

# Unveiling the Journey of Women NCAA Athletes and their Pursuit of NIL Deals: A Grounded Theory Approach



Carolyn Adkerson - EMS 2024 Presentation



# Research Topic

## 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)



# Motivation

## ***Relevance & Impact***

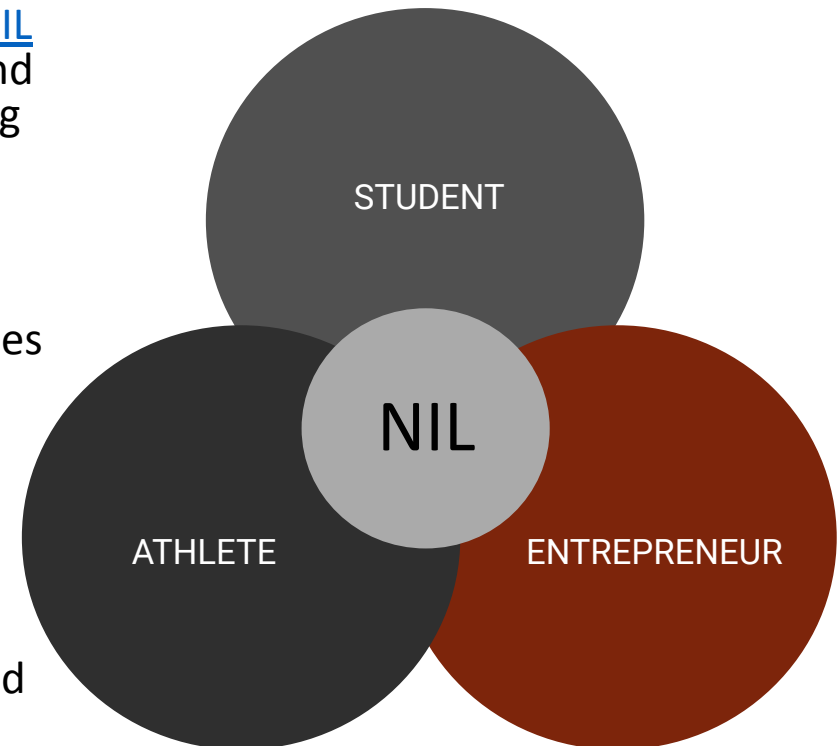
- New phenomenon that is taking the NCAA world by storm where the Year 1 [Spend on NIL is estimated to be \\$1B](#) and Year 2 is \$1B+ and impacting all U.S. student-athletes (including high school).

## ***Debatable: Amateur vs. Professional***

- Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises” (Ayranci, 2017, p. 70).

## ***Novel***

- The introduction of the Student-Athlete-Entrepreneur: Understudied area with a wide range of stakeholders and uncertainty of actual impact or effect across the landscape





# Relevant Literature & Concepts

## ***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 and Branding
- Social Support in Athletics

## ***Dissecting the NIL Landscape***

- Gig Economy
- NIL Collectives
- Social Media and Sponsorships/Endorsements (Congruency Theory)

## ***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).

# How has the onset of NIL deals in college sports impacted women athletes?

A grounded theory exploration of the *experience* of women athletes in their quest or success in securing NIL deals and other entrepreneurial efforts.



TO CELEBRATE TITLE IX'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY ADIDAS SIGNS 15 FEMALE STUDENT-ATHLETES TO NIL DEALS AND ANNOUNCES BRAND INITIATIVES TO PUSH SPORT FORWARD FOR ALL



# Expected Impact

- Generate a practical understanding of how to ***solicit athletes and maximize profits*** from investing in NIL players, women specifically.
  - Brand Managers and Marketing practitioners with brands that leverage sports endorsements by adding to the understanding of the value, worth, and effectiveness of NIL deals in NCAA sports.
- Provide connections or relationships between known and relevant ***theories within the sports management, entrepreneurship, marketing, or psychology fields.***
- Understand any underlying ***effects on college athletes***, specifically underrepresented populations such as women.



# Methodology

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***.

Employing this method allows for a systemic exploration and comprehension of the complexities within the NIL landscape and the experiences of women student-athletes while remaining receptive to novel insights emerging from the data.

# Data Sources

- PRIMARY DATA:
  - Semi-Structured Interviews with women athletes from January 2022-present
    - Participants will initially be based on convenience sampling and later evolve into snowball sampling
    - Interviews will last up to 60 minutes (in person and virtual based on availability and location)
    - Goal is to interview up to 20 participants for the study. The exact number of interviews will be determined by either reaching theoretical saturation or it may increase if additional data is needed based on thematic coding and analysis of the initial interview responses.
- SECONDARY DATA:
  - Youtube Videos
    - YouTube is an American online video sharing and social media platform owned by Google with publicly available content.
    - The focus will be collegiate women athletes from January 2022-present discussing NIL





# Data Collection - Interviews

## *Key Objectives of Interview Questions*

The questions will be exploratory in nature, grounded in relevant literature, and piloted in advance to promote rigor and ensure clarity and coherence:

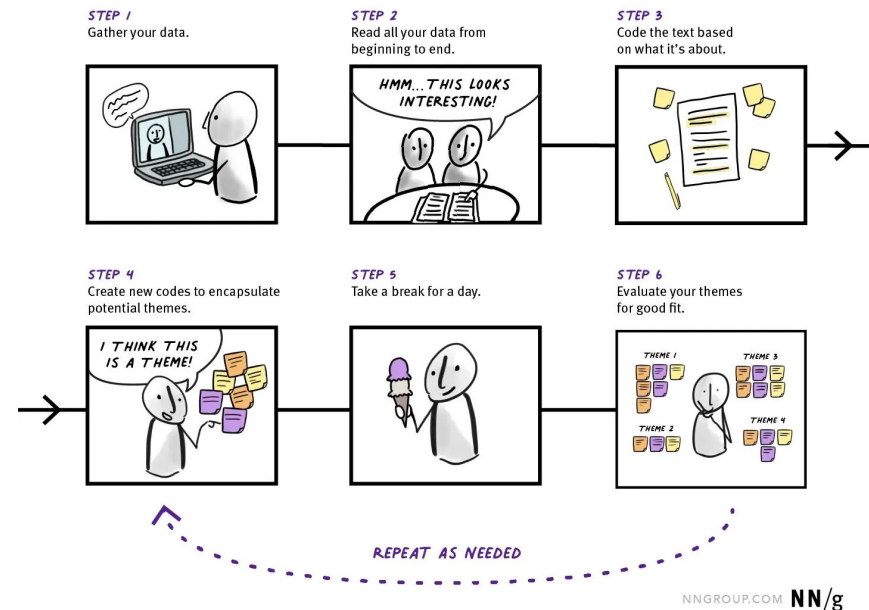
- Levelsetting/ Warm Up Questions
- Understanding the NIL Landscape
- Capturing the “Student-Athlete-Entrepreneur” Experience
- Uncovering the influence of social media
- Closing and request for follow up/introductions

# Data Analysis

## Analysis – Thematic Coding

This analysis will follow the iterative principles of grounded theory as outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1990), employing a systematic four-step coding approach. Initially, open coding will deconstruct data into discrete segments, followed by axial coding to establish connections among these codes. Subsequently, selective coding will identify a central category that unifies all codes, encapsulating the research essence. These iterative steps may continue until theoretical saturation is achieved.

### 6 Steps to Doing a Thematic Analysis



# Results - Cases & Attributes

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

# Results - Examples of Codes

Athletic  
Journey

Advice

COVID

Future of  
NIL

Intro of  
NIL

NIL  
Rules

Recruiting

Transfer  
Portal

WNBA  
Decisions

# Results – 3 Prominent Themes

Athlete's  
Personal  
Brand

NIL  
Support

Advancing  
Women's  
Sports



# Key Finding – Understanding *her* brand is Important

[NIL] is something that all athletes should know about.

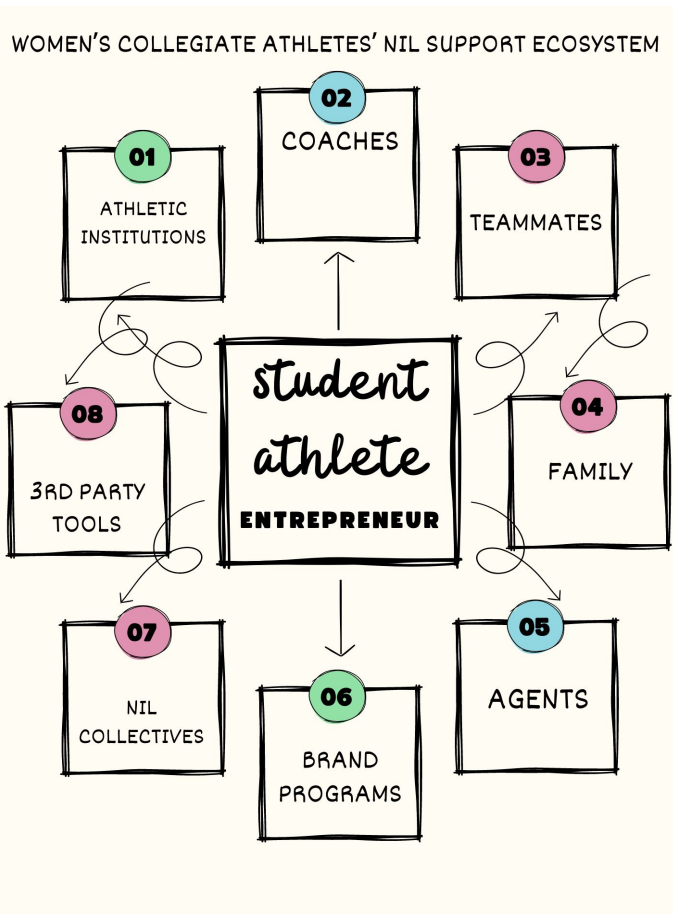
**Because not only is it good to build your brand, it's a good way to make money, too.**

(Case #20)

- “It’s all about the brand” - The *Intentionality* behind brand development
- Branding is introduced in role as athletes, in representation of the school, and general self-identity
- Mission/Brand Alignment drive decision making for deals



# Key Finding – The SAE Can't Do It Alone - It Takes a Team



- Institutions provide support/resources to athletes
- Family are first line of resources and advice
- Student-athletes do not have time to source the deals, so agents are integral towards their success
- 3rd Party tech companies/resources (i.e. Opendorse or Basepath) aid in the managerial aspects of NIL

# Key Finding - Women are still “Growing the Game”

I think it just kind of **shows the progression of the game and athletes and the recognition that they get for their talents and skills.**

(Case #12)



- Football is the true King of NIL
- Maturity (or lack) of Women’s Sports
  - Self awareness and “acceptance” of differences in gender, sports, and divisions
- Exposure and Division Level matter



# Discussion - Grounded Theory Conceptual Model

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



# Conclusions - Limitations of Study

- Access to primary, mainstream NIL athletes
- Managing across variable dimensions
  - Divisions
  - Race
  - Sports

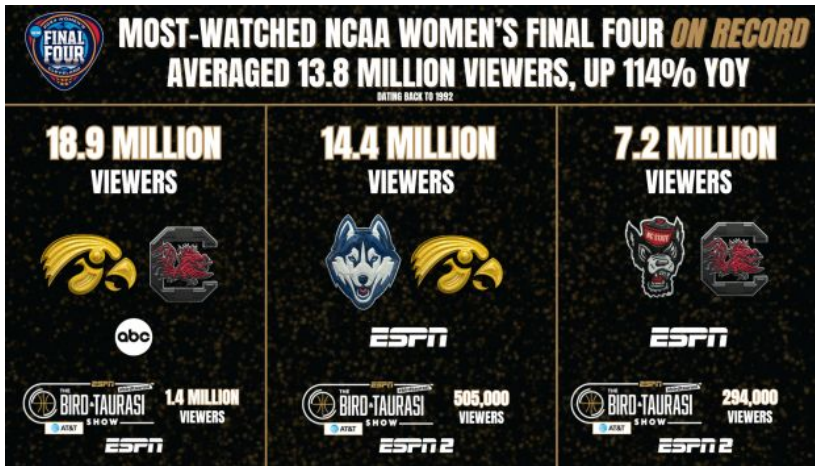


# Conclusions - Study One: Research Question Recap

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

- 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 networks 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.

# Introduction: Study Two



NCAA vs. The House Settlement: The next step in formalizing the settlement agreement that will reshape college sports. They provide additional details on the previously announced \$2.8 billion in back-pay damages to be paid out over 10 years to former Division-I athletes dating back to 2016, as well as a 10-year revenue-sharing model that could distribute money directly from athletic departments to college athletes starting in 2025. The documents also detail other aspects of the settlement agreement, including the institution of roster limits and potential establishment of an oversight program for future NIL deals.

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5660945/2024/07/26/ncaa-house-settlement-college-sports/>

# Motivation: Study Two

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



### Layer One: Individual Athlete Branding

Focuses on athletes developing their personal identities and brands, which is critical for maximizing Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) opportunities as supported by research from Arai et al. (2014) and Parmentier & Fischer (2012)

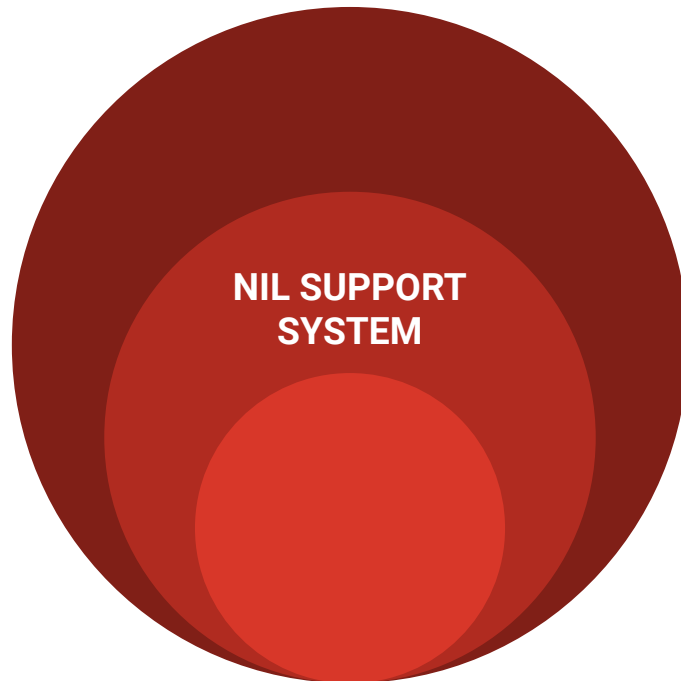
### Layer Two: Expanded NIL Support System

Highlights the importance of robust social networks for navigating NIL deals, which goes beyond traditional support structures as backed by studies from Smith (2020) and Walker (2015)

### Layer Three: Growth of Women's Sports

Driven by increased media exposure and investment, which is facilitated through strategic branding and support systems as supported by research from Fink (2015) and Kane et al. (2013)

# Motivation - Expansion of Social Support



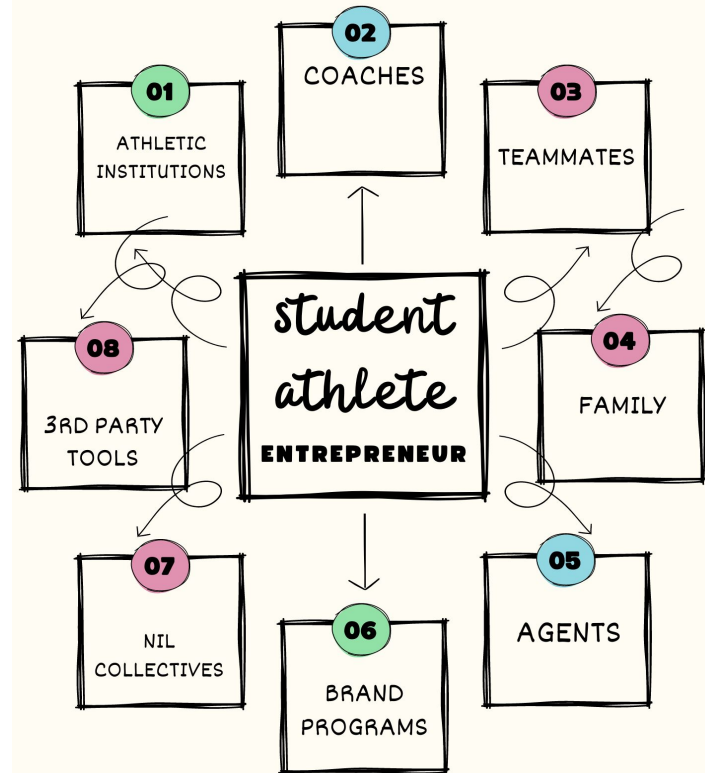
**Giacobbi et al. (2004)** highlight the importance of social support during the transition to university for first-year female athletes. This support comes from various sources, including coaches, teammates, and family. It serves as a resource that enhances the well-being of the recipient.

*Coaches provide guidance, encouragement, and technical expertise. Teammates offer camaraderie, understanding, and a shared journey. Family members continue to play a vital role by providing emotional and practical support.*

# Research Question: Study Two

How do expanded social support systems impact the ability of collegiate women athletes to navigate and maximize NIL opportunities?

WOMEN'S COLLEGIATE ATHLETES' NIL SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM



# Methodology

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# Data Sources

## Semi-Structured Interviews (3-5 each group)

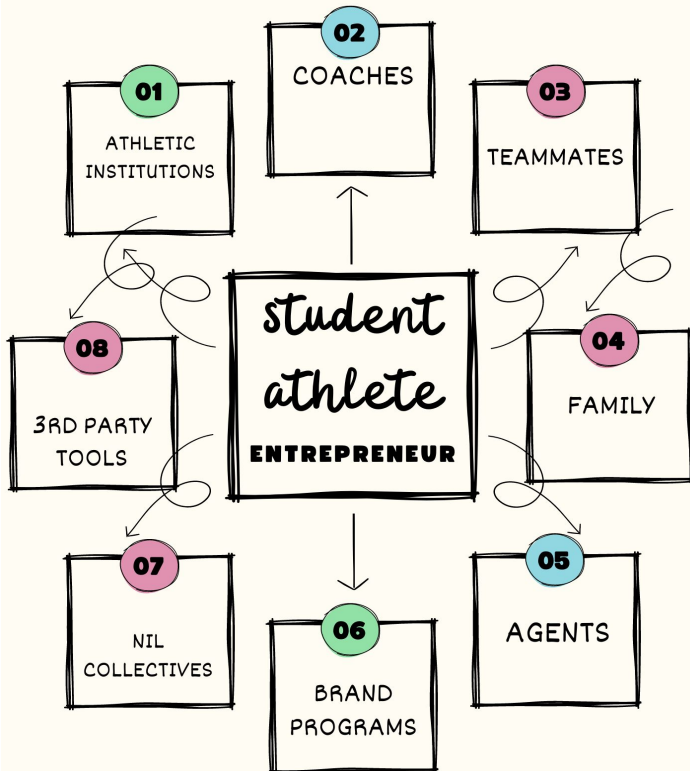
### Group 1: NIL-Specific Support Roles

- **NIL Agents:** Industry specialists who manage NIL deals for athletes, negotiate contracts, and ensure compliance with regulations while securing endorsements that align with the athletes' branding and career goals.
- **Third-Party Tools:** Companies like Opendorse provide platforms and tools that facilitate NIL activities, helping athletes build their personal brands, connect with sponsors, and manage endorsements.
- **Brand Programs:** Specialized programs designed to enhance athletes' branding potential by offering resources and training in personal branding, media engagement, and financial literacy.
- **NIL Collectives:** Organized groups that pool resources to support athletes from specific institutions or regions, often through fundraising and securing endorsements.

### Group 2: Traditional Support Roles

Coaches, Teammates, Family & Friends, and Athletic Institutions

WOMEN'S COLLEGIATE ATHLETES' NIL SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM





# Data Collection - Interviews

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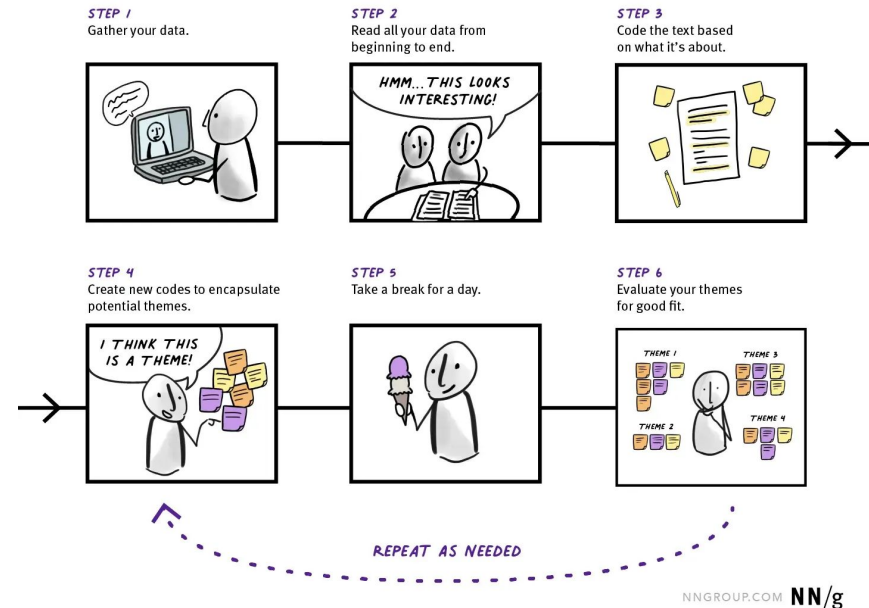
- Levelsetting/ Warm Up Questions
- Understanding of their Role
- Support Mechanisms In Place
- Challenges and Solutions
- Collaboration with Other Support System
- Impact and Future Directions

# Data Analysis

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### 6 Steps to Doing a Thematic Analysis



# Expected Contributions

## Academic Contribution:

Advancing the literature around:

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

## Industry Contribution:

- Brand Development + Exposure = Growth of Women's Sports
- Defined NIL Support Roles



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# Questions?



Thank You!