themselves in the sporting space (Chadwick, 2008; Doyle et al, 2022), this research takes a feminist perspective on representation in intercollegiate athletics, focusing specifically on women athletes. Scholars have noted that the representation of women athletes in traditional media, while improving (Bruce, 2016), remains bleak. Thus, this paper aims to add to our understanding of women in sports by assessing how these women tell their own stories online during a six-month period within the first year of the NCAA’s new name, image and likeness policy. While scholars have studied the branding of professional women athletes (Cooky, 2018; Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018), this study focuses on college athletes, and even more specifically, college athletes in Olympic sports. Specifically, this paper engages Arai et al.’s (2014) model of athlete brand image to assess and evaluate the ways in which elite women swimmers and track and field athletes present their athletic performance, athlete appearance, and marketable lifestyle experiences on Instagram, a particularly visual platform, in the age of NIL.

**Literature Review**

The foundational relationship of any NIL agreement is the one that exists between an athlete and a third party. Yet, the majority of college athletes still find themselves in uncharted waters as they attempt to navigate these relationships, many of which depend on an athlete’s ability to either credibly endorse a product or service (e.g., by leveraging previous athletic success) or to reach a sufficiently broad and desirable demographic via established social networks. Thus, we situate our study within the extant literature pertaining to athlete endorsements and athletes’ burgeoning status as a distinct class of social media influencers.

**Model of Athlete Brand Image**

The model of athlete brand image (MABI) identifies the brand associations for athlete brands in developing brand equity among their target audiences (Arai et al., 2014). The construct of athlete brand image is based on Keller’s customer-based brand equity theory (1993), which is modified to athlete brands. The MABI consists of three dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. The first dimension, athletic performance, consists of four sub-dimensions (athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, and rivalry). The second dimension, attractive appearance, consists of three sub-dimensions (physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fitness). The third dimension, marketable lifestyle, consists of three subdimensions (life story, role model, and relationship effort). While all three dimensions...
are common facets of athlete branding, the marketable lifestyle sub-dimensions are particularly useful for critiquing an athlete’s ability to strategically communicate a personal narrative (Arai et al., 2014). Notably, the MABI has informed recent scholarship examining how athletes use social media to develop personal brands (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2022; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Na et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020). In this vein, we utilize a modified version of this model to conceptualize and assess the ways in which women college athletes develop their brand images using social media.

The Rise of Social Media Influencers

The level of social media consumption is ever increasing. As of January 2022, 58.4% of the world’s population uses social media. The average daily usage is two hours and 27 minutes (Gurd et al., 2022). The rapid growth and adoption of social media have resulted in the spread, consumption, and creation of content by users (Ho & Ito, 2019). This has created new communication dynamics (Melumad et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2018).

The influencer market grew from $1.7 billion in 2016 to $9.7 billion in 2020. In 2021, it expanded to $13.8 billion, indicating steady growth. In 2022, the market is projected to be around a $16.4 billion industry (Santora, 2022). Social media influencers (SMIs) have become part of many organizations’ strategic communication and are seen as third-party actors that have built a community around a specific niche and have influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Darlow (2018) notes that any association with sports places an individual in the category of influencer.

Previous research has evaluated the ways in which popular professional women athletes have embraced their role as opinion leaders and ambassadors in sports through their self-representation, and this study builds on such work within a sport management context. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) found that some elite-level women lean into hegemonic norms in their self-representation and find empowerment through social media activity, while other women shy away from such public representations of themselves. The decision to actively participate in branding activities during the NIL era adds a new dimension to the understanding of athlete branding, and Duffy (2022) notes that there is a gendered element to the relationship between digital labor and financial reward. Though Duffy’s (2022) work focused primarily on general lifestyle influencers and social media professionals, her insights about the challenge of remaining “Instagram worthy” in all posts are worth considering in the assessment of the NIL landscape for women swimmers and track and field athletes. Both sports are underrepresented by traditional sports media, and while NIL opens new doors for promotion and opportunity for such athletes, complications remain.

For women influencers, conformity to heteronormative views of attractiveness and femininity has historically been fundamental in garnering celebrity (Duffy, 2022). These individuals typically create content that falls into six categories: appearance, relationships, activities, achievements, wisdom, and expertise (Devos et al., 2022). These roles usually lead women influencers to portray themselves as “superwomen” or as having and doing it all. Women athletes have similarly presented themselves as having full social and personal lives on and off the field (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2018), and athletes who present themselves in ways that conform to heteronormative views of attractiveness in backstage images are following a pattern set by SMIs who have found success with this model. However, “when given the opportunity to portray their own images, female athletes are more likely to portray themselves differently than traditional media do” (Shreffler et al., 2016, p. 472). Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) also
note that women athletes face added pressure when selecting images, as images that are too personal may not provide the same long-term branding benefits within the patriarchal sporting structure.

**Endorsements and Brand Partnerships in the Age of the Social Media Influencer**

Enke and Borchers (2019) explain that SMIs’ communication falls under three pillars: managed strategic influencer communication, which contributes to the organizational objectives that the organization has identified as substantial and are planned; unmanaged strategic influencer communication, which is independent from management attempts but still contributes to organizational objectives; and strategically insignificant influencer communication, which is unmanaged and does not contribute to organizational objectives (see Figure 1). Strategic social media influencer communication is the purposeful use of communication by organizations or social media influencers in which social media influencers perform activities with strategic significance to organizational goals (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

![Figure 1. Types of Social Media Influencer Communication](image)

Within managed strategic influencer communication, brands manage endorsements that are not always based on clear agreements (Gong & Li, 2017). Bergkvist and Zhou (2016, p. 644) define the action of celebrity endorsement as “an agreement” settled between two parties, “an individual who enjoys public recognition—a celebrity—and an entity, such as a brand, to use the celebrity for the purpose of promoting the entity.” SMI endorsement practices fall into three types of endorsement relationships: experimenting (where SMIs create content with hopes of capturing the attention of a brand), partnering (in which SMIs receive product or exclusive access from a brand without financial compensation), and bonding (where SMIs are treated as a traditional celebrity and may be hired by brands to star in campaigns with financial compensation) (see Figure 2) (Nascimento et al., 2020). Moreover, the strategic value of small influencers (nano and micro) is increasing alongside the perception that they are more credible (Gupta & Mahajan, 2019).
Figure 2.
The SMI Endorsement Process

Jackson (2015) explains that athletes function as celebrities in today’s modern, digital culture, and they have the potential to earn profits both for themselves and for corporate partners through sponsored posts. These athletes—both professional and collegiate—are uniquely situated to promote products related to their sport or their athletic lifestyle “because of the symbolic representations they have for certain consumer groups and thus can transfer cultural meaning from them to the product” (Jackson, 2015, p. 11). These athletes have the potential to grow their brand, but such a decision can require work and support.

Much like SMIs, collegiate and niche sport athletes do not typically have access to widespread media coverage or marketing consultants, do not receive large salaries, and must rely on their inherent brand value and more organic means of promotion (Geurin-Eagleman & Clavio, 2015). Athletes use social media to achieve similar outcomes to SMIs, including sponsorship opportunities, brand partnerships and self-promotion (Geurin, 2017).
Methods

To assess the social media usage of elite collegiate women swimmers and runners during the first winter season in which new NIL policies were in effect, the researchers conducted a qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts published by 2021-2022 NCAA champions in swimming and indoor track and field. These sports were chosen because they function in a similar way, as they are both individual, time-based sports in which an athlete has the potential to grow brand awareness in the NIL era as an individual and as a member of a team. This study covers a six-month period from October 2021 to April 2022, as this time frame encompasses both the 2022 NCAA indoor track and field championships and the 2022 NCAA swimming championships—the first two championship events of the NIL era in these sports, both of which occurred during mid-March 2022. This approach provides a consistent time frame in which to assess social media activity in relation to the trajectory of an athlete’s competitive season.

Content analysis serves as a particularly useful approach for unpacking patterns in a given data set, and feminist content analysis, in particular, allows researchers to evaluate content for patterns of power; such power relationships are particularly present in sports media, an historically male-dominated field (Hardin & Shain, 2005; Leavy, 2007). Previous studies (Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018) have used content analysis to analyze Instagram, specifically, as a tool for interpreting athlete branding because the site offers a visual representation of an athlete’s brand and allows for accessible data collection of public figures. This study follows this approach in its analysis of self-representation among top women’s swimmers and track and field athletes during a six-month period. This project also intentionally focuses on women to amplify their strategic sports media and business choices during the selected time period. Given that the focus of this project centers around the branding patterns used by swimmers and track and field athletes—athletes who compete in sports popular during the Olympic period but receive much less attention during the college season—content analysis of this data set serves as an appropriate method. Literature suggests that women athletes historically choose to represent themselves in more holistic ways, beyond simply focusing on their athletic experience (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2018), and this project builds on this finding to assess the nuanced ways in which women athletes present themselves in the endorsement age.

Nineteen athletes were selected for analysis. Each of these athletes won their individual event at their respective national championship event and maintain a public Instagram account. Each photo from these athletes’ Instagram posts during this period was catalogued and assessed according to a modified coding scheme—based on the model developed by Arai et al. (2014)—specifically focused on athletic performance and marketability (see Table 1).

The authors adapted these codes for the assessment of Instagram posts. Athletic expertise was typically demonstrated through photos that highlighted an individual athlete’s success, including images of medals, trophies, competition, or further signals of elite athletic experiences (e.g., a photo of an athlete on a podium receiving a medal). Competition style was indicated by action shots or video clips that highlighted an individual’s specific approach to competition or approach to an event (e.g., a video clip of an athlete executing a specific race strategy). Evidence of sportsmanship consisted of photos of an athlete engaged in respectful, supportive behavior with the opposition, such as hugging a competitor after a race or shaking hands on the podium. This code designates the respect that athletes show for one another in fair competition. Rivalry was indicated by discussions and ongoing rhetoric surrounding competition with one or more specific athletes from another team (e.g., doing the “gator chomp” in front of a rival’s sign). Body fitness was demonstrated by photos highlighting muscles or notable attributes of the athletic body, such as an athlete posing with a flexed bicep. The code attractiveness was not used...
in this study in an effort to maintain a feminist perspective in coding and analysis. Instead, this code was replaced with a more inclusive term labeled *physical appearance*. Instances of athletes presenting the body in a focused, non-competition, non-practice, front-facing way were coded as *physical appearance* (e.g., mirror selfies). The *symbol* code was used for references to personal style like certain clothing choices being highlighted. The *life story* code was used for posts about the athletes’ daily routines or personal backgrounds; for example, photos of the athletes at football games or parties. *Role model* was used for posts in which athletes’ accomplishments were characterized as inspiring or motivating to others like being honored as an ambassador of the university or community outside of competition. Finally, *relationship effort* was used when athletes interacted directly with their fanbases or sponsors like selfies in front of a sponsor’s logo thanking them.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sub-Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Athletic Performance</strong></td>
<td>An athlete's sport performance-related features</td>
<td><strong>Athletic Expertise</strong></td>
<td>An athlete's individual achievement and athletic capability as well as subsequent rewards for those achievements (winning, skills, proficiency in their sport)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Athletic Appearance</strong></td>
<td>An athlete’s external appearance in a setting</td>
<td><strong>Competition Style</strong></td>
<td>Highlighting an individual's specific approach to competition or approach to an event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Sportsmanship</strong></td>
<td>An athlete engaged in respectful, supportive behavior with opponents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Rivalry</strong></td>
<td>An athlete's competitive relationship with other athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Physical Appearance</strong></td>
<td>Representing the body in a non-competition, non-practice front-facing way (non-performance-based photo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marketable Lifestyle</strong></td>
<td>An athlete’s off-field marketable features</td>
<td><strong>Body Fitness</strong></td>
<td>Highlighting muscles or notable attributes of the athletic body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Symbol</strong></td>
<td>References to personal style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Life Story</strong></td>
<td>An appealing, interesting off-field life story that reflects the athlete's personal value (family, friends, events)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Role Model</strong></td>
<td>Serving or being honored as an ambassador of the university or community outside of competition (e.g., being celebrated on the football field, owning a business)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Relationship Effort</strong></td>
<td>An athlete's direct positive interaction with fans or sponsors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The authors applied these codes and subcodes to a total of 207 posts that included 676 pieces of content (i.e., photos and videos) across top swimmers and track and field athletes. One coder evaluated the swimmers’ posts while the other coder assessed the track and field athlete profiles. During the first round of coding, authors noted every possible code that aligned with each image. A second round of coding was then conducted to identify the code that best fit with each image. The coders then switched samples and each coded 10% of the respective groups to ensure intercoder reliability. Neuendorf (2011) notes that one of the most common approaches for assessing intercoder reliability in content analysis research is to select a “subset of the main sample, usually around 10-20% of the full sample” as a representational sample of the total amount of content assessed in the study (p. 283). Each coder then analyzes the subsection to ensure reliability. The authors followed this approach, identifying a representative sample of the total content and comparing codes to ensure reliability. Code selection was then discussed and checked with a third author for an additional layer of reliability (Krippendorff, 1980). This approach for conducting intercoder reliability also aligns with previous content analysis research in sports media focused self-representation (Bell & Coche, 2018; Coche, 2017).

As part of the coding process, the authors paid particular attention to athlete posts including #ad or #sponsor to create a sample of content intentionally identified as business opportunities. The authors recognize that branded posts may not always contain #ad, thus they coded all content produced by the swimmers and track and field athletes during this time period, including posts that mentioned a brand name or referenced a sponsored product. However, the authors were particularly interested in when, and on what posts, the athletes used #ad. Therefore, coding for #ad also allowed the authors to identify a subsection of posts specifically focused on sponsorships.

The follower counts for each athlete were also included in the data collection to understand the reach of each of these individuals. The authors also calculated engagement rates for each post by adding the total “likes” on a post with the total “comments” on a post and dividing that total by the number of followers for each athlete.1 Previous social media scholars have assessed engagement and engagement strategy of influencers and digital leaders by following the same formula (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). NCAA champions without public Instagram accounts were not included in this study because the researchers’ aims were to explore how these individuals were embracing branding as a potential revenue stream on a public account.

Feminist Reflexivity

The authors of this study are uniquely positioned to conduct this research, as they all hail from collegiate athletic programs, with two authors competing in track and field and the other racing as a swimmer. The authors are also all actively involved in developing programming around name, image and likeness education on their respective campuses. The challenges and experiences of athletes in these two individual sports of swimming and track and field are specific and distinct, and the authors’ understanding of the collegiate environment and current digital landscape shaped their code selection. A feminist perspective theoretically and

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1 Engagement rates were calculated in January 2023 using follower counts from the time period when coding took place. In the interim, athletes deleted or turned off public comments and likes on several posts. While the calculated engagement rates are perhaps illustrative, they are not completely accurate for the time period during which the posts were initially coded.
methodologically remains critically important in sports management research as it centers athlete voice, particularly women athlete voice, at the center of the research and pushes the boundaries. Jessop and Sabin (2021) argue that “intercollegiate athletes could generate meaningful incomes from their NIL rights,” and track and field and swimming serve as two sports worthy of more NIL attention from a scholarly perspective (p. 283). As the NIL conversation moves forward, women and Olympic sport athletes like track and field athletes and swimmers cannot be ignored.

Results and Discussion

Data were collected from a sample of seven swimmers representing five different universities and twelve track and field athletes representing eight different universities. Of these nineteen athletes, all but one competed for an institution belonging to a “Power 5” athletic conference: seven from the Southeastern Conference (all track and field), six from the Atlantic Coast Conference (four swimming, two track and field), three from the Pac-12 Conference (two swimming, one track and field), one from the Big 12 Conference (track and field) and one from the Big Ten Conference (swimming). This is notable insofar as universities belonging to these conferences were early in developing NIL support resources for athletes, both within their athletic departments as well as via alumni and donor groups. Florida, for instance, initiated one of the first known NIL collectives (Dodd, 2022), and Ohio State and Miami have built various NIL facilities and promotional displays to support and celebrate student athlete business success (Crabtree, 2023). While NIL opportunities are not reserved for Power 5 programs, and some mid-major schools have also created support systems for their athletes (Bromberg, 2021), the large budgets and resources associated with Power 5 schools (Ngo, 2022) make them notable programs within this study.

The seven swimmers collectively generated 65 posts and 238 individual pieces of content during the period examined in this study and had an aggregate following of approximately 140,500 Instagram users (see Table 2). The swimmers with the largest followings were Regan Smith (75,000), Alex Walsh (29,200), and Kate Douglass (21,100). Every other swimmer had fewer than 8,000 followers. In general, the swimmers’ content was not always limited to or even focused on their athletic experiences. In fact, of the 238 photos and videos analyzed in this sample of swimmers, only 88 were coded as “athletic expertise” (36.97%). Notably, of these 72 items, only 27 featured a swimmer in action (actively moving across the lane in the water), immediately before or after competition (in cap and goggles on the blocks or on the deck), or celebrating in the water.

The twelve track and field athletes collectively generated 142 posts and 438 pieces of content and had an aggregate following of approximately 143,300 users. Average engagement rates ranged from 9% to 69% (see Table 3). The athletes with the largest followings were sprinter Abby Steiner (71,900), pentathlete Anna Hall (27,700), and sprinter Talitha Diggs (10,700). Every other athlete had fewer than 7,000 followers. Track and field athletes posted more athletic expertise shots than swimmers (184 posts out of 438), but, overall, the photos published by athletes in both sports during an early six-month period of the NIL era represent a range of holistic collegiate athlete experiences including both athletic and non-athletic activities (see Table 4).

The lone non-Power 5 athlete represented Brigham Young University, which will become a Big 12 Conference member beginning in 2023.

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2 The lone non-Power 5 athlete represented Brigham Young University, which will become a Big 12 Conference member beginning in 2023.
Table 2
Summary Data for Sampled Swimming Athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Username</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Followers (as of 5/1/2022)</th>
<th>Event(s)</th>
<th>Total Posts</th>
<th>Average Engagement Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex Walsh</td>
<td>@alexwalsh7</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>29.2K</td>
<td>200 IM, 400 IM, 200 Butterfly</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gretchen Walsh</td>
<td>@gretchwalsh2</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>7,941</td>
<td>100 Freestyle</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Douglass</td>
<td>@kaatedouglass</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>21.1K</td>
<td>50 Freestyle, 100 Butterfly</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaitlyn Dobler</td>
<td>@kaitlyndobler</td>
<td>USC</td>
<td>1,644</td>
<td>100 Breaststroke</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katharine Berkoff</td>
<td>@katharineberkoff</td>
<td>N.C. State</td>
<td>3,409</td>
<td>100 Backstroke</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige McKenna</td>
<td>@paigemckennaaaaa</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>2,210</td>
<td>1650 Freestyle</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regan Smith</td>
<td>@regansmith4</td>
<td>Stanford</td>
<td>75K</td>
<td>200 Backstroke</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>~140,500</td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Summary Data for Sampled Track & Field Athletes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Username</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Followers (as of 5/1/2022)</th>
<th>Event(s)</th>
<th>Total Posts</th>
<th>Average Engagement Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Baxter</td>
<td>@rachel baxter</td>
<td>Virginia Tech</td>
<td>2,057</td>
<td>Pole Vault</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine Moore</td>
<td>@jasmineemoore</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>6,239</td>
<td>Long Jump, Triple Jump</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shey Taiwo</td>
<td>@<strong>shey</strong></td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>2,710</td>
<td>Weight Throw</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtney Wayment</td>
<td>@courtsasport20</td>
<td>BYU</td>
<td>5,776</td>
<td>5000m, 800m</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamar Distin</td>
<td>@lamaradistin</td>
<td>Texas A&amp;M</td>
<td>2,517</td>
<td>High Jump, Shot Put</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorinde Van Klinken</td>
<td>@jorindevanklinken</td>
<td>Arizona State</td>
<td>5,683</td>
<td>Pentathlon</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Hall</td>
<td>@anna.hall</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>27.7K</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talitha Diggs</td>
<td>@talithadiggs</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>10.7K</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey Butler</td>
<td>@lindseebatler</td>
<td>Virginia Tech</td>
<td>2,648</td>
<td>800m</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace Stark</td>
<td>@grace_stark</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>3,177</td>
<td>60m Hurdles</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby Steiner</td>
<td>@abby_steiner</td>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>71.9K</td>
<td>200m</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor Roe</td>
<td>@taylor.roe</td>
<td>Oklahoma State</td>
<td>2,211</td>
<td>3000m</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>~143,300</td>
<td></td>
<td>144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4
Sampled Instagram Content by Branding Dimension and Sub-Dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Pieces of Content (% of total)</th>
<th>Sub-Dimensions</th>
<th>Pieces of Content (% of total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletic Performance</td>
<td>313 (46.30%)</td>
<td>Athletic Expertise</td>
<td>256 (37.87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Competition Style</td>
<td>2 (0.30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sportsmanship</td>
<td>55 (8.14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rivalry</td>
<td>0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic Appearance</td>
<td>100 (14.79%)</td>
<td>Physical Appearance</td>
<td>81 (11.98%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Symbol</td>
<td>4 (0.59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Body Fitness</td>
<td>15 (2.22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketable Lifestyle</td>
<td>263 (38.91%)</td>
<td>Life Story</td>
<td>249 (36.83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Role Model</td>
<td>3 (0.44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship Effort</td>
<td>11 (1.63%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using Athletic Expertise to Build a Brand

When women track and field athletes are focusing on representing themselves on Instagram, they overwhelmingly focus their attention on promoting their athletic performance with a focus on their athletic expertise. These posts also serve to highlight their appearance with a particular focus on body fitness. This suggests that these track and field athletes are gaining their celebrity by leveraging their status as a college athlete through athletic expertise (Kamins et al., 1989). Twenty-seven of the posts in the track and field sample were produced by third parties (i.e., athletic departments, media companies, or freelance photographers). For example, when Anna Hall (Figure 3) won the NCAA indoor pentathlon title in 2022, the University of Florida posted about her win and tagged her so it would show up on her Instagram feed. Hall amplifying this content on her own feed adds equity and value to her brand as she emphasized her association with a known institution and used this content to highlight her athletic skill as a collegiate athlete.

As Hall’s example demonstrates, track and field athletes in this sample primarily emphasized their athletic expertise, frequently pairing their physical appearance with their university brand, highlighting uniforms and team success in both their action clips and more lifestyle content, such as mirror selfies in uniform (see Figure 4). Fifteen posts included the uniform without action. However, only one swimmer (the University of Southern California’s Kaitlyn Dobler) posted content directly from the school, while several others used produced roster photos and photoshoot images likely taken by their universities. Five track and field athletes posted content directly from the school and several used produced roster photos likely
Women Athletes’ Brand Images in the NIL Era

Athletic departments like Florida and Southern California that produce content such as graphics, headshots, video montages, or photos leverage the athlete’s NIL in service of meeting organizational goals within the strategic communication structure (Enke & Borchers, 2019). More so, engagement rates for individual posts were higher if shared from athletic departments (typically by tagging the athlete). A post announcing that Grace Stark, a hurdler from University of Florida, was up for The Bowerman (an award given to the nation’s top collegiate track and field athlete) had an engagement rate of 287%. Title IX requires schools to provide equitable publicity to men’s and women’s sporting programs, and such school-produced social media content has the potential to be repurposed and reshared by an athlete for the benefit of the athlete, school and, potentially, sponsorship partner (Jessop & Sabin, 2021).

While swimming and track and field remain underrepresented across traditional college sports media, coverage of these sports from external, third-party outlets like ESPN also served as a resource for those wishing to express athletic expertise. Jasmine Moore, a then-sophomore long jumper at the University of Florida, used clips from ESPN in a post summarizing her season. Paige McKenna, a then-freshman swimmer at the University of Wisconsin, also posted clips from BTN+ and ESPN on her feed, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between the media and personal branding. These video clips represented Arai et al. (2014)’s principles of athletic expertise and sportsmanship, both characteristics of athletic performance. Athletes’ use of such material underscores the value of women’s sport media coverage and the importance of gender equity in mainstream sport broadcasting, where women are still vastly underrepresented (Cooky et al., 2021).
Marketability, Lifestyle and Branding in Less Athletic-Centric Styles

The results suggest that top women’s swimmers and track and field athletes are not overly focused on using their self-representation to gain commercial success, but rather on building a more well-rounded personal brand. Despite their success and media exposure on the international stage during the Olympics, these elite swimmers and track and field athletes maintain a balanced presentation of themselves on their Instagram accounts, having a mixture of athletic achievements and showing glimpses of their college experiences (see Figure 5). This finding aligns with previous work on women’s self-representation (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hayes Sauder and Blaszka, 2018), adding to a deeper feminist understanding of women’s self-representation in Olympic sports. Much of the brand building around athletic performance is being produced by athletic departments, and while track and field athletes are taking advantage of these athletic-centric images more than swimmers, even those track and field athletes are not re-centering their entire Instagram feeds around commercial content.
Such findings confirm predictions made by Jessop and Sabin (2021) that NIL would not take over the college landscape immediately but instead would offer athletes the opportunity to profit from their name, image and likeness. Two swimmers in particular, Alex and Gretchen Walsh, took advantage of NIL opportunities in their posts about a new sponsorship deal with SwimOutlet.com, but this promoted content only emerged once among all of their posts during the six-month timeframe of this study. SwimOutlet.com was a partner for the athletes, but ads for the company did not dominate their feeds nor did this sponsorship deal change the tone of the posts analyzed in the sample. During the six-month sample period, the Walsh sisters portrayed their lifestyle in a way that Arai et al. (2014) would describe as “marketable,” as they each sprinkled in images of their swimming experiences alongside photos of general collegiate events, making them relatable college students at the University of Virginia, a school that has recently announced itself to be a leader in the NIL space (Crabtree, 2022).

Within the track and field sample, Shey Taiwo specifically promoted her own business, and Anna Hall partnered with Free People Movement, Reebok, and Kérastase. These athletes expressed their “athletic expertise” in more direct ways than the swimmers, though select promotions and sponsorship posts ran across both sports. Previous research suggests that women athletes are more likely to promote themselves in this lifestyle-centric way, though more research still needs to be conducted to determine how NIL impacts that pattern across time and across sports (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2018). Women athletes also have unique potential in the NIL space to grow their brand and use their platforms to inspire even greater interest and fandom in their sports, as recent data suggests that sponsorship of women athletes increased at a rate of ten times their male counterparts from 2021 to 2022 (Kunalic & Lawrence, 2023).
The Role of #AD in Athlete Posts

Of the 207 posts published by NCAA champion swimmers and track and field athletes from October 1, 2021 to April 1, 2022, only six (four swimmers and two track and field athletes) referenced a formal sponsorship or business partnership, and none of them specifically used the #ad or #sponsor distinctions that have been used with influencer posts both inside and outside of the sports world. The FTC requires that social media influencers disclose business relationships in posts and specifically note sponsored content, but the regulatory body offers a number of options for individuals looking to mark their content in an appropriate, legal, undisruptive way (Disclosures 101 For Social Media Influencers, 2019). The top collegiate swimmers and track and field athletes who are promoting such sponsored content have found creative ways to promote corporate brands beyond the simplistic, obvious hashtag.

Stanford University swimmer Regan Smith, an Olympic medalist and NCAA champion in the women’s 200 meter backstroke, published the greatest number of sponsor-related posts across the sample of swimmers, as she mentioned her relationship with Speedo twice in this six-month period and her relationship with the Foss Swim School once, each time visually representing her athletic experience while sporting Speedo products and promoting the school. Her first sponsored post during this sample, which she published on December 2, celebrated her first meet as a Speedo athlete and showed her adjusting her Speedo goggles while wearing a black Team USA flag cap, a cap typically worn during the finals of an international meet.

Smith followed this post with a second Speedo advertisement on March 8 in honor of International Women’s Day:

Behind every successful woman is a team of other successful women who have her back. I am so grateful to be a part of an amazing team full of strong and accomplished women. If I am having a bad day or a rough practice, I know I can count on any one of my teammates to help push me through and cheer me up. I never feel as motivated as I do when I’m surrounded by such fierce women! The love my teammates have for me is something I aim to reciprocate for them and for female swimmers around the world. That is why I am celebrating #IWD2022 with @speedousa #TeamSpeedo

This post again featured Smith in athletic wear, as she sported a Speedo suit while posing on the blocks of an outdoor pool. Smith was one of the few swimmers to showcase her athletic expertise across the majority of her posts during this sample, while her peers mixed in the occasional athletic expertise representation with more of a life story-centric theme on their feeds. Arai et al. (2014) explain that for athletes building their brand around athletic performance specifically, leaning into sporting “expertness” can help build trust with audience members, potentially creating a more beneficial sponsorship relationship for the athlete and the corporate partner (p. 101). Those, such as Smith, who choose this form of branding have the opportunity to create an image for themselves of success, and this brand image has the power to continue, regardless of performance and success (Arai et al., 2014). Expertise sells products, and Smith’s posts suggest that she is leading the way among NCAA champion swimmers in 2022 with regards to promotions and deals in the NIL era.

Sisters Gretchen and Alex Walsh from the University of Virginia, two other swimmers who shared sponsored content, both published photos of their partnerships with SwimOutlet, and they shared their announcement in a similar way, each wearing a blue SwimOutlet shirt in their published image with a corresponding caption thanking the company for its support of their swimming careers (see Figure 6).
Kate Douglass rounded out the sponsored swimmers, as she promoted her deal with Arena in one post on December 16, 2021 while sporting an Arena suit while standing on the blocks and adjusting her goggles, much like Smith. Douglass, the Walsh sisters, and Stanford’s Smith, however, were the only four swimmers to officially acknowledge a sponsor on Instagram, and three of these athletes—Alex Walsh, Smith and Douglass—were on the 2020 Olympic team together, reinforcing the branding power and opportunities for college athletes with Olympic experience.

Of the track and field athletes, champion hammer thrower Shey Taiwo promoted her own business and is capitalizing on NIL as an entrepreneur launching her own beauty line. Champion pentathlete Anna Hall had the most variety of deals from the sample with three: Free People Movement, Reebok, and Kérastase appeared on her feed. Her Free People Movement posts on February 1 and February 16 feature Hall in the clothing brand facing the camera in a non-active
pose. The captions are short, simply using the hashtags associated with the Free People brand and tagging @postgame.official, a full-service agency connecting national brands with college athletes. Her now-deleted Reebok post on January 5 is an unboxing video of the product and Hall recommends the shoes for weight training. Finally, the Kérastase posts on October 20 and December 7 are selfies of Hall with the product. The caption goes on to describe why she loves the product and provides a discount code for the beauty brand. The focus of the majority of these posts was on physical appearance, with the exception of the Reebok post which built on her athletic expertise (Arai et al., 2014).

Many of the athletes tagged brands or management firms in their bios. From the previous small sample, track athletes tended to focus on their own physical appearance off the track when promoting brands. This suggests that while these athletes are engaged in managed strategic influencer communication, the sponsors might not have a uniform, clear set of expectations for the athlete in terms of the specific way the product should be promoted or have not tailored expectations to the athletes’ brands (Gong & Li, 2017). The athletes have not had a chance to move through the stages of the SMI endorsement relationship and are treated as a traditional celebrity from the beginning of the relationship, without the opportunity to experiment and find the content that works for their particular audiences (Nascimento et al., 2020). Swimmers did diverge from this pattern slightly, as they promoted their sponsors either by wearing their products on the blocks, as was the case for Smith and Speedo, or simply wearing a t-shirt with a brand logo. Neither of these examples specifically focused on appearance; thus, future research should consider the ways in which athlete promotion differs across sporting spaces.

**Conclusion**

This project shows that although swimmers and track and field athletes are not leveraging all dimensions of MABI when representing themselves on Instagram, they do possess the capacity to serve as SMIs through marketable lifestyle content or athletic expertise. This project focuses specifically on the content currently being produced by these athletes and assesses the self-representation choices being made by such individuals. The findings reinforce Arai et al.’s (2014) suggestion that “strategic branding…is now truly needed for athletes,” (p. 104) particularly those looking to profit from loosened NIL restrictions. These athletes have the ability to sign endorsement deals and, based on Kunkel et al.’s (2021) argument that “athletes who present a compelling image, which is generally multi-faceted…can resonate with consumers and attract valuable brand partnerships,” the track and field athletes and swimmers in this sample could qualify as valuable product ambassadors (p. 853). Future research should continue to investigate the self-representation of women athletes and audience engagement in the age of NIL.

Results also suggest that there is a need for more education and guidance on how to build a personal brand, with many athletes lacking representation on their Instagram of all dimensions of the athlete brand image and most relying on their identity as a collegiate athlete. A 2022 NCAA well-being study that surveyed more than 9,800 athletes from all divisions found that 39% of women’s sports athletes and 42% of men’s sports athletes are looking for more resources on “navigating NIL opportunities” (NCAA, 2022a). Schools have attempted to build their own programs, and some states’ legislation requires (e.g., Florida, Georgia, Tennessee) or encourages (e.g., Illinois, Kentucky) institutions to provide education to athletes in areas ranging from time management and financial literacy to personal branding and social media management (NIL Network, 2022). However, the NCAA’s interim NIL policy and subsequent updates do not set specific standards for how schools should educate athletes and resources range across schools.
and divisions (Christovich, 2022). In the wake of the NCAA’s updated guidance on NIL issued in October 2022, institutions were permitted to play a more direct role in facilitating relationships between athletes and sponsors (NCAA, 2022b). This policy change creates more opportunities for schools to assist athletes, especially in those sports that are traditionally not heavily marketed, and could work to counterbalance the impact of private (i.e., donor) collectives designed primarily to entice recruits in higher-profile sports. As state governments, universities, and the NCAA continue to refine and reform NIL policy, continuing to ease restrictions on the role university athletic departments can play in connecting athletes with NIL opportunities could create a more efficient and equitable distribution of both institutional and private sector resources.

For both swimming and track and field, images coded as “rivalry” or “competition style” were rarely observed. Both sports certainly feature team and individual rivalries, and athletes in these sports have distinctive approaches to competition. However, these are relatively difficult to capture in still images or video. These challenges potentially limit the brand-building options available to athletes, though they could also present opportunities for athletes and brands to differentiate themselves as the market matures. Similarly, “role model” and “symbol” had few observations in the sample. While the lack of “symbol” content speaks to the fact that most collegiate athletes have not yet fully developed a personal style or brand, the lack of “role model” content indicates another available opportunity for athletes to construct a comprehensive identity according to MABI.

Ultimately, building a brand while still competing at the collegiate level offers great potential for swimmers and track and field athletes to experiment with their content and move through the different stages of SMI endorsement while leveraging access to a wider audience through athletic departments. The opportunity for swimmers and track and field athletes to generate financial support in college has the potential to encourage athletes to remain student-athletes for their entire eligibility period (though, given how new such NIL rules are, the complete impact of NIL on eligibility choices remains to be seen).

From a sport development perspective, NIL arrangements for college athletes could offer a way for track and field and swimming to garner exposure beyond the Olympics; as these arrangements mature, they could eventually develop into an alternative framework for sustaining professional careers. Given the size of the relevant participant markets and the lack of a robust traditional professional sport model, athletes in these sports are well-positioned (especially during their intercollegiate careers) to capitalize on their potential as influencers and brand ambassadors. In addition to their similarities in participation and prize money, swimming and track and field draw similar audiences at their peak, with both receiving prominent prime time slots during the NBC Sports broadcast of the Summer Olympics (Billings et al., 2014). Excluding athletes who win global medals or major marathons, swimmers and track athletes often struggle to earn enough money to pay for their essentials plus cover their career-related expenses (Butler, 2021; Greaney & Abreu, 2022; McCaffrey, 2010; MySwimPro, 2021). The development of NIL relationships at the intercollegiate level may broaden the possibilities for post-collegiate support for a greater number of athletes.

This paper suggests that there is an untapped (or at the very least, underexplored) endorsement market for athlete influencers in swimming and track and field, two sports that, despite their popularity vis-à-vis the Olympics, have been slower to embrace NIL. Given the NCAA’s recent guidance targeting the behavior of booster collectives using NIL deals to influence recruits’ signing decisions, businesses will need to expand to athletes outside of football and basketball (Clarke, 2022). As of this writing, there is no comprehensive national database of NIL deals, and firms such as Opendorse and On3NIL use different algorithms to
suggest athletes’ values as influencers (Brown, 2022). Firms should recognize that swimmers and track and field athletes can contribute to their strategic communication goals within their organization acting as an SMI or celebrity endorser. Indeed, swimming and track and field represent potential growth areas, especially for firms searching for audiences that are still competing in the sport.

Limitations

Given the recency of the NIL policy change, this paper is limited in that it only includes six months of content analysis, though future research should consider a more longitudinal approach to assess how athlete branding choices change over time under these new rules. This sample is also small and focused solely on swimming and track & field to specifically explore the experiences of Olympic sport athletes, but scholars should also consider assessing how athletes in other sports that may be considered more niche, such as field hockey or bowling, navigate the NIL space. The NCAA outdoor track and field championships are also more closely aligned with the Olympic track and field program in terms of events and could be included in further study. Research regarding the role of institutions and governing bodies could be correspondingly expanded to examine the role of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC), especially given its recent interest in working more closely with intercollegiate sports programs via the USOPC College Sports Sustainability Think Tank (USOPC, n.d.).

Women have been historically underrepresented and under-supported in sports media, and while NIL does give individual athletes the chance to market themselves, systemic, structural change is still needed to create equitable media opportunities at the university level. Studies of women’s Olympic sports and NCAA events would serve to fully complete the picture of the impact of NIL in the first year of its existence (Scovel, in progress). Athlete branding models should also continue to account for changing technologies, as branding strategies shift with each new platform. For the purposes of this study, Instagram served as a useful platform for analysis, though scholars could continue to assess changes in athlete branding across other platforms such as TikTok.

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