

THESIS

COLLEGE ATHLETES AS INFLUENCERS: EXPLORING PARASOCIAL DYNAMICS,
PURCHASE INTENT, AND BRAND ATTITUDE IN THE NIL MARKETPLACE

Submitted by

Paeton K. Lesser

Department of Journalism and Media Communication

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Science

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2026

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Samuel Tham

Gaya Sivakumar
Ashley Anderson
Abraham Khan

Copyright by Paeton K. Lesser 2026

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

COLLEGE ATHLETES AS INFLUENCERS: EXPLORING PARASOCIAL DYNAMICS, PURCHASE INTENT AND BRAND ATTITUDE IN THE NIL MARKETPLACE

College athletes are increasingly using social media to connect with fans, followers, and consumers in ways that extend beyond the capabilities of traditional sports coverage (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Frederick et al., 2012). By frequently sharing detailed aspects of their personal and athletic lives, college athletes cultivate feelings of familiarity and trust among their followers, encouraging fans to feel as if they have genuine relationships with the athletes they follow (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Klostermann et al., 2023). While these relationships may be meaningful to followers, they also carry persuasive potential, creating valuable marketing opportunities for brands seeking partnerships with college athletes in the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) era. This uniquely positions college athletes to serve as compelling social media influencers (SMIs), particularly among college-age consumers. Thus, understanding the college athlete-follower connection is particularly important, as product/brand endorsements on Instagram have become one of the most prolific forms of player monetization in the NIL era (Sponsor United, 2025).

This study utilizes Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of Parasocial Interaction (PSI) to understand how the strength of these influencer-follower relationships influence consumer behavior in the NIL marketplace. Specifically, it employs a 2x2 quasi-experimental design with college students to examine the extent to which parasocial relationships (PSRs) drive purchase intention and brand attitudes regarding products endorsed by college athlete influencers on

Instagram. The study also considers how the gender of the athlete, the level of product involvement (high/low involvement), and the gender of the consumer impact these purchase-related intentions and attitudes. Ultimately, the findings of this study provide practical implications for sports marketers and brands seeking entry into the evolving NIL marketplace, while also advancing scholarly understandings of the extent to which PSRs explain the psychological mechanisms shaping consumer decision-making in this emerging context.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Overviews and Rationales.....	1
1.2 Goal and Research Question.....	3
1.3 Organization of Thesis	4
Chapter 2. THE EMERGENCE OF NIL	5
2.1 Background on the NCAA and its History of Amateurism.....	5
2.2 The NCAA’s Longstanding Prohibition of NIL Compensation.....	6
2.3 The Impact of NIL Legislation on the College Sports Landscape.....	11
2.4 The Current State of College Athlete Branding	13
Chapter 3. LITERATURE REVIEW	17
3.1 Parasocial Relationships	18
3.2 PSIs via Social Media	19
3.3 Athletes’ Self-Presentation on Social Media.....	21
3.4 College Athletes: SMIs or Celebrity Endorsers?	25
3.5 College Athlete Influencers.....	27
3.6 Purchase Intention.....	30
3.7 Brand Attitude.....	31
3.8 Conditions of PSR	32
3.8.1 Product Involvement.....	33
3.8.2 College Athlete Gender.....	34
3.9 Consumer Gender	36
Chapter 4. METHODS	38
4.1 Research Objectives.....	38
4.2 Study Design.....	39
4.3 Selection of Athletes and Products	41
4.4 Stimulus	42
4.7 Data Collection Procedures.....	42
4.7.2 Sample.....	42

4.7.1 Recruitment.....	43
4.7.3 International Review Board (IRB) Approval.....	43
4.5 Study Flow	44
4.6 Instruments and Variables	45
4.6.1 Independent Variable: PSR	46
4.6.2 Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention.....	47
4.6.3 Dependent Variable: Brand Attitude	48
4.6.4 Consumer Gender	48
4.6.5 Other Variables.....	48
4.8 Validity and Reliability of Proposed Study.....	48
4.8.1 Internal Validity	48
4.8.2 External Validity	49
4.8.3 Ecological Validity.....	50
4.8.4 Reliability.....	51
Chapter 5. RESULTS.....	52
5.1 Hypothesis 1.....	52
5.2 Hypothesis 2.....	53
5.3 Hypothesis 3.....	53
5.4 Hypothesis 4.....	54
5.5 Hypothesis 5.....	55
5.6 Hypothesis 6.....	56
5.7 Research Question 1	56
Chapter 6. DISCUSSION	58
6.1 Parasocial Relationships	59
6.2 Product Involvement.....	60
6.3 Gender Congruence	61
6.4 Consumer Gender	62
6.5 Theoretical Contributions	64
6.6 Practical Implications.....	66
6.7 Limitations	68
6.8 Future Research	71
6.8.1 Incorporating Additional Perspectives.....	72
Chapter 8. APPENDICES.....	86
8.1 Recruitment Email	92

8.2 Recruitment Message for Reddit	93
8.3 Debrief Statement	94

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Research Objectives	38
Table 2: Questionnaire Items	86

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Examples of Arch Manning's NIL endorsements on Instagram.....	15
Figure 2: Examples of Jeremiah Smith's NIL endorsements on Instagram.....	16
Figure 3: Stimulus post for the male athlete, low-involvement condition.....	88
Figure 4: Stimulus post for the male athlete, high-involvement condition.....	89
Figure 5: Stimulus post for the female athlete, low-involvement condition.....	90
Figure 6: Stimulus post for the female athlete, high-involvement condition	91

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overviews and Rationales

Traditionally, fans' insight into college athletes' lives was largely limited to what was presented in conventional media coverage such as news broadcasts, radio commentary, and game reports. However, the rise of social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok and X has disrupted this dynamic by providing fans immediate and unfiltered access to their favorite college athletes, fostering perceptions of interaction and authentic two-way communication (Hambrick et al., 2010; Frederick et al., 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). At the same time, these platforms have enabled college athletes to directly share aspects of their personal and athletic lives with fans (Wanzer et al., 2023; Xue et al., 2025; Scovel 2025). Collectively, these exchanges foster a sense of familiarity and perceived closeness, blurring the boundaries between mediated exposure and personal connection (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Klostermann et al., 2023).

While these relationships may be meaningful to followers, they also carry persuasive potential, creating opportunities for brands considering endorsement partnerships with college athletes. Therefore, analyzing how these relationships can be leveraged by brands to connect with consumers is essential to evaluating the importance of social media marketing in the college sports context.

This line of inquiry is especially relevant following the recent passage of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policies– which have allowed college athletes to monetize their personal brands through commercial ventures. Although many avenues for NIL monetization exist, many college athletes have opted to leverage their existing social media accounts for product and brand

endorsements (Kunkel et al., 2021; Cocco & Moorman, 2022). Thus, college athletes are increasingly positioning themselves social media influencers (SMIs) with valuable access consumers. Considering Shan et al. (2022) determined that consumers often identify with influencers and perceive them as more relatable than traditional celebrities, and Swant (2016) also found that consumers often place high levels of trust in influencers, the dynamic between college athlete influencers and their followers is an important area of both scholarly inquiry and business acumen.

Horton and Wohl's (1956) parasocial interaction (PSI) theory offers a relevant framework for understanding and evaluating this dynamic. Although it was originally developed to explain the one-sided bonds that may emerge between audience members and prominent figures in traditional media, scholars such as Labrecque (2014) argue the interactive affordances of social media enable users to develop perceptions of intimacy and connection with influencers, suggesting these platforms serve as environments conducive for parasocial relationship (PSR) formation. Additionally, Bergkvist and Zhou (2016, p. 665) assert "the ultimate goal" of PSR research is to identify how to persuade consumers to buy endorsed products; thus, it is a well-suited framework to examine how followers respond to college athlete endorsements on social media.

Accordingly, this study evaluated the persuasive power of college athlete influencers by examining how the strength of consumers' PSRs with specific players influences their purchase intentions and brand attitudes toward products endorsed by them on Instagram. To reflect the complexity of real-world marketing, this study also examined the extent to which the level of product involvement (low/high involvement) and the gender of the college athlete impacted these variables as well. Additionally, during analysis, consumer gender was used as a grouping

variable to identify potential gender-based trends in consumers' responses, and the extent to which gender congruency (such that the gender of the college athlete influencer and the participant match) influenced consumers' purchase related intentions and attitudes.

Ultimately, this study provides empirical evidence for brands considering the use of college athlete influencers to connect with consumers by evaluating the extent to which PSRs impact consumers' purchase-related decisions and brand evaluations in the NIL marketplace. In doing so, it provides insight into the psychological mechanisms through which athlete endorsements influence consumer decision making in a social media environment. Moreover, this study expands scholarly literature on PSRs that are primarily sustained through social media and applies concepts that are commonly written about in SMI scholarship to sport marketing literature. By situating these dynamics within the NIL marketplace, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how emerging forms of athlete self-branding intersect with an established theory about mediated relationships to explain consumer behavior and digital persuasion.

1.2 Goal and Research Question

This research evaluated the persuasive potential of an emerging cohort of directly connected social media influencers to college consumers: college athletes. To do so, the study utilized PSR as a framework to understand the extent to which consumers' perceived relationships with college athlete influencers impacted their purchase intention and brand attitudes regarding products promoted by them on social media in the NIL marketplace. Thus, the over-arching question guiding this study and its hypotheses is:

Overarching Research Question: How do parasocial relationships (PSRs) impact male and female college consumers purchase intentions and brand attitudes regarding NIL

products endorsed by male and female college athlete influencers across conditions of (high/low) product involvement?

Findings from this study contribute to existing literature on college athlete branding and influencer marketing by providing empirical evidence for how parasocial dynamics influence consumer behavior and attitude after viewing NIL-driven social media endorsements. The study also offers practical implications for brands considering the use of college athlete influencers to enhance product conversions and brand attitudes among college consumers.

1.3 Organization of Thesis

To provide a baseline understanding of the emergence of this highly connected group of social media influencers, chapter two presents an overview of the recent legislative changes related to NIL and college athletes' compensation rights. At the same time, the chapter emphasizes college athletes' increased incentive to engage in SMI efforts, given their increased agency in constructing marketable personal identities and advancing personal branding initiatives. Additionally, chapter three describes the current state of the NIL marketplace and provides a literature review of recent studies regarding college athlete influencers. The chapter also presents PSRs as the theoretical framework and introduces the conditions by which it will be evaluated in this study, setting up the research questions and hypotheses guiding this work. Chapter four details the chosen methods, while chapter five describes the findings of this study. Chapter six discusses the findings in further detail, emphasizing the theoretical contributions and the practical implications of this scholarship. Lastly, chapter seven reiterates the significance of the study and leads into the appendix, which contains the items that were used to operationalize the described procedures.

Chapter 2. THE EMERGENCE OF NIL

Given this study takes places within the NIL marketplace, it is important to briefly address how the recent passage of NIL-related state laws and various Supreme Court resolutions influenced the NCAA's recent decision to allow college athletes to generate income by licensing their NIL rights. Doing so provides a foundational understanding of how the NIL marketplace was developed, while also contextualizing college athletes' increasing incentive to actively engage in personal branding efforts. Therefore, this chapter details the historical context of NCAA amateurism as well as the legal developments that have enabled college athletes to engage in commercial ventures based on their NIL value.

2.1 Background on the NCAA and its History of Amateurism

The NCAA is a non-profit governing body that maintains the basic purpose to “support and promote healthy and safe intercollegiate athletics, including national championships, as an integral part of the education program and the student-athlete as an integral part of the student body” (NCAA, 2025, p. 1). The association was formed out of a national concern to regulate the rules of college sport and protect young athletes from commercial exploitation (NCAA, 2014).

For years, the organization championed “amateurism” as its cardinal principle. The term was used to denote the NCAA's vested interest in “retain[ing] a clear line of demarcation between intercollegiate athletics and professional sports”, (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2014, p. 1) and was cited as an important distinction that helped preserve fair competition among member programs as well as the marketability of the college sports enterprise (Lodge, 2016). Amateurism also clearly defined collegiate athletics as avocations and

prevented players from receiving monetary remuneration outside of scholarship packages and monthly stipends (Afshar, 2014; Lodge, 2016; Serazio, 2025).

Additionally, around the mid twenty-first century, the NCAA coined the term “student-athlete”, which reinforced the idea that players are students first and their athletic participation is an extension of their academic experience (Soloman, 2018; Fisher, 2021). As a rhetorical tool, the label also further differentiated college athletes from professional athletes and framed the players’ motivation to participate in sport as a passion for the game (Solomon, 2018). This designation, the NCAA argued, helped maintain the ideal that intercollegiate athletics should provide a unique opportunity to obtain higher education (Afshar, 2014). However, critics have also argued that the label helps the organization to sidestep legal and financial liability, as it emphasizes athletes’ primary identity as students, rather than workers or professionals that are entitled benefits like health care and injury compensation (Southall & Stuarowsky, 2013; Soloman, 2018). In a similar vein, critics have suggested the term strategically downplays the value of players’ labor, further justifying why they shouldn’t be paid salaries (Soloman, 2018).

2.2 The NCAA’s Longstanding Prohibition of NIL Compensation

Additionally, for years, every February, on a day known as National Signing Day, athletes all over the country formally committed to the university of their choice by signing the National Letter of Intent and the Statement of Financial Aid (Meghamez, 2015). Although these documents were replaced by a new financial aid agreement in 2024 (Lederman, 2024), for 60 years they served as a binding agreement that granted players NCAA eligibility as long as they abided by the organization’s policies– including the amateurism guidelines that strictly governed their NIL rights and personal branding potential (Meghamez, 2015).

Upon signing these two documents, college athletes agreed to several NCAA bylaws, including Section 12.5 titled “Promotional Activities” which detailed permitted uses of a player’s “name, image, or appearance” by schools, conferences, and non-profits (NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff, 2014; Meghamez, 2015). This section also forbade college athletes and agencies, other than non-profits, from utilizing their NIL for commercial ventures or product marketing and prohibited college athletes from receiving anything of value for use of their athletic identity (Meghamez, 2015). However, it also explained that the NCAA and its affiliates retained the ability to enter into licensing agreements on the players’ behalf, without their involvement or compensation– which often involved negotiating lucrative broadcast partnerships and licensing deals with third-party entities that relied on players’ likeness (Meghamez, 2015). These included licensing deals with companies such as Electronic Arts (EA), Inc for the production of college sports video games; negotiations with merchandise brands for the production of replica jerseys featuring players’ identifiable names and jersey numbers; as well as contracts with broadcast networks for live/archival game footage.

While these arrangements significantly contributed to the visibility and commercial success of college athletics (Afshar, 2014), many people also questioned the fairness of “amateurism” as a business model. Southall and Staurowsky (2013), for instance, likened the NCAA to a hegemonic power that suppressed dissent through propagative language designed to “create the impression that the business practices associated with the running of big-time college sport are educational and not exploitative in nature” (p. 409). Moreover, others called out how the amateur designation forced college athletes to forfeit the right to license their NIL when agreeing to compete for an NCAA sport– even though third-party audits revealed a significant portion of the financial rewards generated for the organization and its member institutions relied

on players' labor and likeness (Afshar, 2014; Baker et al., 2018; Meghamez, 2015). A financial statement audit revealed that during the 2018 to 2019 fiscal year (one year prior to the introduction of new NIL legislation), the NCAA surpassed \$1 billion in athletics revenue for the first time and distributed \$560.4 million to Division I member schools (The Associated Press, 2018). This example illustrates the value of players' individual NIL and the profit the NCAA and its member institutions were able to generate as a result of it, further deepening critics view of the organization (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013; Afshar, 2014; Serazio, 2025). At the same time, it is important to note that this number does not include the additional revenue generated by member schools' athletic departments on their own.

Coupled with the growing popularity and commercialization of college sports, this pushback sparked several notable attempts at rectifying what some considered to be a "suppression" of college athletes' rights (Serazio, 2025). For example, in a 2009 landmark case, former UCLA Bruins basketball star, Ed O'Bannon posited that the NCAA had violated antitrust law by using his and several other players' NIL within video games and highlight reels without their consent or compensation (O'Bannon v. NCAA, 2015). Ultimately, the court ruled in favor of the athletes, both undermining the organization's legal foundation of amateurism and marking a shift in national discourse about players' rights (O'Bannon v. NCAA, 2015). Following suit, in 2015, football players from Northwestern University petitioned the National Labor Relations Board for union status to collectively bargain the terms and conditions of their athletic and academic participation (Northwestern v. NLRB, 2015). While their petition was ultimately unsuccessful, the case questioned the fairness of longstanding amateurism rules and laid the groundwork for future legal challenges (Northwestern v. NLRB, 2015).

Together these decisions catalyzed the establishment of state legislation regarding players' NIL rights. As a result, in 2019, California became the first state to establish a legal right for college athletes to profit from their NIL with the "Fair Pay to Play Act" (Farrey, 2015; Semaya, 2023). Although the law did not necessitate pay for players, it precluded universities from limiting their NIL monetization and revoking scholarships or playing eligibility because of it (Serazio, 2025). Several other states crafted similar legislation in response, including Texas, which has since passed some of the most comprehensive NIL laws (Semaya, 2023).

However, in one of the most consequential moments in this debate was the Supreme Court's landmark decision in the *Alston vs. NCAA* case in 2021. Although the ruling only expanded the education-related benefits (e.g. computers, supplies, tutoring, post-graduate scholarships, paid internships) college athletes could receive from their schools, it also questioned the legality of broader restrictions on athlete compensation and confronted the organization's reliance on amateurism as a business model as potentially exploitative under antitrust law (*NCAA v. Alston*, 2021). In the ruling, Justice Neil Gorsuch specifically called out the 'charade of amateurism', pointing to the high salaries of those who oversee college athletics such as conference commissioners, college athletic directors, coaches, and assistant coaches (McCann, 2021). In his concurring opinion, Justice Brett Kavanaugh also argued the NCAA's business model would be "flatly illegal in almost any other industry in America" (*NCAA v. Alston*, 2021, p. 43), specifically critiquing the suppression of salaries on the open market in order to preserve an ideal of playing sports purely for the 'love of the game' (McCann, 2021; Serazio, 2025). Ultimately, their comments led lawmakers, advocates, and the public to call on the NCAA to refine amateurism guidelines.

In consequence, a month after the *Alston* ruling, on July 1st, 2021, the NCAA issued a brief, yet foundational interim policy that altered longstanding amateurism rules by allowing college athletes to engage in NIL activities that are consistent with the state law where their school resides (Brutlag Hosick, 2021). It also permitted the use of professional service providers (sports agents) for facilitating NIL opportunities and required college athletes to report NIL activities to their school (Brutlag Hosick, 2021). The organization made it clear, however, that these endorsements should not be treated as ‘pay-for-play’ arrangements, or veiled opportunities to compensate players for their performance on the field (Brutlag Hosick, 2021). Since then, the organization has also introduced the NCAA NIL Assist, which is a platform designed “to serve as a centralized source for student-athletes to understand and make informed decisions about NIL” (NCAA, n.d., para 2). Together, these initiatives have supported college athletes in their pursuit of personal branding initiatives while they are still in school.

Moreover, in response to these legal developments, former college athletes filed the *House v. NCAA* settlement (2025), seeking compensation for athletes who were previously denied NIL opportunities while also advocating for a revenue-sharing model that would provide direct compensation to current athletes (Kloetzer et al., 2026). In June 2025, Judge Wilken approved a settlement that requires the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, and Southeastern Conference to distribute approximately \$2.8 billion in back damages to athletes who competed between 2016 and 2024 over a ten-year period (Kloetzer et al., 2026). Other Division I institutions may elect to participate under the settlement's terms. Thus, although *Alston v. NCAA* (2021) served as the catalyst for NIL reform, the *House v. NCAA* settlement has arguably had a more profound impact by formally recognizing the

economic value of college athletes' labor and further distancing collegiate athletics from its longstanding amateurism model.

At the time of this paper, 32 states have also enacted their own NIL legislation, most of which have been modeled after California's "Fair Pay to Play Act" (Saul Ewing, n.d.). The remaining states do not have specific NIL laws and instead rely on the NCAA's interim policy (Saul Ewing, n.d.). Given this inconsistency, Semaya (2023) reports that many institutions have requested uniform federal legislation to help ensure a future of fair competition among NCAA member programs. Although a national solution has yet to be implemented, a recent executive order stated that third party endorsements should continue as long as they reflect "fair market value" (Murphy, 2025, pp. 5).

2.3 The Impact of NIL Legislation on the College Sports Landscape

The legitimization of NIL opportunities has drawn mixed analyses about its impact on both the college sports landscape and the players themselves. Some scholars offer neoliberal critique by likening NIL to a resurgence of the "gig economy" and raising concerns about potential instability and inequity. Ehrlich and colleagues (2023), for instance, describe the proliferation of alternative revenue sources under NIL as exploitative of college athletes' labor and a resurgence of an "uber-esque" landscape that fails to give college athletes proper employment benefits such as "workers' compensation, discrimination protections, and minimum wage" (p. 319) for their time and effort. On the other hand, scholars such as Stahler and Pennington (2025), also suggest the experience of negotiating NIL opportunities may help college athletes develop professional skills that will be applicable for future job positions.

At the same time, researchers also point to a discrepancy in the distribution of NIL opportunities across athlete gender, legal status, and conference (Stahler & Pennington, 2025).

For example, industry analysts report that the top 43 NIL earners are athletes competing in male sports (On3, 2026). There is also impressive growth, however, in the public interest in women's college basketball, as athletes such as Juju Watkins, Hailey and Hannah Cavinder, and Paige Beuckers secured the most NIL deals among female college athletes during the 2024 – 2025 season (Sponsor United, 2025). Similarly, Olivia Dunne, a highly competent gymnast who competed for Louisiana State University amassed roughly \$4.1 million from endorsement deals in 2025 largely due to her social media presence (Nakos, 2025). These findings are significant, as some scholars suggest that social media offers female athletes' greater agency in the portrayal of their public image and enables them to disrupt the norms of sports media (Thorpe, 2017; Bruce, 2013). Moreover, some scholars have written about how NIL sponsorships and increased social media use may help close the visibility gap between men's and women's sports (Cooky et al., 2021); although, others argue this equalizer has yet to happen (Boston, 2022).

Additionally, players from foreign nations face barriers for NIL compensation due to potential complications with F-1 visas, which prohibit holders from working while residing in the United States (Murphy, 2025). Although, college athletes may be able to apply for a P-1A visa in the future– the type of visa most often used by professional athletes in that it allows them to make money while playing sports in the United States– as it currently stands, guidance remains unclear as to whether paying college athletes from foreign countries via third-party endorsements complicates their immigration status (Murphy, 2025).

Additionally, Division I athletes earn significantly more than athletes competing for Division II and Division III schools, let alone community colleges (Cocco & Moorman, 2022). Moreover, industry analysts consistently report that top NIL earners generally emerge from “Power Conferences” (the Southeastern Conference, the Big Ten Conference, the Big Twelve

Conference, and the Atlantic Coast Conference), while those competing within mid-major conferences, such as the Mountain West, tend to earn much less (Drape & McCann, 2024). Since power conferences consist of the highest-profile schools, backed by the largest athletic budgets and donor/fan bases (or collectives), the athletes competing within them are positioned to obtain the greatest NIL opportunities (Drape & McCann, 2024). This discrepancy has the potential to disrupt the college sports enterprise, as the transfer portal has allowed college athletes to essentially “shop” themselves and commit to schools based on the affiliated collectives’ ability to help them secure lucrative NIL sponsorships (The Athletic College Football, 2024).

2.4 The Current State of College Athlete Branding

Nevertheless, since the 2021 ruling, the NIL industry has ballooned into more than a \$1 billion business (Sponsor United, 2025). A recent report by the College Sports Commission illustrated the scope of this emerging marketplace by reporting that 8,000 NIL deals, valued at more than \$80 million in total, were approved since June of 2025 (Russo, 2025). The same reported noted that these deals offered payouts ranging in value up to \$1.6 million.

At the time of this study, industry analysts identify the most common method of NIL monetization as paid social media endorsements, particularly those taking place on Instagram (Opendorse, 2025; Sponsor United). Considering 65-75 percent of the social media followers for college athletes consist of Gen Z users (Opendorse, 2025), college athletes are positioned to serve as persuasive influencers for this group of consumers. This is significant since Gen Z, as a generational cohort, has been recognized as an influential consumer group due to their purchasing power and ability to directly influence the buying behavior of their parents (Batra and Ali, 2015).

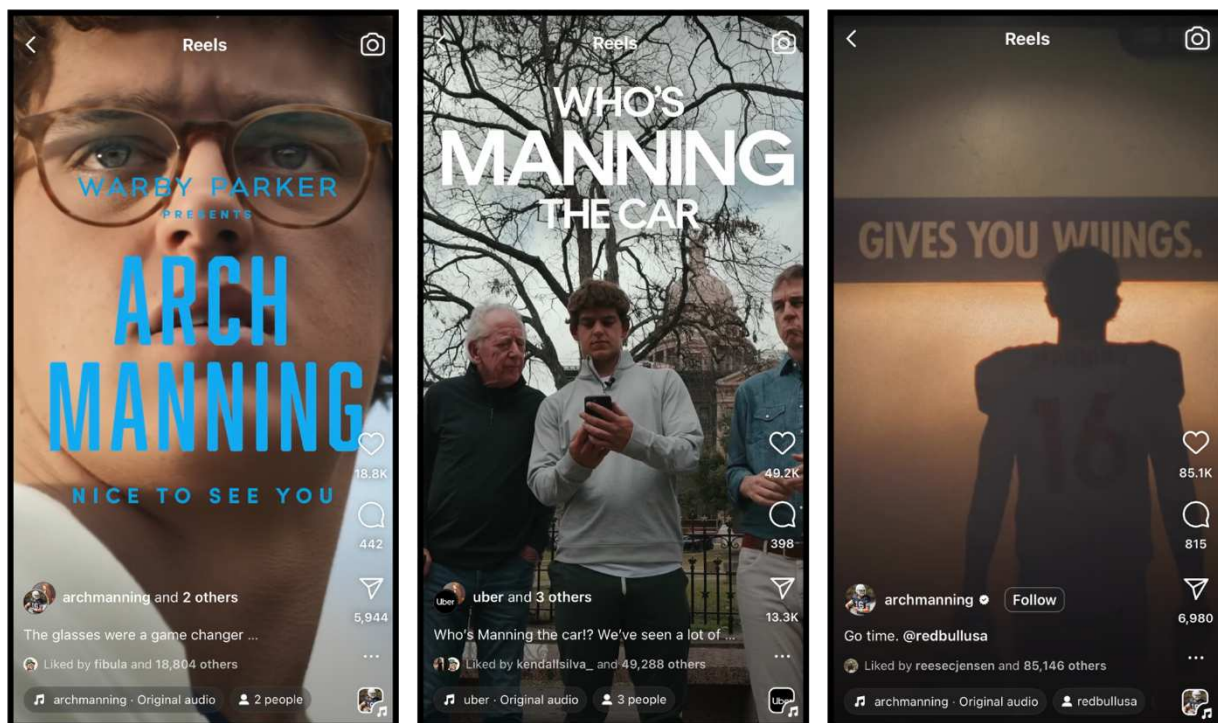
Sponsor United (2025) also revealed that five brands currently dominate the NIL marketplace: EA Sports inc., Raising Cane's, Powerade, and Epsilon (via Opendorse). EA Sports recently executed the largest single-sport NIL deal in history by compensating more than 14,000 Football Bowl Subdivision players \$1,500 each for their inclusion in the upcoming 2026 College Football video game (Vannini, 2025). Epsilon took a similar approach, offering every female college athlete competing in the Women's Division I basketball championship \$500 to participate in their "Work Together to Win Together" campaign on Instagram (Epsilon Marketing, 2024). The fast-food restaurant, Raising Cane's, also cemented itself as an NIL mainstay by partnering with several National Championship-winning collegiate athletes to surprise customers at restaurant locations and promote a Sportique x Raising Cane's apparel line (Sponsor United, 2025). Technology and non-alcoholic beverage deals have also infiltrated the market, with industry analysts reporting Nintendo and Red Bull as some of the most active brands (Sponsor United, 2025).

High-profile athletes, such as Arch Manning (a quarterback at the University of Texas) and Jeremiah Smith (a wide receiver at Ohio State University) both illustrate the scope of NIL potential and how brands have leveraged college athletes' social media presence to pursue marketing initiatives. Despite only have 538K followers on Instagram (Manning, n.d.), Manning has become one of the most recognizable college athletes in the country (On3, 2026). Since multiple members of the Manning family— including his grandfather Archie Manning as well as his uncles' Payton and Eli Manning— played in the National Football League (NFL), and two of them have become professional broadcast commentators since their professional playing careers, the Manning family name derives strong brand recognition and marketability. As a result, going into the 2025 college football season, Manning was ranked the highest-paid college athlete via

NIL deals (with a 6.3-million-dollar NIL valuation) with lucrative collaborations with companies such as Warby Parker, Raising Cane's, Panini America, Vuori, Uber, Redbull, EA Sports, and more (On3, 2025). With many of these partnerships involving social media endorsements, Arch Manning has been able to successfully leverage his name and status to pursue SMI efforts, positioning him as an influential persona for followers. On Instagram, his sponsored posts include a mixture of user-generated content and brand-generated content with high-production value (Manning, n.d.). Examples of his recent Instagram endorsements can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Examples of Arch Manning's NIL endorsements on Instagram



Note: From right to left– Arch Manning's NIL partnerships with Warby Parker, Uber, and Redbull. Screenshots via Instagram.

In a similar vein, On3 (2026) estimates suggest that Ohio State's wide receiver, Jeremiah Smith, has earned roughly \$4.2 million in NIL partnerships with companies such as 7-Eleven,

American Eagle Outfitters, Adidas, Nintendo, and more (Figure 3). His All-American status and record-breaking athletic achievements elevate the marketability of his personal brand. Given that many of his partnerships include an element of social media endorsement, Smith is also positioned to serve as an influential SMI for followers. Examples of his recent endorsements can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Examples of Jeremiah Smith's NIL endorsements on Instagram



Note: From left to right– Jeremiah Smith’s NIL partnerships with 7-Eleven, Nintendo, and EA Sports. Screenshots via Instagram.

Chapter 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Park et al. (2020) described social media as a place where athletes have the ability to interact and connect with fans, followers, and supporters to share facets of their personal life, including interests, achievements, and hobbies while simultaneously shaping their personal brand. In line with this, many sport marketing and communication scholars contend that PSRs are increasingly relevant when it comes to evaluating how athlete endorsements influence consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes (Su et al., 2023; Klostermann et al., 2023; Harry & Kloetzer, 2025). This is particularly relevant considering the friendly, direct nature of athletes' communication with fans on social media– which mimic genuine social interaction and contribute to PSR development (Hambrick et al., 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Frederick et al., 2012; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Klostermann et al., 2023). Their content also often provides glimpses into their personal lives, fostering a sense of closeness and familiarity among followers, further enhancing parasocial dynamics (Bond, 2016).

In addition to sharing information about themselves with fans, scholars argue that college athletes can use their social media channels to build and sustain a profitable identity (Kunkel et al., 2021; Cocco & Moorman, 2022). At the same time, brands may be able to leverage parasocial dynamics to pursue a number of desirable marketing objectives such as increasing awareness, shaping consumer attitudes, and driving purchase-related attitudes and behaviors (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

Thus, when college athletes promote products, share branded content, and engage with followers, they are positioned to serve as powerful intermediaries between brands and their audiences. Given the persuasive power embedded in these interactions, it is critical to examine

the nature of PSRs between college athlete influencers and their followers, as it plays a central role in the effectiveness of NIL-driven marketing strategies.

3.1 Parasocial Relationships

Horton and Wohl (1956) originally conceptualized parasocial interaction (PSI) as a “simulacrum of conversational give-and-take” (p. 215) that occurs through mediated channels and fosters a sense of intimacy between audience members and media performers, or “personae”. Their work also alluded to a related concept, the parasocial relationship (PSR), which has since been used by sociologists and media scholars to describe an enduring emotional connection that audience members may develop with a media performer through repeated exposure to PSIs over time (Dibble et al., 2016). In this dynamic, a media persona sustains the illusion of an ongoing relationship, leading the devotee to believe they know the persona more intimately than others do (Dibble et al., 2016).

Although PSI and PSR have often been used interchangeably in literature, there have been a number of studies in recent years that put forth important distinctions between the two concepts. According to Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011), PSI refers to the way a media user reacts/responds to a media persona in a single exposure situation that is similar to how they would respond in a real social interaction. Horton and Strauss (1957) also distinguish PSIs from purely imaginative interactions by arguing that they are initiated and directed by the persona; thus, suggesting that PSIs can be deliberately facilitated through strategic management of a persona’s mediated presence. They further contend these interactions may be triggered when a persona acknowledges the presence of the audience, demonstrates an informal conversation-style, and physically and verbally addresses audience members in their performance (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Horton & Strauss, 1957). When taken together, Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011)

also contend these actions can initiate a sense of reciprocity for audience members derived through perceptions of “mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment” with the media performer (p. 1107). They recognize these as the experiential qualities of PSIs, which combine to give audience members the impression a performer is aware and paying attention to them; thus, prompting adjustment of their own behavior as if they were actually interacting with the performer (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). These moments are distinct from PSR, which Dibble et al. (2016) conceptualize as the enduring relationships that can emerge from recurrent, one-sided interactions like these.

Additionally, despite audience members perceived accumulation of knowledge and loyalty overtime, Horton and Wohl (1956) argue the resulting relationships (PSRs) are ultimately illusory— only appearing to resemble reciprocal ortho-social relationships— as they are one-sided, nondialectical, entirely controlled by the performer, and not susceptible to genuine mutual development. Therefore, although the devotee may consider a persona to be a friend, counselor, comforter, and/or model, Horton and Wohl (1956) emphasize that they are, in reality, a carefully constructed character shaped by writers and managers according to a standardized formula— which makes the development of a genuine mutual bond impossible.

3.2 PSIs via Social Media

Since PSI originated in mass communication scholarship to explain the one-sided interactions that can occur in traditional media environments, early studies examined parasocial dynamics between audience members and newscasters (Pamlgreen et al., 1980; Rubin et al., 1985), soap opera characters (Perse & Rubin, 1989), as well as television and radio talk show hosts (Rubin & Step, 2000). However, more recently, scholars have extended the application of this theory to the interactive social media environment (Hambrick et al., 2010; Labrecque, 2014;

Bond, 2016; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Su et al., 2023; Frederick et al., 2012). For instance, Labrecque (2014) revealed that when personae offer timely, personalized, and direct responses on social media, they facilitate perceptions of interactivity and openness, fostering feelings of PSI among users. Additionally, Cohen (2003) related following and unfollowing someone on social media to starting and breaking up a relationship, while Yuksel and Labrecque (2016) characterized technological functions such as “tweeting to, retweeting, and favoriting” (p. 315) as tools that allow users to parasocially interact with prominent figures in the context of Twitter. Although these studies point to a narrow form of interactivity, they are significant in that they allow users to respond to media personae similarly to how they would in real-life encounters (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Also, it is important to note these interactions are classified as PSIs, which are distinguished from social interactions, in that they are one-sided behaviors that play a role in helping sustain an illusion of intimacy (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Building on this, sport marketing and communication scholars contend that social media platforms are fundamentally changing the nature of fan-athlete relationships by enabling direct and frequent interactions between them (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Frederick et al., 2012). More specifically, Hambrick et al. (2010) determined six uses of social media by professional athletes (interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content sharing, promotional, and fan ship) and identified ‘interactivity’ as the most common category of use employed by professional athletes on Twitter. The researchers used this term to describe a professional athlete’s direct communication with other athletes and fans via direct message and responses to posted tweets (Hambrick et al., 2010). In a similar vein, Frederick et al. (2012) and Kassing & Sanderson (2010) also revealed that professional athletes most frequently use Twitter to directly communicate with fans about subjects such as race

conditions, family life, religious beliefs, and more. Together these results suggest that social media platforms go beyond the capabilities of mainstream media by affording fans direct, unfiltered access to their favorite athletes at all times.

Although these studies explained parasocial dynamics as episodic, situational experiences, they also suggest the technological affordances provided by social media facilitate an interactive, complex, and dynamic environment that can help cultivate enduring connections between users and athletes by allowing them to characterize well-known athletes “as if they were in the circles of their peers” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Results of these studies also suggest that isolated interactions can intensify an already burgeoning PSR (Bond, 2016).

3.3 Athletes’ Self-Presentation on Social Media

Closely related to scholarly understandings of PSRs and empirical examinations of how interactive elements of social media are changing fan-athlete relationships is a growing body of interdisciplinary literature that has explored the significance of athletes’ increasing self-disclosure of details related to both their personal and athletic lives with fans, followers, and consumers via social media (Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Geurin-Eagleman, 2016; Doyle et al., 2022; Wanzer et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2024; Scovel, 2025). These studies commonly drawn on Goffman’s (1959) self-presentation theory to explain how athletes regulate the impressions, behaviors, and attitudes of others by posting online content that reflects both frontstage and backstage performances of self. The framework conceptualizes frontstage performances as depictions of publicly visible behaviors or formally disclosed information, and backstage performances as representations of the “behind-the-scenes” aspects of one’s personality that are typically reserved for close relationships (Goffman, 1959; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). In sport media contexts, scholars have used these concepts to distinguish between content that depicts an

athlete in action, or actively competing, from content showing an athlete's lifestyle outside of their sport, or in non-athletic settings (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Scovel, 2025). For example, Wanzer et al. (2024) applied this framework to a content analysis of college athletes' Instagram and TikTok accounts, revealing the athletes generally presented a combination of frontstage and backstage content by posting promotional and sport-related updates alongside casual, personality-driven material. The researchers also revealed gendered differences in the self-presentation techniques employed by male and female athletes, noting that "female athletes are most often presented in a backstage frame, where their salient identity as an athlete is minimized and instead, physical appearance is promoted" (Wanzer et al., 2024, p. 597). Conversely, they revealed that male athletes generally post more content displaying their athletic performance and marketable lifestyle, reflecting similar findings in previous literature on male athletes' self-presentation techniques (Doyle et al., 2022). Moreover, an additional content analysis by Xue et al. (2024) reaffirmed these results. In their study, the researchers investigated gendered differences in college athletes' self-presentation techniques on Instagram, revealing the female athletes in their sample predominantly posted personal stories, with less emphasis on athletic actions, while the male athletes distributed their content more evenly across inspirational messages, personal stories, and athletic highlights (Xue et al., 2024). It is important to note, however, that Smith and Sanderson's (2015) findings contradict the results of these studies, as their content analysis revealed that female college athletes posted more photos of them actively competing on Instagram than their male counterparts did. It is possible that male athletes took a more strategic approach to the management of their social media accounts and began posting more athletic content following the passage of NIL-related legislation; however, this is a gap in literature that future research may wish to address.

Nevertheless, these findings point to potential differences in the way female and male athletes respond to the conditions of their lives, especially given the increasing incentive to pursue personal branding initiatives in the new NIL era. Scovel (2025), for instance, observed that while three female college athlete influencers (Haley Cavinder, Hanna Cavinder, and Olivia Dunne) frequently shared backstage content emphasizing heteronormative femininity on Instagram and TikTok, they also shared posts that strategically conveyed their athletic identities. These findings prompted Scovel (2025) to expand Goffman's framework (1959) to include a competition-adjacent category, which allowed for further assessment of how these female athletes subtly portrayed aspects of their athletic identity within posts highlighting their physicality or personal attributes. Given that posts within this category depicted aspects of their athletic, personal, and gender identities simultaneously, the posts complicated the binary notions of back and frontstage performance (Scovel et al., 2025). Since Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) assert the images that fall within this category often generate high fan–athlete interaction, Scovel (2025) suggests that competition-adjacent posts may demonstrate how female athletes attempt to manage the cultural and economic demands of SMI influencing—pointing to the complicated and layered nature of female athlete branding in the NIL era. This explanation is in line with Corr et al. (2023), who similarly explained that although “athletic performance is equally important for a women's sport athlete to grow their social media following” (p. 342), female athletes face additional pressure to represent themselves as both athletic and feminine subjects— a distinction that is more prominent for women than men, as “athletic” and “masculine” traits are more often perceived to be complementary in the United States' sporting culture (Anderson, 2009). Thus, it is possible that gendered differences in the self-presentation techniques employed by college

athletes on social media in the NIL era may be the result how male and female athletes uniquely internalize and embody larger societal expectations (Thorpe, 2017).

Scholarship on self-presentation is relevant to this study in that it connects to another interesting component of PSR development. In their original paper, Horton & Wohl (1956) suggested that a media persona may develop intimate relationships with audience members by sharing “the small episodes of his public life—and to some extent even of his private life” (p. 216). Thus, when athletes provide details about their personal and athletic lives as well as inside perspectives about game conditions and activities surrounding competitions, such as warm-up/cool-down routines, injury treatments, team dinners, etc. (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), they are offering intimate insight into their lives, which can lead users to feel as if they know the athlete personally, fostering enduring PSRs (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Klostermann and colleagues (2023) found evidence for this when they revealed that the professional soccer players who posted a combination of content depicting their personal lives and careers as athletes on Instagram positively influenced PSR development among participants (Klostermann et al., 2023). These results reaffirmed the findings of Yuksel and Labrecque (2016), who determined that NCAA athletes’ use of Twitter to share their daily experiences, provide personal information, communicate their thoughts on contemporary issues, and to publicize their personal values and circumstances enhanced PSR levels among fans.

Thus, it is evident that patterns of self-disclosure give fans the opportunity to accumulate in-depth information about their favorite athletes over time, increasing perceptions of intimacy and familiarity, and enhancing PSR development.

3.4 College Athletes: SMIs or Celebrity Endorsers?

Although it is evident that athletes have been using social media to interact with and share different facets of their lives with fans, the introduction and proliferation of NIL ventures have placed greater emphasis on the individual identity and marketability of college athletes, encouraging them to develop distinct personal brands that reflect their values and interests. With that, scholars recognize the significant role of social media in this development, arguing that platforms such as Instagram have enabled college athletes to create personal narratives that resonate with fans and foster authentic connections; thus, positioning them as effective SMIs for brand and product endorsements (Su et al., 2023; Cocco et al., 2023; Fridley et al., 2024; Harry & Kloetzer, 2025).

At the same time, the omnipresence of social media has spurred a growing body of literature across various research fields aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of SMIs as a marketing tool (Vrontis et al., 2021). This has also introduced multiple conceptualizations of the SMI. For instance, Freberg et al. (2011) defined the social media influencer as an “independent third party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (p. 90), while other scholars have likened SMIs to “endorsers” (Chung & Cho, 2017), or individuals who leverage their public recognition to promote a consumer good by appearing alongside it in an advertisement (McCracken, 1989). In contrast, Yuan and Lou (2019) identified the SMI as “first and foremost a content generator” who obtains marketing value by leveraging their expertise on a subject and regularly disseminating social media content to followers (p. 51).

More recent published work has expanded this scholarship by specifying five categories of SMI: the celebrity influencer, megainfluencer, macroinfluencer, microinfluencer, and

nanoinfluencer (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). These categories are not only designated by follower count, but also by an SMI's origin of notoriety and fame— an important component that can significantly influence elements of their branding (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). For example, Campbell and Farrel (2020) describe the 'celebrity influencer' as an individual who gains public recognition independent from social media and then uses their social media account(s) to support their career and generate brand partnerships (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This explanation significantly differs from their conceptualization of the 'megainfluencer', which is used to characterize the individuals who have enjoyed significant follower growth on social media, and may have even reached celebrity status, but nevertheless are people who lacked celebrity status prior to becoming recognizable influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). These designations are beneficial in that they reflect the sentiments of Vrontis et al. (2021), which propose that different SMI types may yield varying consumer responses, which may also be explained by different underlying mechanisms. Vrontis et al. (2021) also calls for a more refined understanding of influencer marketing by expanding empirical insight into how consumers' potentially process and react differently to various SMI types.

With that in mind, Campbell and Farrell's (2020) nuanced conceptualization of the SMI is particularly important to this study because it considers how origin of recognition impacts an SMI's brand, which is particularly relevant considering how NIL-related legislative changes prompted many to college athletes to engage in social media influencing at different points in their careers. While earlier definitions of the SMI, such as Lou and Yuan's (2019), emphasized user-generated content as the sole source of influencer expertise and fame, Campbell and Farrell's (2020) contribution accommodates athletes who have who have leveraged their fame or athletic recognition to distribute social media content and develop a marketable personal brand

online, as well as those whose origin of acclaim can strictly be attributed to their dissemination of social media content. Olivia Dunne, for instance, amassed more than 5.4 million Instagram followers (Dunne, 2025) and obtained celebrity status primarily by posting candid and flirty depictions of her experience in collegiate gymnastics, aligning her more with the megainfluencer designation. At the same time, Arch Manning represents a different type of SMI, as he has been able to leverage name recognition derived from a family legacy of NFL football players, serving as a prominent example of the ‘celebrity influencer’.

Thus, while prior definitions of the SMI could potentially alienate college athlete influencers, such as Manning– who have been able to effectively leverage their prior notoriety and status to pursue SMI efforts– the categories put forth by Campbell and Farrell (2020) allow for examination of these athletes. Therefore, drawing on previous literature, this study conceptualizes college athlete influencers as individuals who attract a mass audience, develop a fan base, and become a source of advice to their followers (Vrontis et al., 2021) and can be categorized by one of Campbell and Farrell’s (2020) specifications.

3.5 College Athlete Influencers

Research shows that users are often drawn to influential SMIs for consumption-related information and/or insight into specific subjects, such as tips on healthy living, travel, food, beauty, and more (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Brands may employ marketing strategies to effectively leverage SMI’s pre-existing relationships with consumers to pursue favorable brand outcomes (Leung et al., 2022; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Repeated exposure to these SMIs may also lead users to develop intimate relationships with them, which can be studied as PSRs.

Given consumers growing skepticism toward traditional marketing tactics, marketers are increasingly opting to select and incentivize online influencers to engage with followers in a way

that promotes their brand and products (Leung et al., 2022). Using elasticity, a conventional measure known to evaluate advertising effectiveness by assessing both cost and engagement, Leung et al. (2022) found that SMIs who share both positive and negative self-generated content, engage in medium-level posting frequency, sustain large followings, and incorporate clickable mentions and URL links can maximize their elasticity for brands looking to use SMIs to effectively engage consumers. On the flip side, Scholz (2021) explored what motivates consumers to seek out and engage with SMIs, finding that not only do consumers turn to SMIs to identify trending topics, they are also well aware of SMI's financial incentive to promote products, so they vet influencers based on their level of independence from brands and strategically select to follow influencers based on their expertise level of on a particular subject. Kim and Kim (2021) offered similar results, explaining when consumers perceive an SMI to have expertise on a subject, post authentic content, and share personal similarities with them, this enhances trust and fosters favorable brand outcomes, though the relative impact of these factors may vary depending on the strength of the influencer–follower relationship.

With all of this in mind, when college athletes act as social media influencers, Kunkel et al. (2021) claim they are positioned to successfully leverage the “inherent brand value” (p. 6) that is derived from their NIL. Su et al. (2023) also recognize that when engaging in social media influencing efforts, college athletes benefit from possessing multiple identities— including their identities as a student, an athlete, and an influencer. Each of these identities, they argue, can help college athlete SMIs cut through the noise of other SMI's marketing communication, can enhance consumers' perception of their expertise and credibility, and can serve as important touchpoints that foster feelings of shared identification, enhancing the influencer-follower relationship (Su et al., 2023). Furthermore, researchers explain that social media provides cost-

effective channels for athletes and brands to connect with consumers beyond geographic limitations (Cocco et al., 2023; Geurin, 2017). Cocco et al. (2023) also confirm that frequent posting, account verification, and effective self-presentation strategies can increase engagement-levels (in terms of likes, comments, etc.) and enhance personal brand equity among college athletes. All of this goes to show that when college athletes post on social media and engage with followers, they can serve as powerful intermediaries between brands and their audiences and can be particularly effective for brands looking to connect with college-age consumers in an authentic way.

It is important to note, however, that even though social media enables college athletes to develop distinct personal brands that reflect their values and interests, researchers have also shown that athletes' personal brands are related to, but also independent, from the brand of the university they attend (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Kunkel & Biscaia's sport brand ecosystem explains this by conceptualizing "the relationship between university brands and student-athlete brands" (Kunkel et al., 2021, p. 9). It also provides a framework for understanding how brands within the sports industry are simultaneously connected and interdependent. For instance, in the NIL marketplace, universities and their athletic departments may serve as master brands while individual college athletes serve as sub brands that are situated within the larger university umbrella. Thus, consumer perceptions of an athlete are based upon evaluations of the athlete's attributes as well as numerous associations surrounding them. This framework has been applied in various studies (Kunkel et al., 2021; Cooky et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2022) to understand how individual athletes may develop and sustain marketable identities through entrepreneurship. These studies offered similar findings, noting that factors such as university brand, sport, gender, competition level, local competition, and more contribute to a college athlete's ability to develop

and sustain a profitable personal brand. Thus, although social media enables college athletes to create personal narratives that resonate with fans, develop authentic connections, and pursue profitable branding opportunities, their marketability is somewhat linked to other elements within the sport brand ecosystem (Kunkel et al., 2021).

3.6 Purchase Intention

When college athletes promote products, share branded content, and engage with followers, they serve as powerful intermediaries between brands and their audiences and can be particularly effective for brands looking to connect with potential consumers in an authentic way. Given the persuasive power embedded in their interactions, it is critical to examine the nature of PSRs between college athlete influencers and their followers, as it plays a central role in the effectiveness of NIL-driven marketing strategies.

According to systematic reviews by Vrontis et al. (2021) and Aldimi et al., (2025), purchase intention is a common variable used to measure the effectiveness of SMIs. Rooted in the theory of planned behavior, as a concept, purchase intention assumes that if an individual intends to buy something, they are more likely to do it, presuming no significant barriers exist. Therefore, it serves as a proxy for actual purchase behavior in many studies, especially when tracking real purchases is difficult. Thus, scholars have investigated how PSR building affects users' purchase intentions in several contexts (Chung & Cho, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019; Yuan et al., 2016; Hudders & De Jans, 2021; Su et al., 2023).

Numerous studies have found links between PSR and consumers' intent to purchase celebrity-endorsed products. For instance, Chung and Cho (2017) found a positive relationship between PSRs with Korean singers and perceived source trustworthiness, which in turn led to increased perceived brand credibility and purchase intentions for endorsed products. Moreover,

in the context of professional athletes, Yuan et al. (2016) surveyed a portion of LeBron James' social media followers and found that PSR was related to the brand equity of his main sponsor, Nike. These findings indicate that consumers' positive associations with an influencer can extend to the related brand, ultimately enhancing purchase intentions for promoted products (Yuan et al., 2016). Further studies confirm the link between PSRs and various attitudinal and behavioral constructs, including source credibility, which has been studied as a powerful antecedent in SMI research (Munnukka et al., 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

While prior studies have examined the mediating role of PSRs in SMI's ability to influence users' intent to purchase promoted products (Hudders & De Jans, 2021; Su et al., 2023) there remains limited research on the direct relationship between PSRs and purchase intention. Also, since Vrontis et al. (2021) recognizes that consumers may respond differently to different types of SMIs, it is important to empirically evaluate college athlete influencers as an emerging cohort of SMIs with persuasive potential. Therefore, the present study investigates how fans' PSRs with a specific college athlete influencer impacts their purchase intention of the products they promote on social media. Accordingly, this study builds on prior research and offers the following hypothesis:

H1: Participants reporting stronger PSRs with a college athlete influencer will indicate greater purchase intentions of the promoted product.

3.7 Brand Attitude

Brand attitude, which is a concept that refers to a consumers' overall evaluation of a brand that is comprised of their beliefs and attitudes about its capacity to deliver on a relevant buying motive (Handranata & Kalila, 2025; Rossiter, 2014), also plays a critical role in

advertising outcomes. For instance, Faircloth et al. (2001) explained that brand attitude plays an important role in consumers' perception of brand equity by enhancing brand image.

More recently, brand attitude has also become a widely studied construct in SMI literature (Vrontis et al., 2021; Aldimi et al., 2025). For instance, Trivedi and Sama (2020) found that expertise and attractiveness had a positive effect on consumers' purchase intentions by enhancing brand attitude. Rialti et al. (2024) also revealed that in a duopolistic market, or a market in which two brands compete for market dominance, mega influencers significantly impact consumers' attitudes toward dominant brands through positive or negative electronic word of mouth on social media. Further research also demonstrates that strong PSRs enhance the perceived credibility of SMIs, which subsequently translate into more favorable brand attitudes and positive advertising outcomes (Breves et al., 2021; Dibble et al., 2016). Munnukka et al. (2019) also found that PSRs with YouTube vloggers significantly influence favorable brand attitudes toward endorsed products. Similarly, Saini and Bansal (2025) revealed participants with stronger PSRs with influencers endorsing premium cosmetics lead to more favorable perceptions of the brands endorsed by the influencers.

Given the centrality of brand attitude in crafting effective advertising strategies, it is essential for sports marketers to understand how college athlete SMIs impact consumers' evaluations of endorsed brands. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Participants reporting stronger PSRs with a college athlete influencer will indicate greater brand attitudes toward the promoted product.

3.8 Conditions of PSR

In addition to examining PSRs as the central factor influencing purchase intention and brand attitude, this study explored how these relationships differ across contexts. Thus, product

involvement and college athlete gender were treated as conditions of PSR, reflecting distinct contexts in which fans engage with college athlete influencers. Moreover, during analysis consumer gender was also be examined as a grouping variable to identify potential differences in male and female consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes toward the endorsed products.

3.8.1 Product Involvement

Numerous studies have examined how the characteristics of a product (or good) can influence consumers' purchase intentions and attitudes toward a brand (Drossos, 2014; Sahaf et al., 2024). Product involvement refers to a consumers' perception of a product category's relevance, which indicates the level of interest it evokes (Dhoklakia, 2001). Measurements of product involvement often segment customers into high or low involvement groups based on their inherent values, needs, and interests (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). High-involvement products are considered imperative to the consumer and often require greater investment in purchase-related decision making (Tyrväinen & Karialuoto, 2025). They also generally pose risk, whether that be financial, social, and/or psychological and lead the customer to consider many variables before making a final purchase-related decision (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). Low-involvement products, on the other hand, are often less important to the consumer, generally low priced, contain little risk, and often require the consumer to engage in less deliberation before making a final purchase-related decision (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021). This distinction is in line with the Elaboration Likelihood Model put forth by Petty et al. (1986), which explains that persuasion occurs either through a central or peripheral processing route. In high-involvement product conditions, consumers may adopt a central processing route and consider logical arguments, while under the peripheral route, they may place greater emphasis on heuristics, such

as an influencer's appearance or social popularity during their purchase-related decision-making process.

Tyrväinen & Karialuoto (2025) found evidence that parasocial engagement is a strong predictor of purchase intention for low involvement influencer-promoted products. However, they did not find PSR to influence purchase intention for high-involvement products. They attribute this result to consumers recognition of SMI's hidden commercial motives for promoting products, and consumers' decision to seek out alternative, more credible sources when making purchases they consider more important, or high involvement. Additional studies by Sahaf et. al (2024) and Drossos (2014) affirm this finding, indicating that social media influencers are more effective at inducing purchase intention and fetching positive brand attitudes when promoting low-involvement products.

Understanding the influence of PSR on purchase intentions and brand attitudes across product types is crucial for marketers to tailor strategies based on target markets. Therefore, this study presents the following hypotheses:

H3: Participants in the low-involvement condition will report greater purchase intentions of the promoted product than those in the high-involvement condition.

H4: Participants in the low-involvement condition will report greater brand attitudes toward the promoted product than those in the high-involvement condition.

3.8.2 College Athlete Gender

Additional research suggests the gender of the SMI can impact consumers' perceptions and purchase-related decision making. For instance, Su et al. (2023) found that consumers reported higher overall purchase intentions for products promoted by male college athletes. In contrast, purchase intentions for products endorsed by female athletes were comparable only

when the athlete was visually depicted in the stimulus (Su et al., 2023). Although this finding may be explained by the fact that the female athlete in the study was considered less recognizable than the male athlete, this points to potential differences in the efficacy of male and female college athlete influencers in the NIL marketplace.

Additional research suggests that shared demographic factors, such as gender, can contribute to feelings of similarity (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), and in turn, influence consumers' behavioral motivations (Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023). When it comes to influencer-consumer relationships, gender congruence (such that the gender of the user/follower and the SMI are congruent) has been shown to enhance feelings of similarity, positively impacting consumers' purchase intent and brand attitudes through parasocial relations (Jin & Ryu, 2020). This is likely because the perceived similarity of an influencer affects how fans construct their imagined relationship, which impacts their decision to purchase the recommended product, as well as their attitudes about the affiliated brand. Hudders and De Jans (2022) found empirical evidence for enhanced perceived similarity after exposing users to same-gender endorsements compared to opposite-gender endorsements— which led to which led to increased PSI and resulted in higher post engagement as well as greater brand attitude. Kneisel and Sternadori (2023) offered similar results, noting that male viewers were significantly more likely to donate to gaming streamers, who are usually male, than female viewers were.

The current seeks to build on these perspectives by suggesting that gender congruence between college athlete influencers and their audiences may be a potential factor shaping purchase-related outcomes for NIL endorsements on Instagram. Therefore, this study presents the following hypotheses:

H5: Participants will report greater purchase intentions of the promoted product when the gender of the influencer and participant are congruent compared to when they are incongruent.

H6: Participants will report greater brand attitudes toward the promoted product when the gender of the influencer and participant are congruent compared to when they are incongruent.

3.9 Consumer Gender

Over the years, several studies have also examined the moderating effects of audience gender on PSI and PSR development. For instance, Wang et al. (2008) found that men and women have different motivations for parasocial media use, with females primarily engaging in PSI to fulfill a perceived lack of family relationships and males doing so to dissipate enduring feelings of loneliness. Other studies have also revealed that women tend to form more intense parasocial attachments than men (Tukachinsky et al., 2020) and that they are more likely to develop these attachments with figures of the opposite sex (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). However, it appears that digital platforms may be key contributors to these gendered differences, as Kneisel and Sternadori (2023) found that gender was not a significant predictor of parasocial dynamics in video game livestreams on Twitch or YouTube. This result may be attributed to the demographic and psychographic characteristics of the video game streaming industry– which is mostly male and prone to objectifying women, making it a community that is still not entirely welcoming of women (Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023).

Additionally, many marketing and communication scholars posit that there are significant differences in the way male and female consumers respond to digital marketing campaigns and social media influencer activity. For instance, in an experimental study, Jin & Ryu (2020) found

gender significantly moderated the effects of envy and PSI on consumers' intent to purchase products endorsed by Instagram celebrities (SMIs). Moreover, they determined that PSI was more strongly associated with purchase intention among female consumers. Su et al. (2022) also pointed to gendered differences in the way that consumers respond to Instagram fitness influencers, as they revealed that female consumers were less likely than their male counterparts to purchase products endorsed by a male influencer who conspicuously displayed a masculine physique.

Together, these findings suggest that consumer responses to influencer endorsements may be shaped by distinct gender-based mechanisms. Considering the importance of identifying potential gender differences driving consumer purchase intention and brand attitudes, the current study provides a deeper understanding of how male and female consumers respond to college athlete influencers. Insights from this study may help brands and athletes in the NIL space tailor their marketing approaches more effectively. Thus, the current study proposes the following research question:

RQ1: How do male and female consumers potentially differ in their purchase intention and brand attitudes towards products promoted by college athletes on social media?

Chapter 4. METHODS

4.1 Research Objectives

This study builds upon existing SMI literature by offering insight into followers' relationships with college athlete influencers and the extent to which these relationships can be leveraged for persuasive messaging efforts. More specifically, this study:

1. Evaluated the persuasive quality of PSRs between followers and college athlete influencers.
2. Examined whether purchase intentions and brand attitudes differed across influencer gender and product involvement conditions.
3. Assessed differences in purchase intentions and brand attitudes between male and female consumers in response to products promoted by college athlete influencers.

To achieve these objectives, the current study measured participants' PSRs with an assigned college athlete. Mock social media posts featuring the athlete promoting a product of either high or low involvement level were shown to participants. After this, their purchase intentions and brand attitudes were measured using valid and reliable scales from previous studies (Su et al., 2023; Spears & Singh, 2004). Lastly, during analysis, trends in male and female participants' responses were recorded. Table 1 clearly states the objectives and the methods by which the present study achieved them.

Table 1

Research Objectives

Objective	Source Data	Method	Outcome data
1) Evaluated the persuasive quality of PSRs between followers and college athlete influencers.	Survey responses	Survey	Quantitative scale scores
2) Examined whether purchase intentions and brand attitudes differed	Random assignment to conditional stimuli featuring either a male or	Experiment	Quantitative scale scores

across influencer gender and product involvement conditions.	female college athlete influencer and a product of high or low involvement.		
3) Assessed differences in purchase intentions and brand attitudes between male and female consumers in response to products promoted by college athlete influencers.	Survey responses and using participant gender as a grouping variable	Survey	Quantitative scale scores

4.2 Study Design

In sports marketing contexts, researchers have used survey methodology to understand college athletes' roles and identities as influencers (Harry & Kloetzer, 2025). Researchers have also conducted content analyses to understand how social media may be used by college athletes to build personal brands and monetize their NIL (Cocco & Moorman, 2022; Kunkel et al., 2021); evaluate the extent to which the sport brand ecosystem impacts individual athletes' brand development and their earning potential (Cocco et al., 2023); and to examine how athletes strategically post content related to their personal and private lives within brand-building efforts (Wanzer et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2025; Scovel, 2025). Although there is a growing body of literature investigating how NCAA college athletes may use social media to build and sustain profitable personal brands, there remains limited empirical insight into how consumers respond to NIL-related product and brand endorsements on Instagram, due to the recency of this phenomenon.

Within scholarship on social media influencing, previous researchers have surveyed the strength of participants' PSRs with celebrities and the degree to which these relationships impact their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to product endorsements on social media (Yuan & Lou, 2020, Chung & Cho, 2017) or their desire to engage in donation efforts (Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023). More recently, other studies have relied on experimental methodology to

examine how PSR mediates the effect of projected identity in college athletes' product endorsements on Instagram (Su et al., 2023) and how audience participation impacts both the development of PSRs and the perceived credibility of YouTube vloggers (Munnukka et al., 2019). In a prior study, Su et al. (2022) also used a between-subjects experimental design to understand how male and female consumers responded to mock social media posts featuring a product endorsement by a male fitness influencer displaying a conspicuous or an inconspicuous muscle display. Jin & Ryu (2020) used similar methods to investigate how the gender of a celebrity influencer on Instagram moderated the effects of envy and PSI on consumers' purchase intent of endorsed products. Lastly, several studies have used experimental methodology to identify gender differences in the way consumers respond to same- versus other-gender SMIs on Instagram (Hudders & De Jans, 2022) and YouTube (Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023).

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design to measure how male and female participants' existing level of PSR with a given college athlete influencer impacted their purchase intention and brand attitudes toward a product endorsed on Instagram. To do so, a 2 by (male/female college athlete influencer) by 2 (high/low product involvement) between-subjects factorial design was used. Participants were randomly assigned and exposed to conditional stimuli displaying either a male or female college athlete influencer endorsing a product of either high or low involvement. During analysis, consumer gender was also analyzed as a grouping variable to identify differences in reported purchase intention and/or brand attitude scores among male and female participants. This design was appropriate because it enabled PSR to be measured as a naturally occurring antecedent, while also allowing for the systematic manipulation of influencer gender and product involvement.

4.3 Selection of Athletes and Products

To select the college athlete influencers and product categories that were used in the experiment, an online pretest survey was conducted first. This selection process ensured alignment with the target audience, enhancing the study's reliability and ecological validity. To carry this out, 78 undergraduate students at Colorado State University were asked to select up to three college athletes that were familiar to them from a list of the top 10 highest-paid male and female college athletes via NIL endorsements (On3, 2026). Given the players' popularity within athletic and social media spaces, as indicated by their estimated NIL value, the pretest revealed the players that were most familiar to the target audience— in other words, the athletes that participants would be most likely to recognize and have an existing parasocial relationship with. Results from the pretest revealed the most recognized male athlete to be Arch Manning ($n = 29$) and the most recognized female athlete to be Jada Williams ($n = 15$). After reviewing the athletes' social media accounts to ensure they had a presence, these athletes were selected for the main study.

The pretest survey also included four products categories that are commonly endorsed by college athletes: electrolyte sports drinks, fast food restaurants, athletic wear, electronic headphones (Opendorse, 2025). To operationalize these product categories, participants were shown four products: 1) an electrolyte sports drink by Powerade, 2) A meal at raising Cane's, 3) Bluetooth headphones by BeatsbyDre, and 4) Ultraboost running shoes by Adidas. Using a Constant Sum Rating Scale where total points sum to 100, participants were asked to distribute a fixed number of points to each of the four products to produce a clear ranking of the involvement-level of each product (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Participants reported the lowest average score for the electrolyte sports drink, Powerade ($M = 17.98$), and the highest average score for

BeatsbyDre Bluetooth headphones ($M = 32.19$). As a result, Powerade was selected to be the low-involvement product for the main study, while Beats headphones were designated the high-involvement product.

4.4 Stimulus

To create the stimulus materials for this study, actual photos from the chosen athletes' Instagram accounts were selected and modified. The pictures and text were manipulated to endorse either the low (Powerade) or the high-involvement (Beats headphones) product, depending on the assigned condition. Since Instagram is the most popular platform used by college athletes to pursue NIL-related SMI efforts (Sponsor United, 2025), the stimulus messaging was formatted to look as similar to an actual Instagram post as possible. For the same reason, the mock posts also used the chosen athletes' real Instagram usernames. Located in the appendix, figures three through six contain the mock social media posts that were used as stimulus messages for this study.

Also, to prevent confusion regarding whether or not the pictured athlete actually endorses the product that was featured in the stimulus material, at the end of the study, participants were debriefed and informed that the endorsements used in the questionnaire were fictitious and developed solely for experimental purposes. Appendix item 8.3 contains the message that was used.

4.7 Data Collection Procedures

4.7.2 Sample

Participants for this study were college students (aged 18 years and above), producing a convenience sample. Since researchers have identified college students as a young generation of consumers and the primary target of influencer marketing efforts (Eastman et al., 2020), as well

as an important cohort due to their purchase power and ability to influence the purchase behaviors of their parents (Batra & Ali, 2015), this sampling frame was appropriate for the current study. As such, college students were selected to be the sample for this study.

4.7.1 Recruitment

Participants were recruited via multiple channels to produce a sample representative of college students above the age of 18 years old. An invitation email was distributed to faculty members who agreed to share the study with their classes, and posters were displayed around Colorado State University's Fort Collins campus. The study was also posted on reddit threads related to college, academics, and college sports/athletes to supplement recruitment. Appendix item 8.1 contains the invitation email that was sent to faculty members and appendix item 8.2 has the message that was posted on Reddit about the study; however, both documents included a concise explanation of the purpose and procedures of the study, as well as the risks associated with participation. Moreover, they emphasized that involvement was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without penalty. The IRB-approved informed consent document reiterated this information for participants at the beginning of the questionnaire as well.

To encourage participation, those who completed the questionnaire were entered into a raffle to win one of five \$20 Amazon gift cards. The raffle winners received their financial compensation on April 24th, 2026, after data collection was closed and analysis had been completed.

4.7.3 International Review Board (IRB) Approval.

Since this study relied on human subjects, IRB approval was obtained on January 28th, 2026 (Protocol #7530). Additionally, the Social/Humanistic/Behavioral training was completed (record ID: 66003680).

4.5 Study Flow

This study was hosted on Qualtrics, an experience management software designed to facilitate the collection and analysis of data from questionnaires. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were given informed consent. Those who did not provide consent to participate were filtered out of the survey, while those who did were allowed to proceed. To promote attention and encourage thoughtful responses, participants were also asked, “Do you commit to providing thoughtful answers to the questions in this survey?” as put forth by Geisen (2022). Only respondents answering “Yes, I will” were retained for analysis.

Participants then reported their familiarity with the college athlete influencer they were randomly assigned to using 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1 = Not at all familiar” to “5 = Very familiar. The present study treated PSR as a naturally occurring antecedent; thus, only participants who indicated some level of prior familiarity with the athlete were retained for analysis. The justification for this is that only the participants who were already familiar with the assigned athlete would provide a measurable PSR; therefore, only these participants would be relevant to the study. As such, 172 of the recruited participants were excluded from analysis due to lack of familiarity with the assigned athlete.

Those that indicated some level of familiarity proceeded to answer a series of questions designed to measure the strength of their PSR with the assigned athlete. At the same time, they were given randomized red herring questions designed to mask the purpose of the study and prevent any priming of responses to the stimulus messaging. Participants were then randomly shown conditional messaging that featured the college athlete influencer they were assigned promoting the low-involvement product or the high-involvement product. Depending on the condition they were assigned to, participants were exposed to a mock social media post featuring

1) Arch Manning promoting Powerade, 2) Arch Manning promoting BeatsbyDre Bluetooth headphones, 3) Jada Williams promoting Powerade, or 4) Jada Williams promoting BeatsbyDre Bluetooth headphones. To check the manipulation of product involvement in the stimulus messaging, in an open-ended question, participants were asked to identify the product that was promoted in the post they viewed. Only responses that correctly identified the product shown in the post “passed” the manipulation check and were retained for analysis. This allowed for an examination of how the participants perceived the stimulus materials, while also working to manage the quality of the data. 11 respondents were removed due to a failed manipulation check.

The study concluded with demographic questions about participants’ age and ethnicity. This data enabled participant gender to be recorded as an additional factor to identify potential trends in how male and female consumers’ purchase intention and brand attitudes towards products promoted by college athletes in this context. Table 4, located in the appendix, illustrates the flow of the questionnaire.

After removing the participants who did not complete the questionnaire as well as those who failed the attention check, did not indicate any prior familiarity with the assigned athlete, or incorrectly identified the product that was promoted in the mock social media post they saw, this produced a final sample of 169 respondents. This data proceeded for analysis.

4.6 Instruments and Variables

The constructs of interest were measured using questionnaire items either adapted or adopted from previously validated scales. Adaptions were minimal– changes were enacted only to recontextualize questions (if needed) to ensure their relevance within the college athlete influencer context.

4.6.1 Independent Variable: PSR

PSR was measured using 21 reliable scale items adapted from the Parasocial Relationship Index for Social Media (PRISM) scale by Boyd and colleagues (2022). Although it is a relatively new scale, during its construction, the researchers identified relevant and distinctive items from three well-established parasocial scales, including the Audience-Persona Interaction Scale (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000), Parasocial Interaction Scale (Rubin et al., 1985), Celebrity-Persona Interaction Scale (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007), and adapted them to align with the specific dynamics of PSRs that are developed and sustained via social media contexts (Boyd et al., 2022).

The PRISM scale was selected to measure PSR in this study because it draws on concepts frequently covered in PSI/PSR literature and has proven to be a valid and reliable measure of the PSRs “individuals develop with online, social media celebrities” (Boyd, 2022, p. 12; Boyd, 2024). These constructs include “interest in”, “knowledge of”, “identification with”, and “interaction with” (Boyd, 2022; Boyd, 2024). In the PRISM scale, the “interest in” construct measures respondents’ level of concern for, attraction, and devotion to a social media celebrity— all of which address their willingness to follow and their level of care for the celebrity (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). The construct, “knowledge of”, refers to a respondent’s perceived understanding of the celebrity’s life as well as the extent to which they seek out additional knowledge about that individual (Boyd, 2022)— which was borrowed from Nordlund’s (1978) scale. Similar to Auter and Palmgreen’s Audience Persona Interaction Scale (2000), the “identification with” construct in the PRISM scale measures perceived similarities between the celebrity and the respondent, such as shared qualities and opinions. The final construct, “interaction with”, addresses the social aspect of viewing the celebrity’s posts, which similarly measures Nordlund’s (1978) perceived group identification factor.

Although PRISM was originally validated as a four-factor measure, the factors were moderately intercorrelated ($r = 0.42 - 0.65$) in a follow-up study (Boyd, 2024). As a result, Boyd (2024) suggested that the PRISM scale can be used to measure the construct of overall PSR strength; therefore, in the present study, participants' item responses were averaged to create a composite PRISM score representing PSR strength with the assigned college athlete. The composite scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.97$), with reliability analyses also indicating acceptable internal consistency across the four constructs: "Interest In" ($\alpha = 0.93$), "Knowledge Of" ($\alpha = 0.92$), "Identification With" ($\alpha = 0.96$), and "Interaction With" ($\alpha = 0.95$).

4.6.2 Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

After exposure to stimulus material, three reliable ($\alpha = 0.94$) scale items adopted from Su et al. (2023) were used to measure participants' intent to purchase the product endorsed in the mock social media post. This scale was selected because it was implemented in similar study of college athlete marketing, and because it exceeded the 0.70 threshold for acceptable internal consistency.

As such, participants used 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = not at all likely" to "7 = extremely likely" to answer three questions regarding their likelihood of purchasing the product promoted in the mock social media post: 1) The likelihood that I would purchase the products [COLLEGE ATHLETE'S NAME] endorsed in the post is ____; 2) My willingness to purchase the product [COLLEGE ATHLETE'S NAME] endorsed in the post is ____; 3) The likelihood that I would recommend the product [COLLEGE ATHLETE'S NAME] endorsed in the post to others is _____. Responses were averaged to create a composite score ($\alpha = 0.94$) representing participants' purchase intention regarding the product endorsed in the stimulus message.

4.6.3 Dependent Variable: Brand Attitude

Brand attitude was measured using five semantic differential items from Spears & Singh (2004). This scale was selected because it has achieved a high level of internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.71$) and because it is one of the most frequently used and validated measures of brand attitude in marketing and advertising research (Bergkvist & Langer, 2017; Nguyen & Vu, 2022). To carry this out, participants were asked to describe their overall attitudes about the brand in the mock social media post they saw using five scale anchors ranging from bad $\rightarrow$ good, unpleasant $\rightarrow$ pleasant, unfavorable $\rightarrow$ favorable, unappealing $\rightarrow$ appealing, and dislike $\rightarrow$ like. Responses were averaged to create a composite score ($\alpha = 0.94$) representing participants' brand attitude toward the product endorsed in the stimulus message.

4.6.4 Consumer Gender

Using a multiple-choice selection, participants were asked to select their gender: 1) Male, 2) Female, 3) A different term (please specify): _____.

4.6.5 Other Variables

Additional demographic questions were asked. Participants will ask to report their age, level of education, and ethnicity. This data was collected for additional contextualization and pattern analysis. Located in the appendix, table two contains a full list of the questions that were included.

4.8 Validity and Reliability of Proposed Study

4.8.1 Internal Validity

To ensure the internal validity of this study, several methodological safeguards were implemented. The study randomly assigned participants to one of the four conditions (male/female college influencer and high/low product involvement). Random assignment was

used to control for individual differences and reduce potential selection bias across groups, ensuring the observations from this study could be attributed to the manipulated variables.

Additionally, this study used standardized stimulus material across all experimental conditions. Each Instagram post maintained the same format, caption structure, and layout. In fact, mock posts only differed in the gender of the athlete and the level of product involvement. This consistency helped ensure that any variation in participants' responses was due to the intended manipulations rather than extraneous differences in message design, image type, or presentation style.

The constructs of interest were also assessed using validated and reliable measurement scales from previous studies. As mentioned in the previous section, the PRISM scale (Boyd, 2022) was used to measure PSR, while purchase intention and brand attitude were measured using scales from Su et al. (2023) and Spear & Singh (2004) accordingly.

Finally, a manipulation check was included to ensure that participants correctly perceived the stimulus materials and were attentive throughout the questionnaire. Additionally, a pledge was incorporated to ensure participants were engaged throughout the questionnaire. The participants that failed these checks or did not complete the questionnaire were excluded from analysis.

4.8.2 External Validity

To strengthen the external validity of this study, several aspects of the methodology were considered to enhance the generalizability of the findings of this study beyond the experimental setting. First, the study used actual college athletes currently competing for NCAA Division I programs as the basis for the mock Instagram endorsement stimuli. By using real athletes that are

recognizable to participants, the experimental materials reflected authentic social media experiences, thereby increasing the ecological validity of the study.

Second, the study's sampling frame was intentionally chosen because this population represents the primary target audience for influencer marketing (Eastman et al., 2020) and NIL-related endorsements (Opendorse, 2025). As such, the participants' attitudes and behaviors are likely to be similar to real-world consumers exposed to NIL endorsements on social media, supporting the generalizability of the results within similar demographic groups.

4.8.3 Ecological Validity

To increase the ecological validity of this study, the implemented procedures and materials were designed to reflect realistic social media experiences and consumer interactions. Specifically, participants were exposed to mock Instagram posts that closely resembled authentic content posted by college athlete influencers. Each post featured real photographs and usernames of the selected athletes, maintaining the visual and textual characteristics typical of social media endorsements. This approach ensured that participants interpreted and responded to the stimuli as they would in a genuine digital environment.

Additionally, by treating PSR as a naturally occurring antecedent rather than an experimentally induced variable, the study captured the real-world nature of these relationships as they exist prior to exposure to stimulus messaging. Measuring PSR before stimulus exposure allowed for a more accurate reflection of participants' preexisting familiarity and emotional connection to the athlete, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of the study's findings.

The decision to employ products commonly endorsed by college athletes also contributed to ecological validity by situating the experimental manipulations within realistic and contextually appropriate endorsement scenarios. Moreover, since Instagram is currently the most

popular medium for student-athletes' NIL promotions (Sponsor United, 2025), using it as the stimulus platform ensured that participants' experiences align with actual social media environments.

Together, these methodological choices ensure that the study's conditions, materials, and measured constructs reflect real-world influencer marketing efforts as closely as possible. This design enhanced the ecological validity of the research and strengthened confidence that participants' responses approximate genuine consumer behavior in the NIL marketplace.

4.8.4 Reliability

Lastly, to ensure the reliability of this study, all key constructs were measured using scales that have demonstrated high internal consistency and reliability in previous studies, a pilot study was also disseminated to a small sample of undergraduate students to identify any necessary revisions, and a manipulation check was incorporated to ensure that only high-quality responses were included in the final analysis.

Chapter 5. RESULTS

The data was cleaned using IBM Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) software, version 31. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) provided an initial exploration of the data by summarizing key variables in the study and participants' demographic characteristics. These statistics supported a contextual understanding of the sample and verified that random assignment across conditions produced relatively equivalent sample groups.

Composite scores for PSR, purchase intention, and brand attitude were used for analysis. Additionally, consumer gender was numerically coded as 1 = male and 2 = female, while gender congruency was coded as 0 = incongruent and 1 = congruent.

Correlational analyses were conducted to examine associations among continuous variables, and ANOVAs were used to compare group means across experimental conditions. Statistical significance was evaluated at an alpha level of 0.05, consistent with conventional standards in social science research (Kirk, 2013).

5.1 Hypothesis 1

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run to assess the relationship between PSR and purchase intention. Preliminary analysis showed the relationship to be monotonic, as assessed by the visual inspection of a scatterplot, supporting the use of Spearman's rho.

Results revealed a statistically significant, strong positive association between PSR and purchase intention, $r_s(167) = .68, p < .001$. This finding indicates that participants who reported stronger PSRs with the assigned college athlete influencer also reported higher levels of purchase intention for the endorsed product.

The strength of the correlation suggests a large effect size, indicating that PSR is a substantial predictor of purchase intention within the NIL endorsement context. Therefore, H1 was supported.

5.2 Hypothesis 2

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was also conducted to examine the relationship between PSR and brand attitude. Visual inspection of the scatterplot indicated a monotonic relationship between the variables, supporting the use of Spearman's rho.

Results revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive association between PSR and brand attitude, $r_s(167) = .40, p < .001$. This finding indicates that participants who reported stronger PSRs with the assigned college athlete influencer also reported more favorable attitudes toward the endorsed brand.

The strength of the correlation suggests a moderate effect size, indicating that PSR is meaningfully associated with brand attitudes within the NIL endorsement context. Therefore, H2 was supported.

5.3 Hypothesis 3

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether purchase intention differed between participants exposed to a low-involvement product and those exposed to a high-involvement product. Participants were classified into two groups: those shown stimuli in which the assigned athlete promoted Powerade, a low-involvement product ($n = 90$), and those shown stimuli featuring Beats headphones, a high-involvement product ($n = 79$). Participants in the low-involvement condition ($M = 4.12, SD = 1.47$) reported higher purchase intention scores than those in the high-involvement condition ($M = 3.11, SD = 1.39$).

Inspection of a boxplot revealed there were no outliers in the data. Results from a Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that purchase intention scores for the low-involvement condition did not deviate from normality ($p < .05$), $W(90) = .97$, $p = .07$, whereas the high-involvement condition showed a significant deviation from normality, $W(79) = .96$, $p = .01$. However, skewness (0.26 , $SE = 0.27$) and kurtosis (-0.37 , $SE = 0.54$) values were within acceptable ranges, and given the relatively large sample sizes, the ANOVA was considered robust to this deviation (Laerd, n.d.). Homogeneity of variances was met, as indicated by Levene's test ($p = .62$).

Results revealed a statistically significant difference in purchase intention between the low- and high-involvement conditions, $F(1, 167) = 21.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Participants in the low-involvement condition reported higher purchase intentions than those in the high-involvement condition, supporting H3.

5.4 Hypothesis 4

A one-way Welch ANOVA was conducted to determine if brand attitude scores differed between participants in the low involvement condition ($n = 90$) and the high involvement condition ($n = 79$). Participants in the low-involvement condition ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.45$) and high-involvement condition ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.14$) reported similar levels of brand attitude.

There were no outliers, as assessed by boxplot. Data was normally distributed for the high involvement group (Shapiro-Wilk, $p = .23$), but not for the low involvement group (Shapiro-Wilk, $p = .001$). However, skewness (-0.55 , $SE = 0.25$) and kurtosis (-0.06 , $SE = 0.50$) for the low-involvement group were within acceptable ranges, suggesting that the deviation from normality was not severe. There was heterogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test of homogeneity of variances ($p = .03$); therefore, Welch's ANOVA was used.

Results indicated there were no statistically significant differences in brand attitude between the low involvement and high involvement conditions, Welch's $F(1, 165.20) = 0.65, p = 0.42$. Moreover, the effect size was negligible, $\eta^2 = .004$, suggesting that the level of product involvement had minimal influence on participants' brand attitudes. As such, the results did not find support for H4, indicating that level of product involvement does not impact participants' brand attitudes in this sample.

5.5 Hypothesis 5

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether purchase intention differed based on gender congruence between participants and the influencer. Participants were classified into two groups: those whose gender was congruent with the assigned athlete ($n = 82$) and those whose gender was incongruent ($n = 89$). Participants in the congruent group ($M = 3.53, SD = 1.49$) reported similar purchase intention scores to those in the incongruent group ($M = 3.76, SD = 1.54$).

There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Although results from the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated a statistically significant deviation from normality for the incongruence group ($p = .03$), the congruence group met the assumption ($p = .10$). However, an inspection of skewness ($0.05, SE = 0.26$) and kurtosis values ($-0.73, SE = 0.51$) suggested that the distributions were approximately normal. Given the robustness of ANOVA to minor violations of normality with large and balanced samples, the analysis proceeded as planned (Laerd, n.d.). Homogeneity of variances was met, as indicated by Levene's test ($p = 0.89$).

The ANOVA revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in purchase intention between the congruence and incongruence conditions, $F(1, 167) = 0.94, p = 0.33, \eta^2 =$

0.006. The effect size was insignificant, indicating a trivial relationship. Therefore, H5 was not supported, suggesting that gender congruence between participants and college athlete influencers did not significantly influence purchase intentions in this sample.

5.6 Hypothesis 6

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether brand attitudes differed based on participant–influencer gender congruence (congruent vs. incongruent). Inspection of boxplots indicated the presence of a single outlier in the incongruence condition. To assess its influence, analyses were conducted both with and without the outlier; the pattern of results remained consistent across both analyses. Therefore, results from the full dataset are reported. Levene’s test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met ($p = 0.75$). Although the Shapiro-Wilk test suggested a deviation from normality for the incongruence group ($p = .007$), skewness (-0.50 , $SE = 0.26$) and kurtosis (-0.007 , $SE = 0.51$) values were within acceptable ranges, and the ANOVA was considered robust to this minor violation.

The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in brand attitudes between the congruent and incongruent conditions, $F(1, 167) = 2.05$, $p = .154$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. Participants in the incongruent condition ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.30$) reported slightly higher brand attitudes than those in the congruent condition ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.31$); however, this difference was not statistically significant. Therefore, H6 was not supported.

5.7 Research Question 1

To assess differences in purchase intentions and brand attitudes by consumer gender, one-way ANOVAs were conducted. Male participants ($n = 69$) reported higher purchase intentions ($M = 4.19$, $SE = 0.19$) and brand attitudes ($M = 5.14$, $SE = 0.15$) than female

participants ($n = 100$), who reported lower purchase intentions ($M = 3.27$, $SE = 0.14$) and brand attitudes ($M = 4.90$, $SE = 0.14$).

For purchase intention, boxplot analyses indicated no outliers. A Shapiro-Wilk test revealed a significant deviation from normality for female participants ($p = .01$), but not for male participants ($p = .66$). However, skewness (0.06 , $SE = 0.24$) and kurtosis (-0.59 , $SE = 0.48$) values were within acceptable ranges, suggesting no substantial violation of normality. Homogeneity of variance was met, as indicated by Levene's test ($p = .28$). The one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in purchase intention between male and female participants, $F(1, 167) = 16.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$, indicating that gender was a significant predictor of purchase intention in this context.

For brand attitudes, boxplot analyses again indicated no outliers. Shapiro-Wilk tests suggested deviations from normality for both male ($p = .037$) and female ($p = .005$) participants; however, inspection of skewness, kurtosis, and central tendency measures indicated that the distributions were approximately normal. Homogeneity of variance was satisfied, as indicated by Levene's test ($p = .49$). The one-way ANOVA indicated no statistically significant difference in brand attitudes between male and female participants, $F(1, 167) = 1.43$, $p = .23$, $\eta^2 = .06$, suggesting that gender was not a significant predictor of brand attitudes in this context.

Chapter 6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute to scholarly understandings of how PSRs function within college athlete influencer marketing, and the extent to which these relationships drive purchase-related decisions and attitudes. Moreover, the results suggest that consumer attributes play a vital role in how they relate to college athlete influencers, providing additional insight into how consumers perceive college athletes and the conditions by which social media posts promoting a product or brand are effective at influencing consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes.

The present study presents four theoretical contributions to literature on PSRs and social media influencers. First, it applies PSR theory to the NIL marketplace by demonstrating that college athlete influencers foster relationships that significantly shape consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes. Second, the findings add to literature on product involvement by showing that low-involvement products may be more susceptible to the “carry-over” of associations about the athlete. Third, the lack of support for the gender congruence hypotheses challenges existing assumptions about the role of demographic homophily in influencer marketing, suggesting parasocial dynamics may supersede such factors. Finally, the observed differences across consumer gender highlight the importance of examining individual-level characteristics in consumer behavior.

The study offers four additional practical implications. First, it provides empirical evidence to suggest that college athlete influencers serve as valuable intermediaries between brands and college-age consumers in an increasingly competitive digital marketplace. Second, it provides a strategy by which brands seeking entry into the NIL marketplace may select college

athletes to partner with, including prioritizing athletes with relational content and those competing within competitive conferences and sports. Third, the results suggest that sport marketers should carefully align product type with influencer strategy— particularly they should use college athletes to promote low-involvement products. Fourth, the study suggests that sport marketers should focus more on psychographic factors when segmenting audiences, rather than consumer gender alone.

6.1 Parasocial Relationships

Previous scholarship established that when college athletes use social media to share small episodes of their public and private lives with fans, it can lead them to feel as if they know the athletes personally, fostering enduring PSRs (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Klostermann et al., 2023). Although these relationships can serve personally meaningful functions for audiences— such as compensating for unmet social needs or feelings of loneliness (Wang et al., 2008)— they also present strategic value for brands. Specifically, brands may also be able to leverage these parasocial dynamics to pursue numerous desirable marketing objectives such as increasing awareness and driving purchase-related attitudes and behaviors (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

Previous scholarship hinted at this possibility, noting that that PSR is positively related to consumers' purchase intention (Chung & Cho, 2017) and favorable brand attitudes (Munnukka et al., 2019; Saini & Bansal, 2025) towards products endorsed by SMIs. The present study reaffirms these results, revealing there to be statistically significant, positive associations between consumers' PSRs with a college athlete and their level of purchase intention and brand attitudes toward products endorsed by that athlete on social media. Therefore, these results suggest that PSRs function as meaningful persuasive mechanisms in the NIL context, enhancing

the effectiveness of college athlete endorsements on Instagram. In this way, college athletes serve as powerful relational intermediaries between brands and consumers, particularly when the intended audience has developed a parasocial dynamic with them.

6.2 Product Involvement

Numerous studies have also examined how the characteristics of a product can influence consumers' purchase intentions and attitudes toward a brand. In SMI literature, scholars have found parasocial engagement to be a strong predictor of purchase intention for low-involvement products— or goods that are generally less important to consumers, low priced, and require less deliberation prior to making a final purchase-related decision (Drossos, 2014; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021; Sahaf et al., 2024; Tyrväinen & Karialuoto, 2025). Similarly, studies have found SMIs to be effective in drawing positive brand attitudes when promoting low-involvement products (Sahaf et al., 2024; Drossos, 2014).

In line with previous literature, findings from the present study indicate that college athlete influencers are more effective at shaping purchase intentions when promoting low-involvement products compared to high-involvement products. Although the current study does not directly assess consumers' underlying purchase-related cognitions, prior research suggests that this pattern may be driven by consumers' recognition of influencers' commercial motives (Tyrväinen & Karialuoto, 2025). Thus, when evaluating products that have higher-stakes, consumers may be more likely to seek out alternative, more credible information sources, thereby reducing the persuasive impact of influencer endorsements that promote high-involvement products (Tyrväinen & Karialuoto, 2025). Conversely, when influencers promote low-involvement products, consumers' resistance to the persuasive messaging may be attenuated

relative to high-involvement contexts, resulting in impulsive purchase-related behavior and attitudes (Drossos, 2014).

Although the present study also hypothesized that participants in the low-involvement condition would report greater brand attitudes toward the promoted product than those in the high-involvement condition, this conjecture was not supported. Possible explanations include that low-involvement products may not elicit the level of emotional engagement, financial investment, or cognitive processing that is typically associated with the formation of strong attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It is also conceivable that, for low-involvement products in this context, purchase related decisions are driven by convenience, habit, or price, rather than a strong preference or brand affiliation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), or that attitudes toward low-involvement products may be less accessible than those regarding high-involvement products (Kokkinaki & Lunt, 1999). Furthermore, consumers may find it difficult to identify major differences between competing brands in low-involvement product categories (Le Claire, 1982), potentially limiting the development of distinct or firmly held brand attitudes.

6.3 Gender Congruence

Although prior research suggested that gender congruency between a consumer and SMI and can enhance feelings of similarity and positively influence consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Hudders & De Jans, 2022; Kneisel & Sternadori, 2023), the present study did not find gender congruence to be a significant factor shaping either outcome for products promoted by college athlete influencers on Instagram in the NIL marketplace.

One potential explanation is that the influence of gender matching may be more nuanced than previously assumed. For example, prior work has indicated that male consumers tend to be

less influenced by gender matching and more responsive to the content of the message itself than female consumers (Apostol, 2023). If this pattern held in the present sample, it could have attenuated any overall effect of congruence. Another plausible explanation is that gender identity—defined as “the extent to which an individual identifies with masculine or feminine personality traits” (p. 347)—may be a more meaningful predictor of consumer responses than biological sex alone in this context (Neale et al., 2014). By operationalizing congruence strictly in terms of biological sex, the present study may have not captured the dimensions of identity that are more relevant to how audiences relate to college athlete influencers. This distinction may be particularly important in athletic and sport media contexts, given that norms around gender expression and identity are often fluid and socially constructed (Miller, 2010). Finally, it is possible that other factors more central to the influencer-consumer relationship—such as the perceived fit between the athlete and the endorsed product or the perceived expertise of the athlete—overshadow the role of gender congruence in this context. Future research should examine the influence of these variables on purchase-related behaviors and attitudes.

In the end, these findings suggest that while gender congruence has been shown to matter in some influencer marketing settings, its influence may be limited or conditional within the NIL marketplace, particularly when more salient relational dynamics are present.

6.4 Consumer Gender

Previous research also suggested that consumer responses to influencer endorsements might be shaped by distinct gender-based mechanisms. Given the consideration paid to consumer gender in the development of tailored marketing campaigns, the present study examined how male and female participants responded to endorsements from college athlete influencers. Composite scores showed that male participants reported greater purchase intention toward the

promoted products than the female participants did, suggesting that male consumers are more likely to be influenced by a college athletes' endorsement of a product than female consumers are. This result aligns with Jin and Ryu (2020), who found that male consumers can be more reactive to social media influencer endorsements through heightened affective responses, such as envy.

However, consumer gender did not emerge as a significant predictor of brand attitudes in the study. This divergence between purchase intention and brand attitudes suggests that while male consumers may be more likely to indicate behavioral intent, their overall evaluative judgements of the brand are not necessarily more favorable than those of female consumers. This reflects the well-established distinction between attitudes and behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, while demographic factors such as gender may shape consumers' behavioral intentions, when it comes to brands endorsed by college athletes in the NIL marketplace, the present study indicates that the consumer attitudes appear to be driven more strongly by relational factors than gender-based mechanisms, in line with previous literature (Chung & Cho, 2017).

It is also possible that consumer gender more likely has an indirect impact on how consumers respond to specific influencer cues. Research by Su and colleagues (2021), for instance, found that female consumers were more sensitive to cues that undermined perceived trustworthiness, which in turn reduced purchase intentions, whereas male consumers were largely unaffected by these cues. This suggests that gender may function as a conditional moderator rather than a direct and consistent predictor of consumer responses, providing an explanation as to why gender did not significantly influence brand attitudes in the present study.

6.5 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to a growing body of research on influencer marketing (e.g. Vrontis et al., 2021; Aldimi et al., 2025). In doing so it highlights the persuasive potential of the relationships college athlete influencers maintain with fans and followers via social media, while also supporting the idea that college athletes stand to benefit from the “inherent brand value” that is derived from their NIL (Kunkel et al., 2021) and the ecosystem of brands surrounding them (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). At the same time, the study also enriches scholarship on college athlete branding and the efficacy of NIL-related product and brand endorsements on social media (e.g. Doyle et al., 2022; Su et al., 2023; Cooky et al., 2023; Cocco et al., 2023; Fridley et al., 2024; Klostermann et al., 2023; Wanzer et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2024; Scovel, 2025; Harry & Kloetzer, 2025). Ultimately, findings from this study advance Horton & Wohl’s (1956) theory by establishing PSRs as persuasive psychological mechanisms within the NIL marketplace, with direct implications on college consumers’ purchase-related intentions and attitudes.

Concurrently, results also highlight the efficacy of college athlete influencers for low-involvement product promotions and provide insight into how male and female consumers respond to these endorsements. These findings provide empirical evidence that consumers are more likely to rely on symbolic associations and preexisting emotional connections with a college athlete influencer, when evaluating low-involvement products (McCracken, 1989).

Moreover, this study expands concepts commonly written about in SMI literature—parasocial relationships, product involvement, gender congruence— to sport marketing contexts in the newly established NIL era, furthering sport marketing scholarship and answering Vrontis and colleague’s (2021) call for a more refined understanding of how consumers process and react differently to various types of SMIs. It also provides empirical insight into the underlying

mechanisms driving college-age consumers' purchase related behaviors and attitudes towards 'celebrity influencers' and 'microinfluencers', as put forth by Campbell & Farrell (2020).

Additionally, although scholars have used a combination of survey methodology to measure the strength of participants' PSRs (Yuan & Lou, 2020; Chung & Cho, 2017), and experimental designs to systematically manipulate elements of parasocial interaction (Labrecque, 2014) or to investigate the indirect effects of parasocial relationships on purchase-related behaviors and attitudes (Su et al., 2022; Su et al., 2023), the quasi-experimental design utilized in this study enabled the measurement of participants' preexisting PSRs with a college athlete influencer that was already familiar to them. This methodology not only enhances the ecological validity of the findings, but it also serves as a framework for measuring PSR as an antecedent rather than a manipulated variable in SMI research. Whereas many studies grounded in PSI theory have artificially induced experiential qualities of PSI— such as a manufacturing a sense of “mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment” with a media performer (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011 p. 1107)— these approaches often conceptualize PSI and PSRs as temporary, situational experiences. As a result, they often fail to capture the enduring, one-sided intimacy that develops over time through repeated exposure to a media figure's content (Dibble et al., 2016). In contrast, the present study's approach extends PSR theory to the NIL marketplace where relationships between fans and college athletes develop organically through ongoing, and often intimate, glimpses into their athletic and private lives (Klostermann et al., 2023; Yuksel and Labrecque, 2016); thus, capturing the elements of PSR that extend beyond any single exposure situation (Dibble et al., 2016) and demonstrating that these relationships function as enduring and consequential drivers of consumer behavior, rather than simple situationally-driven media effects.

6.6 Practical Implications

The empirical findings of this study offer several managerial implications. Previous research established that college athletes who share aspects of their public and private lives on social media may foster the development of parasocial relationships with fans (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Klosterman et al., 2023). These relationships, characterized by perceived intimacy and emotional connection, can then be leveraged to promote products and brands in ways that are mutually beneficial for both the athlete and the sponsoring organization. Since the present study found PSRs to be strong predictors of both consumers' purchase intention and brand attitudes, college athlete influencers represent valuable intermediaries for brands seeking to build trust and drive consumer engagement in an increasingly competitive digital marketplace.

For brands, these findings also suggest they should prioritize an athletes' relational content when considering entry into the NIL marketplace. As established by previous scholars, encouraging athletes to maintain a consistent, personal, and interactive social media presence may facilitate PSR development over time, ultimately increasing the persuasive impact of their product and brand endorsements.

PSRs, however, do not develop in isolation. This idea can be understood through Kunkel and Biscaia's (2020) sport brand ecosystem, which proposes that college athletes' individual brands are inherently embedded within larger institutional and commercial structures. Although the recent NIL legislation emphasizes individual entrepreneurship, athletes' visibility, reach, and ability to cultivate PSRs with fans are in part influenced by the brands of the universities, athletic programs, and conferences they are affiliated with. Accordingly, when considering entry into the NIL marketplace, brands should not only evaluate the individual athletes' brands, but also the broader context in which that athlete operates, as these structural factors may amplify or

constrain the athletes' ability to develop authentic and persuasive consumer relationships—ultimately impacting the efficacy of their endorsements. Given that competitive programs, such as those competing within Power Four Conferences, receive substantially more media exposure and national broadcast levels than those with lower levels of competition, as evidenced by the higher media rights (Palicz, 2026), this increases fans' awareness of athletes' brands, subsequently influencing their NIL value (Cocco et al., 2023). With this in mind, sport marketers might prioritize athletes competing within Power Four conferences and high-profile sports, such as football or basketball, as these athletes receive the most media exposure and the highest levels of consumer engagement (Drape & McCann, 2024). In this situation, fans are likely to be aware of the athletes' brands, which may improve the players' ability to cultivate PSRs, ultimately enhancing the efficacy of their social media endorsements in the NIL marketplace.

The results also indicate that product involvement plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of athlete endorsements. Specifically, college athlete influencers were more effective at increasing purchase intentions when promoting a low-involvement product compared to a high-involvement product. This suggests that brands marketing low cost and low-risk goods may see greater returns when collaborating with college athletes. In contrast, for high-involvement products that often required consumers to engage in greater cognitive effort before making a final purchase-related decision, consumers may be less likely to rely on influencer endorsements and instead seek out additional information from expert sources. With that in mind, marketers should carefully align product type with influencer strategy to maximize campaign effectiveness.

The findings related to consumer gender offer additional nuance for market segmentation strategies. While male consumers reported greater purchase intentions overall, gender was not a

significant predictor of brand attitudes. Similarly, conditions of gender congruence between the consumer and the athlete did not significantly influence purchase intention or brand attitude outcomes. This suggests that although demographic segmentation may still be useful for targeting purchase-driven campaigns, matching the gender of an influencer and the intended audience's gender may not be necessary for SMI marketing in the NIL marketplace. Instead, brands may benefit from focusing on broader psychographic factors, such as shared interests, values, and school identities, which may play a more meaningful role in shaping consumer responses.

6.7 Limitations

There are a few notable limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a convenience sample consisting primarily of undergraduate students limits the generalizability of the findings. College students may differ from the broader population in terms of social media usage, familiarity with college athletes, and responsiveness to influencer marketing, which may have influenced the observed relationships between the variables of interest. Moreover, although these variables are commonly measured through self-reports in social science research, self-reported measures are subject to biases such as social desirability, which has the potential to skew results. Furthermore, the study measured purchase intention rather than actual purchasing behavior, which may not fully reflect real-world consumer decision-making.

At the same time, the college athletes that were selected for the main study represent the upper echelon of NIL value and popularity. For instance, Arch Manning comes from a family lineage of well-known and highly impactful NFL players and boasts more than 620K followers on Instagram (Manning, n.d.). Similarly, Jada Williams has competed at the highest levels of collegiate women's basketball and has been affiliated with several nationally prominent

programs, including the University of Arizona, Iowa State University, and Louisiana State University (Williams, n.d.). Her athletic prominence is reflected in her social media following, which exceeds 574K Instagram followers (Williams, n.d.). Given these athletes occupy the upper echelon of NIL marketability and public interest, the findings of the present study may not generalize to college athletes with smaller followings, less established personal brands, or lower levels of athletic prominence. Consequently, this study does not capture whether the relationship between PSRs, purchase intentions, and brand attitudes varies across different levels of athlete influence. Future research should therefore examine how athletes occupying different tiers of NIL visibility and market value affect consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes toward endorsed products.

Additionally, the cross-sectional, quasi-experimental nature of the study limits its ability to draw causal inferences. Although statistically significant associations were identified between several of the variables of interest, the directionality of these relationships cannot be definitively established. Similarly, while the use of naturally occurring PSRs enhanced the ecological validity of the present study's findings, it also reduced the experimental control over how these relationships were formed and maintained, prohibiting this study from examining causal relationships between the variables of interest.

Finally, the study focused on a relatively narrow set of variables— PSR, purchase intention, brand attitude, influencer gender, product involvement, and gender congruency. Other factors known to impact influencer effectiveness— such as perceived authenticity, trustworthiness, and source credibility— were not examined. These variables may meaningfully shape how consumers perceive college athlete influencers and the strength of the relationships they form with them, ultimately influencing purchase intentions and brand attitudes toward

endorsed products. Future research should empirically examine how these factors affect athletes' self-branding strategies, as well as how they shape the explanatory power of mediated relationship theories in predicting consumer behavior within the NIL context.

As the NIL marketplace continues to evolve, the dynamics of athlete endorsements and consumer perceptions may shift over time, potentially affecting the stability and applicability of these findings. For instance, although the present study examined how college students, regardless of geographical location, responded to athletes competing for the University of Texas and Iowa State University, previous research suggests that shared school identity plays an important role in shaping consumer responses. Specifically, when consumers share the same school identity as a college athlete influencer, they are more likely to view the athlete as credible and trustworthy, to develop stronger PSRs with them, and to report greater purchase intentions of the products they promote (Su et al., 2023). At the same time, however, Cocco et al. (2023) found that neither the local market population nor the local market competition are significantly associated with the NIL value of college athletes on social media. This finding suggests that social media may help overcome the geographic barriers traditionally associated with sports identification and consumption (MacIntosh et al., 2017; Guschwan, 2016), while also indicating that the geographic location of an athletes' academic institution is not relevant to a player's ability to build NIL value on social media. Therefore, additional research should examine how geographic and psychological proximity to an athlete and/or the institution they compete for influence the development of consumers' PSRs, as well as how these relationships shape their purchase intentions and brand attitudes.

6.8 Future Research

To expand NIL-related scholarship further, future studies should incorporate more diverse and representative samples beyond undergraduate students. Including broader age groups, non-college populations, and individuals with varying levels of sports engagement would enhance the generalizability of findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how PSRs function across different consumer segments in college athlete influencer marketing. Similarly, future research should consider replicating this study across all three NCAA divisions, as consumer responses to and interest in the athletes may vary.

Moreover, incorporating a broader range of athletes, products, and brands would help determine whether the observed results are consistent across different influencer profiles, as well as product and brand types. The present study prioritized ecological validity when selecting products to be featured in the stimulus material; however, this resulted in the promotion of one product that may be more readily purchased online (BeatsByDre Bluetooth headphones) and another product that may be more often purchased in-person (Powerade). It would be worthwhile for future research to examine how the type of product, as well as the typical purchasing channel, impacts consumers' intention and attitudes in the NIL endorsement context.

Additionally, future research is needed to explore how PSRs operate across different social media platforms. Given the distinct affordances of platforms such as TikTok and X, future studies should investigate the extent to which platform-specific features influence the development of PSRs, and how these affordances potentially impact consumer attitudes and behaviors. College athletes are increasingly using TikTok to establish marketable personal identities (Sponsor United, 2025) thus, empirical investigation into the effectiveness of their

endorsements on the platform would provide valuable insight into how college athlete influencers can most effectively engage audiences across digital environments.

Scholars should also examine additional variables that may mediate or moderate the observed results of this study, such as perceived authenticity, trustworthiness, and source credibility. Moreover, they should also account for participants' past experiences with the athletes of interest, as variables such as loyalty and brand recognition may influence the effectiveness of their social media endorsements. These constructs may play a significant role in shaping consumer responses to endorsed products and may help explain the underlying mechanisms through which PSRs influence purchase intentions and brand attitudes within the NIL marketplace.

6.8.1 Incorporating Additional Perspectives

Although some scholars describe the recent passage of NIL-related legislation as a long-overdue response to antitrust concerns and a historical suppression of student athletes' rights (Serazio, 2025), others have raised concerns about the potential for instability and inequity within the current structure (Ehrlich et al., 2023; Serazio, 2025). For instance, Ehrlich and colleagues (2023) argue the existing NIL model provides minimal guidance for the new era of NCAA amateurism. They also suggest that it resembles the framework of a gig economy, functioning as another mechanism through which the NCAA works to preserve the original sentiments of their "student-athlete" designation— which many argue was invented to help the organization side-step obligations to provide employment benefits, such as workers compensation, discriminatory protections, and minimum wage, to their athletes (Ehrlich et al., 2023).

In light of these critiques, future scholarship should utilize mixed-methodology and critical perspectives to question the structural conditions shaping college athletes' experiences. Such approaches are well-suited to examine whether college athletes experience the negative psychological impacts that tend to be associated with traditional gig economy workers (Malos et al., 2018), as well how the current NIL model may reflect and potentially reinforce broader issues of labor, inequity, power, and institutional control within the college sports landscape.

Moreover, although the current NIL model emphasizes entrepreneurship and individual agency, Kunkel and Biscaia's sport brand ecosystem (2020) also explains that college athletes' branding potential is somewhat linked to, and limited by, the brands and contextual factors surrounding them. Larger brands, including those of the university and the affiliated athletic conference, play a significant role in shaping athletes' exposure and ability to serve as an effective endorser (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Kunkel et al., 2021; Cocco et al., 2023). These institutional factors may also shape the content that athletes share, potentially influencing the way consumers perceive the athletes (Harry & Kloetzer, 2025). Future research should examine how collegiate athletes respond to these conditions, as well as how they feel athletic departments and institutions could best support them as they navigate NIL opportunities.

Chapter 7. CONCLUSION

The present study expands social media influencer (SMI) literature by examining an emerging cohort of influencers: college athletes. More specifically, it empirically evaluated the extent to which PSRs with college athlete influencers influence consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes toward products promoted on Instagram. In addition, the study assessed how influencer gender and product involvement shape consumer responses to these endorsements, while further analyses examined differences in purchase intentions and brand attitudes across male and female consumers.

This scholarship is particularly relevant in light of recent NIL legislation, which has enabled college athletes to monetize their athletic identities through endorsement partnerships with third-party brands. Although NIL has been widely examined from a legal perspective, there remains limited empirical understanding of how college-aged consumers– the primary audience of college athletes– develop relationships with these athletes on social media and how such relationships shape their purchase-related intentions and attitudes for the products they endorse on social media. Accordingly, this study contributes helps fill this gap in literature by providing empirical insight into the role of these relationships within the NIL marketplace.

Results and analysis of this study may serve as guidance for brands considering the use of college athletes to bolster new or existing SMI marketing efforts, while also working to help them select the appropriate college athletes. For college athletes, this research also offers additional insight into the persuasive potential their relationships with followers.

References

- Afshar, A. (2015). Collegiate Athletes: The Conflict Between NCAA Amateurism and a Student Athlete's Right of Publicity. *Willamette Law Review*, 51(101), 101–133.
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T)
- Aldlimi, T., Priporas, C., & Chang, S. (2025). Engagement in Influencer Marketing: A Systematic Review of Key Drivers, Behaviors, and Future Research Directions. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 24(3), 1541–1566. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2485>
- Anderson, E. D. (2021). The Maintenance of Masculinity Among the Stakeholders of Sport. *Sport Management Review*, 12(1), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2008.09.003>
- Apostol, N. E. (2023). Consumers' Gendered Responses to Influencer Marketing: A Research Synthesis. *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, 25(2), 7–22. <https://doi.org/10.21018/rjcpr.2023.2.398>
- Auter, P. J., & Palmgreen, P. (2000). Development and validation of a parasocial interaction measure: The audience-persona interaction scale. *Communication Research Reports*, 17(1), 79–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090009388753>
- Baker III, T. A., Edelman, M., & Watanabe, N. M. W. (2018). Debunking the NCAA's myth that amateurism conforms with antitrust law: A legal and statistical analysis. *Tennessee Law Review*, 85(3), 66–674.
- Batra, D., & Ali, A. (2015). Parent's Opinion of Children's Influence in Purchase Decisions: A Comparative Analysis between Rural and Urban Delhi. *Global Business Review*, 16(6), 1100–1111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972150915597612>
- Bergkvist, L., & Langner, T. (2017). Construct Measurement in Advertising Research. *Journal of Advertising*, 46(1), 129–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2017.1281778>
- Bergkvist, L., & Zhou, K. (2016). Celebrity endorsements: A literature review and research agenda. *International Journal of Advertising*, 35(4), 642–663. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2015.1137537>
- Bocarnea, M., & Brown, W. (2007). Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale. In *Handbook of Research on Electronic Surveys and Measurements* (pp. 309–312). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-59140-792-8.ch039>
- Bond, B. J. (2016). Following Your "Friend": Social Media and the Strength of Adolescents' Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 19(11), 656–660. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0355>
- Boston, T. (2022). The NIL glass ceiling. *University of Richmond Law Review*, 57(4), 1107–1168.
- Boyd, A., Morrow, J., & Rocconi, L. (2022). Development and validation of the Parasocial Relationship in Social Media Survey. *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 11(2), 192–208.

- Boyd, A. T., Rocconi, L. M., & Morrow, J. (2024). Construct validation and measurement invariance of the Parasocial Relationships in Social Media survey. *PLoS ONE*, 19(3), e0300356. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0300356>
- Boyle, B. A., & Magnusson, P. (2007). Social Identity and Brand Equity Formation: A Comparative Study of Collegiate Sports Fans. *Journal of Sport Management*, 21(4), 497–520. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.21.4.497>
- Breves, P., Amrehn, J., Heidenreich, A., Liebers, N., & Schramm, H. (2021). Blind trust? The importance and interplay of parasocial relationships and advertising disclosures in explaining influencers' persuasive effects on their followers. *International Journal of Advertising*, 40(7), 1209–1229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1881237>
- Bruce, T. (2013). Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Women and Femininities. *Communication & Sport*, 1(1–2), 125–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479512472883>
- Brutlag Hosick, M. (2021, June 30). *NCAA adopts interim name, image and likeness policy*. NCAA. <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2021/6/30/ncaa-adopts-interim-name-image-and-likeness-policy.aspx>
- Burroughs, B., Malik, M., Johnson, R., & Romney, M. (2021). Content analysis of biological sex-specific media coverage of sport: The case of National Collegiate Athletic Association athletic department home webpages. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 57(5), 673–692. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902211029612>
- Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business Horizons*, 63(4), 469–479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.03.003>
- Chung, S., & Cho, H. (2017). Fostering Parasocial Relationships with Celebrities on Social Media: Implications for Celebrity Endorsement. *Psychology & Marketing*, 34(4), 481–495. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21001>
- Cocco, A., & Moorman, A. (n.d.). Untapped Potential: An Examination of Name, Image, and Likeness Earnings Estimates for Community College Athletes. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 15(1). <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/jiia/vol15/iss1/29>
- Cocco, A. R., Kunkel, T., & Baker, B. J. (2023). The Influence of Personal Branding and Institutional Factors on the Name, Image, and Likeness Value of Collegiate Athletes' Social Media Posts. *Journal of Sport Management*, 37(5), 359–370. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2022-0155>
- Cohen, J. (2003). Parasocial Breakups: Measuring Individual Differences in Responses to the Dissolution of Parasocial Relationships. *Mass Communication & Society*, 6(2), 191–202.
- Colorado State University. (n.d.). *2018-19 Colorado state student athlete handbook* (pp. 14–23). Colorado State University. https://csurams.com/documents/2018/10/26/2018_19_Colorado_State_Student_Athlete_Handbook.pdf?id=9722

- Cooky, C., Council, LaToya D., Mears, M. A., & Messner, M. A. (2021). One and Done: The Long Eclipse of Women's Televised Sports, 1989–2019. *Communication and Sport*, 9(3), 347–371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795211003524>
- Corr, C., Harry, M., Stokowski, S., & Boatwright, B. (2025). The Local Perspective: Regional Television Framing of Name, Image, and Likeness. *Communication and Sport*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795251340275>
- Dholakia, U. M. (2001). A motivational process model of product involvement and consumer risk perception. *European Journal of Marketing*, 35(11/12), 1340–1362. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EUM00000000006479>
- Dibble, J. L., Hartmann, T., & Rosaen, S. F. (2016). Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship: Conceptual Clarification and a Critical Assessment of Measures. *Human Communication Research*, 42(1), 21–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12063>
- Doyle, J. P., Su, Y., & Kunkel, T. (2020). Athlete branding via social media: Examining the factors influencing consumer engagement on Instagram. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 22(4), 506–526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2020.1806897>
- Drape, J., & McCann, A. (2024, August 31). In College Sports' Big Money Era, Here's Where the Dollars Go. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/08/31/business/nfl-money-ncaa.html>
- Drossos, D., Coursaris, C., & Kagiouli, E. (2023). Social media marketing content strategy: A comprehensive framework and empirically supported guidelines for brand posts on Facebook pages. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 23(3), 1175–1192. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2269>
- Dunne, O. [@livvydunne]. (n.d.–a). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved November 7, 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/livvydunne/>
- Eastman, J. K., Shin, H., & Ruhland, K. (2019). The picture of luxury: A comprehensive examination of college student consumers' relationship with luxury brands. *Psychology & Marketing*, 37(1), 56–73. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21280>
- Ehrlich, S. C., Sabin, J., & Ternes, N. C. (2023). With Name, Image, and Likeness, College Sports Enters the Gig Economy. *Journal of Sport Management*, 37(5), 319–332. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2022-0152>
- Epsilon Marketing. (2024). *Nothing But Net: Epsilon First to Offer NIL Deal for all Women's D1 Basketball Tournament Participants*. <https://www.epsilon.com/us/about-us/pressroom/nothing-but-net-epsilon-first-to-offer-nil-deal-for-all-womens-d1-basketball-tournament-participants>
- Eyal, K., & Cohen, J. (2006). When Good Friends Say Goodbye: A Parasocial Breakup Study. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(3), 502–523. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem5003_9
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A.-G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, 39, 175–191.

- Faircloth, J. B., Capella, L. M., & Alford, B. L. (n.d.). The Effect of Brand Attitude and Brand Image on Brand Equity. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 9(3), 61–75.
- Farrey, T. (2015, August 17). Northwestern players denied request to form first union for athletes. *ESPN*. https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/13455477/nlrb-says-northwestern-players-cannot-unionize
- Fisher, B. (2021). “Swipe up?”: Reality stars-turned- influencers vs. College athletes and the road ahead with name, image, and likeness. *Mississippi Sports Law Review*, 10(1). https://law.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Fisher-Executive-Final_v10n1_239-260.pdf
- Fox Sports. (2024, May 24). Big Ten, SEC are top conferences in revenue with athlete pay plan on horizon. *Fox Sports*. <https://www.foxsports.com/stories/college-football/big-ten-sec-top-conferences-revenue-athlete-pay-plan-horizon>
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review*, 37(1), 90–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001>
- Frederick, E. L., Choong Hoon Lim, Clavio, G., & Walsh, P. (2012). Why We Follow: An Examination of Parasocial Interaction and Fan Motivations for Following Athlete Archetypes on Twitter. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 5(4), 481–502. SPORTDiscuss. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.5.4.481>
- Fridley, A., Springer, D., Stokowski, S., & Anderson, A. (2024). Athlete–Student–Influencer: How the Introduction of Name, Image, and Likeness in Intercollegiate Athletics Further Complicates Applications of Role Theory. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 41(1), 90–98. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2022-0139>
- Geisen, E. (2022, August 4). *Improve data quality by using a commitment request instead of attention checks*. Qualtrics. <https://www.qualtrics.com/articles/strategy-research/attention-checks-and-data-quality/>
- Geurin, A. N. (2017). Elite Female Athletes’ Perceptions of New Media Use Relating to Their Careers: A Qualitative Analysis. *Journal of Sport Management*, 31(4), 345–359. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2016-0157>
- Geurin-Eagleman, A. N., & Burch, L. M. (2021). Communicating via photographs: A gendered analysis of Olympic athletes’ visual self-presentation on Instagram. *Sport Management Review*, 19(2), 133–145. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2015.03.002>
- Goffman, E. (1959). The presentation of self in everyday life. *Anchor Books*.
- Guschwan, M. (2015). New media: Online fandom. *Soccer & Society*, 17(3), 351–371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2015.1082761>
- Hambrick, M. E., Simmons, J. M., Greenhalgh, G. P., & Greenwell, T. C. (2010). Understanding Professional Athletes’ Use of Twitter: A Content Analysis of Athlete Tweets. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3(4), 454–471. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.3.4.454>

- Handranata, Y., & Kalila, S. (2025). Attitude toward fashion influencers and its impact on purchase behavior: The roles of brand attitude and purchase intention. *Frontiers in Communication*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1583602>
- Harry, M., & Kloetzer, H. (2025). Player to Influencer? College Athletes' Roles and Identities in the Context of Name, Image, and Likeness. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2024-0183>
- Hartmann, T., & Goldhoorn, C. (2011). Horton and Wohl Revisited: Exploring Viewers' Experience of Parasocial Interaction. *Journal of Communication*, 61(6), 1104–1121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01595.x>
- Hoffner, C., & Buchanan, M. (2005). Young Adults' Wishful Identification With Television Characters: The Role of Perceived Similarity and Character Attributes. *Media Psychology*, 7(4), 325–351. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0704_2
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 19(3), 215–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>
- Horton, D., & Strauss, A. (1957). Interaction in Audience-Participation Shows. *American Journal of Sociology*, 62(6), 579–587. <https://doi.org/10.1086/222106>
- Hudders, L., & De Jans, S. (2021). Gender effects in influencer marketing: An experimental study on the efficacy of endorsements by same- vs. Other-gender social media influencers on Instagram. *International Journal of Advertising*, 41(1), 128–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1997455>
- Jin, S. V., & Ryu, E. (2020). “I’ll buy what she’s #wearing”: The roles of envy toward and parasocial interaction with influencers in Instagram celebrity-based brand endorsement and social commerce. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 55, 102121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102121>
- Kassing, J. W., & Sanderson, J. (2015). Playing in the New Media Game or Riding the Virtual Bench: Confirming and Disconfirming Membership in the Community of Sport. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 39(1), 3–18. SPORTDiscus. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723512458931>
- Kassing, J. W., & Sanderson, J. (2010). Fan–Athlete Interaction and Twitter Tweeting Through the Giro: A Case Study. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3(1), 113–128. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.3.1.113>
- Kim, D., & Kim, H. Y. (2021). Trust me, trust me not: A nuanced view of influencer marketing on social media. *Journal of Business Research*, 134, 223–232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.05.024>
- Kirk, R. (2013). Fundamental Assumptions in Analysis of Variance. In *Experimental Design: Procedures for the Behavioral Sciences* (4th ed., Vol. 1–0). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384733.n3>

- Kloetzer, H. R., Harry, M., & Bunch, N. (2026). Inequitable by Design: Framing, Marxist Feminism, and Objections to House v. NCAA. *Communication & Sport*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795261425517>
- Klostermann, J., Meißner, M., Max, A., & Decker, R. (2023). Presentation of celebrities' private life through visual social media. *Journal of Business Research*, 156, 113524.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113524>
- Kneisel, A., & Sternadori, M. (2022). Effects of parasocial affinity and gender on live streaming fans' motivations. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 29(2), 322–341. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221114461>
- Kunkel, T., Baker, B. J., Baker, T. A., & Doyle, J. P. (2021). There is no nil in NIL: examining the social media value of student-athletes' names, images, and likeness. *Sport Management Review*, 24(5), 839–861. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2021.1880154>
- Kokkinaki, F., & Lunt, P. (1999). The effect of advertising message involvement on brand attitude accessibility. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 20(1), 41–51.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-4870\(98\)00042-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-4870(98)00042-7)
- Kunkel, T., & Biscaia, R. (2020). Sport Brands: Brand Relationships and Consumer Behavior. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 29(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.32731/SMQ.291.032020.01>
- Labrecque, L. I. (2014). Fostering Consumer–Brand Relationships in Social Media Environments: The Role of Parasocial Interaction. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 28(2), 134–148. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2013.12.003>
- Lebel, K., & Danylchuk, K. (2012). How Tweet It Is: A Gendered Analysis of Professional Tennis Players' Self-Presentation on Twitter. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 5(4), 461–480. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.5.4.461>
- Le Claire, K. A. (1982). A Strategic Tool for Low Involvement Products: Leverage Analysis. *European Journal of Marketing*, 16(5), 3–11.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/EUM0000000004848>
- Lederman, E. (2024, October 9). NCAA approves elimination of national letter of intent program. *ESPN*. https://www.espn.com/college-sports/story/_/id/41702974/ncaa-approves-elimination-national-letter-intent-program
- Leung, F. F., Gu, F. F., Li, Y., Zhang, J. Z., & Palmatier, R. W. (2022). Influencer Marketing Effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing*, 86(6), 93–115.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429221102889>
- Lodge, A. (2016). Who's afraid of the big bad NCAA: The Ed O'Bannon v. NCAA decision's impact on the NCAA's Amateurism model. *Journal of Corporation Law*, 41(3), 775–793.
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>
- Malos, S., Lester, G. V., & Virick, M. (2018). Uber Drivers and Employment Status in the Gig Economy: Should Corporate Social Responsibility Tip the Scales? *Employee*

- Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 30(4), 239–251. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-018-9325-9>
- Manning, A. [@archmanning]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved June 7, 2026, from <https://www.instagram.com/archmanning/?hl=en>
- McCann, M. (2021, June 21). *Supreme Court Rules Unanimously Against NCAA in Alston Case*. Sportico. <https://www.sportico.com/law/analysis/2021/supreme-court-rules-unanimously-against-ncaa-in-alston-case-1234632182/>
- McCracken, G. (1989). Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3), 310–321. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209217>
- MacIntosh, E., Abeza, G., & Lee, J. (2017). Enriching identity in the “fan nation.” *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 7(3), 315–331. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SBM-06-2016-0028>
- Meghamez, J. (2015). "An All-Encompassing Primer on Student-Athlete Name, Image, and Likeness Rights and How O’Bannon v. NCAA and Keller v. NCAA Forever Changed College Athletics. *Liberty University Law Review*, 9(2), 314–371.
- Miller, S. (2010). Making the Boys Cry: The Performative Dimensions of Fluid Gender. *Text & Performance Quarterly*, 30(2), 163–182. *Communication & Mass Media Complete* (49142839). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462931003658099>
- Munnukka, J., Maity, D., Reinikainen, H., & Luoma-aho, V. (2019). “Thanks for watching”. The effectiveness of YouTube vlog endorsements. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 93, 226–234. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.12.014>
- Murphy, D. (2025, September 19). Judge rules against U.S. government in NIL-visa lawsuit. *ESPN*. https://www.espn.com/womens-college-basketball/story/_/id/46315688/judge-rules-us-government-nil-visa-lawsuit
- National Collegiate Athletic Ass'n v. Alston, 594 U.S. 69 (2021). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/20pdf/20-512_gfbh.pdf
- Nakos, P. (2025, February 11). <https://www.on3.com/nil/news/top-10-on3-nil-valuations-in-womens-nil-100/>. *Top 10 On3 NIL Valuations in Women’s NIL 100*. <https://www.on3.com/nil/news/top-10-on3-nil-valuations-in-womens-nil-100/>
- NCAA. (n.d.). *NIL (Name, Image, Likeness)*. NCAA. <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/7/9/name-image-likeness.aspx>
- NCAA. (2021, February 16). *Overview*. NCAA. <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/16/overview.aspx>
- NCAA. (2025). *Division I 2025-2026 Manual*. <https://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/D126.pdf>
- NCAA Academic and Membership Affairs Staff. (2014). *2014-2015 NCAA Division I Manual*. NCAA. <https://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/D115.pdf>
- Neale, L., Robbie, R., & Martin, B. (2015). Gender identity and brand incongruence: When in doubt, pursue masculinity. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 24(5), 347–359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2015.101120>

- Nordlund, J.-E. (1978). Media Interaction. *Communication Research*, 5(2), 150–175.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/009365027800500202>
- Northwestern University v. National Labor Relations Board, 362 NLRB 1354 (2015).
- Nguyen, D., & Vu, H. (2022). Measuring Attitudes Toward Sponsor And Purchase Intention. *Cogent Business & Management*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2022.2049961>
- O'Bannon v. National Collegiate Athletic Association, 802 F.3d 1049 (9th Cir. 2015).
<https://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2015/09/30/14-16601.pdf>
- On3. (2026, April 27). *On3 NIL Valuations*. On3. <https://www.on3.com/nil/rankings/player/nil-valuations/>
- Opendorse. (2025). *NIL at Four Monetizing the New Reality* (The Annual Opendorse Report). Opendorse. https://biz.opendorse.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/NIL-at-Four-Monetizing-the-New-Reality_July2025.pdf
- Ozanian, M. (2024, December 18). What the top 75 college sports programs are worth. *Consumer News and Business Channel*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/12/19/college-sports-programs-valuations.html>
- Palicz, M. (2026, March 06). A government panel negotiating media rights would ruin college sports. *State News Service*. <https://advance-lexis-com.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a6J2M-CCB3-RSVM-P2GM-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=BZJTHM63429>
- Palmgreen, P., Wenner, L. A., & Rayburn, J. D. (1980). Relations Between Gratifications Sought and Obtained. *Communication Research*, 7(2), 161–192.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/009365028000700202>
- Park, J., Williams, A., & Son, S. W. (2020). Social Media as a Personal Branding Tool: A Qualitative Study of Student-Athletes' Perceptions and Behaviors. *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*, 2(1), 51–68. <https://doi.org/10.25035/jade.02.01.04>
- Perse, E. M., & Rubin, R. B. (1989). Attribution in Social and Parasocial Relationships. *Communication Research*, 16(1), 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365089016001003>
- Petty, R., & Cacioppo, J. (1986). The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 19, 123–205. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60214-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60214-2)
- Puriwat, W., & Tripopsakul, S. (2021). Explaining Social Media Adoption for a Business Purpose: An Application of the UTAUT Model. *Sustainability*, 13(4), 2082.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13042082>
- Pushparaj, P., & Kushwaha, B. (2024). Social Media Influencer Marketing: A Systematic Literature Review Using TCM and ADO Framework. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 48(6). <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.13098>
- Rialti, R., Zollo, L., Kim, K., & Yoon, S. (2024). Mega-influencers and brand dynamics: Shaping attitudes toward leading and challenger brands through electronic word of mouth. *Psychology & Marketing*, 41(12), 3041–3059. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.22102>

- Rossiter, J. (2014). 'Branding' explained: Defining and measuring brand awareness and brand attitude. *Journal of Brand Management*, 21(7–8), 533–540.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2014.33>
- Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and local television news viewing. *Human Communication Research*, 12(2), 155–180.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1985.tb00071.x>
- Rubin, A. M., & Step, M. M. (2000). Impact of Motivation, Attraction, and Parasocial Interaction on Talk Radio listening. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 44(4), 635–654. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4404_7
- Russo, R. (2025, September 4). Nearly \$80 million in NIL deals approved since June; collectives say \$11 million more is tied up. *The Athletic*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6597682/2025/09/04/college-sports-commission-nil-go-deals/>
- Sahaf, F., Wani, T., & Showkat, B. (2025). Decoding the dynamics of endorsements: How endorser type and product involvement shape advertising effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2025.2499845>
- Saini, S., & Bansal, R. (2025). Parasocial Relationships and Self-Disclosure: Strengthening Brand Image Through Brand Attitude in Premium Cosmetics. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 31(2), 337–366. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2025.2466585>
- Scholz, J. (2021). How Consumers Consume Social Media Influence. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(5), 510–527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1980472>
- Scovel, S. (2025). Navigating Expressions of Femininity in Online Influencer Culture: A Content Analysis of Collegiate Women Athlete Branding in the Age of “Name, Image, and Likeness.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990241311854>
- Semaya, S. (2023). Name, Image, and Likeness: Giving college athletes the clearest guidance to best profit off their NIL. *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal*, 41(2), 659–689.
- Serazio, M. (2025). Getting NIL for Unpaid Labor: Self-Branding U.S. “Student-Athletes” in the Influencer Marketplace. *Television & New Media*, 26(5), 586–603.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764251314177>
- Shan, Y., Chen, K.-J., & Lin, J.-S. (2019). When social media influencers endorse brands: The effects of self-influencer congruence, parasocial identification, and perceived endorser motive. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(5), 590–610.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1678322>
- Smith, L., & Sanderson, J. (2015). I’m Going to Instagram It! An Analysis of Athlete Self-Presentation on Instagram. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(2), 342–358.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1029125>
- Solomon, J. (2018, April 23). *The History Behind the Debate Over Paying NCAA Athletes*. Aspen Institute. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/history-behind-debate-paying-ncaa-athletes/>

- Southall, R. M., & Staurowsky, E. J. (2013). Cheering on the Collegiate Model. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 37(4), 403–429. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723513498606>
- Spears, N., & Singh, S. N. (2004). Measuring Attitude toward the Brand and Purchase Intentions. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 26(2), 53–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2004.10505164>
- Sponsor United. (2025). *NIL Endorsements Report 2024–25*.
- Stahler, T., & Pennington, C. (2025). How Name, Image, and Likeness Affects College Athletics. *International Journal of Sports, Exercise and Physical Education*, 7(1), 197–201. <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26647281.2025.v7.i1c.175>
- Su, Y., Guo, X., Wegner, C., & Baker, T. (2023). The New Wave of Influencers: Examining College Athlete Identities and the Role of Homophily and Parasocial Relationships in Leveraging Name, Image, and Likeness. *Journal of Sport Management*, 37(5), 371–388. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2022-0192>
- Su, Y., Kunkel, T., & Ye, N. (2020). When abs do not sell: The impact of male influencers conspicuously displaying a muscular body on female followers. *Psychology & Marketing*, 38(2), 286–297. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21322>
- Swant, Marty (2016), “Twitter Says Users Now Trust Influencers Nearly As Much As Their Friends,” Adweek, May 10, <http://www.adweek.com/digital/twitter-saysusers-now-trust-influencers-nearly-much-their-friends-171367/>.
- The Athletic College Football. (2024, May 13). Inside how college football’s transfer portal works: Coaches, players and agents dish on NIL. *The Athletic*. <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5484900/2024/05/13/college-football-transfer-portal-nil-deals/>
- The Associated Press. (2018, March 9). Correction: NCAA-Finances story. *Canadian Press*. [https://advance-lexis-com.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a5RTP-NT21-JBVR-335G-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=BZJTHM63429](https://advance.lexis-com.ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a5RTP-NT21-JBVR-335G-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=BZJTHM63429)
- Thorpe, H., Toffoletti, K., & Bruce, T. (2017). Sportswomen and Social Media: Bringing Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism, and Neoliberal Feminism Into Conversation. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 41(5), 359–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723517730808>
- Toffoletti, K., & Thorpe, H. (2018). Female athletes’ self-representation on social media: A feminist analysis of neoliberal marketing strategies in “economies of visibility.” *Feminism & Psychology*, 28(1), 11–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517726705>
- Trivedi, J., & Sama, R. (2019). The Effect of Influencer Marketing on Consumers’ Brand Admiration and Online Purchase Intentions: An Emerging Market Perspective. *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 19(1), 103–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332861.2019.1700741>
- Tukachinsky, R., Walter, N., & Saucier, C. (2020). Antecedents and Effects of Parasocial Relationships: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Communication*, 70(6), 868–894. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa034>

- Tyrväinen, O., & Karjaluoto, H. (2025). Unrequited love? A mixed-methods study of parasocial engagement with social media influencers. *International Journal of Information Management*, 80, 102845. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2024.102845>
- Vannini, C. (2025, April 17). EA Sports raises payments to \$1,500 for players appearing in College Football 26. *New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6213494/2025/03/18/ea-sports-college-football-26-nil-payments/>
- Vrontis, D., Makrides, A., Christofi, M., & Thrassou, A. (2021). Social media influencer marketing: A systematic review, integrative framework and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 45(4), 617–644.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12647>
- Wang, Q., Fink, E. L., & Cai, D. A. (2008). Loneliness, Gender, and Parasocial Interaction: A Uses and Gratifications Approach. *Communication Quarterly*, 56(1), 87–109.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01463370701839057>
- Wanzer, C. V., Pfender, E. J., Travis, N. P., & Bleakley, A. (2024). Mapping the Field: A Content Analysis of Marketable NCAA Athletes' Social Media Self-Presentation. *Communication and Sport*, 13(4), 585–603. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795241232404>
- Williams, J. [@cbg.jada24]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved June 7, 2026, from <https://www.instagram.com/cbg.jada24/>
- Xue, F., Karuturi, S., & Begum, M. (2025). The human brands of name, image and likeness (NIL) influencers: A content analysis. *Journal of Digital & Social Media Marketing*, 13(1), 59. <https://doi.org/10.69554/PLBE6933>
- Yuan, C., Kim, J., & Kim, S. (2016). Parasocial relationship effects on customer equity in the social media context. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(9), 3795–3803.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.12.071>
- Yuan, S., & Lou, C. (2020). How Social Media Influencers Foster Relationships with Followers: The Roles of Source Credibility and Fairness in Parasocial Relationship and Product Interest. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 20(2), 133–147.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2020.1769514>
- Yuksel, M., & Labrecque, L. I. (2016). “Digital buddies”: Parasocial interactions in social media. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 10(4), 305–320.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-03-2016-0023>
- Zaichkowsky, J. (1994). The Personal Involvement Inventory: Reduction, Revision, and Application to Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 23(4), 59–70.

Chapter 8. APPENDICES

Table 2

Questionnaire Items

Constructs	Items
Informed Consent	Do you wish to participate in this research?
Attention Check	Do you commit to providing thoughtful answers to the questions in this study?
Familiarity	How familiar are you with college [ATHLETE'S NAME]?
Social Media Following	Do you follow [ATHLETE'S NAME] on Instagram?
Inclusion Criteria	Are you over 18 years old? Are you a current college student?
Participant Gender	What is your gender?
Academic Institution	What academic institution do you attend?
Masking Questions	In general, I enjoy watching college sports. I follow news about athletics at my school. I often watch videos or posts made by college athletes. I feel connected to the (ACADEMIC INSTITUTION)'s community.
Parasocial Relationship	Interest In I look forward to seeing [NAME]'s content. I like to see content that [NAME] has made. I am interested in [NAME]. I care about what happens to [NAME]. I hope [NAME] achieves their goals. I like to see content that [NAME] is in that they did not make themselves. Knowledge Of When I come across information about [NAME] I will search to learn more about them. I seek out information to learn more about [NAME]. Learning about [NAME] is important to me. I am aware of the personal details of [NAME]'s life. If I saw a story about [NAME], I would read it.

Identification	I have many of the same beliefs as [NAME].
With	I have many of the same opinions as [NAME].
	I usually agree with [NAME].
	I usually make the same choices as [NAME].
	I can relate to [NAME]'s attitudes.
	I like the way [NAME] handles problems.
Interaction	[NAME] makes me feel as if I am with a friend.
With	[NAME] keeps me company when viewing their content.
	I can imagine myself as [NAME]'s friend.
	[NAME] understands the kinds of content I want to see.

STIMULUS MATERIAL

Manipulation Check	What is the product being promoted in the post?
Purchase Intention	The likelihood that I would purchase the products [NAME] endorsed in the post is ____. My willingness to purchase the products [NAME] endorsed in the post is ____. The likelihood that I would recommend the product [NAME] endorsed in the post to others is ____.
Brand Attitude	Please describe your overall feelings about the described in the post you just saw: Unappealing > appealing Bad > good Unpleasant > pleasant Unfavorable > favorable Unlikable > likable
Demographic Questions	How old are you? What year are you in school? How would you describe your ethnicity?

Figure 3

Stimulus post for the male athlete, low-involvement condition

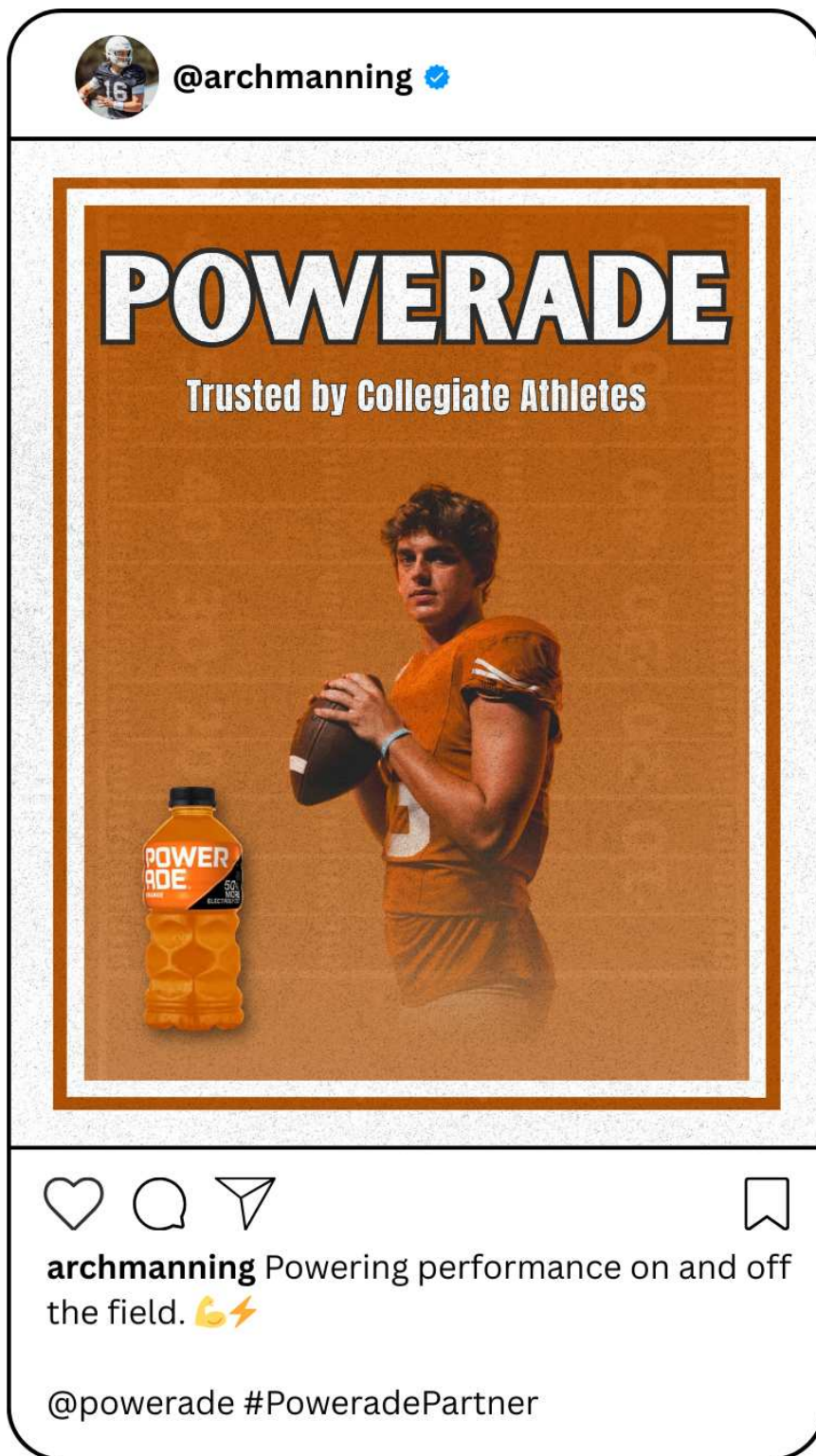


Figure 4

Stimulus post for the male athlete, high-involvement condition

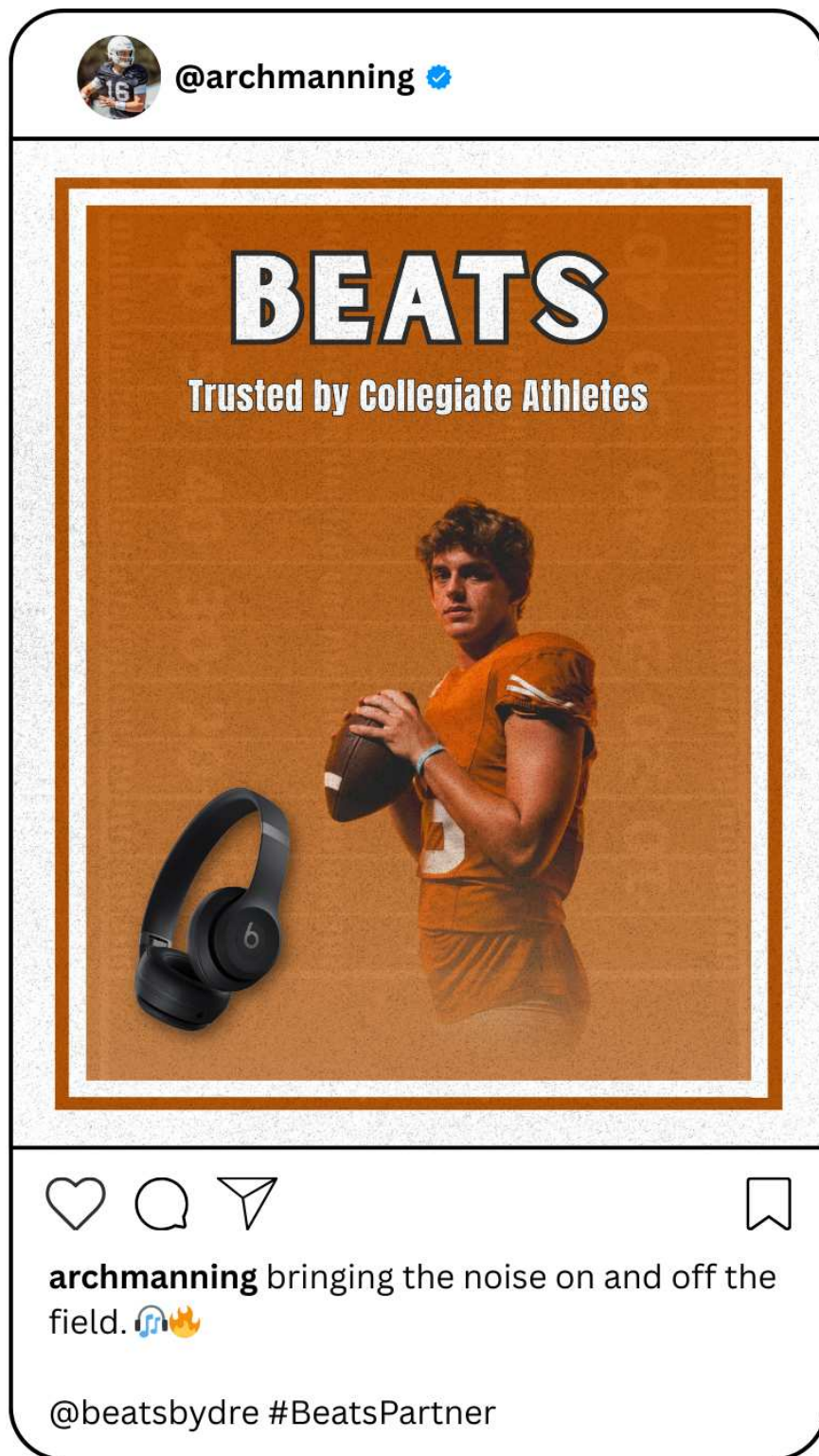


Figure 5

Stimulus post for the female athlete, low-involvement condition

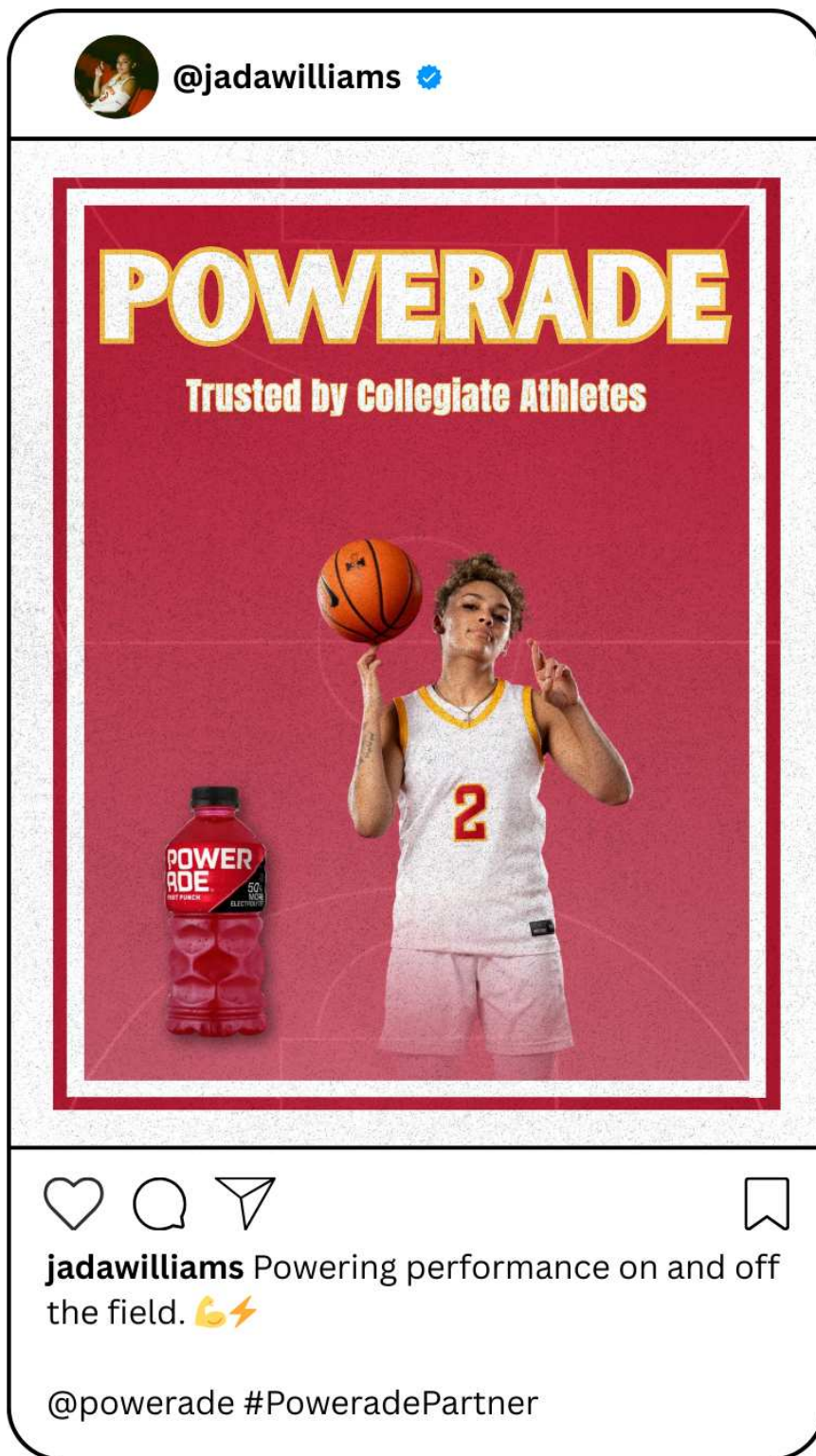
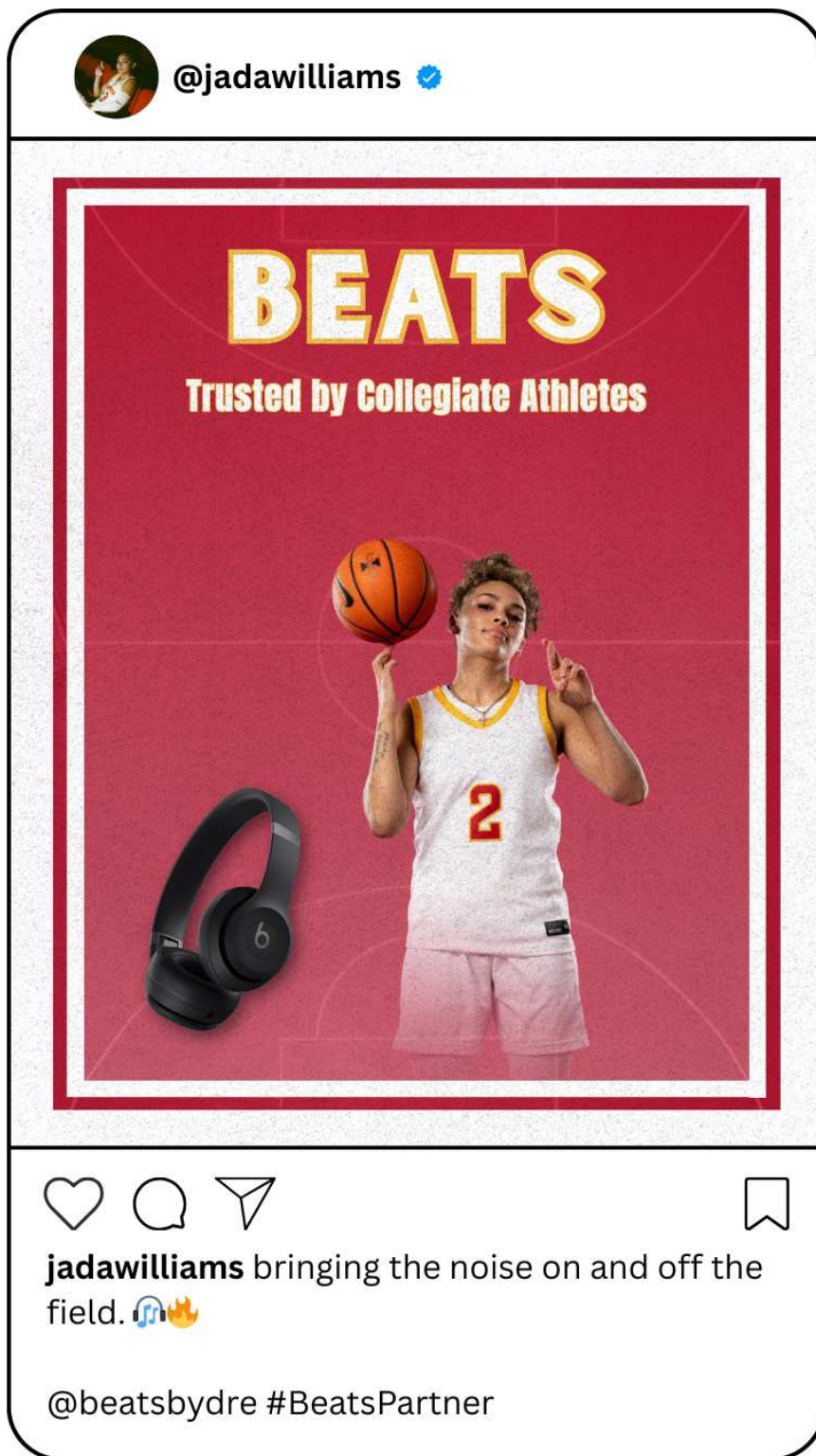


Figure 6

Stimulus post for the female athlete, high-involvement condition



8.1 Recruitment Email

Recipient: Professors and department listservs

Subject: Request to share graduate research study opportunity with students

Dear [XXX],

My name is Paeton Lesser, and I am a master's student in the Department of Journalism and Media Communication at Colorado State University, working under the supervision of my advisor, Dr. Samuel Tham. I am currently conducting an IRB-approved research study (Protocol #7530) as part of my master's thesis, and I am writing to ask if you would be willing to share a research participation opportunity with your students.

The study examines how college students respond to Instagram posts featuring product endorsements by college athletes in the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) era. Specifically, the research explores consumers' perceptions of college athlete influencers and how these perceptions relate to brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Participation involves completing an online questionnaire that takes approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Eligible participants must be at least 18 years old and current college students. Participation is completely voluntary and students may stop at any time or skip any questions they prefer not to answer. To encourage participation, students may opt to enter a drawing for one of five \$20 Amazon gift cards.

If you are willing, I would greatly appreciate it if you could share the questionnaire link with your class via email or Canvas. I am also happy to provide a brief description for students or answer any questions you may have about the study.

Here is the questionnaire link: [XXX]

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I sincerely appreciate your support of graduate student research.

Best regards,

Paeton Lesser
Master's Student, Journalism and Media Communication
Colorado State University
Paeton.Lesser@colostate.edu

Principle Investigator/Thesis Advisor:
Dr. Samuel Tham
Associate Professor, Journalism and Media Communication
Samuel.Tham@colostate.edu

8.2 Recruitment Message for Reddit

Title: College Students Needed for 10-Minute Questionnaire about College Athletes & Instagram (Gift Card Drawing)

Hi everyone!

I'm a master's student at Colorado State University conducting an IRB-approved research study for my thesis, and I'm looking for current college students to participate in a short online questionnaire.

What's the study about?

- The study looks at how college students respond to college athletes' product and brand endorsement posts on social media in the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) era. Specifically, it examines consumers' perceptions of college athlete influencers and how those perceptions relate to brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

What participation involves:

- The completion of an online questionnaire. It will take about 10 minutes to complete.
- Answering questions about your familiarity with a college athlete.
- Responding to questions about your attitudes and intentions regarding a social media post.
- Participation is also completely voluntary (you can skip questions or stop at any time).

Who can participate?

- You must be at least 18 years old.
- You must be a current college student.

Compensation:

- Participants may choose to enter a drawing for a \$20 gift card (approximately a 1 in 56 chance of winning).

Privacy & ethics:

- The study is approved by the Colorado State University IRB (Protocol #7530).
- Responses are confidential and collected via Qualtrics.
- No identifying information be connected to your questionnaire responses.

If you're interested, here's a link to the questionnaire: [XXX]

If you have questions, feel free to comment or message me. Thanks so much for considering helping out with graduate research!

Paeton Lesser
Master's Student, Journalism & Media Communication
Colorado State University

8.3 Debrief Statement

Thank you for your time and valuable contribution to this study. The purpose of this research is to examine how college consumers respond to college athlete endorsements on social media based on different conditions of influencer gender and levels of product involvement. Please note that all athlete endorsement materials used in this questionnaire—including names, images, brands, and promotional content—were fictitious and created solely for experimental purposes. The athletes and brands depicted may or may not have any actual affiliation or endorsement relationship.

Your responses are confidential and will be analyzed only in aggregate form for academic research purposes. If you have questions about the study or wish to receive a summary of the findings once the project is completed, please contact the co-investigator, Paeton Lesser (paeton@colostate.edu), and/or the principle investigator, Samuel Tham (Samuel.tham@colostate.edu).

If you would like to be entered into a drawing for one of five \$20 Amazon gift cards as compensation for participating in this study, you may click the link below. This link will direct you to a separate form where you may provide your email address to enter the drawing. Providing an email address is completely optional and is not required to complete the questionnaire; however, only participants who provide an email address will be entered into the drawing. You will have an approximate 1 in 56 chance of winning a gift card. Email addresses will be used solely for the purpose of administering the gift card drawing and will not be linked to your survey responses.

[Click here to enter the drawing.](#)