



ABSTRACT



The implementation of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) deals has ushered in a seismic shift within collegiate athletics, fundamentally redefining the economic and social landscape, especially for women athletes. Amid the rising influence of the gig economy, this study explores how NIL opportunities have transformed the student-athlete paradigm by providing alternative avenues for employment and empowering athletes to leverage their personal brands for entrepreneurial ventures. Furthermore, it examines the profound influence of NIL on women collegiate athletes, focusing on how these deals enhance their athletic identity, personal branding, and entrepreneurial initiatives. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in interpretivist philosophy, the research delves deeply into the nuanced experiences of women in this evolving environment. Utilizing interviews and secondary data analysis, the study highlights how NIL deals empower women athletes to leverage their visibility and success in new domains, thereby transforming their career trajectories and personal development. By employing a meticulous four-step coding process and utilizing NVivo software for data analysis, the findings emphasize the empowerment of women athletes through enhanced visibility and branding opportunities. By exploring the intersections of personal branding, support networks, and the growth of women's sports, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on how NIL legislation can be shaped to foster an equitable, supportive, and prosperous environment for all collegiate athletes. The study advocates for supportive policies and practices that recognize the specific needs of women in collegiate sports, calling for increased investment and equitable treatment in the sports industry. This research contributes to the broader discussion on equity in sports and provides strategic insights for stakeholders aiming to navigate the evolving landscape of NIL deals effectively.

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Beyond Competition: An Exploration of How Women Collegiate Athletes Navigate NIL Opportunities

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BACKGROUND

What is NIL? Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) refers to the ability of college athletes to profit from their personal brand and endorsements. With the recent changes in NCAA rules, student-athletes can now earn money through third-party endorsements and use of their NILs for advertising purposes. (Ehrlich, et. all 2023)



Novel

The introduction of the Student-Athlete-Entrepreneur. An understudied area with a wide range of stakeholders and uncertainty of actual impact or effect across the landscape (Figure 1).

Relevance & Impact

New phenomenon that is taking the NCAA world by storm where the Year 1 [spend on NIL is estimated to be \\$1B](#) and Year 2 is \$1B+ and impacting all U.S. student-athletes (including high school). (See Figure 2)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant Literature

Broader Connection to Academic Literature

- Sports Entrepreneurship Theory: "The process of establishing new startups or ventures that interact with the sports industry" (Ratten, 2012)
- Athletic Identity
- Social Support Theory in Sports

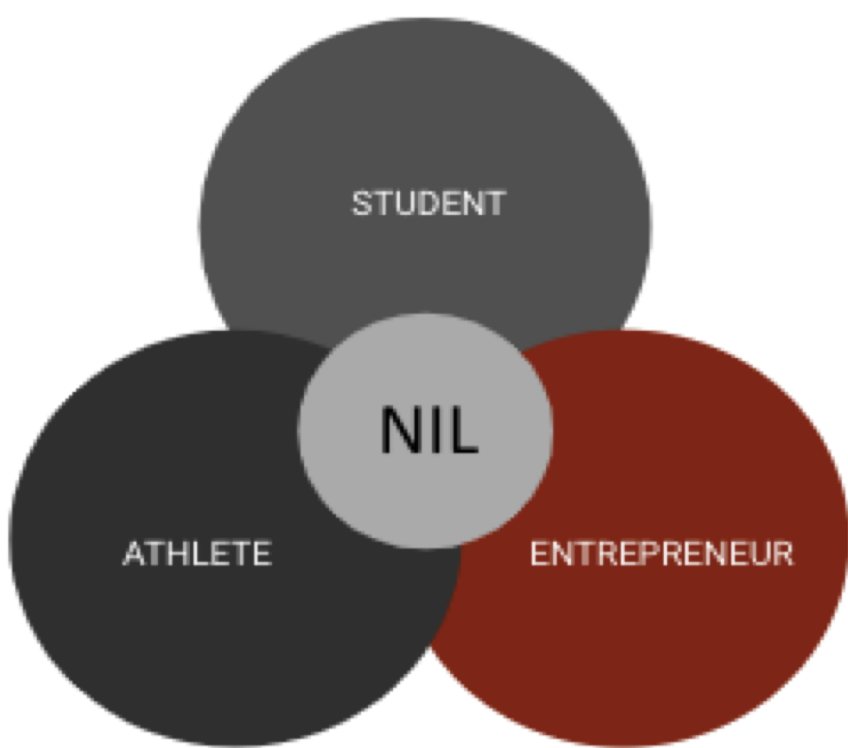
Dissecting the NIL Landscape

Gig Economy
NIL Collectives
Social Media
Sponsorships/Endorsements

Advancing Women in Sports

by fostering collaboration, providing education, and empowering female athletes to leverage and fully utilize their NIL rights, the disparity in publicity between male and female athletes could be narrowed, aligning with the principles of Title IX, ensuring greater equity for women in sports (Jessop & Sabin, 2021). (See Figure 3)

Figure 1. Evolution of the Student-Athlete with the Onset of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) Opportunities



[NIL] is something that all athletes should know about. Because not only is it good to build your brand, it's a good way to make money, too. (Case #20)

There are a lot of people who also have opportunities to get [NIL] deals. So basically, just trying to separate myself to see, like, Hey, you all should work with me and then just making sure that I'm making time like I said, for everything else. I don't want NIL to, you know, take place with me, like getting in the gym or doing my homework or putting in work for my actual sport. So just time management and separating myself will look like a good contender for deals. (Case #17)

[My school] has helped in so many different ways. They have so many amenities for all the student-athletes, helping with NIL and helping navigate the whole thing because, at first, it was just so unprecedented, and it was such a new area for everyone and even for myself. And they've helped so much. (Case #4)

The company that I'm investing with they created a wallet, which is where like, the athletes NIL deals are there and then it predicts their tax... They have a system where the athlete has everything that they need to know about their NIL deals, how much money they're making, how much money they're going to lose because of taxes. What percentage is getting cut, stuff like that? It's all in one place. (Case #7)

Our NIL agent has helped, because she takes care of it all. So it's very easy, like most stressful, for us, to have to worry about what needs to be signed and what contracts to write up. She'll just have you, this is what it is, sign it off and we'll sign off on it. (Case #25)

I was also a part of the NIL Empower 3.0 program that Metta put on. It's a six month program where they bring in a female collegiate athletes and they basically train them in in media, social media as well as career development and what that looks like trying to further your brand, but also kind of set you up as you're kind of moving out of college and in the career field as well. And out of that came that Marriott deal that I'm working with them right now. (Case #15)

A statement that I'll use to describe women collegiate sports, don't sleep on women's sports. [That] comes from the shirt that I always see Dawn Staley wear that says "Everyone watches women's sports". So my quote would be, "Don't sleep on women. Everyone watches women's sports. (Case #22)

Figure 2. Opendorse NIL Market Projections

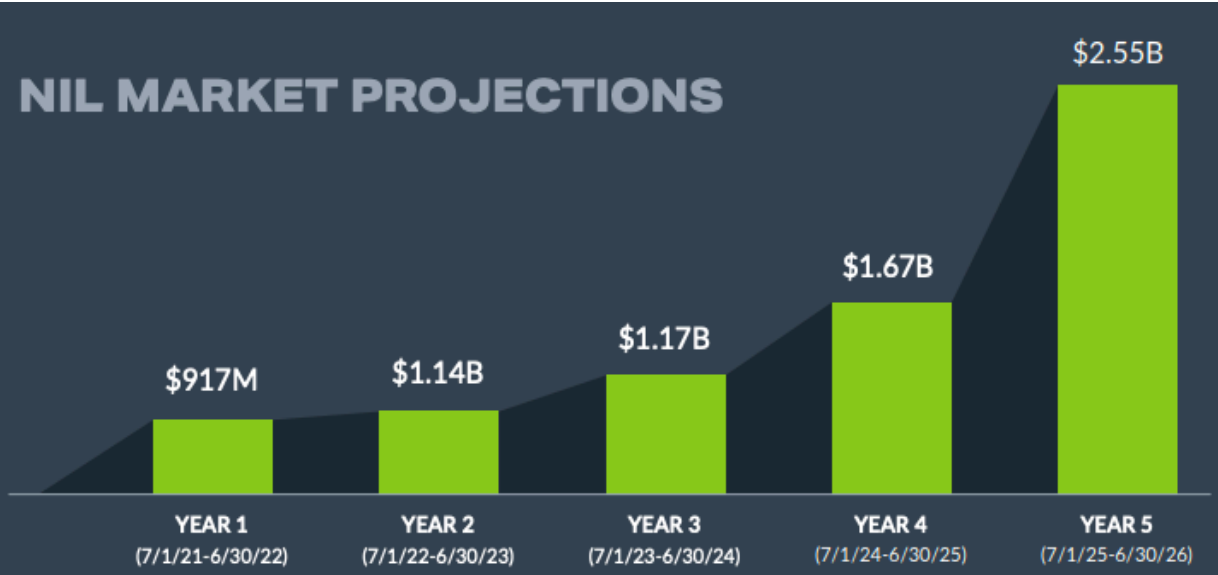
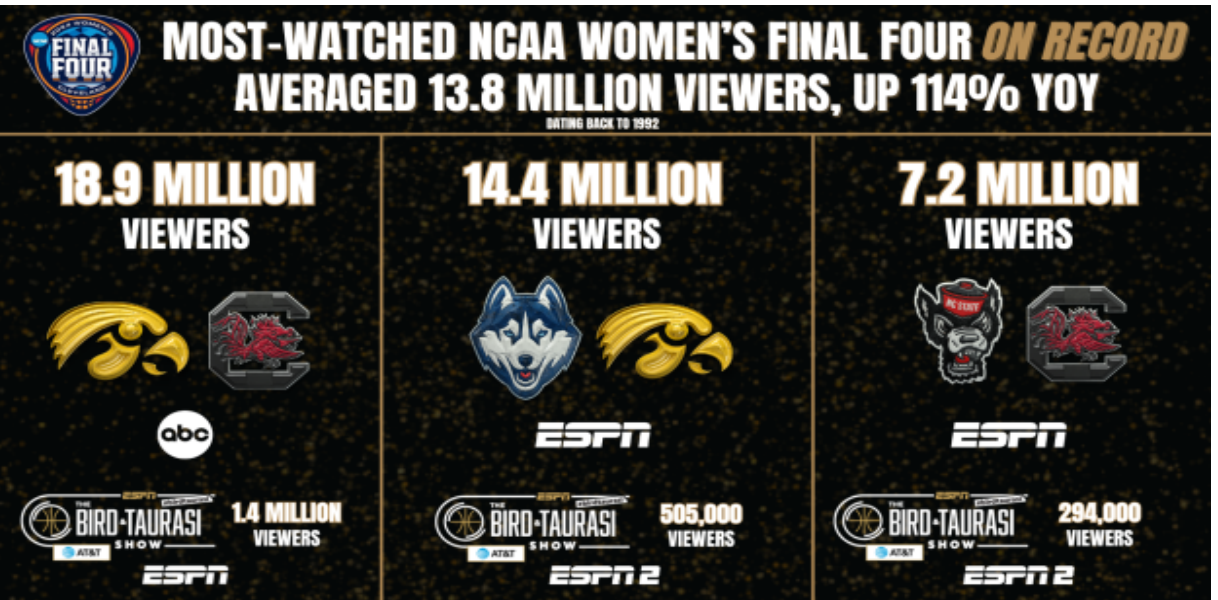


Figure 3. 2024 Women's March Madness Ratings



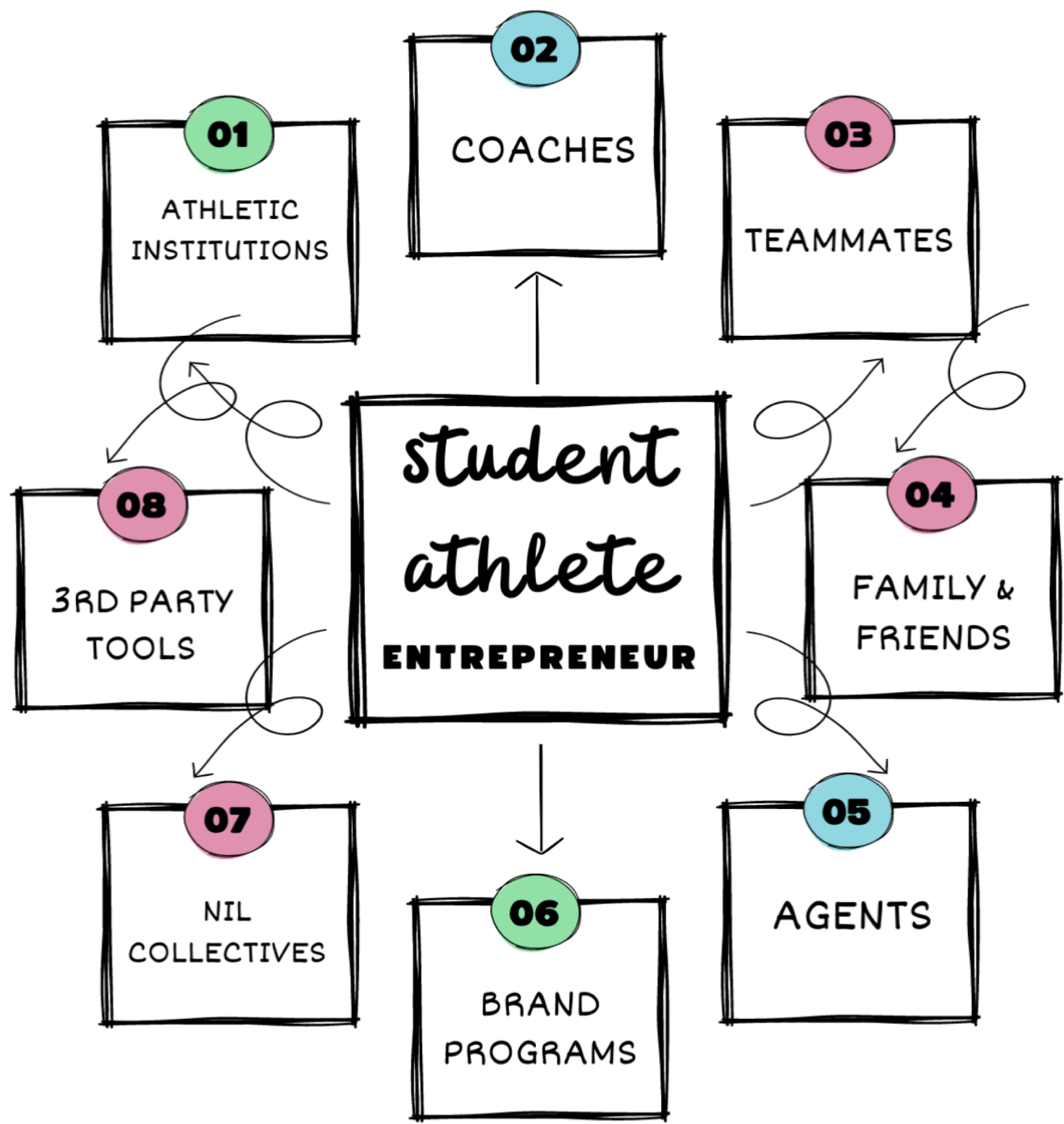
RESULTS

It's All About the BRAND

I think things you know, honestly, it goes back to when we're in AAU, right, like, *everyone talks about your brand* like, you know, for recruiting you want your social media profiles....*branding yourself as like a good citizen. So to make sure that you know, colleges think that you're a great person. You have great morals. You have great people around you.* You're not just posting crazy things. (Case #11)

It takes a TEAM

THE NIL SUPPORT NETWORK FOR COLLEGIATE WOMEN ATHLETES



Grow the Game

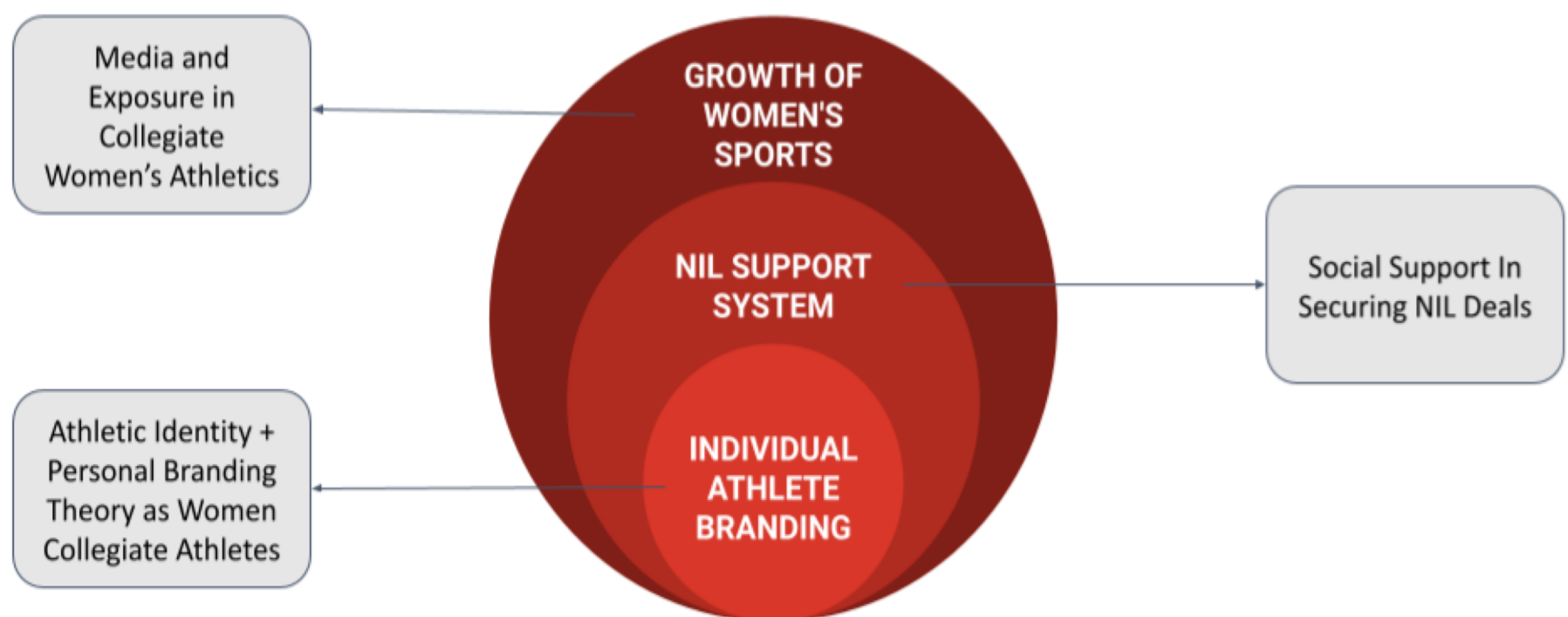
"Game changing, I mean, it's game-changing and helps you financially, and it helps you socially, and it really just helps you, (incredible)." (Case #18)

Figure 4. Data Attributes and Details

Attribute	Data Details
Case #	1 - 25
Division	I, II, III, and NWBA
	Cross Country, Basketball, Gymnastics, Track, Softball, Volleyball, Golf, Swimming, and Field Hockey
Sports	Yes or No
NIL Contract	3rd, 4th, 5th, or Graduated
Year in Athletic Sport	HBCU or No
HBCU vs Non HBCU	Adaptive or No
Adaptive or Non Adaptive	YouTube or Interview
Data Source	Domestic or International
Domestic or International	BIPOC or White
Perceivable Race	Preliminary, 1st, or 2nd
Iteration Phase	

DISCUSSION

Adkerson's Ripple Effect of NIL Dynamics within Collegiate Women Athlete Experiences



Layer 1: Individual Athlete Branding= Athletic Identity & Personal Branding Theory

Athletes are not only introduced to branding through their roles as representatives of their schools but also as architects of their own self-identity (Arai et al., 2014). This process of brand development is marked by a high level of intentionality, as athletes carefully craft and align their personal brands to resonate with their missions and the values they stand for (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Layer 2: NIL Support System = Social Support in Securing or Navigating NIL Deals

The NIL experiences of women collegiate athletes underscore that success in athletics is not an individual endeavor—it takes a team. The findings from this grounded theory research expand our understanding of social support by incorporating additional critical stakeholders for navigating NIL for women, such as NIL agents, NIL brand programs, NIL collectives, and third-party tools.

Layer 3: Growth of Women's Sports = Media and Exposure in Collegiate Athletics

"Grow the game". As a result of individualized athletic branding amplified through robust social support systems, there is a culminating increase in media exposure, investment, endorsements, and awareness that leads to the growth and advancement of women's sports (Kane et. al., 2013).

METHODOLOGY

RQ: How has the onset of NIL deals in college sports impacted collegiate women athletes?

Qualitative Grounded Theory Approach: Grounded theory, as described by Martin & Turner (1986), is an inductive and theory discovery approach enabling researchers to formulate a *theoretical framework* based on *empirical observations* and *data*.

- Secondary Data - YouTube Videos
- Primary Data Semi-Structured Interviews
- Sampling - The focus is on collegiate women athletes from January 2022-present discussing NIL through convenience and snowball sampling. (See Figure 4)
- Analysis – Thematic Coding
 - Otter Transcriptions
 - Iterative NVivo Coding – 21 Interviews/ 4 YouTube Videos

CONCLUSIONS

- **Enhanced Athletic Identity:** NIL deals have fostered a greater sense of intentionality in collegiate women athletes' branding and athletic identity.
- **Formation of Support Teams:** The emergence of NIL deals has led to the development of dedicated social support teams for women athletes.
- **Growth in Women's Sports:** Increased brand recognition and media exposure from NIL deals have contributed to the advancement and growth of women's collegiate sports.

Academic Contribution:

Advancing NIL literature through prevalent academic theories:

- The Intersection of Athletic Identity + Personal Branding
- Social Support

Industry Contribution:

- Pursuing NIL Deals
- Brand Development + Exposure = Growth

Study Limitations:

- Access to primary, mainstream NIL athletes

Future Study:

- Deeper Dive into NIL Support Network