

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: NAME, IMAGE AND LIKENESS: A
CONTENT ANALYSIS OF HOW WOMEN
STUDENT ATHLETES SHARE THEIR
STORIES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES ON
SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE AGE OF NIL

Shannon Marie Scovel, Doctor of Philosophy,
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Dissertation directed by: Professor Sarah Oates, Philip Merrill College of
Journalism

This dissertation assesses the self-representation and representation of ten elite collegiate women athletes during the first year of the NCAA's new 'name, image and likeness' policies. Building on theories of representation, gender performance, self-presentation and intersectionality, this study explores how women athletes reproduce notions of feminism, femininity and athleticism on their public TikTok, Instagram and Twitter accounts. Each of the women in this study have at least 50,000 followers across their social media accounts, and the content they produced on these platforms over the 12-month period from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022, serves to both reflect and reject hegemonic norms surrounding women in sport. Previous research has

demonstrated that women athletes remain marginalized and underrepresented in sports. Scholars have also noted that women athletes typically represent themselves on social media in ways that highlight their personal lives, as opposed to their athletic experiences. This study explores these questions of self-representation through a content analysis of social media posts produced by ten collegiate women and addresses how these women navigated digital storytelling within the neoliberal, capitalist, patriarchal U.S. college sports media ecosystem. The ways in which athlete content was reproduced by journalists during this same period was also assessed. Findings show that journalists rarely engaged with women athletes' posts during the first year of the NCAA's new NIL policies and presented women's success in the NIL era as surprising, unexpected and unrelated to athletic achievements. This dissertation adds to the larger body of research on women's representation and self-representation in sports but adds a new dimension to this subject by exploring such representations in the collegiate environment, an arena in which athletes were previously denied the opportunity to earn money from their digital storytelling and online brands. The ways in which women challenge and reproduce hegemonic norms in their social media content during this period also contributes to the broader understanding of gender tensions in sports.

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by

Shannon Marie Scovel

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Sarah Oates, Chair

Professor Linda Steiner

Assistant Professor Krishnan Vasudevan

Professor David Andrews

Professor of the Practice Mark Hyman

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Dedication

To mom and dad, thank you.

Acknowledgements

There are so many sports metaphors that could be used to describe the dissertation experience, but here's where I'll start: Dr. Sarah Oates once told me that her role as my advisor would be equivalent to that of a coach. She said she would offer instructions and encouragement, but that the dissertation writing process was my "game." This was an analogy I understood well. I've had a lot of coaches in my career as a competitive athlete, but Sarah is unquestionably one of the best. She believed in my work from the beginning and consistently encouraged me to pursue my interest in women's representation in sports media. I tell people all the time that I have the 'world's greatest advisor,' and I mean it. I would not have had the confidence to finish this project if not for the kindness, generosity and support of Dr. Sarah Oates. Thank you for coaching me to the finish line, Sarah.

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My understanding of sports culture and sports media has also largely been informed by my experience as part of the University of Maryland's Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) research group, and I cannot thank Dr. David Andrews enough for welcoming me into this community. PCS has become a second home for me, and I am a better scholar, thinker and collaborator because of the skills I've learned and the friendships I've made in this group. Thank you to the

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I started with a sports metaphor, so I'll end with one as well. The dissertation is a marathon, not a sprint. And marathons are long, hard and isolating, so thank you to all of the friends and family beyond the Maryland campus community who helped make this possible as well. Thank you to Garland Bartlett for letting me ramble on about my research during our runs, and thank you to Holly Lawrence (and the entire Lawrence family) for all that you did to support me on this journey as well. Last but certainly not least, thank you to Curt, Kathryn, Riley and Conroy Scovel for being there with me through the ups and the downs and never giving up on me. Thank you for consistently encouraging me on this grueling journey and always helping me find joy and positive vibes during this experience.

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List of Abbreviations

American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (AAHPER)

Associated Press (AP)

Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW)

Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW)

Committee on Women's Athletics (CWA)

Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly (ESPY)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Louisiana State University (LSU)

Most Valuable Player (MVP)

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)

National Women's Soccer League (NWSL)

Name, image and likeness (NIL)

Southeastern Conference (SEC)

Texas Christian University (TCU)

University of Connecticut (UConn)

United States Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT)

Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC)

Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA)

Women's Professional Fastpitch League (WPFL)

Chapter 1: Introduction

On July 1, 2021, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) passed a new ‘name, image and likeness’ (NIL) policy that enabled college athletes to earn revenue from social media posts, promotional events and corporate sponsorships for the first time. For women athletes in particular, this unprecedented rule change created an opportunity to develop profitable brands on social media that challenged male hegemony. This dissertation explores the digital self-representation of women college athletes, a group that has previously been denied the chance to build themselves into marketable, revenue-generating athletes on social media during their collegiate careers.

The women in this sample capitalized on the branding potential afforded to them on TikTok, Instagram and Twitter during the first year of this NIL policy. They produced content that mirrored influencer culture (Duffy, 2017; Abidin, 2016), publishing front-facing, selfie-style lifestyle videos on TikTok and promoting curated, filtered feminine photos on Instagram. They also used Twitter to express their athletic identities more prominently with the help of journalists and athletic departments who posted shareable content on that platform. Each of their social media accounts also contained some elements of postfeminism, neoliberal feminism and third-wave feminism. The women in this sample overall helped shift narratives about women in sports in various moments throughout the first year of these NIL changes, but their agency was also countered at times by sexist norms imposed either by society or the athletes themselves. Journalists also represented women athletes in

gendered ways when reporting on athlete self-representation in the age of NIL. Reporters rarely engaged directly with athlete content, but, when they did embed an athlete post into their articles or comment on an athlete's social media following more broadly, such coverage was presented in a hegemonic fashion which served to 'other' women in the NIL space and in sports more generally.

Background

The NCAA's NIL rule change came just two weeks after the Supreme Court ruled in *National Collegiate Athletic Association vs. Alston* that the NCAA's approach to limiting athlete income under the guise of amateurism violated antitrust laws. The *Alston* ruling did not directly address NIL and instead focused on "education-related compensation or benefits," with justices unanimously arguing that NCAA member institutions could not limit merit scholarships, postgraduate fellowships, grants and living expenses related to students' academic needs, even if those students were still competing in the NCAA (*National Collegiate Athletic Association vs. Alston*, 2020, p. 13). Yet the Court's decision sent a message to the NCAA that its role as the sole operator of college sports would be under further scrutiny. The NCAA responded to this ruling by addressing the long-standing issue of athlete publicity rights, ultimately loosening the rules on NIL by creating the new July 2021 policy. Though the *Alston* decision and the NIL policy adjustment that followed represent two separate issues — antitrust and publicity — they remain connected in that they both led to sweeping change across the NCAA that impacted experiences and opportunities for student athletes.

This dissertation explores the ways in which women athletes have capitalized on these new NIL opportunities to express athleticism, femininity and feminism in their self-representation. The ability for athletes, particularly women athletes, to make money from their content and their identity creates increased potential for fandom and attention not previously promoted in any significant way by traditional media companies. Cooky et al. (2021) highlight that during the NCAA basketball tournament, an event that collegiate women and men compete in during the same month, coverage of male athletes outpaced coverage of women athletes by over 90%. Research also suggests that traditional media organizations such as ESPN and local news affiliates build up excitement and interest for men's sports by including "colorful descriptions of male athlete's performances and captivating commentary" (Cooky, 2018, p. 34; Greer et al., 2009) compared to more matter-of-fact broadcast discussions of women's sports. Musto et al. (2017) suggests that this form of 'gender-bland sexism' "otherizes softly" women athletes in the sporting space (p. 586). The contrast of coverage, both in terms of quality and quantity, pervades both print and social media platforms, presenting women inherently less popular and less interesting than their male counterparts.

Hall's (1997) theory of representation argues that such content disparities and broader media coverage reflect and reproduce power relations. The circulation and recirculation of discourse creates hegemonic norms that are then absorbed into culture and perceived as natural (Hall). In the case of sports media, the focus on representation of male athletes has inculcated a cultural norm in which male athletes are considered the default subjects (Duncan, 2006). Their involvement in sport is not

questioned or marked in a gendered way. For instance, Cooky et al. (2021) notes that journalists present male athletes as athletes, while women athletes are identified by their gender and labeled as ‘women athletes.’ Such language choices, combined with women’s general under representation in sports media “inscribes women athletes and women’s sports as other, as secondary to men’s sports, which are positioned as the universal standard norm” (Cooky et al., 2021, p. 17). This representation of women athletes reinforces difference.

Previous scholars have explored the ways in which women athletes have responded to such disparities by attempting to reclaim their voices on social media and amplify their own sporting experiences. In fact, Smith and Sanderson (2015) found that professional women athletes represented themselves on social media, specifically Instagram, as “athletes first, females second” (p. 354), challenging their representation as passive figures in sports media. Coche (2014), however, notes that such expressions of athleticism differ across mediums. Women athletes “overwhelmingly present themselves as athletes through their biographies” on social media but are more likely to “visually highlight their femininity...[and] frame themselves as women first and athletes second” in photos (Coche, 2014, p. 116-117). Hayes Sauder and Blaszk (2015) similarly found that women soccer players in particular opted to share more of their personal lives in Twitter photos than they did their athletic lives. The type of social media platform used by athletes plays a role in how they express themselves, and the extensive scholarship on athlete self-representation on Twitter and Instagram highlights the nuances through which women present themselves on and off the field across mediums.

Individual self-representation also varies across sport. Football players, for instance, highlight their football identity on social media while soccer players, both men and women, frequently promote off-the-field aspects of their life (Pegoraro, 2010; Chadwick and Burton, 2008). Hayes Sauder and Blaszk (2015) also suggest that team dynamics can influence self-representation with the potential for similarities in branding across multiple players within a given team culture. This study includes a range of athletes across individual and team sports to account for such differences, though this study notably only focuses on women in order to understand the ways in which women's self-representations promote or push back against the historically stereotypical imagery of such athletes in media coverage.

Goffman's theory of self-representation (1959) suggests that this decision-making process, the act of deciding which photos to post, is a form of impression management in which an individual deliberates about which version of themselves to present to the public. Goffman proposes that individuals engage in two primary forms of self-representation: 'frontstage' public representation and 'private' backstage representation. These concepts have been applied to sports media to note how athletes, both men and women, choose to present themselves as active athletes (frontstage) or personal, private (backstage) individuals. This dissertation applies Goffman's theories to analyze women's self-representation on Instagram, TikTok and Twitter, building on previous work (Coche, 2014; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Hayes Sauder and Blaszk, 2015) but exploring these questions within the context of a modern collegiate sports landscape. This dissertation is not focused on comparing the self-representation choices made by collegiate men versus women, but rather the

ways in which collegiate women athletes in particular express themselves. This research adds to the understanding of women's digital sports media representation in college sport, particularly during the NIL era. In a broader way, this dissertation contributes to the central question of whether social media content can challenge traditional media norms in sports journalism.

Goffman's theory of self-representation stems from his background as a theater scholar, and he emphasizes the performance of self as a form of representation. Gender scholar Judith Butler (1990) similarly explores expressions of identity through the lens of performance, arguing that hegemonic norms influence gender expression. Gender is not fixed, rather it is repeatedly enacted and disciplined. Ideals of naturalized femininity or masculinity are falsified, according to Butler, but reinforced through representations of gender in culture. Fink (2014) explains that women in sports media have been infantilized and sexualized throughout history, and while such blatant sexism has declined in recent years, more subtle forms of marginalization such as gender-bland sexism (Cooky et al., 2021) have emerged as similarly problematic. Social media gives women the space to recreate their image and counter these stereotypes, though these platforms still serve as disciplined spaces in which gender norms play a prominent role in the self-representation of women (Hasmath & Cook, 2013).

Women, however, are not monolithic, and Crenshaw (1991) argues that women of color in particular face more scrutiny, discipline and marginalization. With work rooted in legal scholarship, Crenshaw proposes that women of color, specifically Black women, sit at an intersection in which they are oppressed because

of both their gender and their race; such identities cannot be separated or acknowledged independently. Media scholars and sports scholars use this concept known as ‘intersectionality’ to understand and explore the representations of women of color in sports, assessing the ways in which they are under-covered (Isard & Melton, 2022) and covered in ways that minimize their athletic achievements (Velloso, 2022). Using Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, Butler’s understanding of gender performance, Hall’s theory of representation and Goffman’s theory of self-representation, this dissertation analyzes the self-representation choices of ten elite collegiate women and the ways in which their storytelling reproduces, reflects and rejects notions of feminism, femininity and athleticism during the first year of the NCAA’s new NIL policy.

Research Questions

Given that this dissertation is focused on assessing the content produced by influential women student athletes in the first year of the NCAA’s updated NIL rules with the goal of identifying patterns across content, this research includes two primary research questions:

How are women student athletes using their voices? Specifically, what different patterns do women student athletes use to express their athleticism, femininity, and personality, and to what degree do these patterns challenge and/or reinforce traditional journalistic representations of themselves?

This first research question addresses the ways in which women student athletes shared their stories through social media content during the first year of NIL policies. Their posts provide insight into their lived experiences as women in sports and serve

as an alternative to male-dominated sports media representations (Bruce, 2012). Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) found that top women professional athletes have historically reproduced hegemonic imagery in an effort to reclaim their own power (p. 302). These athletes present themselves as autonomous, independent actors who “know exactly what they are doing” and “do not experience themselves as manipulated and powerless” (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003, p. 85; Thorpe et al., 2017), even as they present themselves in ways that highlight their physical features or serve to potentially self-objectify them. Thorpe et al. (2017) recognize that such representations, despite their perceived potential for empowerment for women athletes, can serve to amplify and promote feminine expectations for all women. Hall, similarly, would argue that women are not necessarily enhancing their cultural power through these posts, as they simply reflect the male hegemony. Hall’s understanding of power and meaning remains vital for exploring the impact of such posts.

This first research question explores the degree to which collegiate women follow self-objectifying patterns established by some leading women professional athletes and the ways in which they diverge from this model in their own self-representation. The selected athletes in this study are divided into three categories: those who embraced NIL opportunities early, those who have been part of a historic moment that garnered media attention, and those who have achieved a standout degree of excellence such as in the Olympics or another significant national (NCAA) or international honor. These categories create distinction among different strategies that athletes are employing based on their situation and add nuance to the understanding of women’s self-representation during the NIL era. The athletes in

each of these categories will be addressed individually in Research Questions 1a, 1b and 1c below. The athletes in this study also represent a range of sports, including gymnastics, basketball, soccer, softball and football, and this study assesses how they individually engage with the expectations and image stereotypes of women in those athletic spaces. All athletes in this study, however, have achieved significant influence and garnered mass followings on social media as well as coverage in traditional media.

1a. How did women who signed early NIL deals use social media to tell their story as student athletes?

Fresno State women's basketball twins Haley and Hanna Cavinder made history on July 1, 2021, as two student athletes to sign immediate official endorsement deals under the NCAA's new NIL policies. They were prepared for the passage of the updated branding rule and reaped immediate benefits. The Cavinder sisters combined their star status and elected to work with companies together, leaning into their value as twin talents (Kuwada, 2021). Their early corporate sponsorships led to billboards in Times Square, and they quickly became celebrities online, which added to the positive reputation they had built through their on-court performances. While Haley and Hanna Cavinder are talented Division I athletes, their content and brand deals are not exclusively sports centric. The twins' initial corporate sponsorship came from Boost Mobile, and they also quickly signed with Six Star Nutrition in the opening week of the new NIL policy, proving that their endorsement value extended across industries (Karimi, 2021).

Despite this corporate and financial success, the Cavinders were still considered by some reporters to be “athletes in non-revenue sports” because they do not play men’s basketball or men’s football (Mauss, 2021). Jessop and Sabin (2021, p. 255) note that revenue in college sports has “[been] distributed more greatly to men’s sports than women’s sports,” and such disparities play out on the professional level as well (Wolter, 2021). Meghamez (2015) suggests that, of all college women’s sports, women’s basketball is typically “the only women's athletic program that can make any sort of profit for the school,” though he still positions women’s basketball as secondary to men's basketball and football (p. 365). Traditional sports media executives have historically been “‘gender blind(ed)’ by intersecting sets of beliefs that ‘leave no other position for women than as ‘different’ and ‘other,’ and women’s sports as inferior and less interesting’” (Bruce, 2012, p. 131). This perspective has limited sports editors and officials from recognizing the growing interest and potential for profit in women’s sports.

Sports editors have suggested that audiences must ‘prove’ their interest in women’s sports in order to prompt additional media coverage from networks like ESPN (Adams & Tuggle, 2004). Yet, even when audiences do ‘prove’ their interest in women’s sports by selling out stadiums or watching women’s games on television in record numbers (Durham, 2019), the increase in coverage has been slow (Cooky et al., 2021). Men’s sports, on the other hand, are considered the default choice and assigned greater value in the industry. The continued lack of coverage of women’s sports has thus created a cultural assumption that women are naturally or inherently worth less than their male counterparts, and these norms and expectations have

financial consequences. In fact, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the NCAA has so undervalued the television rights to the women's basketball tournament in particular that it bundled the event into a television contract deal with 28 other sports for a combined sale of \$34 million a year (Bachman, 2023). The women's basketball tournament alone is projected to be worth between \$81 million to \$112 million, but such contracts are not open for negotiation until 2025.

This pattern of underestimating the value of women athletes has extended into the NIL market. Jessop and Sabin (2021) even suggested that, prior to the 2021 Supreme Court ruling, "experts question[ed] whether allowing intercollegiate athletes to benefit from their NIL will lead to Title IX¹ violations" because they worried schools would assist male athletes in generating far more NIL revenue than female athletes (p. 258). While Title IX remains an important and critical part of the women's sports discussion, the fear that women would lag so far behind male athletes in NIL opportunities is problematic as it suggests that women do not have the potential to match or outpace men in this space. Women athletes such as the Cavinders disproved the assumption that women athletes cannot achieve success in the NIL era, as they have now generated upwards of two million dollars in revenue as individuals (Knight, 2022).

¹ Title IX was passed in 1972 as part of the Education Amendments with the intention of ensuring equitable educational opportunities and support for all genders. The entirety of the Title IX amendment is as follows: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." Title IX has since been applied to high school and collegiate sports with the intention of holding schools accountable for inequitable and disproportionate athletic experiences across genders. Title IX has created new opportunities for women and increased athletic participation in the NCAA by 600 percent (Lee & Dusbery, 2012). However, women athletes are still disproportionately under-represented in collegiate athletic programs and offered fewer scholarships than men (Axon & Schnell, 2022).

Olivia Dunne, a Louisiana State University (LSU) gymnast and leading collegiate athlete by follower count on social media, has also shown that NIL revenue is not reserved exclusively for male athletes or athletes playing a particular sport. The ways in which the Cavinder twins and Dunne have achieved their financial success through self-representation will be assessed in this dissertation in relation to feminist theory and understandings of hegemony in sports, though their individual success does not indicate that the updated NIL rules have eliminated inequality in sports. The Cavinder twins and Dunne ultimately represent critical case studies in athlete branding and media studies because of their early success and million-dollar brands.

As part of their identity expression, Dunne and the Cavinder twins have incorporated varying elements of femininity in their content, posing in designer clothes, swimsuits, and streetwear while showcasing their experiences on and off the court. Hanna and Haley Cavinder in particular have worked to actively promote themselves as people who have a “sporty side and [a] girly side,” and they have publicly explained that they are interested in corporate endorsements that allow them to express both elements of their identity and personality (Steinberg, 2021). Their comments also indicates that that they view these traits — sporty and girly — as distinct from one another. The Cavinders have signed deals with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), sports store Champs, shoe company Eastbay, and more, suggesting that they deem these brands appropriate fits for their image.

Athletes who embrace the opportunity to share a holistic expression of themselves focused on all aspects of their life, including their hours off the court or outside the gym, engage in what Goffman would describe as backstage

communication — behind-the-scenes footage and photos that explore interests in fashion, business and music, or more generally non-athletic related activities. Evaluating the ways in which athletes navigate frontstage and backstage communication offers an important perspective on the self-representation of women athletes in the first year of NIL, especially for those who signed early endorsement contracts and established themselves as leaders in this digital space. Haley and Hanna Cavinder and Olivia Dunne are distinct in that they launched brand deals and sponsored social media posts on July 1, 2021, that positioned them as leading influencers in this space, while other athletes, even those more well-known before the NIL policy passed, approached digital storytelling differently, creating the need for additional categories in decoding social media content for women athletes as discussed below.

1b. How do women who have been part of a historic event use social media to tell their story as student athletes?

Dunne and the Cavinder sisters drew headlines for their early business deals and large social media followings after the creation of new NIL policies, but other athletes have worked to maintain an active brand following a breakthrough moment pre-NIL. Two athletes in particular — Sarah Fuller and Sedona Prince — experienced a burst of media coverage and social media followers during the 2020-2021 season after historic sporting moments and have continued to build their brand since July 2021 by telling stories that go beyond their time in their spotlight. These case studies warrant assessment in that they demonstrate how athletes have capitalized on the recognition they earned and created potentially profitable, popular brands in the NIL

era. Both Fuller and Prince broke onto the scene as disruptors, women who pushed back against traditional gender norms and hierarchies through their participation and voice in sport, but they each did so in unique ways.

Fuller's rise started eight months prior to the NIL ruling, after she became the first woman to compete in a Power 5 collegiate football game. The former Southeastern Conference (SEC) soccer champion completed just one kick during her first game for the Vanderbilt University football team, but her participation in the event drew significant attention (Gibbs, 2020). Viewers interested in Fuller's background could access her social media page where she continued to present herself as a holistic, two-sport athlete proudly representing her school and her conference throughout her time on the football and soccer teams. Though she couldn't profit from her likeness during this period, Fuller translated her fame into activism, participating in events with the organization "Play Like A Girl" and using her platform as a forum for women's empowerment. She also spoke at the 2021 Presidential Inauguration, introducing Vice President Kamala Harris virtually ahead of the evening event (Treisman, 2021). Fuller ultimately transferred to North Texas following her graduation to play soccer for one more season (Bengel, 2021), and her use of social media as a member of the soccer team there reveals her brand-building efforts after experiencing a historic moment in sports. The NIL rules changed during the height of Fuller's athletic career, making her an ideal case study for understanding the transition from social media engagement to paid online capital for college athletes.

Fuller is not the only athlete, however, who has continued to embrace social media as a storytelling platform after a major media moment. Sedona Prince, a former University of Oregon women's basketball player, built her popularity directly through her play on the court and her expert use of social media, making her a notable candidate for an NIL case study as well. During the 2021 NCAA women's college basketball tournament, Prince chronicled her experience practicing, competing, and living in a semi-quarantined hotel throughout the event, but she broke into the national media when she posted a video calling out the NCAA for the mistreatment of women athletes (Scovel & Velloso, 2022). Prince already had an established following at this point in her collegiate career, as she had been using TikTok for entertainment purposes prior to the tournament, but her 38-second clip highlighting the lack of equipment provided to women athletes in comparison to male athletes caught the attention of the country and led to appearances on *Good Morning America* and other popular media shows (McCarthy, 2021).

Prince's video contrasted the images of squat racks and lifting equipment provided to the men with the small collection of dumbbells offered to the women during the tournament. Her post sparked a national media frenzy that eventually forced the NCAA to address systematic gender inequity through a formal, legal audit of the governing body (Kaplan Hecker & Fink, 2021). While some scholars have assessed the general media coverage and fan commentary about Prince and Fuller (Harry, 2021), little research exists on the content that these athletes have produced since the NCAA enabled them to profit from their name, image and likeness. Prince and Fuller achieved success as student athletes, but they became known more for their

historic NCAA experiences. This dissertation evaluates their brand-building efforts and digital storytelling in the year following their breakthrough moments.

1c. How do standout women in sports use social media to tell their stories as student athletes?

Once women student athletes have gained attention through sporting success, how do they use their platform to communicate? Previous literature argues that while women athletes are generally underrepresented in traditional media, they experience frequent increases in attention during national and international sporting events where patriotism and pride are amplified such as the Olympics or Olympic Trials where athletes represent their country, as opposed to their town or their school (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021; Wensing & Bruce, 2003). Such coverage is often more positive and produced at a higher quality than content distributed during non-Olympic periods, though some lingering issues of sexist commentary remain (Cooky et al., 2021; Billings et al., 2002). Given this precedent, studying the ways in which women who have experienced standout performance on such a stage is relevant and important to the aims of this study. This category of athletes includes the following people: Olympic gymnastics champion and college athlete Sunisa Lee, NCAA gymnastics all-around champion Trinity Thomas, NCAA women's basketball champion Aliyah Boston, 2021 Associated Press (AP) NCAA basketball Player of the Year Paige Bueckers, and NCAA softball record-holder Jocelyn Alo. Each athlete serves as a different case in how women are using NIL to tell their story and attempt to take control of their narrative in a sports industry historically dominated by men.

Sunisa Lee, a sophomore gymnast at Auburn, arrived on campus in Fall 2021, just months after the passage of the updated NIL policy and just weeks after her gold medal-winning performance in the gymnastics all-around competition in the Tokyo Olympics. Lee became the first all-around Olympic champion to compete in college, a historic decision driven by the potential for her to now profit off her brand while still maintaining her collegiate eligibility (Radnofsky, 2021). Her success combined with her public fame following the Olympics makes her an interesting example to study in understanding how athletes who experience standout success navigate athlete branding. ESPN also reported that Lee is “arguably the most famous athlete at a school that is known for basketball and football” and “walks around [Auburn’s] campus like the star quarterback” (Torre & Roenigk, 2022, 9:48). Lee has spoken publicly about the pressure associated with competing at this level following her international achievements (Scarborough, 2022), but this research question explores the way Lee represents herself and her experiences on social media in her first year on campus during this unprecedented time.

The power of publicity that comes from winning an Olympic gold is nearly unparalleled in the sports world, but winning national awards and recognition through the NCAA also generates press attention and enhances an athlete’s platform. Florida gymnast Trinity Thomas, for instance, inspired headlines after finishing first in the 2022 women’s gymnastics all-around competition at the NCAA championships and winning titles on floor and uneven bars. Despite beating Lee in floor, uneven bars and the women’s all-around at NAAs, Thomas does not have nearly the online following that Lee does, though her collegiate accomplishments still make her worthy

of study as part of this research question, particularly given the fact that she competes in the same sport as Olympic champion Lee and as Dunne, the most followed athlete in the NCAA.

Oklahoma's Alo has had a similar experience as Thomas in terms of success and social media popularity. She made a name for herself as a top-performing collegiate athlete in softball by breaking the NCAA record for home runs in 2022 (Marinofsky, 2022). Though Alo is also not among the most followed athletes online, as she has just over 50,000 followers on Instagram and a similar following on Twitter, her elite athletic achievements in softball have amplified her brand. ESPN also made a recent investment into growing the popularity and publicity of softball (Elchlepp, 2021; Caron, 2020), creating a larger stage for Alo. The growth of softball's fanbase combined with Alo's status as a leader in her sport makes her a useful case study for this research.

Much like Thomas and Alo, South Carolina basketball star Aliyah Boston also elevated her brand through her performance on the national stage as she helped South Carolina to a 2022 women's basketball national championship and earned top individual honors along the way. Nearly 5 million people tuned in to watch Boston and her South Carolina team beat the University of Connecticut (UConn) 64-49, but Boston's social media feeds offered a more personal perspective on the game and the season as a whole (Tapp, 2022). Boston's ability to self-promote her success in the national tournament led her to sign contracts with brands such as Orangetheory, a fitness and lifestyle company that has actively been involved in women's

empowerment efforts in the last year (Christovich, 2022; Orangetheory® fitness offers studios and equipment, 2021).

While Boston and her team won the title in 2022, UConn standout guard Paige Bueckers generated more followers than her peers in the sport. Bueckers built a brand that is now worth \$62,900 per social media post, and she also became the first women's college basketball player athlete to gain over 1 million Instagram followers (Front Office Sports, 2021; Yanchulis, 2022). She further added to her legacy in the sport by being an active advocate for anti-racism. Her powerful speech at the Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly (ESPY) award ceremony in July 2021 in particular acknowledged her privilege on the court as a White woman and also celebrated Black women in the sport. Lou Moore (2021) calls on companies to listen to Bueckers' ESPYs speech. He argues that historical precedent suggested that "White women athletes would be the ones to reap the most rewards from the new era" of NIL but that "Blackness has appeal to consumers from every background and is equally worthy of celebration" (Moore, 2021). He added that Black players could help "finally expand a pop culture vision of American femininity that has for so long excluded most Black women" (Moore). This dissertation examines this potential through an assessment of athlete self-representation.

The intersection of race and gender represents an important space for study with regards to NIL because of this history and the role of identity in branding. Crenshaw explains that women of color face added challenges in society because they "experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to those experienced by men of color and

sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism, and feminism are limited, even on their own terms” (p. 1252). Women, however, looking to gain fame and value in the sporting space, are expected to be empowered individuals who develop their own brands without focusing on any adversity or sexism they might face. Such an expectation is critiqued throughout this dissertation.

Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) define the challenges that women, and particularly women of color, face in attempting to navigate sexism and racism to be able to present themselves as empowered icons as the “athletic labour of femininity” (p. 307). Stars such as Serena Williams are repeatedly held up as examples of Black women who have navigated that labor, but Williams’ ability to pose seductively and make money from her brand does not erase the constant discrimination faced by Black women in sports (Cooky, 2018; Crenshaw). Pointing to a single example of athletic and financial success by a woman of color cherry-picks an example in an attempt to ignore the significant forces of sexism and racism that confront women in sport. Women of color continue to face discrimination and marginalization by the “male-dominated sports media that is invested in the maintenance of sports as a masculine-dominated cultural space” (Cooky, 2018, p. 28), and breaking free of the meaning ascribed to such bodies by language and culture has proven immensely challenging (Hall, 1997). Yet, society continues to encourage women of color to carry the burden of their struggle and uphold the responsibility to fix these problems as neoliberal individuals, with little regard or public discourse about the systematic structures that make such a task so challenging.

As Crenshaw explains, women of color achieving elite success in college sports are still targets of entrenched discrimination, meaning race, gender, and intersectionality must be considered in the assessment of athlete self-representation. Bruce (2012) argues that media representation of athletes sends a message “about [the] social position and role” of women in sports, and the content created by the selected individuals in this study offers a roadmap for how collegiate athletes are navigating these dynamics in the era of NIL changes (p. 131-132). The ways in which women who have experienced fame through sponsorship deals, monumental moments, or elite success represent themselves across sports offers a model for the next generation of athletes; analyzing themes from athlete social media posts during the first year of NIL policies shows the benefits and concerns about such modeling. Journalists, however, also play a role in discussing and disseminating such imagery, inspiring the second research question:

RQ2: How do journalists engage with the voices of women student athletes in their reporting?

Athletes such as Prince, Fuller, Lee, Thomas, Boston, Alo, Bueckers, Dunne and the Cavinder twins all manage social media accounts of over 50,000 followers and act as individual media companies, branding themselves to the public. Hall argues that meaning and power are created and reinforced through representations, and such representations contribute to hegemonic norms, conveying value in culture. Women athletes in the NIL era are thus creating their own representations. Tweets, Instagram posts, and TikToks from female athletes publicize their lived experiences and have the potential to reshape how women in the NCAA are viewed by the public.

The ways in which this content, and the voices of these athletes, are reproduced, embedded, and promoted in more traditional journalistic outlets demonstrates the impact of their self-representation.

This research question helps add a broader understanding of the impact that athlete self-representation can have on traditional media representation for these ten women athletes. Dunleavy (2014) explains that journalists use athlete social media feeds as a news source, incorporating athletes' tweets to enhance their reporting. Paulussen and Harder (2014) also argue that athletes and other sports stars have a greater chance than most individuals to "see their social media activity reflected in newspaper stories" (p. 104), and Sanderson et al. (2015) similarly suggests that journalists report on athletes' social media posts as newsworthy commentary. This research question adds to this body of literature and explores how and when journalists use athlete social media posts during the first year of new NIL policies. Is athlete-centric content infiltrating media coverage of those athletes and shaping coverage in a notable way? This research goes beyond just addressing how athletes are representing themselves and explores how such self-representations are reproduced and potentially contribute to more nuanced understandings of women's representation in sports. Research for this dissertation found that journalists made little use of social media content in their coverage of these ten women athletes.

Organization

The next chapter of this dissertation provides the theoretical foundation of this study and explains how Hall's understanding of representation, Goffman's theory of self-representation, Butler's concept of gender as a performance and Crenshaw's

writings on intersectionality allow for a holistic assessment of athletes' social media posts and media coverage during this era. Given that collegiate athletics is also engulfed in a neoliberal, capitalist sporting system, Chapter 2 also addresses the role of neoliberalism in athlete branding and how different expressions of feminism and femininity have been employed by elite athletes within this culture to maximize profits.

Chapter 3 discusses the content analysis process involved in this research. This chapter explains the rationale for the coding process as well as each of the codes used in analyzing social media posts and journalists' use of social media posts in media coverage of these athletes. Further justification for each of the ten athletes in this study is also included in this chapter. The limitations of content analysis as a method for this project are additionally discussed in Chapter 3.

This dissertation also includes a total of three chapters with detailed findings. Chapter 4 explores how athletes embrace elements of influencer culture to express backstage representations that align with elements of postfeminism, popular feminism, third-wave feminism and neoliberal feminism. This chapter addresses how women both reproduce stereotypical imagery in an effort to reclaim their bodies in a patriarchal sports media culture and also complicate such stereotypical messaging by responding to critics and expressing variations of feminist empowerment. TikTok and Instagram have become popular sites of influence for women (Duffy, 2017), and the athletes in this sample built their brands on these platforms primarily through non-athletic content. Their images and self-representations mostly align with traditional

representations of women in sports, but the nuances and subtle differences in their tone and presentation add depth to understandings of women's digital storytelling.

For early NIL adopters Olivia Dunne, Haley Cavinder and Hanna Cavinder, TikTok served as a popular platform for them to show behind-the-scenes footage of their experiences as collegiate women. They frequently published posts showing themselves dancing or talking directly into the camera about fashion and relationships. Dunne, in particular, did express hints of feminism, particularly neoliberal feminism and postfeminism in some of her 'can-do,' women's empowerment videos (Gill, 2008). She also called out commenters who left inappropriate comments on her videos or discredited her sport. Sarah Fuller similarly addressed commenters through additional videos, and she and Oregon women's basketball star Sedoan Prince took on more explicitly feminist voices in their content. However, their TikTok and Instagram posts must be analyzed within a neoliberal sporting context, recognizing the way that their videos individualize inequalities and frequently present personal empowerment as the only path forward.

Chapter 5 addresses how Twitter served as a space for women to counter perceptions of women's sports as less interesting or engaging. The athletes in this study interacted with their schools, legacy media and individual reporters to promote images and videos of themselves that contributed towards a nuanced brand. They also used Twitter to directly respond to journalists who misrepresented them. Olivia Dunne, in particular, presented herself in action and in competition-adjacent settings on Twitter more often than she did in lifestyle settings, though all of her action photos and videos came from her school. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) suggest that elite

women athletes undergo this form of ‘athletic labor of femininity’ in their self-representation by electing to show filtered, positive, slick images of themselves in competition, and Dunne embodies this point through her carefully curated tweets. Haley Cavinder, Sunisa Lee and Paige Bueckers all also posted more imagery of themselves in competition-adjacent settings on Twitter than they did in lifestyle situations, suggesting that Twitter has the potential to challenge hegemonic norms of women in sports. Twitter remains a site for potential brand growth, and this findings chapter explores some of the strengths and weaknesses of Twitter for women in the age of NIL.

The final findings chapter, Chapter 6, expands the analysis to assess the ways in which journalists embedded athlete social media posts into their coverage during the first year of NIL and how this reporting addressed such social media posts produced by the athletes. While Chapter 5 addressed how athletes engage with reporters on Twitter to amplify a positive, athletic image of themselves, Chapter 6 showed that reporters are not reciprocating such engagement. Reporters notably did not engage often with women’s social media posts in their coverage of these athletes, and when they did choose to use tweets, Instagram posts and TikToks from athletes in articles, those posts tended to focus on athletes outside of their playing arena. Journalists did write extensively about the NIL deals signed by the athletes, but their coverage often expressed surprise that women were generating such revenue, particularly in comparison to male athletes in football and basketball. Some journalists also used social media posts from athletes, particularly Dunne and the Cavinder twins, to discuss the advantage that certain women had in the NIL landscape

because of their looks. This chapter demonstrates that sexism remains prevalent in sports media in the NIL era and explores how media coverage of these elite women reproduces and only occasionally challenges stereotypical representations of collegiate women in sport.

Chapter 7 offers a conclusion to the study, noting areas for future research and summarizing the key contributions of this dissertation. The final chapter addresses how the precedent set by the early NIL adopters, transcendent athletes and standout stars could impact future self-representation decisions of the next generation of collegiate women and the way such imagery could continue to push back against stereotypes about women in sports in the media more broadly. The athletes in this study primarily represented themselves in ways that aligned with gender norms and expectations on TikTok, Instagram and Twitter, though the examples where they countered hegemonic understandings of gender and used their voice to advocate for equality are notable. Women athletes who create their own brands online and publish content that celebrates their athletic success have the chance to challenge traditional stereotypes and strengthen a growing market for women's sports in the United States. Women are not individually responsible for producing their own media coverage or correcting long standing issues of inequity, but the way they are electing to do so occasionally on social media is relevant and noteworthy in the broader context of women's representation in sports.

This project adds to the theoretical and empirical understanding of collegiate women athletes' self-representation in this new era of college sports and addresses how women have navigated nuanced expressions of feminism on social media. This

study also explains how such self-representations were reproduced and repurposed by journalists reporting on these athletes. The women in this sample all engaged in impression management (Goffman) in their self-representation on TikTok, Instagram and Twitter, flipping from frontstage, action-centric imagery to competition-adjacent content to backstage, private imagery to express themselves in ways that highlighted their femininity, athleticism and feminism. While they ultimately presented themselves primarily in lifestyle settings most often on TikTok and Instagram, their athletic identities were never invisible. They expressed their role as Division I stars through team clothing and uniforms, and they also occasionally posted popular action and competition-adjacent photos and videos that captured fan attention and represented hints of resistance to hegemonic norms. On Twitter in particular, the women in this sample reproduced content from their schools and traditional media members that presented them as athletes who were competing or cheering on teammates near their fields of play.

Journalists, however, rarely engaged with such social media posts, as they incorporated athlete content in just 33 articles and almost exclusively repurposed lifestyle imagery from athletes. While journalists are under no obligation to engage with athlete posts, the rare use of athlete social posts was still notable. The ways in which women told their stories and how those stories were retold by journalists adds a deeper understanding to athlete storytelling and identity-building on social media in the digital age.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study adds to the growing body of literature on women's representation and self-representation in sports media by assessing how photos and videos posted by athletes on social media and embedded by reporters in traditional media highlight athletic achievements and lifestyle experiences. While previous studies have evaluated elite women athletes' self-representation on individual platforms, this study assesses if and how collegiate women athletes are using TikTok, Twitter and Instagram to both reinforce and reject traditional media representations of women in sports media. Women athletes have been underrepresented in traditional media coverage but now have the opportunity to share their story with a broader audience on social media. Thus, the content produced and published by top women in the collegiate sporting space during an era in which they can profit significantly from such coverage warrants study. Feminist theory in particular provides a critical lens through which to answer these research questions, and this dissertation builds on understandings of postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, popular feminism and third-wave feminism to contextualize imagery posted by women athletes online. Judith Butler's work on gender performance, Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation, and Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality also provide frameworks through which to assess athlete branding and digital storytelling during the NIL era within U.S. sport culture.

New NIL policies in college sport create a space upon which to critically evaluate expressions of feminism, as women can now represent themselves in complex ways and profit from their content. This dissertation, however, is not

suggesting that these women are independently responsible for using their platforms to push back against patriarchal norms nor is it suggesting that the solution to gender inequality is to just ‘lean in’ and expect inequitable social structures to dissolve. Instead, the goal of this study is to interrogate how women are expressing themselves in this new era by evaluating their storytelling strategies while recognizing the intersecting issues of sexism, racism and homophobia in society, particularly within a sporting context. Hargreaves and Vertinsky (2007) argue that feminist theory provides the tools necessary for analyzing such women’s representation, and they suggest “treating the body as a problematic text, that is as a fleshly discourse within which power relations in society can be interpreted and sustained” (p. 2). The degree to which the women in this sample express postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, and popular feminism will be noted, and this study will thus add to the existing literature on feminist expressions in the sport space (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Feminist theory and theory of gender performance

Gender performance must be considered within a cultural context. Butler argues that society rewards particular presentations of femininity, masculinity, and athleticism; imagery that aligns with social expectations of gender can lead to public support and power. Such gendered self-representation expectations discipline individuals into presenting traditional notions of manhood and womanhood. Individuals who conform to these norms are praised, while those who subvert norms are punished. For example, women athletes who post photos of themselves on the sidelines of an arena, lying on the playing field, or generally positioned in a non-active manner match traditional stereotypes of women as passive figures in sports;

these images can thus be decoded in a dominant manner by audiences and may result in more engagement from viewers familiar with seeing women in this setting (Pocock & Skey, 2022). This is not to suggest that only content that reinforces stereotypes generates support from fans, but historically women have been encouraged to reproduce similar imagery to gain sponsorships and fans. Analyzing such content through the lens of Butler's theory of gender performance is also not intended to criticize any individual posts or identify them as problematic; rather, this theory helps contextualize such imagery and explore meaning within a patriarchal U.S. sports media culture.

Butler's theory that the performance of gender norms leads to praise and acceptance is particularly relevant in the NIL era. Collegiate women who "post or share nude or semi-nude photos... that may help them personally gain visibility, promote their brand, and secure sponsorships," (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014, p. 327) recognize that such content has historically been "preferred by online users" who value femininity and by "potential sponsors who want to be associated with the most high-profile athletes" (Pocock and Skey, 2022, p. 10). Kane et al. (2013) found that women athletes themselves do value expressions of athletic expertise, but the historical notion that 'sex sells' remains embedded within culture, despite its patriarchal roots. Media representations, both those produced by the press and the athletes themselves, serve to shape a cultural understanding of womanhood in sports, as Butler (1990) argues that "the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (p. 33). Representation on social media is a form of gender performance, one that is

constantly changing but one that has consistently served to reproduce traditional expectations of femininity. Scholars have continued to build upon Butler's work to explain different variations of gender performance and feminist expressions (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; Meân & Kassing, 2008); their work can be applied to the sporting space to address how and why women represent themselves in the ways that they do across platforms in the digital era.

Inspired by Butler, Gill evaluates gender expression and performance in modern culture in her work, analyzing the way postfeminism has inspired women to promote tones of individualism and self-improvement in their representations (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019). Gill notes postfeminism as a phenomenon has historically been “marked by warm enthusiasm about equality, ‘girl power’ and female success” without a proper critique of the structural inequity that allows some women to rise in this culture while others are left behind (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 13).

Postfeminists disavow the need to continue the equality fight, as they view society as a space in which rights have been achieved (McRobbie, 2007). Gill (2007) recognizes the spread of the postfeminist perspective and, through her critique, she “attempts to make sense of the paradoxical, yet commonly accepted scenario whereby women are cast as empowered subjects because they are ‘assumed to choose to present the self in a seemingly objectified manner’” (p. 151; Thorpe et. al, 2017, p. 369). Scholars suggest that women embodying a postfeminist perspective may publish stereotypical content in an effort to reclaim such imagery to gain control and capital (Cooky, 2018; Toffoletti, 2016). However, the popularity of such sexualized content ultimately stems from a patriarchal history that objectifies women, particularly women athletes.

Reclaiming sexualized imagery, therefore, is difficult in a culture with a gendered hierarchy (Kane & Parks, 1992).

In a sports media context, the postfeminist perspective can be seen in the self-representation of athletes such as popular surfer Alana Blanchard, who position themselves as women leaders in a digital media era while also reflecting conventional narratives of women in sport through their posts. Thorpe et al. (2017) suggests that Blanchard in particular takes “pleasure in projecting a heterosexy appearance” in an effort to show that she is clearly not a victim of “patriarchal expectations or regulations” (p. 371). Her photos frequently feature her in “modeling poses” while wearing a bikini; she further promotes her body and her heterosexuality by posting images of her and her boyfriend in nearly every fifth photo (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 363). This pattern of posting ‘sexy pictures’ is the product of “the pressures and expectations that women athletes face to gain greater visibility for themselves and their sport” (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 370). McClearen (2021) further explains that the “hierarchies of visibility online” ultimately reward women athletes for such content (p. 115). Women athletes acknowledge this trend, recognizing that posting “hyperfeminine, heterosexy image[s]” on social media can often lead to profit and opportunity (McClearen, 2021, p. 115). Yet, some athletes are still willing to forgo this option to create authentic representations that resonate with a niche or personal audience. There is no one formula for women athlete branding, but Blanchard has demonstrated one model that has worked for her and women who share similar visual traits.

Representations and self-representations of women in sports ultimately remain sites of tension. (Procter, 2004, p. 68). Women are encouraged, but not forced, to “perform and enact their gendered, feminine subjectivities” (Thorpe et. al, 2017, p. 370) at any opportunity. Hall (1997) adds that those who promote traditional, stereotypical representations have internalized hegemonic values and are creating material that “[reflects] ‘the dominant cultural order’” (p. 134). Feminist theory helps assess the power relations involved in athlete self-representation and allows for an analysis of how gender expectations and societal pressures intersect with the kinds of ‘heterosexy’ photos published by such athletes.

These negotiations and complications surrounding self-representation in the modern era are embraced by third-wave feminists in particular, as they challenge the notion that sexualized imagery is either oppressive or empowering. Feminists debate definitions of third-wave feminism, but Thorpe et al. (2017) loosely defines third-wave feminists as those who “broadly claim to embrace messiness, complexity, multiplicity, a nonjudgmental attitude toward women’s cultural productions, and an attempt to think outside existing gender, sexuality, and race binaries” (p. 365). Third-wave feminists suggest that women make deliberate online choices to present their “femininity and physicality as an integrated whole” (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 365), embracing a ‘pretty *and* powerful’ self-representation. This perspective can be defined as a wave of feminism that is more political, more activist and more willing to acknowledge the nuances of feminism than previous eras of feminism.

Postfeminism, unlike third wave feminism, focuses less on some of the structural and political inequalities that remain within a patriarchal institution and

instead centers around personal empowerment (Thorpe et al., 2017). Evaluating athlete self-representation with an understanding and recognition of postfeminist and third-wave scholarship helps unravel the “set of characteristics through which patriarchal and capitalist logics operate” in this digital culture (Toffoletti, 2016, p. 205). Women such as Blanchard are producing images within a capitalist society that rewards them for such representations of femininity, and the impact of postfeminism and third-wave feminism on sports media representation and self-representation cannot be ignored in branding analysis. These critical lenses, however, are just two of several feminist perspectives that enable the assessment of athlete imagery.

Gill’s work on postfeminism and Thorpe et al.’s analysis of third-wave feminism offer insight into why prominent women reproduce such sexualized and stereotypical content, but Sarah Banet-Weiser and Catherine Rottenberg’s research on popular feminism and neoliberal feminism also remains relevant to the understanding of women’s self-representation on social media in the NIL era. Rottenberg explored the growth of a different kind of emerging feminism, one that relates to postfeminism in its focus on individuality while also differing from the previous form of feminism by recognizing the inequities that remain in society. Identifying this feminist movement as neoliberal feminism, Rottenberg suggests that those embodying this perspective call on all women to “[accept] full responsibility for [their] own well-being and self-care” while navigating a culture that discriminates against them socially, culturally, and economically (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 7). Neoliberal feminists operate under the assumption that they can break through patriarchal barriers through individual improvement. This strand of feminism engages with the

economic market to a greater degree than postfeminism and demonstrates how financial incentives and entrepreneurship shape representation. Neoliberal feminism also amplifies women who have found success in the capitalist market, and then suggests that every woman has the potential to achieve similar success without acknowledging the impact of other social and cultural factors involved in such fame.

An exploration of neoliberal feminism is particularly relevant for this dissertation because neoliberal feminists would suggest that athletes in the NIL era should take control of their individual brands and capitalize on their own media content. While this perspective is alluring, neoliberal feminism still ignores the structural inequality at play and fails to properly acknowledge the cultural factors that lead some women to fame in this system and cause others to fall behind. Antunovic and Whiteside (2018) note that, within neoliberal feminism, “certain women are cheered publicly for individual achievements” but typically “only...those who meet certain aesthetic standards” (p. 122). Thus, neoliberal feminism creates gendered, racial and class hierarchies that privilege some women while penalizing others.

Azzarito (2018) adds that neoliberal feminism contributes to further disciplining of women’s bodies. Neoliberal feminism creates “high- and low-status feminine bodies,” reproducing “unjust power relations and discrimination” (p. 138). The neoliberal discourse furthers the idea of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ by presenting neoliberalism as a patriotic mindset that values personal responsibility and dismisses and discounts those who have struggled as lazy or incapable (Hall, 2011). This dissertation acknowledges the emergence and history of neoliberal feminism while

also moving beyond a neoliberal perspective and embracing a more intersectional lens to analyze the branding strategies of top women collegiate athletes.

Postfeminism and neoliberal feminism allow scholars to evaluate expressions of gender identity and empowerment through a critical lens, but Banet-Weiser et al. argue that another concept, popular feminism, is also necessary to analyze in modern culture. Banet-Weiser et al. (2019) defines popular feminism as “a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are obscured” (p. 9). Popular feminism is particularly common on social media, as women can use hashtags and photos to join trends or express their interest in women’s empowerment from the comfort of their home (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019). While popular feminism provides visibility to the feminist movement, it stops short of addressing inequalities and instead presents a happy, corporate version of feminism that fails to fully challenge structural norms.

Within a sports media context, athletes and organizations have embraced popular feminism when convenient to promote women in sports without having to critically evaluate the ways in which sports continue to discriminate against women. For instance, McClearen (2021) suggests that the Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC), an organization that originally included women simply as an “experiment,” decided to “promote the women’s division as a revolution for women and women’s sports” when officials realized that fans were drawn to their star fighter Ronda Rousey (p. 44-45). Popular feminism aligns with postfeminism and neoliberal

feminism in the sense that women are seen as singular actors promoting equality at the individual level. While each of these strands differs slightly in the way they view culture and economics, all of them fall short of a more complex feminism that acknowledges how institutions and social structure continue to marginalize women.

Theory of representation

Stuart Hall, a cultural studies theorist whose work aligns with Butler's and further addresses meaning and power, also centers his theoretical perspective around culture and the impact of culture on representation and gender. His scholarship thus further provides a critical framework through which to assess athlete social media content and evaluate how top women are using these platforms to share their stories. Hall (1997) proposes that words contain signs and signifiers that represent power and convey value in society when "meaningfully interpreted or decoded by the receiver" (Hall, 1997, p. 18). Readers and viewers then consume material in either a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional fashion in order to reach a conclusion about the meaning of such content. Images, videos, and texts conveying stereotypes, for instance, are intentionally developed to create recognizable cues for the consumer to process in a hegemonic, dominant fashion that reinforces existing hierarchies in society. Audience members who engage with texts in a negotiated or oppositional manner do not interpret the message exactly as intended and either process the core meaning with some disagreements, or they reject the meaning intended by the producers and reach an alternative conclusion.

Hall's (1997) theoretical work builds on Foucault's ideas of discourse (1972, 1980) and power, as well as Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony (1971) as a dominant ideology, and he argues that media remains intertwined in the process of upholding dominant ideologies. Hall (1997) notes that those with capital can attempt to "fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility and ideology" through representations of difference in media intended to be interpreted by audiences in a dominant way (p. 259). In the case of sports media, women are positioned as different and secondary, and, through repetitive representations of such difference, this perception has become hegemonic.

The Gramscian concept of hegemony is particularly relevant in Hall's theory of representation, as hegemony "centers around ideas of winning, power, and domination of a ruling class portrayed through the media and accepted as normal and natural" (Smith, 2011, p. 147; Connell, 1995). The hegemonic understanding of the sports industry is that "masculine is the default [and]...the feminine is seen as the Other," (Duncan, 2006, p. 254). Sport is thus viewed as a "male body experience" (Hall, 1997, p. 41), and this discrimination is reflected in the press. Men make up the majority of the leadership positions in sports media, and, similarly, take up the majority of space and time in news broadcasts and print write-ups. Cooky et al. (2021) notes that not only are women represented less than 6% of the time on leading programs such as ESPN's SportsCenter, but editors and writers have also historically portrayed women as sexual "objects to be consumed by heterosexual male sports fans" (2018, p. 28). Reporters have frequently highlighted the physical appearance and relationship status of women athletes as opposed to their athletic achievements,

and they've provided more coverage to women who "embody feminine ideals such as grace, beauty, and glamor" (Fink, 2014, p. 335). This patriarchal history of the representation and perception of sports as a male space contributes to problematic, negative perceptions of women athletes and an overall devaluation of women's sports.

Representation ultimately comes from understanding something or someone in opposition to another person and object. Media reflects and reproduces this phenomenon in sports through reporting and coverage of male athletes as fit, athletic, valuable assets whereas women are both underrepresented and represented as weaker, less powerful individuals (Duncan, 2006). Framing athletes according to their differences may have historically helped audience members make sense of the sports world, but "difference is also threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility, and aggression towards the other" (Hall, 1997, p. 238). Banet-Weiser (1999) found evidence of this theoretical understanding of difference in her study of women's basketball, as she noted that the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) frequently underwent "complicated cultural negotiations" in marketing the sport to sponsors and fans because "action shots of strong, sweaty female bodies, simply by their sheer corporeality, challenge[d] dominant masculine conventions involving sport" (p. 404). These athletes were considered different, outside the norm of a traditional athlete. The representation of difference, according to Hall, is complicated and can take a variety of forms at the social, cultural, and linguistic levels, but difference is essentially what helps form language and meaning. For women in sports, this representation difference has been deeply detrimental.

The narrative that men's sports are more important to audience members is culturally created, but, in a patriarchal sports media industry, is presented as undisputed in a way that enables men to maintain power. Meân and Kassing (2008) argue that coverage of men and women in sports "is linked to discourses of natural, biological elitism...that literally embodies heterosexuality and masculinity" (p. 140), reinforcing the idea of women as 'other' or secondary to men. Media members uphold this perception of male superiority by constructing men's sports as objectively more interesting than women's sports through a series of deliberate techniques involving production choices and editorial commentary. For example, in a content analysis of the 2004 Olympics, Greer et. al (2009) found that NBC chose to build up the excitement for men's track and field through more long shots and more total shots per minute on the broadcast, creating the perception that the men's race had more action. These decisions were subtle, and Greer et al. (2009) argued that "viewers [who were] not cognizant of the ways visuals are constructed may decode women's sports in the way they were encoded as less exciting and entertaining than the men's" (p. 184). Such representations of the Olympics, however, encouraged audience members to take more interest in men's track and field than women's track and field, building a self-fulfilling prophecy that men's sports were more exciting. Musto et al. (2017) suggests that this "stealth sexism...operates under the radar to reify gender boundaries and render invisible the very real and continued need to address persisting inequalities" (p. 592). Such discourse, however, reflects who "has power and who is powerless" (Kellner, 2011, p. 1). The representation of women in sports suffers

because these media production practices reinforce male power and perceived objectivity while ignoring the patriarchal cultural influence on such decisions.

Rather than taking responsibility for the patriarchal nature of sports media that has led to the underrepresentation and sexualizing of women in sports media, media producers justify their decisions as simply the product of objective storytelling and a response to a lack of fan interest in women athletes. Cooky et. al (2013), however, calls on media companies to see their role as less of a “passive entity responding to” interest and rather as an institution “actively creating consumer demand” (Kane, 2013, p. 233). By underrepresenting women and attempting to defend such actions, media members contribute to an ongoing “symbolic annihilation” of women athletes (Greer et al., 2009, p. 185). These editorial decisions remain rooted in a media structure that dismisses the power and value of women and women athletes in particular.

The misrepresentation of women in sports media mirrors the misrepresentation of women in media more generally. When women are portrayed in general news coverage, they are typically represented as sexualized, objectified and inferior (Wood, 2010). These stereotypes fail to capture the achievements of women and the complexity of their lived experiences. Women are also frequently relegated to the style pages or presented in non-active, lifestyle manners, sidelined (Jaffe, 2013). Additionally, NPR’s internal audit revealed that the organization quoted men as experts twice as often as women as of 2015 (Jensen, 2015). Much of this disparity can be attributed to the predominantly male staff that make up legacy media staff. Seventy-three percent of worldwide media leaders are men (Griffin, 2014) and,

within sports, 83.3% of editors are men (Lapchick, 2021). Whiteside (2019) cautions that correcting such misrepresentations of women is more complicated than just adding more women to the news staff and instead requires more of a systematic and structural overhaul of patriarchal norms. In the meantime though, the (sports) media industry “is an overwhelmingly male and hegemonically masculine domain that produces coverage by men, for men, and about men” (Bruce, 2012, p. 128). The hegemonic tradition is thus on display in sports media every day, reproducing male power in sports through continuous content.

Maintaining such ideological hierarchies remains an ongoing process. Hall (1997) explains that meaning is consistently contested and “unfinished” and evolves with culture (p. 277). Sports scholars (Bruce, 2012, 2016; Thorpe et. al, 2017; Cooky & Antunovic, 2020) as well as feminist scholars and critical race scholars (Carrington, 2001, 2004, 2007) have embraced Hall’s (1997) theory of representation to show how athletes are conveyed in the press and how they respond to such coverage. Bruce (2016) explains that Hall’s theory of representation has helped demonstrate that, in sports, “...women are constrained within a narrow range of discursive possibilities, predicated on an articulation of sport and masculinity that plays a decisive role in producing media coverage that privileges men’s sports” (p. 363), a particularly noteworthy and powerful claim tied into Hall’s ideas about the relationship between discourse and power. Duncan (2006) offers a similar perspective, explaining that sports media representations of women previously left viewers “with the impression that women in sports were laughable and that they belonged in the bedroom, not on the playing field” (p. 255). This type of blatant sexist

representation has been on the decline in recent years, though Cooky et al. (2013) notes that this change “has not been accompanied by an increase in respectful coverage” because when “news and highlights shows ceased to portray women athletes in trivial and sexualized ways, they pretty much ceased to portray them at all” (p. 21). These patterns of coverage are a direct result of hegemonic masculinity and perception of sports and sports media as a male domain.

Hegemony, however, differs across sports, with audience members accepting some women’s sports, such as gymnastics and figure skating, as more ‘gender-appropriate’ than other activities such as basketball or hockey. These ‘gender-appropriate’ sports are “perceived[d] as less threatening to the male domain” because they are not associated with aggression, violence, or physical contact with another athlete (Schell & Rodriguez, 2000, p. 19) and instead emphasize “aesthetic grace and beauty” (Kane, 1988, p. 97). Individual sports also generate more frequent and more positive coverage for women athletes as opposed to team sports. Higgs and Weiller (1994) noted that women in cycling and tennis also received more coverage during the 1992 Summer Olympics than women competing in basketball and volleyball. This pattern has shifted over time, with Billings et al. (2018) reporting that beach volleyball, in particular, generated the greatest amount of coverage of any women’s sport in the Games. Women’s beach volleyball also generated more coverage than men’s beach volleyball, though coverage of women athletes in this sport often comes with increased commentary about image, emotions, size and appearance (Billings et al., 2018).

Bruce and Hardin (2014) suggest that sports remain inextricably linked with masculinity as a result of historic media coverage that has sexualized and othered women. The women athletes who do generate positive media coverage tend to be those who maintain a particular body type focused on thinness while competing in ‘gender appropriate’ events (Powell, 2015). Such a phenomenon supports Butler’s theory that those who align with societal expectations of gender performance receive praise. Those who do not align with such gendered norms — whether because of body type, sexuality, identity or general self-representation — are critiqued and demonized, leading to an increased pressure on collegiate women to align themselves with narrow, cultural expectations of expression (Smith, 2015). Bruce (2012) explains that “the ideologies, attitudes, and values that are present in mediasport production powerfully shape our understandings of ourselves and of others” (p. 133); thus questioning why some bodies are rewarded and others are not through Hall’s understanding of representation in culture is important work. Hall’s (1981) articulates the “cultural realm as a continually contested terrain: a ‘sort of constant battlefield’ between the constraining influence of the social structure and the creative impulses of human agents” (p. 112). This more nuanced theoretical outlook on culture is particularly useful in sports media research, as it enables the assessment of representations and self-representation of gender hierarchy in the industry.

As more women and girls have entered the sporting space and achieved success, reporters have produced less stereotypical coverage (Cooky et al., 2021), though women still remain vastly underrepresented in sports media and continue to be covered in more subtle marginalized ways. Bruce (2016) suggests that sports media

members have started to embrace the representation of an evolved “form of femininity” that moves beyond the limits of “pretty or powerful” and “refuses to cede physical strength and sporting excellence to men” (p. 372). These representations, of course, do “differ by historical, cultural, and national context,” but Bruce’s (2016) work still offers a sense of optimism about the future of women’s representation in sport, as she suggests that more modern representation of women and men in sports represent serve as “an important rupture in the articulation of sport and masculinity” (p. 363). Her conclusions draw heavily from the idea that, while binaries, particularly gender binaries, enable viewers and consumers to understand representations in relation to opposites, “there is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition” (Hall, 1997, p. 235) that should be considered. Binaries themselves are limiting and simplistic, but the degree to which women conform to gendered expectations does still impact their likelihood of acceptance in the sporting space to varying degrees. The role media representations in upholding gendered hierarchies requires continuous evaluation (Bruce, 2016). This dissertation will assess the ways in which women themselves reproduce or challenge those norms in their own self-representation.

Self-representation of women in sports

Traditional media outlets poorly represent women because of the history of male power embedded in the institutions of sport and media, but the rise of digital technology offers revived hope for improved, nuanced representations. Women’s sports fans are finding alternative, digital sources of news on women athletes (Antunovic & Linden, 2014; Creedon, 2014), showing that “there’s a massive market

for women's sports” that sports media companies could embrace if they moved beyond the entrenched in patriarchal values that have defined the industry (Schafer, 2021). Unrestricted by space on a printed page or time on a broadcast, digital media platforms create new avenues for women in sports to be represented.

Individual content creators can reach expanded audiences, and women have the chance to enter these spaces and tell their own story, though some women may opt to reproduce hegemonic norms simply because those notions of gendered expectations remain prevalent online. Smith (2011) ultimately proposes that digital media creates a “contested space where meaning, narrative, and representation are increasingly challenged by and from the spectrum of constituencies that form the sports media complex” (p. 149). Blogs such as *Women Talk Sports* (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013) or women-centric websites such as *Just Women's Sports* (Crawford, 2022) have served as digital space for the growth of women's sports media coverage, and some scholars have found social media to be an empowering space for athletes (Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

Others, however, have found that women often reproduce hegemonic norms and traditional stereotypes on social media (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, 2018b). Kane (2013) similarly notes that many of the issues seen in traditional media coverage of women in sports “have been replicated in new media, such as Internet-based blogs” (p. 232). Even in the online space, attention is still limited and framing still matters. Elements of hegemony and power permeate through sports and media continue into the digital age. Theories around self-representation online in this context are multifaceted and evolving, but Goffman's framework around public and

private performance through frontstage and backstage communication offer a useful foundation for the analysis of self-representation in women's sports in this new technological era.

Goffman's theory of self-representation developed from his work in theater, where he established the concepts of frontstage and backstage representation to quite literally refer to performances on stage and behind-the-curtain. Scholars have applied these concepts of frontstage and backstage communication in a sports media context to distinguish between content showing an athlete in action, actively competing in a sport, and content showing an athlete's lifestyle off the field of play (Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Cruz and Thornham (2015) note that frontstage content enables actors to perform a public character — in this case, a character that is athletic and physically elite. Punch et al. (2021) adds that “for an elite player identity, the presentation of the self concerns the ‘frontstage’ identity, which is performative and social,” particularly in an athletic arena (p. 809). Backstage content, on the other hand, includes imagery that is more personal, typically away from the field, and encompasses any non-sporting activity. Previous research suggests that athletes recognize the value that comes from frontstage communication from a branding perspective, but they also appreciate the opportunity to represent their authentic personalities and experiences through more backstage photos and videos (Park et al., 2020). These athletes are also actively aware of both the upsides and drawbacks to public content consumed by an active audience (David et al., 2018; Park et. al, 2020). Research suggests that women athletes in particular are more likely to publish backstage content (Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2015; Lebel & Danylchuk,

2012), such as images of family life or personal activities, on their own social media platforms, though more research needs to be done to understand the factors that impact these representations.

Athletes, and performers in general, ultimately participate in a complex balancing act that involves engaging in both public and private self-representation. Visibility, and the opportunity to share stories, though is ultimately a driving factor motivating elite women athletes to post on social media because these platforms provide athletes the opportunity to “construct their identities as sports participants” live (Antunovic and Whiteside, 2018, p. 122). Such visibility, however, is never simple and finding the right combination of frontstage and backstage representation can be a challenge (Banet-Weiser et. al, 2019). Engaging in this type of identity performance online to attract and appeal to an audience is reminiscent both of Hall’s theory of representation and of Goffman’s argument that the self is managed for a crowd; both theories thus offer an important lens through which to ask future questions about women’s self-representation in sports media.

Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) suggest that because athletes continue to expose themselves to fans online constantly in an effort to capture power and attention, Goffman’s theory of self-presentation does not go far enough in accounting for the particular variance in women athletes’ authenticity in such self-representation. Though case studies of Alana Blanchard, Serena Williams, Ronda Rousey, Danica Patrick and Maria Sharapova, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) conclude that the “variety of aesthetics athletes embody” on social media in relation to “qualities that are expected of contemporary young women, such as empowerment, adaptability and

self-management” must be considered as well in studies of self-representation online (p. 300). While authenticity serves as an important measurement and subject of analysis for women athlete branding, this dissertation is focused on representations of femininity, athleticism and feminism. Goffman’s theory of self-representation thus still serves as a useful framework through which to study this content, though Toffoletti and Thorpe’s (2018a) work on the gendered labor of women athletes on social media adds useful context for this study.

Given that collegiate athletes can now profit from their social media posts, the ways in which athletes express representations of femininity, athleticism, and personality in the NIL era cannot be ignored. O’Shea and Maxwell (2021) argue that while social platforms do give women athletes a voice in the sports media space, such platforms can also be “digital spaces through which gendered, racial, heteronormative and other normative discourses are strengthened and reproduced” (p. 80). Thus, evaluating social media as simply an entirely “liberating” platform that can be used to erase systematic sexism would be naive (O’Shea & Maxwell, 2021, p. 66). Critically analyzing the perception and promotion (or lack thereof) of women in sports at the collegiate level through the use of representation and self-representation as theoretical concepts, however, remains a valuable feminist project.

Women have attempted to reclaim their power within sports by rejecting marginalizing narratives in traditional media and building their own visible brands, but much of this process still remains tangled in hegemonic norms, neoliberalism, and gendered expectations. Wolter (2021) notes that because sport is “grounded in characteristics like...strength, and power that typically benefit men,” women who

hope to redefine themselves through self-representations online may face challenges in pushing back against the “conceptions of sport performance... tied to masculinity” (p. 734-735). This study aims to add to the literature on women’s sports media by using theories of representation and self-representation to evaluate the social media feeds and editorial choices of prominent, influential athletes in this new environment.

Intersectionality

The potential for power created through self-representation for women in a patriarchal, capitalist society is not equitable. In fact, much of the culturally-embraced images of women’s self-representation in sports are mostly confined to “the largely white, heteronormative, corporate and neoliberal-friendly versions” of womanhood, prompting questions of “which versions get to be seen and heard, and which remain marginalised” (Banet-Weiser et. al, 2019, p. 15). Alana Blanchard, for example, has experienced privilege in self-representation as she is someone who represents a perceived “idealized youthful, White, Western femininity” (Thorpe et. al, 2017, p. 365). Collins (2000) would argue that the popularity of women like Blanchard and the lack of women of color embraced by popular culture reflects the broader issues of racism and sexism in the U.S. political economy. Though Collins (2000) looked at the impact of race and identity in institutions such as families and marriage, her work is deeply relevant in the digital sports media age, where representations of race and gender are being reproduced by reporters and athletes in complicated ways.

Women of color face added challenges in sports and society because they are marginalized for their race and gender, creating a ‘double bind’ oppression (Crenshaw). In an effort to define this phenomenon, Crenshaw coined the term

‘intersectionality,’ and she argued that this concept helps to explain why race and gender cannot be evaluated, assessed, or analyzed independently from one another. Within a sports media context, such discrimination against Black women in particular is frequently portrayed in the form of stereotypes, as research suggests that Black women are often presented as overly physical and overly sexualized (McKay & Johnson, 2008). Media coverage has also described Black women as angry and aggressive (Velloso, 2022), all negative, outdated stereotypes that negatively misrepresent these athletes. McKay and Johnson (2008) note that “sport both reinforces and reproduces the ‘persistent’, ‘resurgent’, and ‘veiled’ forms of white power that permeate society” leading to “a systematic targeting and ‘outing’ of racist and sexist narratives” for women athletes of color (p. 500). Even the most elite, popular sports stars are not exempt from these negative representations, as Cooky et al. (2010) noted that tennis superstars Venus and Serena Williams were depicted throughout their careers as “simultaneously sexually grotesque and pornographically erotic” (p. 142). These representations that reinforce harmful traditional media stereotypes and serve to disrespect and devalue athletes of color (McKay & Johnson, 2008).

Though most previous research focused on the racialized ways in which women of color are othered in sports media (McKay & Johnson, 2008; Cooky et al., 2010; Velloso, 2022), a recent study on women's professional basketball in particular also suggests that Black women are also covered less frequently than other athletes. In a quantitative study of articles published in ESPN, CBS Sports and *Sports Illustrated* during the 2020 WNBA season, Isard and Melton (2021) found that White

players in the WNBA receive more coverage than their Black teammates, even when they score fewer points. This study aligns with findings by Lumpkin and Williams (1991) concerning the underrepresentation of Black women in *Sports Illustrated* articles from 1954 to 1987 as they found that Black women were featured in just .4% of 3,723 articles during this period and were shown in just 4.3% of the 114 covers featuring women athletes published by the magazine (Kane, 1988). Carter-Francique and Richardson (2016) argue that the “inattention to and disregard of the black female athlete by white culture” further ‘Others’ women of color in sports (p. 21). Media, and the representation of groups in media, thus reinforce power dynamics and assign worth to athletes and communities based on their representations.

Within sports media research, Crenshaw’s conceptualization of intersectionality — which originally focused on legal protections, or lack thereof, of Black women — has since been applied to understanding the way women athletes of color across races and ethnicities experience marginalization. For instance, Bains and Szto (2020) and Razack and Joseph (2021) found that media representations of Asian and Asian American athletes in particular embody the ‘model minority’ trope as reporters overly focused on the intellect of these athletes as opposed to their athleticism. Such stereotypes can lead these athletes to be “underestimated... in sport,” hindering their potential to grow as media stars (Razack & Joseph, 2021, p. 294). Additionally, Asian American women athletes have also been presented as “less American” than their Caucasian teammates and framed as an “object of gaze” in sports media, particularly in sports that emphasize beauty and grace, such as figure skating (Chin & Andrews, 2020, p. 160). This hypersexualization of Asian American

athletes emerged as the result of popular media representations in which “the perceived frailty of the Asian American female body is positioned as part of its sexual allure” (Chin & Andrews, 2020, p. 158-159). Such particular racial stereotypes, however, only serve to further marginalize Asian American women as a result of their intersecting identities in sports media.

Media coverage that remains simplistic and stereotypical can be particularly harmful to mixed-raced or multiracial athletes as well. Reporters have historically reduced mixed-race or multiracial athletes to a binary of identities, particularly “discourses of White with another race,” or erased an element of an athlete’s identity entirely (Razack and Joseph, 2021, p. 294). For instance, tennis player Naomi Osaka, who identifies as Japanese and Haitian-American, has frequently been portrayed as either Japanese or American. She’s also been ‘white-washed’ or presented as racially ambiguous, both of which misrepresent her and minimize her identity (Ho & Tanaka, 2021). Osaka is far from the only prominent multiracial woman athlete generating media coverage in the United States, though little research exists about media coverage of additional multiracial athletes, particularly multiracial women, suggesting a need for more scholarship in this area.

Scholars have evaluated the ways in which notable multiracial and biracial athletes such Tiger Woods and Colin Kaepernick have been covered in the media, and findings suggest that these athletes have responded to media framings of their identity in a range of ways (Loison, 2020). Woods, for instance, notably pushed back against labels that identified him as the ‘first Black golfer’ to achieve certain feats, such as winning the Masters. He instead labeled himself as ‘Cablinaisian,’ a term used to

encompass his Black, Indian, Caucasian and Asian identities (Gabriel, 2002). Morton (2022) argues that reporters, however, elected to portray Woods as exclusively Black following his DUI arrest in 2017, highlighting the racist framing that remains in the media.

Kaepernick's blackness, on the other hand, was openly debated by reporters and critics following his activism. Broadcaster and former NFL player Rodney Harrison famously responded to Kaepernick kneeling for the national anthem by arguing that the then-San Francisco quarterback should not speak for the Black community because he did not understand the experience of Black men in American since "he's not black" (Deeb & Love, 2017, p. 106). Others though critiqued Kaepernick exclusively through a racist lens, drawing attention to his hair and his physical attributes and "denigrating him as animalistic" (Duvall, 2020, p. 267). Such media coverage boxes athletes into a particular identity and reduces a person's life experiences to a trope that reinforces existing, harmful power structures in sports media.

Representations of sexuality and identity also intersect with race and gender. Isard and Melton (2021) note that, in the WNBA, Black women received less coverage if they dressed in ways seen by the press as "more androgynous or masculine" (Isard & Melton, 2021, p. 317), and this policing of women's expressions of sexuality by the press aligns with earlier research on femininity, womanhood, and masculinity in sport. McClearen (2021) in particular found that "the dominant paradigm for promoting women in sports [is] sexual desirability, compulsory heterosexuality, and emphasized femininity" (p. 94). Women have navigated this

reality through a range of self-representation practices, including both leaning into these hegemonic norms and deviating from them through a form of “branded difference” that worked to maintain marketability while also emphasizing authenticity in a patriarchal society (McClearen, 2021, p. 92). The intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in sports media representation and self-representation remain ripe areas for research, and this study will address this relationship through the self-representation analysis of content produced by a group of prominent women college athletes who represent a diverse set of sports and identities.

Intersectionality is thus a critical part of any theoretical analysis involving the representation and self-representation of women athletes, particularly with regards to which athletes have a platform to push for change and which athletes are rewarded for sexualized images. Traditional media has both underrepresented women of color and represented them in gendered ways, but social and digital media represents a complex new space where athletes have the potential to share their voice, potentially challenging negative stereotypes. Some scholars (Smith, 2011), however, conclude that these platforms are only continuing to perpetuate harm while other researchers such as LaVoi and Calhoun (2014) are more hopeful. Through the use of Hall, Goffman, Butler and Crenshaw’s theories of representation, self-representation, gender performance and intersectionality, this dissertation takes a feminist perspective and tackles questions of women’s self-representation in this new NIL era.

Athletes as influencers

In this neoliberal, capitalist culture, athletes who can generate a following on social media in the NIL era have the potential to build a business for themselves

online through sponsored posts and other paid content. Through apps such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, these individuals can share their stories to a mass viewership and gain fame. A more equitable media environment would promote women's sports content in the mainstream press, but modern culture consistently favors men's sports and places the promotional responsibility for women's sports on women athletes themselves (Thorpe et al., 2017). Social media thus becomes an important site for women to represent themselves and tell their stories. This dissertation explores how women have navigated that challenge, acting as influencers, putting forth labor on social media (Duffy, 2022), and reaching new audiences across social media sites, particularly Instagram, Twitter and TikTok.

Instagram serves as a particularly notable site of influence for athletes and celebrities, as the app created a new space in the late 2010's for individuals to share their personal lives with a growing base of dedicated followers. The potential for Instagram users to upload photos from the camera on their phone directly to a public forum enabled individuals to share content while interacting with other artists and creators. Stars such as Snoop Dog, Kylie Jenner and Justin Bieber became popular early users of Instagram, embracing the app's unique features to tell public stories (Frier, 2021). Their engagement with the app transitioned Instagram into a pop culture haven, a place for stars to push sponsored items and promote their work. These celebrities used their status and following to serve as "tastemakers for a generation" (Frier, 2021, xxi). Fisher (2021) notes that Instagram's 'swipe up' feature — a tool awarded to those with 10,000 followers or more that allowed users to direct viewers to external content such as articles or videos linked through Instagram —

further helped the app establish itself as the ideal space for gaining influencer status and increasing follower count.

Brands and marketing teams recognized the potential value of this new platform in reaching fragmented target audiences. Companies like Blast or Michael Kors in particular quickly started hiring such individual influencers to capitalize on their “[deep] physiological bonds with their followers by sharing highly personal content that revolves around their lifestyle and interests” while simultaneously promoting the needs of the associated company through sponsored content (Frier, 2021; Tafesse & Wood, 2021, p. 1). This process ignited a new trend in digital storytelling and social media marketing.

The power of an individual influencer varies, depending on subject matter experience, niche fandoms and follower counts, but Vangelov (2019) broadly defines an influencer as an opinion leader with a significant following who creates and spreads content to a trusting base of fans. Instagram’s community-building features combined with the “personality-driven content” created by initial influencers made it an ideal space for promoting impactful narratives (Hund, 2019, p. 24). Thus, influencer culture grew as Instagram became a niche space to measure audience engagement for brands. Though influencers became concentrated in the lifestyle industry, the tactic of using social media and brand endorsements on Instagram to gain popularity ultimately evolved into a strategy for those across all businesses.

Athletes, in particular, have found Instagram to be an efficient, accessible way to reach fans and increase likability and status. In fact, the individual account with the greatest number of followers is Cristiano Ronaldo, a professional soccer player who

has used his account to show off his skills, his family and his body. Chadwick and Burton (2008) suggest that athletes like Ronaldo achieve personal branding success because of their ability to present their team experiences, off-field life, physical characteristics, mass appeal, age and reputation in a desirable manner that highlights both a thriving professional and private life. Yet, Ronaldo is not just influential and notable because of his following on Instagram. Haenlein et al. (2020) argue that “what is relevant is not the size of the follower base but the fact that the influencer can connect to a community and inspire this community to take action based on his or her recommendations” (p. 17). Building influence can be challenging, but social media platforms like Instagram offer athletes this unique opportunity to achieve such a feat by promoting their athletic accolades and personality to their fans instantaneously.

Athletes who post frequently on platforms such as Instagram and engage with fans through personal updates can increase their popularity. Such content, however, must still be high-quality and thoughtful in order to truly resonate with a particular fan base (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). The labor involved in creating impactful content thus requires added time and effort (Duffy, 2017), though athletes who participate in major events, such as the NFL draft, can see an increase in following and fandom simply because of their involvement in such high-profile experiences (Su et al., 2020a; Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016). Performing well on the field or in competition can also improve celebrity status for individual athletes, though Korzynski and Paniagua (2016) note that success in their athletic sphere does not always directly correlate to increased social media attention. Fan exposure to athlete media content

creates interest in a player or team, and athletes have the ability to use Instagram to become influencers and build profitable, interesting brands, regardless of their stats and scores in athletic competition.

Athletes, like all influencers, also face the added pressure of attempting to appear ‘authentic,’ and this expectation is heightened for women who face overlapping pressures to be ‘real’ online and align with societal expectations of femininity and womanhood. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) described this tension as the “athletic labour of femininity” — the “aesthetic work that female athletes undertake online to brand themselves in the global sports marketplace” (p. 299). This framework attempts to complicate previous understandings of self-representation and athlete branding and challenges scholars to consider socio-cultural contexts when evaluating athlete imagery online. Duffy adds that this expectation for women in the media to be authentic, real and relatable has been a historic element of the media industry, with representations of ‘real women’ embodying only a narrow, hegemonic form of femininity. Though this dissertation is not analyzing authenticity or evaluating the impact of authentic representations on fandom, the fact that women athletes face additional barriers to representation because of a social expectation that they portray authentic femininity representations is relevant.

The content that women athletes produce on Instagram creates a rich pool of data to investigate expressions of gender norms. Smith and Sanderson (2015) found that imagery produced by women athletes is often candid, a marked shift away from the selfie that dominated for so long and remains a favorite for influencers outside of athletics (Abidin, 2016). However, Smith and Sanderson (2015) also noted that the

photos and videos produced by women athletes on Instagram also contained more “suggestive” tones than photos posted by men, though they acknowledge that this finding is likely the “result of cultural norms more than the conscious decision to look suggestive” (p. 354). The nature of such ‘suggestive’ content and the cultural factors that inspire such imagery require further interrogation, prompting questions about what types of images should fall into this category. Toffoletti and Thope (2018a) agree that culture plays a significant role in the decision-making process for women on social media, and they note that women who appear confident and empowered online and are able to “generate affective feelings of intimacy and inspiration in consumers” find the most success in influencer culture (p. 313). Tiusanen (2022) adds that Instagram in general “is firmly wrapped in the fast-changing rhythms of what is most recent or contemporary at any given time,” making it a useful platform for studying culture (p. 1). While this dissertation is focused on content produced by women athletes as opposed to fan reaction, audience perception of such material remains an area for future research.

While much of the research on influencers has focused on Instagram, the text-based platform, Twitter is also highly pertinent to branding and athlete communication. Twitter has become a popular home for sports media commentary, storytelling and engagement. The site, which was first launched in 2006, was designed as a public platform for users to directly send content into the world and ignite conversation through short-form text. Twitter’s original motto — “push-button publishing for the people” — remains a core tenant of the platform and highlights its most useful function: the ability to instantaneously share thoughts with an active

community of other users (Bilton, 2014, p. 16). Twitter also became known for hashtags — strings of words or phrases preceded by the pound sign that allowed users to follow a particular topic or trend (Bilton, 2014). By 2011, the instantaneous nature of content on Twitter and its ability to connect users online through text helped the platform become a favorite among athletes (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011).

Athletes and sports personalities embraced the site because of its potential to reach fans directly and communicate with the community. Leagues and governing bodies, however, have historically viewed this platform as a risk, fearing that athletes would become distracted or release confidential team information (Thomas, 2011). Sports reporters remain equally concerned about the impact of Twitter and its potential to diminish the value of reporters in society (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). While both reporters and leagues have only recently started to embrace the platform as a tool for promotion, athletes and individuals have been at the forefront of social media content creation on Twitter by using this tool to share their stories.

From a branding perspective, Twitter opened new doors for athletes. Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) note that the platform creates space for “athletes that were previously invisible in traditional-media markets” to “cultivate their own brands through diverse engagement with a broad audience,” particularly through smart, humorous commentary or fan interactivity (p. 462). However, Coche (2014) explained that women are not necessarily using Twitter as a space to push back against hegemonic norms, rather they continue to present themselves as “feminine” subjects away from the field of play “while the majority of their male counterparts frame themselves primarily as athletes” (p. 95). Lebel and Danylchuk (2012)’s work

revealed a similar takeaway, as they found that women athletes use Twitter to share stories about their personal lives more frequently than stories about their athletic lives. The women athletes in Lebel and Danylchuk (2012)'s study did use Twitter more frequently than their male counterparts overall though. These athletes are spending hours on Twitter to “construct a ‘character for a kind of ritual of the performance of the self’” (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, p. 466), bolstering Goffman's theory that the presentation of the self requires a negotiation of expression as part of an individual's performance. Hull (2014) ultimately suggests that all athletes could benefit from representing themselves on Twitter at increasing rates because of the potential of the app to share stories with fans to create a more well-rounded media image. This opportunity remains particularly relevant for sports underrepresented in traditional media. The future of Twitter remains somewhat uncertain since its purchase by Elon Musk in late 2022, but that was outside the scope of this study.

Twitter has been a useful platform for athletes to share their stories for over 15 years, but a much new platform — TikTok — emerged on the scene in late 2016 and revolutionized digital branding and online storytelling. TikTok, which originated in China as part of a company called ByteDance, allows users to post short video clips, typically including a music element, and the app has been a popular one among influencers and social media stars (Anderson, 2020). While TikTok has become known for its meme content and dancing videos, the app's most notable feature is its algorithm: users are fed individualized content based on their engagement with previous videos, and new content automatically populates in a streaming feed that allows users to seamlessly move from video to video (Anderson, 2020; Bhandari &

Bimo, 2022; Schellewald, 2021). TikTok does not rely on a set order for content nor does it provide users particular context surrounding the videos they see on their feeds. Instead, users are simply presented with video after video, each one intended to be more personalized than the previous one as the app continuously learns more about the user and generates content in line with personalized interests. TikTok's algorithm has the potential to inspire addictive tendencies, both in users and creators engaging on the platform, and understanding the ways in which individuals engage on this platform remains essential in understanding digital media storytelling in this new era.

TikTok's algorithm and potential for virality creates challenges and opportunities, both for the user and for the creator. In fact, Bhandari and Bimo (2022) argue that TikTok's algorithm-based model has led to a shift in how users represent themselves online on TikTok, suggesting that individuals are informed by the self-selected content they see through the app, and this material helps to shape the identity of the user that is then reproduced on the app through videos created by other TikTokers. Bhandari and Bimo (2022) describe this process of identity development through TikTok as the emergence of the "algorithmized self," a curated version of a user who acknowledges the intricacies of TikTok's algorithm and presents a version of themselves that aims to capitalize on such algorithm (p. 5). TikTok influencers engaging in this practice may also spend considerable time weighing video length and hashtag usage, hoping to design the perfect piece of content that inspires commentary from other viewers and lands on the "For You" page, a landing site that reaches the greatest number of audience members (Klug, 2021). Su et al. (2020b) suggests that TikTok rewards "grassroots content" that appears playful, authentic and personal, and

influencers have found great success on TikTok through trend videos and raw, selfie-style content (p. 444). The labor and effort involved in creating the perfect TikTok post is reminiscent of the time involved in maintaining an active and successful Instagram presence (Duffy, 2017), as both require influencers and stars to commit themselves to public storytelling through different features and platforms.

Much like Instagram, TikTok's visual nature has also played a key role in its popularity in the digital media age and has helped the app develop as a unique site for influencers. Schellewald (2021) explains that the audiovisual interface of TikTok content strongly reflects "embodied and performative aspects of communication" and creates "shared sensibility" among viewers (p. 4447). Influencers striving to tap into this community and create self-made fame have taken to producing a diversity of content and edited clips on TikTok with the goal of unlocking the formula for attracting more viewers (Abidin, 2020). The ultimate recipe for producing viral content on TikTok remains unclear, but users continue to be drawn to TikTok because of the app's ability to predict interests and present content automatically without requiring individuals to make their own choices (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Little research exists on the relationship between TikTok and athlete branding, but Su et al. (2020b) note that sports stars used the platform successfully during the COVID-19 pandemic to form connections with fans. Su et al. (2020b) also argue that TikTok can be "profitably used as a social media tool to foster fan engagement and brand development while also strategically improving the performance of other social media platforms," making it a valuable resource for branded content and activism (p. 443). Though this dissertation is focused on how women athletes are using TikTok,

Instagram and Twitter to express themselves athletically and personally, the ways in which athletes used this platform during the pandemic provides useful context for understanding the value of the app. This research builds on these previous findings to assess how top collegiate women athletes are using the platform to express their athleticism and lifestyle online.

Women in college sport

Women have not always had the opportunity to capitalize on their brand in the college sports space, as this policy was only changed in 2021. The new NIL rules, however, are just one of many rules that have impacted women's participation and involvement in college sports. Women did not compete in formal NCAA events until 1982; instead, they participated in championships hosted by a number of different organizations, including the Committee on Women's Athletics (CWA), the National Section on Women's Athletics of the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (AAHPER), the Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW) and, ultimately, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW). The AIAW was founded in 1971 and operated independently from the NCAA — given that the later organization had explicitly banned women athletes in 1966 — and prided itself on avoiding the perceived corruption and danger associated with NCAA events (Suggs, 2005; Wushanley, 2004). AIAW athletes were not on scholarship, but they enjoyed the opportunity to compete against other women in sanctioned collegiate competition. One year after the founding of AIAW, Congress passed Title IX, the legislation that required all organizations receiving federal funding to provide equal educational opportunities to everyone, regardless of sex. The

passage of Title IX in 1972 forced the NCAA member schools to reckon with their exclusion of women and contemplate future policy that promoted equality.

The NCAA was not initially receptive to Title IX. In 1974, the organization petitioned Congress to exclude athletics from Title IX, but Congress refused to make this exception (Buzuvis, 2015). The following year, executives from the NCAA traveled to Houston for the AIAW convention and discussed the possibility of offering women's championships under the NCAA banner, a proposal that the AIAW rejected (Suggs, 2005). AIAW leaders were concerned that the NCAA did not value women's sports and would prioritize profit over the educational experiences of women athletes. By 1980, however, the NCAA developed women's DII and DIII championships in five sports: basketball, tennis, swimming, field hockey and volleyball (Suggs, 2005). This move directly competed with the AIAW and marked the start of the NCAA's takeover of women's sports. Division I schools followed, adding cross-country, gymnastics, softball and outdoor track and field to the list of championship sports. This decision laid the foundation for the modern NCAA structure that includes over two dozen sports for men and women. The growth of women's sports within the NCAA led the AIAW to dissolve, creating division between women involved with the AIAW and those competing in the NCAA. Critics suggested that the NCAA's acquisition of the AIAW led to a violation of antitrust laws (Koch, 1985), and the NCAA would face a number of federal lawsuits surrounding anti-trust in the years to come.

In the early 2000's, the NCAA's antitrust issues came to the forefront again in a lawsuit filed by Worldwide Basketball and Sports Tours Inc. that claimed the

NCAA's control over men's basketball tournaments during the competition season violated the law (Schaefer, 2005). The NCAA ultimately won this case in the Court of Appeals, but the governing body would be back in court four years later for another case, *White v. NCAA*, that concerned amateurism, one of the core, historical pillars of the NCAA but an element of college sports that would slowly erode in the coming years. Meyer and Zimbalist (2021) argue that amateurism remains an important part of college sport, as it shields athletes from the pressures associated with professional sports and maintains an emphasis on education within the sporting system. The NCAA, despite losing the *White* case and being required to provide college athletes with health insurance, has fought to maintain amateurism in subsequent legal cases (Meyer & Zimbalist, 2021).

The NCAA's biggest challenge to its structure, however, came in 2009, when UCLA basketball player Ed O'Bannon filed a lawsuit arguing that the NCAA's control over athlete likeness overstepped its legal right. O'Bannon filed his case after he discovered that the NCAA had used his image in an EA Sports collegiate basketball video game without his permission (Buzuvis, 2015; Berri, 2016). The NCAA was making money from an O'Bannon-like figure in the video game, while O'Bannon, the individual actually playing the sport and generating revenue for his school and the NCAA, did not earn any compensation beyond his original scholarship. This case stayed in court for years, ultimately working its way to the Supreme Court when the judges denied the NCAA's appeal and O'Bannon's request for review (Meyer & Zimbalist, 2021). This decision, or lack thereof, upheld the ruling that the NCAA violated antitrust laws by denying athletes the right to profit

from their own image, but the Court did not require the governing body to pay athletes beyond existing scholarship and new ‘cost of attendance’ stipends that allowed athletes to be paid for basic living expenses (Berri, 2016). This case set the stage for the subsequent Supreme Court case on athlete rights, *Alston vs. NCAA*, that would inspire new NIL rule changes in 2021.

Following the example set by O’Bannon, two student athletes, Shawne Alston and Justine Hartman, filed a lawsuit against the NCAA arguing that the governing body violated antitrust laws by limiting educational funding for college athletes (Meyer & Zimbalist, 2021). The District Court ruled that the NCAA must extend benefits to student athletes further than what had been permitted under the *O’Bannon* ruling. This decision meant that student athletes could now receive educational equipment and financial support while completing either undergraduate or graduate education. Again, the NCAA appealed. This case ultimately made its way to the Supreme Court in June of 2021, and, in a 9-0 decision (Jessop & Sabin, 2021), the justices ruled against the NCAA with Justice Neil McGill Gorsuch writing the majority opinion and Justice Brett Kavanaugh writing the concurring opinion (*National Collegiate Athletic Association vs. Alston*, 2021).

The Supreme Court decision, combined with the fact that 27 states had developed legislation that would allow athletes to earn compensation for their likeness and labor, prompted the NCAA to make a radical change that moved the governing body even further away from the amateurism value that had defined the organization for so long (Grow, 2022). On June 30, 2021, the NCAA announced that “college athletes will have the opportunity to benefit from their name, image and

likeness” as long as they remain compliant with school and state laws, meaning that athletes could now sign sponsorship deals that rewarded them financially for their brand (Hosick, 2021). Under these new policies, athletes could still not earn bonuses for performance, but they could now sign contracts with third-party service companies to receive endorsements and monetize their likeness. The ability for athletes to make money from their content and their identity in college creates new potential for fandom and audience exposure not previously offered in any significant way by traditional media companies. Given that women athletes have historically had less attention and investment from their school athletic programs and the NCAA, the ability to manage personal brands was particularly important and potentially empowering.

These NIL rules shifted student athlete branding from a hobby to a profession, as student athletes now navigate sponsorship deals, corporate endorsements, and business plans while competing in their sport and pursuing their degrees. These policy changes, however, still remain embedded in neoliberal, capitalist culture where “what matters is to make as much money as possible...by whatever means necessary” (Hall, 2011, p. 727). Athletes cannot profit from their performance, but they have the opportunity to market themselves, their bodies, and their stories independently. Sport and self-representation in sport can therefore be said to be caught up in the same principles of “commodity culture” as other industries and spaces (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, p. 301). Athletes are now viewed as “active subjects responsible for their own self-making” (Thorpe et. al, 2017, p. 370) within the market; they are individual agents financially rewarded for embracing popularized versions of

femininity. Jessop and Sabin (2021) offer a more positive perspective on the potential for feminist athlete agency in the modern market, arguing that “women’s sports athletes can actually benefit — and attain greater publicity through endorsement deals — when given full opportunity to market themselves instead of relying on governing body or athletic departments to do so” (p. 281). They describe this opportunity as a potential for ‘power,’ equating editorial freedom and financial benefits with capital (Jessop & Sabin). The following sections engage these complex, overlapping perspectives in an exploration of the ways in which women are representing themselves in this era.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to answer the two research questions related to athlete representation and self-representation in the era of NIL, this study employed a content analysis of athlete social media content published on TikTok, Twitter and Instagram and a content analysis of media articles that engaged with those social media posts. I analyzed how ten prominent women athletes in the NCAA — Hanna Cavinder, Haley Cavinder, Olivia Dunne, Sedona Prince, Sarah Fuller, Paige Bueckers, Trinity Thomas, Sunisa Lee, Aliyah Boston and Jocelyn Alo — shared images and commentary about their student athlete experiences on social media from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022. The time frame represents the first year of the NCAA's new NIL policy and allows for a holistic assessment of each of these athlete's brands. Every social media post from each athlete was coded into one of five primary categories including action, lifestyle, competition-adjacent, text and promotional graphic. These categories allowed me to assess the relationship between an athlete's experience as a competitor, the athlete's experience as an ambassador of her collegiate program and the athlete's experience as an everyday college student.

Additionally, journalistic articles that included embedded social media content produced by the athletes were evaluated through a similar codebook, as each article was coded based on the ways in which the article presented the athlete in an athletic context, athletic-adjacent context or a lifestyle context. These codes also align with Goffman's theory of representation, with lifestyle content representing backstage communication and athletic-centric social media posts and articles representing frontstage communication. The coding process and methodology in this dissertation

draw from previous studies of sports media and digital storytelling (Bell & Coche, 2018; Toffoletti, 2016, Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Su et al., 2020b) but advance the scholarship by focusing on collegiate athletes and studying their content creation and representation across multiple platforms. This chapter explains the process used to conduct the content analyses in this study as well as the ways in which this work relates to existing work on the representation and self-representation of women in sports.

Content analysis of athlete social media posts

Conducting a content analysis of each social media post published by elite collegiate athletes during the first 12 months of the NCAA's new NIL policies helped answer the first research question focused on athlete self-representation online. Previous scholars have used content analysis to explore athlete branding and self-representation on social media (Coche, 2014, 2017; Smith & Sanderson, 2015), and this study builds on such findings to assess the role of athlete storytelling during the NIL era in which collegiate athletes can profit from these stories. The following ten NCAA athletes were included in this study: Olivia Dunne, Haley Cavinder, Hanna Cavinder, Sarah Fuller, Sedona Prince, Trinity Thomas, Paige Bueckers, Aliyah Boston, Sunisa Lee and Jocelyn Alo. These women were selected to represent a diverse sample of elite NCAA athletes across sports who have experienced a range of opportunities and achievements during their collegiate careers including national championships, notable activism, and Olympic performances. All of these athletes also had a public presence on social media and had an audience reach of over 50,000 followers on at least one platform.

Table 1: Total Content Published by Each Athlete Across Platforms

Name	TikTok	Instagram	Twitter
Olivia Dunne	255	124	55
Haley Cavinder	N/A	81	64
Hanna Cavinder	N/A	98	63
Cavinder Twins	325	200	N/A
Sedona Prince	89	18	197
Sarah Fuller	76	225	654
Sunisa Lee	71	162	327
Trinity Thomas	34	180	265
Paige Bueckers	4	128	159
Aliyah Boston	41	52	229
Jocelyn Alo	N/A	146	1065
Total Content	895	1414	3078

Content analysis is an ideal approach for analyzing athlete social media data because the method allows for the unobtrusive assessment of large quantities of information (Andrew et al., 2020). Previous scholars have also demonstrated the relative ease with which such material can be accessed, coded and saved physically or digitally (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bruce et. al, 2010) to explore patterns in representation. While this method has been used to assess content across a range of mediums, including television, print and radio, it has recently been used extensively to study social media content, particularly on platforms such as Twitter (Coche, 2017), Instagram (Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Toffoletti, 2016) and TikTok (Su et al., 2020b). Content analysis serves as an appropriate method for “[delineating] trends,

patterns and absences over large aggregates of text” (Bruce et al., 2010, p. 22). This method is thus well-suited for analyzing the ways in which women represent themselves in alignment with hegemonic norms or in an alternative manner on Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. Leavy (2007) argues that the goal of content analysis is to help scholars “learn about our society...by looking at the text we produce, which reflect macro social processes and our worldview” (p. 229). Content analysis therefore offers a useful method through which to continue to evaluate media produced by the athletes themselves in order to further analyze the self-representation choices of women in sports.

Case studies and sampling

The sample of athletes analyzed in this first research question was selected with the goal of representing diverse voices, races, backgrounds, sexualities and sports. The stories told by Dunne, the Cavinder twins, Fuller, Prince, Thomas, Bueckers, Boston, Lee and Alo on social media offer glimpses into their personalities, interests, and brands, and identifying the women included in this sample involved a series of steps. Previous research has assessed several of these athletes in relation to their perceived athletic ability (Leonard, 2021), fan response (Harry, 2021) and activism (Scovel & Velloso, 2022), but little research exists comparing the self-representation choices of athletes to one another in the NIL era.

The first step in creating the sample for this study involved identifying athletes with significant (and hence measurable) influence. Celebrities and those with popular online personalities experience increases in brand value and influence as their follower count increases, and Mellado and Hermida (2021) also found that this

phenomenon applies to journalists and content creators. Those who are “digitally visible” experience increases in “symbolic and cultural power” (Mellado and Hermida, p. 285). Fisher (2021) also argues that athletes with large follower bases in the NIL era may model their self-promotion and public brand management after such influencers and to increase their visibility. Given that women’s sports remain vastly underrepresented in traditional media, athletes who have the potential to grow interest in their brand through social media hold added value, particularly at a time when follower count and perceived cultural capital can lead to financial success in college sports. All of these elements mean that the women with the largest following on social media in the NCAA thus are worth studying.

Reducing the sample to just those with the largest followings, however, would have produced a fairly homogenous sample of women athletes who aligned with a particular hegemonic physical presentation. Identifying a representative sample thus required expanding the case studies beyond just those with popularity online because follower count is also not the sole indicator of brand resonance (Faucher, 2018; Brooks et al., 2021; Ki, 2020). Selective sampling was instead used to create a more well-rounded, representative group of case studies. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) note that such selective sampling with the goal of capturing diversity remains a common approach in content analysis and allows for a more complex study. Therefore, in addition to follower count, athlete notoriety and success were also considered in the sampling process. Sports with an Olympic star or a well-known NCAA champion who gained media attention beyond her championship run were given higher priority

because they presented an opportunity to study a household name in comparison to other top female athletes in that sport.

Creating this collection of athlete case studies, however, still proved difficult, given that the NCAA sponsors nearly two dozen Division I women's collegiate sports, and all of those athletes have stories to tell. Sport diversity and identity were further considered in an effort to create a small sample of case studies that represented different elements of the student athlete lifestyle. Previous research (Isard & Melton, 2022) suggests that women of color remain underrepresented in the media; an intentional, intersectional feminist effort was therefore made to ensure that this sample did not reproduce such harmful representation practices. Su et al. (2020b) used a similar selective approach in their sample by choosing well-known athletes across a range of genders, sports and backgrounds. While a small selection of case studies cannot represent the entire range of student athlete experiences and self-representation choices online, this group of athletes does offer insights into how some of the most prominent women use these platforms to share their stories online and how reporters are engaging with those posts.

Notably, this particular sample only includes women athletes. The goal of this research is to explore how women, an underrepresented group in traditional media, have engaged with NIL opportunities to tell their stories and how those stories have been reproduced by reporters in traditional media coverage. Thorpe et al. (2017) argue that the economy “places expectations on women (not the media) to self-market and produce their image and representation to garner greater visibility and economic opportunity” (p. 375), and this dissertation explores how well-known colleges athletes

have engaged with this self-marketing experience. Women who want to be heard in sports media have historically been responsible for creating their own media.

This study is not intended to compare men versus women; instead, it is focused on exploring content produced by women and how the messages conveyed in such content tell a story about women's experiences as athletic, influential leaders. Antunovic and Hardin (2015) argue that such feminist intentions in sports media studies to only study women and other underrepresented groups "can contribute to producing a liberatory, transformative subjectivity in an oppressed or marginalized group" and "produce knowledge that such a group desires" (p. 668). The self-representation conveyed in media produced by women athletes is thus notable and worth studying without a comparison to the self-representation of men in sports media.

All of the athletes in this sample competed at the same division and level of college sport as they participated in a Division I sport during the 2021-2022 collegiate season. While McCarthy (2020) argues that skills and talent level may not automatically correlate to high levels of NIL success, selecting athletes competing at the same level allows for simpler comparisons across athletes. Korzynski and Paniagua (2016) also note developing a popular athlete brand on social media requires a combination of athletic performance and strategic storytelling, and this study builds on this finding by studying a group of athletes with varying degrees of elite athletic success who engage with popular social media platforms in diverse ways. Several of the women who made headlines in the last two years, either on or off the playing field, were included in the sample, because they had name recognition

heading in the NIL era. Women who qualified for the Olympics, an international stage with increased viewership, were also considered, as were women who won NCAA titles. The women in this sample can be grouped into three categories: early NIL adopters, women involved in a historic event and standout, successful, elite stars.

Following the NCAA's decision to allow athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness, several media and marketing companies including Izea, Swaylytics and ActionNetwork.com (Top college athletes on Instagram, 2022; Top 100 college athletes with the biggest Instagram followings, 2021; Rovell, 2021) published lists ranking the top women athletes by follower count across platforms in the NCAA. These lists equated follower count with NIL potential, offering readers a preview of which athletes to watch in this new era of collegiate sport corporate social media branding. Research does suggest that follower counts can indicate revenue opportunities for athletes, particularly college athletes who can use social media to generate media attention and create "organic means of promotion" for themselves and their teams (Kunkel, 2021, p. 5). Ki (2020), however, argues that follower count is not necessarily the only critical factor in branding; relationship-building and emotional connections with influencers, or, in this case, athletes, also matter. Thus, while popularity and impact cannot be reduced to follower count, those with the largest audience reach are notable.

One woman consistently topped the lists of athletes with the highest follower counts: Olivia Dunne. A 2021 All-American gymnast for LSU, Dunne led the country in followers across all genders and sports, and by October of 2021, she had signed public endorsement deals with Vuori and American Eagle, among others. These

sponsorships made her a key figure in the discussion around athlete use of NIL and self-representation (Feinswog, 2022). As of September 1, 2022, Dunne boasted 5.8M followers on TikTok, 2M followers on Instagram and 28.2K followers on Twitter.

Similarly, former Fresno State (California) basketball players Haley and Hanna Cavinder also put themselves in the spotlight almost immediately after the NIL rule change, as they too signed endorsement deals on July 1, 2021 (Knight, 2022). The Cavinder twins operate several social media accounts for their brands, and all of their accounts were included in this study to gain a full understanding of their self-representation and storytelling approach in the NIL era. Previous scholars have suggested that creating multiple branded accounts can add to a sports brand portfolio, and the joint “Cavinder Twins” account can be seen as a way for Hanna and Haley Cavinder to generate additional media attention, revenue, and capital (Kunkel et al., 2021). Marwick and Boyd (2010) note that social media users, particularly Twitter users, may also create multiple accounts as a way of shielding their identity from a particular group of followers or to embrace an alternative persona on a secondary account. In the case of the Cavinder twins, the joint account was assessed to see if and how the content differs from the individual account and how the presentation of the student athlete experience varies across platforms and usernames. As of September 1, 2022, the ‘Cavinder Twins’ TikTok account boasted the most followers amongst all of the accounts operated by Hanna and Haley Cavinder with 4.1M, while the ‘Cavinder Twins’ Instagram account had 74.7K followers. Hanna and Haley Cavinder each had 417K and 416K followers respectively on their individual Instagram

accounts as well. On Twitter, Hanna Cavinder has 11.7K followers while Haley Cavinder has accumulated 12.1K followers.

While Haley and Hanna Cavinder and Olivia Dunne each have impressive athletic accolades including conference player of the year honors, school records and All-American honors, other athletes in their respective sports arguably have even more notable sporting successes. Understanding the ways in which the top athletes in each sport represent themselves online in comparison to the athletes with the largest follower count offers important insight around athlete storytelling and branding efforts. Thus, in addition to Dunne, Olympic All-Around gold medal gymnast Sunisa Lee was included in the sample, as was NCAA all-around champion Trinity Thomas. Basketball stars Aliyah Boston, the 2022 NCAA women's national tournament Most Valuable Player (MVP), and Paige Bueckers, the 2021 AP Player of the Year, were also added to the sample to offer further points of analysis within that sport. Softball home run record holder Jocelyn Alo was added as a fifth athlete in the 'standout, successful, elite stars' category because of her level of dominance and her participation in softball, a traditionally gendered sport and a sport underrepresented on the list athletes with top follower counts. Each athlete in this group serves as a different case in how women are using NIL to express themselves and capture power in a patriarchal sports industry.

As the only athlete in the sample with an Olympic gold medal, Sunisa Lee is an interesting and relevant case study for this sample because of her name recognition, accomplishments and leadership in gymnastics as well as her extensive social media following. Hasaan et al. explain (2018) that athletes who compete in

mega events like the Olympics experience an increase in media coverage that can consequently result in enhanced interest in the individual as a brand. The NCAA's new NIL rule allowed Lee to compete in collegiate gymnastics and make money from her successful brand following her Olympic title in the women's all-around at the Tokyo Games. This dissertation further explored the way she represents herself and all of her experiences on social media during this historic time. Lee had 1.6M followers on TikTok, 1.7M followers on Instagram and 183.3K followers on Twitter as of September 1, 2022.

While Lee's Olympic success stands out, her peers in the NCAA gymnastics arena also inspired headlines during the 2021-2022 season. University of Florida's Trinity Thomas, for example, made a name for herself when she won the 2022 women's NCAA All-Around title, beating Lee. Assessing her self-representation in this new era adds to an understanding of women's self-representation in the NIL era. Gladden et al. (1998) notes that athletes and teams experience increased capital when competing for a branded institution within the Division I NCAA sporting structure, and previous scholars have applied this model to evaluating the branding potential of teams and coaches in the NCAA as well (Bruening & Min, 2007, McGehee & Cianfrone, 2019). In the case of Thomas, she is the most successful current athlete on the well-known Division I Florida Gators gymnastics team and won titles on floor and bars, as well as her all-around title. She also edged out Lee in *all* of those events. Thomas had 4,485 followers on TikTok, 75K followers on Instagram and 9,539 followers on Twitter as of September 1, and while Thomas does not have as many followers as Lee, her success against the Olympic champion on the collegiate stage

makes her worthy of study. She also has the lowest follower total across all of the athletes in this sample despite her accolades and her stated investment in social media brand building (Hunzinger, 2022).

Similar to Thomas, NCAA softball home-run record holder Jocelyn Alo also stood out as a top-performing collegiate athlete in the sport of softball, leading the University of Oklahoma to another national title in 2022 (Marinofsky, 2022). She became the biggest star in a sport that ESPN, the leading sports network in the United States, has recently invested in, inspiring increased popularity and publicity in the game (Elchlepp, 2021; Caron, 2020). Thomas (2022) argues that such media attention could lead to “increased branding opportunities” for softball players in the NIL era (p. 44). This study assesses how Alo engaged in such ‘branding opportunities’ on her social media feeds during the first year of NIL, particularly the ways in which she represented herself both on the field and off the field as a student athlete during this time.

In contrast to women’s softball, media coverage of women's basketball lags behind media coverage of its male counterpart — men’s basketball — but understanding how the best women’s basketball players in the country respond to this disparity through their NIL activity is noteworthy (Cooky et al. 2021). Aliyah Boston, the 2022 NCAA women’s basketball MVP, helped her South Carolina team win a title that year, but she had been building up her brand prior to this achievement as well, signing deals with companies such as Orangetheory (Christovich, 2022; Orangetheory® fitness offers studios and equipment, 2021). The content that Boston posts for her 26,600 followers on TikTok and 93,200 followers on Instagram is worth

exploring to understand how a player who achieved the highest level of collegiate success in her sport is representing herself and her journey.

Jessop and Sabin (2021), however, note that even with South Carolina's 2022 NCAA title, the women's basketball program with the most success in March remains the UConn program. UConn's top player, and 2021 Associated Press women's basketball Player of the Year, Paige Bueckers boasts more followers than Boston, despite losing to Boston and the Gamecocks in the NCAA tournament. Moore (2021) suggests that Bueckers' success in the NIL and her ability to generate a following is not only related to her elite skill but also connected to her whiteness. Bueckers recognizes this relationship between race and fame as well, and she has used her platform to be an active advocate for anti-racism. Her speech at the ESPYs award ceremony in July 2021 educated viewers on the racial disparities and inequalities in sport, and she used her moment in the spotlight to celebrate Black women in the sport (WBB, 2021). Bueckers is an important figure in women's sports more broadly because of her success, the high NIL expectations that follow her and the way she uses her platform to advocate for others.

In addition to the previously mentioned five standout athletes and the athletes leading the follower count charts, two popular women athletes who made headlines in the last two years are worth studying in the NIL era. Former Vanderbilt and North Texas soccer player Sarah Fuller and Oregon women's basketball player Sedona Prince helped create NCAA history during their careers, with Fuller becoming the first woman to kick for a men's Division I Power 5 football team and Prince creating a viral TikTok that prompted a NCAA investigation on gender equity.

Fuller's historic kick came in the fall of 2020, just weeks after she won the Southeastern Conference (SEC) championship with the Vanderbilt women's soccer team. Her football experience, however, thrust her into the news and brought increased media attention to Fuller and her team. These games came nearly a year before NIL, meaning that Fuller could not create any promotional content around her historic kicks or sign endorsement deals in connection with her football success. Fuller transferred to North Texas the following season and built her brand in the NIL era with the Mean Green. Jessop and Sabin (2021) suggest that Fuller could have made \$160,000 a year based on her social media content, and this study assesses the self-representations of such profitable content. Her evolution as a player, as a brand and as a transcendent woman athlete made her a notable case study for this analysis. Fuller had 54.3K followers on TikTok, 134K followers on Instagram and 71.8K followers on Twitter as of September 1, 2022.

Fuller's historical sporting moment came when she stepped on the football field for Vanderbilt, but another notable change-making athlete, Sedona Prince of Oregon, made her impact in women's basketball. In March 2021, Prince published a 38-second TikTok exposing the inequalities between the NCAA women's basketball tournament and the men's NCAA basketball tournament that prompted a national investigation into the governing body. While Prince, like Fuller, could not capitalize on NIL opportunities at the time of her viral post, her fame and impact makes her a valuable case study to include in this analysis of athlete self-representation. Prince also filed a lawsuit against the NCAA to seek damages from loss of potential revenue pre-NIL (Holden et al., 2021). Additionally, Prince is also one of the most followed

openly queer women in the NCAA, and her discussion of sexuality online adds depth to an understanding of the lived experience of women college athletes and queer representation in sports overall. Prince has her largest following on TikTok with 3M followers, though she is also active on Instagram with 251K followers and Twitter with 44.6K followers as of September 1.

Data collection

All content analyzed in this study for each athlete across Twitter, Instagram and TikTok was collected through the publicly available social media accounts for each of the athletes as well as the two “Cavinder Twin” accounts. Every post published between July 1, 2021, and July 1, 2022, by the ten athletes was added manually into a spreadsheet via a link to the individual post. Any content deleted or removed by the athlete before July 1, 2022, was excluded from the study. Each piece of content (photo, video, caption) served as a unit of analysis for this study. The total number of posts published by each athlete across all three platforms was noted, as was the engagement on each of those posts and the date in which the post was published. In the case of TikTok, the song choice was also noted. A short photo description was also added into the spreadsheet for each image to assist in the coding process. The University of Maryland IRB board deemed this project exempt from IRB review because it did not meet the criteria for human subject research. All of the material reviewed for this project is from public accounts.

In a previous study of athlete social media posts, Hambrick et al. (2010) similarly cataloged athlete tweets before coding for six themes: interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fanship and promotion. Given that this study

is focused on representations of athleticism and student athlete lifestyle, Hambrick's et al. (2010) codes have been modified, but the theme of interactivity was acknowledged in the cataloging of the Twitter data in this sample, as athlete retweets and quote tweets of other athletes, schools or business were noted. Lamirán-Palomares et al. (2020) also found that total social activity can suggest added dimensions of influence for a given athlete, and the number of posts published by each athlete adds to an understanding of self-representation efforts.

TikTok, Instagram and Twitter profiles were useful sites of analysis in this study because of the online public nature of these accounts, and the fact that content can be collected and saved through public links. Though the types of content on these platforms vary from photos to video to text, all of this material can be assessed through content analysis and categorized accordingly. YouTube was not included as a site of analysis in this study because it was not used by the athletes in the same daily manner as platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Twitter. The Cavinder twins and Olivia Dunne do have active YouTube accounts, but the other athletes in the study did not post regularly on the platform. This study builds on previous sports content analysis research that analyzed publicly available social media content, as opposed to interviewing athletes about the production of such content (Sullivan et al., 2012). This dissertation is focused on questions related to the content itself and the stories contained in such content as opposed to audience perception of content and the development of the content by producers.

Table 2: Follower Count for Each Athlete as of September 1, 2022

Name	TikTok	Instagram	Twitter
Olivia Dunne	5.8M	2M	28.2K
Hanna Cavinder	N/A	417K	11.7K
Haley Cavinder	N/A	416K	11.7K
The Cavinder Twins	4.1M	74.7K	N/A
Sarah Fuller	54.3K	134K	71.8K
Sedona Prince	3M	251K	44.6K
Sunisa Lee	1.6M	1.7M	183.3K
Paige Bueckers	372.4K	1M	75.9K
Aliyah Boston	26.6K	93.2K	27.6K
Jocelyn Alo	N/A	50K	36.9K

Content analysis coding process

Given that the first research question in this study is based on the self-representation of the athletic and personal experiences for the ten student athletes in the study, two main codes — active and passive — were initially selected for the coding process for content published on TikTok, Instagram and Twitter. These two codes, which have been used previously in sports media research, were originally chosen as a way to distinguish between content that showed athletes in motion and content that showed athletes away from competition, participating in everyday life activities. These binary codes also reflect Goffman's (1959) distinctions between backstage and frontstage content, allowing for further assessment of content related to athleticism and expression. Related codes of action shots and passive imagery have

been used to analyze photos of women in newspapers (Bell & Coche, 2018) and Twitter profiles (Coche, 2017). Su et al. (2020b) also used similar categories in their study of athlete TikTok use, though they identified these categories as “sport-related or family-oriented.” (p. 439). The full list of codes used in this study is included later in the chapter in Table 3.

Starting with the codes ‘active’ and ‘passive’ helped this study add to the literature around athlete self-representation and contribute to the understanding of women’s branding and storytelling in the digital age. Active content was defined as any image in which an athlete is “in action playing their respective sport;” this code is used to “indicate ‘true athleticism’” in the sporting space (Wolter, 2021, p. 724). Thorpe (2016) explains that action clips offer athletes the opportunity to increase social capital by highlighting their skills, determination and fearlessness in sport. Though her work focused on the use of highlight clips and video montages for sports such as snowboarding, surfing and skateboarding (Thorpe, 2016), the value associated with such action-based, athletic-centric content represented an important category within the coding process.

For the purposes of this study, “action” was divided into two secondary categories: “practice” and “competition.” The difference between training and competition content is particularly important in the NIL era, as media companies almost exclusively promote competition, while athletes have the chance to tell a more complete story of their athletic experiences through training content. Previous research also demonstrates that athletes feel pressure to post workout updates for fans (Dumont & Ots, 2020). While this study is not focused on sports psychology or

fandom, the notion that athletes publicize their training and offer comments on their performances suggests that coding for practice and performance under the umbrella of ‘action’ is relevant to understanding self-representation in the digital age.

The term ‘passive’ originally came from a codebook used by Wolter (2021). Coche’s (2017) also included the term ‘passive’ in her study of athlete Twitter profiles. Throughout the coding process of this particular study though, the term ‘passive’ evolved into the code ‘lifestyle’ in an effort to better encapsulate the content conveyed in the image or video posted by the athlete. Limiting all non-action photos and videos to a “passive” category reduced athletes' photos into a simplified and reductive category. Athletes represent themselves in a range of ways when not competing in their sport, and the code ‘passive’ proved to be less useful in accounting for the diversity of image in this study. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) note that women athletes “contribute to their own unique branding through the crafting of a marketable lifestyle,” and the degree to which that ‘lifestyle’ focuses on off-the-field content and content focused on individuals and teammates was noted and assessed as part of this coding process (p. 305). The evolution of the ‘passive’ code to a more detailed and layered ‘lifestyle’ code adds depth and nuance to the codebook and the analysis.

The ‘lifestyle’ code was further separated into three subcategories including ‘lifestyle in team gear,’ ‘lifestyle in street wear’ and ‘lifestyle in uniform’ to add depth to this category and avoid dismissing this content as less important than action photos. Smith and Sanderson (2015) applied similar codes to their study of athlete Instagram accounts, coding photos based on clothing type, as well as poses and focal

points in the photo. The purpose of distinguishing between photos that include team gear or uniforms as opposed to those that do not include team gear or uniforms is to account for the branding power of such team apparel. McEvoy (2006) suggests that a strong relationship can develop among athlete success, university brand and public image, indicating that a university benefits from a standout athlete interacting positively with the public; while on the other hand athletes who wear a school brand can also gain capital, even if they are not actively competing in their sport in a photo or video (Gladden et al., 1998). The degree to which this mutual branding relationship continues or creates more tension between individuals and schools in the NIL era is beyond the scope of this research, but the value of an athlete wearing a school's brand remains notable. Representing a school, even in non-athletic spaces or during lifestyle activities, identifies an individual as affiliated with a given school and has the potential to increase their branding influence and power.

Neuendorf (2002) explains that the process of “evalut[ing] and modify[ing]” codes is a particularly important step in content analysis, as it allows the researcher to ensure that she is using the best tools of analysis for a given data set (p. 174). Reflecting on the value and use of codes, and understanding the “specific power relations in [the] society from which they emerge,” is a necessary step in conducting quality content analysis (Van Sterkenburg et. al, 2010, p. 833); this evolving, feminist content analysis allowed for reflexivity and evaluations of codes throughout the process. Leavy (2007) suggests that scholars are drawn to content analysis as a method for these kinds of gendered assessments of representation because content analysis enables coders to “critically [interrogate] the texts and products that

comprise culture to resist patriarchal understandings of social reality that push women and other minorities to the peripheries of their culture” (p. 224). In sports where the traditional media power dynamics so dramatically favor men, this type of research focused on posts created by women about their own lived experiences is critical.

In a further effort to modify codes beyond the original binary categories of ‘active’ and ‘passive,’ the code ‘competition-adjacent’ was also added to account for photos and articles in which an athlete was representing her athletic expertise in a non-competitive situation. The ‘competition-adjacent’ code developed throughout the research process as an alternative for some photos that may have been deemed ‘lifestyle’ but instead contained imagery of the student athlete experience and athletic expertise. Competition-adjacent content included images such as posing with a trophy, standing with a fellow elite athlete on a field or performing an athletic skill outside of practice or competition. Smith and Sanderson (2015) found that “female athletes are typically shown on the sidelines” in traditional media but have pushed back against this position on social media and presented themselves as active athletes (p. 354). This code allows this finding to be tested within this sample of Division I collegiate athletes during the first year of NIL changes.

The ‘competition-adjacent’ code was also further divided into three subcategories to represent different degrees of athletic representation based on the location and presentation of the athlete including: ‘competition-adjacent in uniform,’ ‘competition-adjacent in team gear’ and ‘competition-adjacent in street clothes.’ Wolter (2021), in her assessment of ESPNW images, also distinguished between photos in which an athlete could be seen in athletic clothing but not competing in an

event. Her codebook also inspired the ‘competition-adjacent’ category. Determining the exact type of content that fell into competition-adjacent versus lifestyle proved to be one of the biggest challenges in the coding process, but this code is ultimately defined by the demonstration of athlete skill and/or the location of an athlete in the content. For instance, images of an athlete performing a sporting skill, such as dribbling a basketball or performing a back handspring, fell into the competition-adjacent category if these activities were not conducted during a practice or a game. The “competition-adjacent” subcategories of ‘uniform,’ ‘team gear’ or ‘streetwear’ though helped further sort such content and identify how the athlete was presenting herself in a given moment in time on social media. This code can be used to highlight the intersection of an athletic lifestyle and a student lifestyle and thus remains an important part of the coding.

The line between competition-adjacent and ‘lifestyle’ became indistinct during the coding process of some images, particularly for photos where an athlete, for instance, was posing in a hotel room wearing a team uniform. In cases like this, the athlete was representing her team but not doing so in an athletic setting or in a way that showed off her athletic ability. Those photos and videos were ultimately considered lifestyle photos within the secondary category of ‘lifestyle in uniform’ instead of ‘competition-adjacent’ because, while the athlete in the photo was showing off a school uniform, neither the setting of the photo nor the motion of the athlete conveyed athletic expertise. The difference between these photos of an athlete standing in front of a mirror in uniform in comparison to an athlete standing in a locker room in uniform may seem slight, but this distinction, which was solidified

during the coding and re-coding process, is significant. The background of an image or video helped determine the kind of message being conveyed in the content and whether that message should be coded as ‘competition-adjacent’ or ‘lifestyle’

Additionally, a fourth category — graphics — was also added to distinguish between content created and shared by the athlete, and content created by a third-party and shared by the athlete. This code also emerged from the data, as graphics did not fit in any of the other codes given that they were produced by an athlete’s school or corporate sponsor and could include a collage of photos of the athlete or associated products. Previous research suggests that athletes rely on promotional material from videos or photos published by their schools or related entities to help them present a “marketable lifestyle” (Arai et al., 2014, p. 97), and scholars have noted that while promotion of women’s sports still lags behind men’s sports, progress towards equality continues (Chen et al., 2016). NIL, however, offers women the opportunity to promote themselves using both school-produced content and individually-produced content to make money through independent business deals. Thus, posts suggesting such business relationships or including the #ad were also noted. Tweets or posts containing just text were coded as ‘text,’ the fifth and final code in this study. The platforms assessed in this study primarily revolve around visual content, but the ‘text’ code was used for the occasional Twitter post that did not include a photo or a video. The content coded “text” was generally devoid of codable meaning, rarely addressing an athlete’s athletic experiences or even lifestyle directly.

The way in which collegiate athletes represent themselves as brand ambassadors and elite stars during this first year of NIL is an important aspect to this

study of women athlete presentation on social media. With regards to athlete branding as a whole, Coche (2017) found that “female athletes use their femininity, rather than their athleticism, as a means of fan enticement” on social media (p. 105), and these modified codes of ‘active’ and ‘lifestyle,’ as well as each of the subcodes, were developed to assess whether Coche’s (2017) finding applies to content produced by women with significant influence in the age of NIL. The same set of codes were used across the analysis of all three social media sites. This uniform coding process also allowed for comparisons of athlete self-representations across platforms. This final codebook ultimately enables a study of how athletes present themselves through graphics, active photos, lifestyle photos and competition-adjacent photos to gain a complete understanding of athlete storytelling in the NIL era.

Table 3: Complete Coding Categories and Definitions for Posts

Category	Secondary Category	Definition and Examples
Action	Practice	An athlete actively training a skill or technique in practice wearing practice gear (i.e., performing a gymnastics routine in a home gym in workout gear)
	Game	An athlete actively competing in her given sport in team uniform (i.e., hitting a home run during a game and running the bases)
Competition-Adjacent	Uniform	Includes images of an athlete standing on the sidelines, cheering for a teammate, celebrating, talking in the locker room or demonstrating involvement in an athletic competition but not actively competition
	Team gear	Includes images of an athlete at an event or involved in an athletic experience while wearing a team shirt or trademarked item of clothing (i.e. cheering for teammates in a sweatsuit or getting on a bus to go to an event in team gear)
	Streetwear	Includes images of an athlete representing athletic skill but not representing the team through a particular clothing item or uniform (i.e. performing a back handspring on the beach or dancing on the street in front of the gym)
Lifestyle	Uniform	Includes images of an athlete in a non-athletic setting posing in a uniform (i.e. taking mirror selfies in a hotel room)
	Team gear	Images of an athlete engaging in activities unrelated to their own sport while still conveying their association with a particular team (i.e., walking across campus in a team t-shirt, having lunch in a team t-shirt)
	Streetwear	Images of an athlete engaging in activities unrelated to their sport without conveying a connection to their athletic team (i.e., family photos, studying, etc.)
Graphics	Action	Includes imagery of an athlete in action (i.e., swinging a bat, shooting a ball, etc.)
	Action-Adjacent	Includes imagery of an athlete posing for an athletic-related photo (i.e., athlete dribbling a basketball with her hair down in formal clothing, posing with a softball bat not in uniform)
	Not Action	Team headshots or promotional material that does not show the athlete in action
	Mixed	A video or split graphic where the athlete is shown both in a posed, formal manner and in an action shot or other combination of representations
Text	N/A	Does not contain any visual representations

Content analysis of articles engaging with athlete social media posts

The second research question concerns media use of athlete social media posts, and this research question involved a similar content analysis process as

Research Question 1. While the material analyzed in this second research question differed from the content analyzed in the first research question, the codebooks for both research questions were similar, as both Research Questions 1 and 2 were designed to explore representations of lifestyle and athleticism in elite Division I women college athletes. Research Question 1 takes a bottom-up approach by looking at how athletes tell their own stories, while Research Question 2 is focused on top-down representation: How do reporters use athlete stories to develop their own narratives about these individuals?

Given the underrepresentation of women athletes in sports media (Cooky et al., 2021), reporters who embed women's voices through their social media posts "broaden the scope of news coverage beyond traditional news sources" and offer a more authentic representation of an athlete's experience (Broersma & Graham, 2013, p. 448). English (2016) explains that "Twitter brings [journalists] closer to their subjects, providing information which can be more attractive than bland comments from a press release or press conference" (p. 490). Reporters spend increased time monitoring athlete posts to learn 'news' about these players, and while this practice can lead to journalists being misled by players (Novich & Steen, 2014), the degree to which reporters are interacting with such posts is notable. Previous research (Foster, 2011) has explored the competitive relationship between athletes-as-producers and journalists, but this dissertation is less concerned with the competition between these two actors and instead focuses on how these posts are integrated into mainstream media sports coverage of these athletes.

Content analysis has been a popular method of choice for scholars interested in studying the representation of women in traditional sports journalism (Bruce, 2010; Wolter, 2021; Billings et al., 2002; Cooky et al., 2021). Bruce (2010, p. 12), however, still encourages more scholars to study “how gender and gender relations are represented and understood in relation to dominant ideological definitions of ideal femininity” in sports, and this study accomplishes that by interrogating the ways in which reporters discuss athlete social media content in their articles. By employing a rigorous feminist content analysis of the 33 articles that included athlete social media posts to study the ways in which reporters discussed this material, this study is able to make conclusions about representation from the data itself, as opposed to needing to engage physical participants or navigate physical spaces for interviews or ethnographies.

Feminist content analysis follows similar steps to traditional content analysis, though Leavy argues that the feminist perspective offers a more critical lens on the influence of power conveyed in such content. Neuendorf (2011) also notes that quality content analysis must be rooted in theory and that feminist research in particular requires a strong theoretical base because of the relationship between gender research and cultural studies of power. In this case, Hall’s theory of representation inspired the codebook for this content analysis and allowed for an interrogation of how women athletes were represented by journalists through reporting and athlete-produced social media content. Throughout the coding process of each article, I followed Leavy’s (2007) model for feminist content analysis, recognizing that “texts produced in dominant venues are likely to contain traces of

gendered ideas of social reality” (p. 230). The texts in this study cannot be divorced from the patriarchal society, and the newsrooms, in which they are produced, but feminist content analysis allowed for an assessment of the power contained in those pieces. Each article analyzed in this process served as a unit of analysis, and I coded each of those articles into categories based on how the women subjects were represented. The social media post embedded in each article was noted, as was the subject of the article and the description of that subject as an athlete and ambassador of her program.

The next step of the qualitative feminist content analysis process outlined by Leavy includes refining codes, and, much like the coding process for Research Question 1, a ‘competition-adjacent’ code was added to the codebook for this sample after the first round of coding. The codes in this process ultimately aimed to help answer questions about athlete representation. The systematic nature of this analysis produced reliable and valid findings that critiqued “problematic gender representation patterns” (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020 p. 707). Skalski et al. (2017) notes that content analysis is a particularly useful method for analyzing material across mediums including printed text in newspapers or more digital content on social media such as photos and videos. This study applies this method to all of those platforms.

Data collection

While the first research question addresses athlete self-representation in the age of NIL policy changes, the second research question prompts an assessment of the ways in which social media posts produced by these athletes were embedded in more traditional media coverage. The same ten athletes were analyzed as part of this second

research question in order to properly compare the way these athletes represented themselves to the way these athlete posts were represented by traditional media. In order to capture a sample of articles that engaged with athlete social media content, a Nexis Uni search was originally conducted for all articles published between 07/01/21 to 07/01/22 that included each athlete's full name. For example, the search term 'Olivia Dunne' was entered into Nexis to capture all articles about Dunne published during this period. Articles within that sample that included a mention of her social media accounts (@livvydunne and @livvy) were then further separated from this sample for analysis. This process was repeated for each athlete to identify all articles that mentioned or included content from any of their social media accounts. Results were filtered for English-speaking outlets only for a total of 33 articles. Each article was then downloaded and uploaded to NVivo in folders for each athlete for coding.

Table 4: Articles Containing Athlete Social Media Posts

Athlete	Total Article Count	Articles with Social Posts
Jocelyn Alo	189	0
Aliyah Boston	729	4
Paige Bueckers	897	3
Haley Cavinder	130	3
Hanna Cavinder	127	3
Olivia Dunne	71	2
Sarah Fuller	49	0
Sunisa Lee	1,172	11
Sedona Prince	208	7
Trinity Thomas	58	0
Total	3,630	33

Content analysis coding process

To understand the ways in which reporters engaged with athlete social media posts during the first year of updated NIL rules, the text of each media article in the sample was coded for one or more of the following three codes based on the text of the article and the subject of the story: action, lifestyle, and competition-adjacent. These codes relate to the codes used earlier in the study for the assessment of athlete social media posts, and pairing these codes allows for a comparison between the way athletes are representing themselves in the NIL era and the way reporters are representing top women athletes. The particular piece of social media embedded in

the article was also noted and matched with its associated code from Research Question 1. Schäfer and Vögele (2021) note that content analysis studies of print media make up the largest percentage of sports media content analysis work in the last decade, but scholars have recently increased their production of social media content analysis; this study combines both the study of social media and the study of traditional media with the goal of providing a more complex assessment of media representation and self-representation. Benigni et al. (2014) further suggests that social media has changed and transformed the relationship between the athlete and the reporter in sports media, allowing athletes more voice in the way their stories are told. Combining a content analysis of athlete self-representation with media engagement with such self-representation tests this conclusion.

Within the sample of articles, those coded as “action” described women athletes during a game or in relation to their statistics and performances in the gym or on the field. Bell and Coche (2018) used similar codes in their study of United States Women’s National Team (USWNT) soccer coverage across newspaper front pages, as they assessed content for ‘athletic’ coverage, ‘non-athletic’ coverage, ‘local/fan’ coverage and ‘other’ coverage. In particular, Bell and Coche (2018) define “athletic” as “when the story focused on the game of soccer,” a definition that is slightly broadened in this study to include all of the sports and athletes in the sample but maintains a similar sentiment. Kane and Parks (1992) used a related distinction in their study of media trends in coverage of women athletes, defining their codes as ‘performance-related’ and ‘non-performance-related.’ While these categories have varied slightly across different studies of women in sports media, Bell and Coche

(2018) and Kane and Parks (1992) use similar terms in content analysis of athlete self-representation, highlighting the value of these particular codes.

The ‘lifestyle’ category, much like the ‘lifestyle’ category in Research Question 1, includes content that centers on an athlete’s experience outside of their field of play. Bell and Coche (2018) explain that the “nonathletic” code in their study included any story “focused on matters not directly related to the game of soccer” (p. 751). Again, that definition has been broadened for this study to include softball, basketball and gymnastics, but the core element of the code remains the same. Previous research suggests that women are often represented in relation to their experiences as wives, girlfriends, sisters or other non-athlete related identity, and these labels serve to marginalize them in the sports media space (Cooky et. al, 2013). Social media has created a space where women can push back against representations that do not align with such a limited relationship-centric identity and instead highlight sports-related accomplishments, though previous scholars (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018; Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2018; O’Shea & Maxwell, 2021) found that elite sportswomen often represent themselves in a way that highlights lifestyle imagery over athletic imagery as well. This research question will help determine if media outlets are engaging with this lifestyle content in telling stories about these women athletes. This question also explores how these social media posts are discussed within the text of such articles. Scholars (Kian & Hardin, 2009; Schmidt, 2016) have assessed the traditional relationship between sports news production and gender, but this study is interested in the digital relationship between these two parties and ways in which reporters interact with athlete content in the presentation of their reporting.

While many media analysis studies of women in sports media focus on athletic versus non-athletic imagery (Kian et al. 2009; Bell & Coche, 2018), this study includes a third category that aligns with the codes from Research Question 1: competition-adjacent. Stories that highlight an athlete's involvement on a team or identity as a student athlete but do not focus on a game or performance would fall into this category. This code is particularly relevant given the media attention surrounding NIL and the degree to which that media coverage also addressed athletic participation or success. Jessop (2021) notes that athletes have taken advantage of NIL opportunities to improve entrepreneurial skills, and media coverage related to those endeavors and athletic-related business deals that emerge from them would be considered 'competition-adjacent' in this study. These stories, and the related social media posts embedded in them, relate to athletics but do not focus on the action on the court and center "true athleticism" as the focus of the story (Wolter, 2021, p. 724). Thus, while sharing information about women outside of the field of play is acceptable, these articles must be coded separately from those focused entirely on lifestyle stories and those focused on action stories.

The differences in quantity across these three codes will be noted and will add to the extensive body of literature surrounding women's representation in sports media (Cooky et. al, 2021; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bruce et al., 2010). The tension and alignment between the ways athletes represent themselves and the way their social media posts are used in coverage about those athletes will also help demonstrate how social media content in the NIL era can influence coverage of women's sports. Frank (2018) argues that representing an athlete solely as an athlete

without an acknowledgement of their lifestyle or other interests can lead to identity struggles, particularly for Black male college student athletes; highlighting other aspects of someone's role on campus may give them more sense of self. However, women have consistently been referred to in ways that erase their athletic experience entirely (Bruce et al., 2010; Meân & Kassing, 2008). Thus, in this coding process, consideration is given to the coverage of women on and off the court and the ways in which that content aligns or rejects self-representation narratives of these same women on social media with recognition of the postfeminist and neoliberal capitalist factors at play in the NIL era.

Table 5: Complete Coding Categories and Definitions for Articles

Category	Definition and Examples
Athleticism	Content related to an individual's athletic performance, stats, scores or accolades
Competition - Adjacent	Content related to an individual's identity as an athlete in a non-competitive activity (signing an NIL deal, entering into a corporate endorsement deal with a business)
Lifestyle	Content unrelated to an athlete's competitive life as a student athlete (i.e. articles about boyfriends/girlfriends/partners/family, etc.)

Limitations to content analysis

While content analysis serves as a useful method for identifying patterns in data and assessing large amounts of information in a reliable and valid manner, this method cannot explain how or why such patterns occurred or the given aims of each

content producer. Previous content analysis scholars (Musto et. al, 2017; Cooky et. al, 2021; Greer et. al 2009) have been careful not to assume, beyond their analysis, the decision-making process that went into the development and creation of such sports media content. They have each explored the impact of content on culture and evaluated societal trends that predated and succeeded such content, but, ultimately, “content analysis...cannot...answer questions about why the content looks the way it does” (Greer, 2009, p. 181). Content analysis, however, still remains an important method for understanding media because it serves as the connective tissue between media production and media consumption. Though this dissertation does not explore why the athletes chose to post the content that they did nor does it measure how such content was received by the audience, it does contextualize the posts themselves through a feminist lens.

Previous feminist sports scholars have had great success employing content analysis to explore the underrepresentation of women in sport. Leavy (2007), in particular, notes that this method “plays a critical role in how we come to interrogate and understand the cultural world... [and adds] to our understanding of gender inequality, social power, and taken-for-granted assumptions about femininity and masculinity” (p. 245). Schäfer and Vögele (2021) do not expect the popularity of this approach to decrease, particularly now that scholars have applied the core tenets of the method to assess how these representations are challenged and reproduced on social media. Future content analysis studies should continue to consider the way codes could differ across platforms; currently, much of the sports media content analysis literature applies similar coding across sites like TikTok, Instagram and

Twitter. As technology continues to evolve and more social media sites emerge, scholars should consider even more modern ways to code such material. For the purposes of this study though, content analysis offers great value in the assessment of media material, though the method is further limited by the fact that analysis of existing material is retroactive and can only be used to evaluate published data, as opposed to drafts or ideas. Kaid & Wadsworth (1989) explain that only “recorded communication” can be included in a content analysis study, which may hinder some studies (p. 2013). However, for the purposes of this study, only published, promoted content is relevant to an understanding of an athlete’s public self-representation.

Content analysis, as a method, has also been critiqued for overly simplifying material and reducing complex messages into reductive categories. Schreier et al. (2019) argues that “category-based analysis” (p. 5) may not capture the full scope of meaning in media, but focused and defined codes that consider cultural contexts can add quality and vigor to the method and counter the critique of simplicity (Bruce et. al, 2010). Bruce et. al (2010) further acknowledges that while “content analysis has theoretical and analytical limitations, it is a powerful method that provides the kind of hard data that governments and sports organizations value” (p. 27), and it remains useful for most sports media research. Feminists have specifically employed content analysis as a way to explore representations and expressions of power in a given culture, and while not all scholars elect to use content analysis through a feminist framework (Leavy, 2007), this dissertation specifically takes a feminist lens, given that the research questions focus on the lived experiences of women and their portrayal of femininity and feminism in their content.

Chapter 4: Influencer culture and nuanced backstage representations of feminism

The passage of the NCAA's new NIL policy in 2021 created an opening for athletes not only to profit from their brands but to develop themselves into 21st century celebrities through digital storytelling and successful self-representation on social media. Goffman argues that self-representation involves a form of impression management in which individuals promote a mix of carefully curated frontstage content and “package snippets of the ‘backstage’ [content]...to present the illusion of an intimate sharing” (Abidin, 2016, p. 8). Sports scholars have applied Goffman's ideas of impression management to athlete branding online, noting that women athletes publish more lifestyle, backstage content than action imagery on their personal social media pages (Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2015; Li et al., 2017; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012). This study expands on these ideas by exploring how ten collegiate athletes represented themselves in frontstage, backstage and competition-adjacent ways during the first year of the updated NIL rules. This chapter addresses how women athletes navigated gendered expectations in their self-representations on TikTok and Instagram, two visually-centric social media apps where these athletes reached upwards over seven million followers as a group.

Each woman athlete in this study approached self-representation differently, though all ten athletes in this sample presented themselves in backstage, lifestyle settings more frequently than in action on TikTok and Instagram during the first year

of the NCAA's revised NIL policies. This finding aligns with expectations of women's self-representation on social media (Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2015; Li et al., 2017; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012), though the case studies in this study offer additional context on the challenges and tensions facing athlete branding by collegiate women. Early NIL adopters Olivia Dunne, Haley Cavinder and Hanna Cavinder, for instance, generated intense media scrutiny for their feminine self-representation during 2021-2022, and this chapter assesses such self-representations in relation to gendered norms and performance expectations for women athletes.

The first section of this chapter builds on Goffman's theory of self-representation by analyzing the impact of the neoliberal marketplace on athlete frontstage, backstage and competition-adjacent self-representation. This section also addresses the 'athletic labor of femininity' involved in maintaining a marketable brand within a patriarchal culture by focusing on the case studies of Olivia Dunne, Haley Cavinder, Hanna Cavinder, Sunisa Lee and Trinity Thomas. The second section explores how the backstage content produced by Dunne, Haley Cavinder, Hanna Cavinder, Sarah Fuller, Aliyah Boston and Sedona Prince, reflects varying forms of feminism, including neoliberal feminism, postfeminism and third-wave feminism through their self-representations. The final section explores the role of race, gender and sexuality in athlete branding through the lens of Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and Butler's understanding of gender performance, evaluating social media posts and examples from Paige Bueckers, Aliyah Boston and Sedona Prince on TikTok and Instagram. This chapter overall offers a nuanced perspective on

the ways in which these college sports leaders blur notions of feminist expression and find success through digital storytelling in the capitalist college sports industry.

NIL and the neoliberalism marketplace

The athletes in this sample all built their brands during the first year of NIL within a neoliberal sports context, one in which individuals are commodified and positioned against one another. Hall (2011) defines neoliberalism as a concept, rather than as a single economic or political position, in which the free market is valued above all. Neoliberalism ignores the role of race, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic class, among other factors, on a brand's earning potential or value in a patriarchal, capitalist society. Instead, it promotes those who have found market success and amplifies them as winners and models in this current social and cultural system. Sports scholars have previously critiqued neoliberalism in analyses of individual brands (Thorpe et al., 2017) as well as corporate brands (Posbergh et al., 2022) in an effort to demonstrate the way neoliberal branding erases notions of inequality and promotes a false notion of 'meritocracy.' Neoliberalism ultimately suggests that those who do not succeed in this market fail due to individual, rather than systemic, barriers.

The NCAA's new NIL policy brought neoliberal self-representation to the college sports world in an even more acute way. In a neoliberal market, athletes are seen as marketable sporting entities, and meeting audience demand therefore becomes a high priority for those interested in generating profit. Women athletes in particular face unique challenges in the act of self-representation within a neoliberal

marketplace, as they are expected to present in both a heteronormative feminine fashion and an authentic manner within a sporting space that has historically valued masculine, male bodies. Scholars argue that, for women athletes, social media representations “that are accorded the most value in the fan–athlete interaction...are modes of expression that align most closely to wider social attitudes about the qualities young women today are expected to possess” (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, p. 313). Butler’s work emphasizes the role of culture in encouraging such repetition of gender norms as well. Self-representations that match hegemonic understandings of gender are amplified and accepted socially, offering positive reinforcement to both men and women who present in culturally normative ways. This section identifies the ways in which women in this sample built themselves into commodified, marketable brands on TikTok and Instagram and how they navigated gendered expectations in the process.

TikTok and neoliberal self-representation

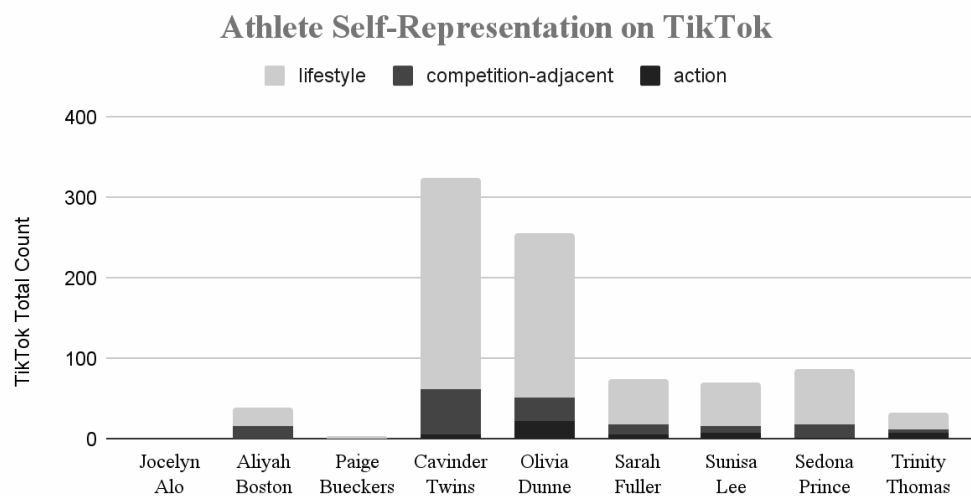
Olivia Dunne and the Cavinder twins in particular immediately embraced NIL as an opportunity to turn themselves into famous athlete influencers who primarily promoted backstage self-representations and aligned with societal norms around gender expression. They published TikToks on July 1, 2021, — the first day of the new NIL policies — celebrating their new endorsement deals and positioning themselves as business celebrities through imagery of themselves on billboards in Times Square (Dunne, 2021a, 2021b; Cavinder & Cavinder, 2021a, 2021b). Their instant popularity helped counter the persistent narrative in sports media that male

athletes would exclusively dominate this new era of college sport, but the particular approach they took to building their brands within this patriarchal, neoliberal market warrants analysis. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) suggests that women athletes undergo particular labor in such online self-representation. They define this tension and phenomenon as the athletic labor of femininity, and explain that women, and women athletes, have embraced this labor by “willingly promote[ing] a sporty and hetero-sexy, ‘current’ femininity” (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, p. 306) in an effort to attract fans and earn popularity. TikTok, along with Instagram and Twitter, served as notable sites of this labor, but TikTok in particular became a popular platform for these three stars to share backstage, feminine self-representations of themselves and grow an audience that would ultimately enable them to secure more sponsorships and drive increased revenue.

Dunne and the Cavinder twins posted a combined total of 584 times on TikTok during the first year of NIL policies, with 81% of those posts showing them singing, dancing and posing with friends, teammates and family members off the court. In one of their more popular videos, the Cavinder twins were seen dancing together in shorts, socks and sweatshirts with their hair down in their apartment on November 20; they posted this video with the caption “go bestfriend go #fyp #foryou,” highlighting their close twin relationship (Cavinder & Cavinder, 2021c). Ma and Hu (2021) note that TikTok’s features and algorithms support such “short dances, lip-sync, comedy, and talent videos” (p. 383). The nature of the app has helped to break down communication barriers between celebrities and athletes like the Cavinder twins and their fans, making it an ideal platform for athlete branding,

particularly athlete branding that includes personal, behind-the-scenes updates and videos. TikTok also inspires virality faster than other platforms, which gives the app even more added value for athletes looking to grow their name, image and likeness (Boffone, 2022). In a neoliberal market where profit and growth are considered priority values, viral content on social media can lead to increased audience and revenue.

Figure 1: Athlete Self-Representation on TikTok



TikTok’s strength lies in its ability to consistently and automatically feed users an individualized stream of content based on previous content preferences (Haenlein et al., 2020), delivering videos that are most engaging to individuals without requiring users to personally select their own material. Much of the TikTok content Dunne and the Cavinder twins published represented such edited, short-form lifestyle content. They showed themselves as feminine sporting subjects with thriving personal brands within and beyond basketball and gymnastics. These three athletes

became successful entrepreneurs in sports media and sent a message, through their popularity and self-representation, that the new NIL opportunities could bring a new spotlight to women's sports on and off the playing field.

With increased fame, however, came increased scrutiny for these athletes. Reporters accused Dunne and the Cavinder twins in particular for using their accounts to self-sexualize themselves (Streeter, 2022) and exploit their beauty for profit (Buckner, 2021). Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018a) argue that women are expected to "invoke tropes of female objectification while promoting the self as an agentic, independent and confident female subject" in the branding process in order to "survive in precarious labour markets" (p. 302). This double-bind for women of needing to self-represent in both empowerment and objectifying ways can result in criticism for sportswomen, both when they show too much feminine expression and too little feminine expression (Krane et al., 2004). Dunne and the Cavinder twins navigated this double-bind tension by leaning into their femininity to varying degrees across both Instagram and TikTok, focusing on behind-the-scenes content away from the gym and the court. Their self-representation is notable in that it aligns with presentation choices of other elite women (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, 2018b; Thorpe et al., 2017; McClearen, 2021; Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2016) and presents a modern look at how college women navigate such branding labor in a digital capitalist market.

Dunne's content on TikTok highlights the complexities and subtleties involved in self-representation for women athletes. She emphasizes her physical

appearance, but she's always clothed — 13% of the time wearing team gear or her uniform — and frequently shown from the chest up. By posting videos of herself nodding along to songs, turning her head for the camera or showcasing her clothing, Dunne offers a predominately backstage view of her life away from the gym on TikTok and expresses her femininity in these settings. For instance, in a series of five videos in early July, just days after the NCAA passed its new policy on NIL, Dunne (2021c, 2021d) posed, selfie-style, for the camera and joked about relationships and bikinis. Similarly, in late-August, Dunne (2021j, 2021k, 2021l) posted another slew of front-facing videos on TikTok, this time talking about food, hair and gymnastics. She sported makeup in all of these clips, and her hair was down and groomed. Such beautified imagery highlights hegemonic gender norms, norms that generate praise and profit in a patriarchal, heteronormative, neoliberal culture (Butler, 1990).

Dunne's repeated performance of identity and gender on TikTok builds her brand and image as a feminine individual, one who reinforces, rather than rejects, nuanced traditional representations. She expressed an awareness of this brand-building effort too, acknowledging that despite her elite status as a college gymnast, the majority of her social media posts intentionally show her in a lifestyle manner. In a July 27, 2021, TikTok, Dunne (2021g) shared that she posts so few action shots because she's "super picky with what gymnastics photos [she likes]." Only 9.06% of Dunne's TikToks show her in action, reinforcing the impact of her pickiness. She also did not post a single Instagram photo showing herself in action. Dunne's deliberate photo filtering aligns with previous research that suggests that social media influencers are cognizant and thoughtful about the imagery that defines their brand

(Duffy, 2017). Even on TikTok, a platform that has gained a reputation as a space for unfiltered, raw imagery (Abidin, 2016), athletes and influencers still undergo significant labor in determining which photos and videos best represent themselves.

Goffman would suggest that Dunne's curated content serves as another example of impression management, an exercise in which performances of identity are carefully crafted for either frontstage or backstage performance, based on the intended audience and market. Dunne serves an unusually large audience as an athlete influencer, reaching over 7 million followers, and her balance between lifestyle imagery and action videos shows that she creates an intimacy with her audience through her lifestyle content, but even those photos and videos are carefully selected as part of her backstage, brand-building performance.

Dunne is notably less particular about which personal images she projects on TikTok. For example, in a July 13, 2021 video, Dunne projected a slideshow of photos she identified as "Pictures I like but don't necessarily look good in." This TikTok, which is captioned "idek² why I just like them #foryou" does not show any athletic images, though the series of photos included in the slideshow video does include several of her in her LSU uniform posing in a lifestyle setting and several selfies of her making faces at the camera (Dunne, 2021e). Dunne's imagery is primarily backstage content, a finding that can be interpreted through Goffman's understanding of impression management, though there is a degree of 'athletic labour of femininity' in her posts as well (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a). She's intentional about her expression of athleticism, only showing pictures that meet her 'picky

² idek is an abbreviation for "I don't even know"

standard' when posting about herself in the sport. This study is less focused on the ways in which this content represents Dunne's sense of authenticity or even the psychology behind why she selected the photos that she did. Rather, this dissertation is more focused on the way this imagery tells as a story of her brand in a neoliberal marketplace, making Goffman's theory particularly worthwhile.

Instagram and the neoliberal marketplace

Early NIL adopters Olivia Dunne, Haley Cavinder and Hanna Cavinder express femininity on TikTok and take on an even more explicit expression of gender on Instagram. Over the course of the 2021-2022 athletic season, Dunne, Haley Cavinder and Hanna Cavinder posted a total of 178 posts on Instagram that included more than 502 photos, videos and graphics. Eighty percent of those posts presented them in non-athletic, backstage settings. They presented themselves as model-like figures, posing for the camera and showcasing their full bodies in static positions.

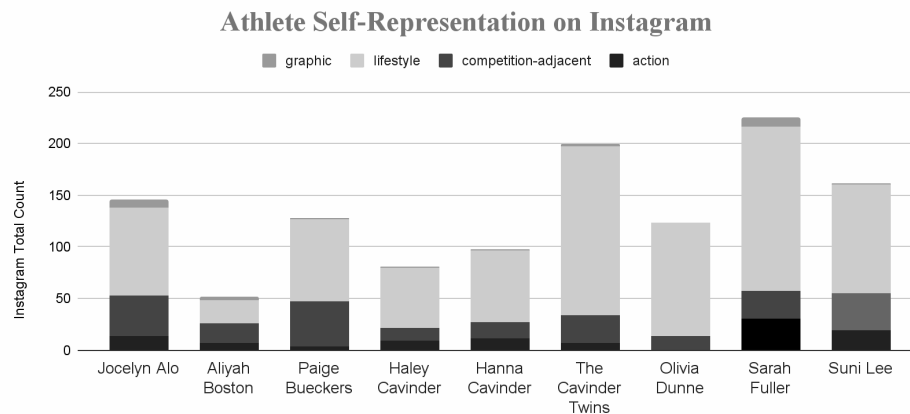
For instance, in September and November, Haley Cavinder (2021f) and Hanna Cavinder (2021g) posted a selection of three-photo slideshows to their Instagram feed showing them modeling a dress and sporting a crop top and loose pants outfit combo. In each of these six total photos, the women pose to the side with at least one hand up, framing their face. Drenten et al. (2018) suggests that such representations are common from microcelebrities looking to grow an audience in a capitalist digital economy. Individuals who strive to "gain the attention of a 'following' on social media through representations of their everyday lives" perform gender in line with "cultural scripts;" those expressions of gender frequently involve similar types of imagery in which the women influencer, in particular, "poses in a in ways that

highlight body parts” while wearing “tight, short and revealing clothing and employ[ing] gestures such as gently pulling their hair [or] touching their parted lips” (Drenton et al., 2018, p. 42, 51; Butler, 1990). The focus of the images of the Cavinders remains on their faces, expressions, and clothing, but their entire body fits within the frame instead of the head-and-shoulders selfies or the dancing videos that showcased them slightly distant from the camera on TikTok. The Cavinder twins remain relevant in the NIL era because of their athletic status, but much of their content reflects influencer culture more broadly.

The values presented in this popular imagery align with traditional femininity, as these posts express interests in fashion and lifestyle activities, as opposed to active sporting experiences. In Dunne’s (2022c) most-liked post on Instagram from 2021-2022 for instance, she’s standing in front of a front door wearing a strappy pink bikini. In the first photo, her arms are behind her back, and her eyes are glancing to the side mysteriously. In the second photo, she has her arms spread out, one on the wall and one on the door, and she’s looking straight at the camera. Haley Cavinder’s (2022a) most popular post contained similar imagery, as she published a pair of photos of her and her sister Hanna standing on the sidewalk in matching silk dresses, posing to the side. This image of the twins generated 159,384 likes, 612 comments and 20 shares. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) suggest that audiences who engage with such content respond “not just to the content of the image but to a particular set of cultivated values, attitudes and sentiments that female athletes convey through the self-presentation of their bodies” (p. 308). Athletes who post such lifestyle content can create an audience base that comes to expect similar imagery (Frederick &

Clavio, 2015), inspiring a cycle in which audience interest is informed by self-representation which is in turn informed by audience interest. In a neoliberal marketplace where audience interest can result in profit, these patterns of representation are notable and contribute to a broader understanding of the pressures and expectations facing women athletes in the sports media ecosystem.

Figure 2: Athlete Self-Representation on Instagram



The posed, curated and filtered lifestyle-centric imagery posted by the Cavinder twins and Dunne on Instagram during the first year of NIL aligns with expected user behavior on the app. Duffy (2017) explains that the nature of Instagram as a visually-centric site lends itself to the production of the “edited self,” one that “tends to adhere to predefined cultural scripts of femininity” and reflects cultural notions of “female perfection” (p. 201). Instagram, originally an app for artists and photographers (Frier, 2021), transformed into an aspirational “public forum for modeling hopefuls” and influencers (Duffy, 2017, p. 3), and Dunne and the Cavinder twins have leaned into this space as leading women’s sports brands. While the athletic

identities of these two women in particular are never erased, of course, their Instagram pages offer a form of self-representation for early NIL adopters that shows them in streetwear, bathing suits and formal attire more frequently than jerseys and team gear. Their Instagram content projects a more filtered, curated aesthetic than their TikTok page. The role of gender expression and performance on both platforms though is notable. The fact that these women choose to show off their private lives through fashion, dancing and selfies across Instagram and TikTok is not radically unexpected from women of their generation online, but the ways in which they present themselves as marketable brands while competing as student athletes is important for understanding how women are navigating self-representation in the age of NIL policies. Dunne and the Cavinder twins offer one approach for women's self-representation and branding in this new era of college sport, but their content suggests that they've elected to follow the model set by other elite women athletes.

The success of these images, however, while relevant to an understanding of athlete self-representation, do not suggest that women athletes can only profit from gender normative, backstage content in a neoliberal collegiate sports environment. Rather, they demonstrate that, for some women, this imagery that presented themselves in more passive, feminine positions, inspired audience interest. Hanna Cavinder's (2022b) most popular Instagram post, however, serves as an exception to this pattern and reveals how competition-adjacent or even action-centric content can generate interest and excitement for fans. In this series of photos published on February 10, Hanna Cavinder is standing on the court in uniform, then sitting on the floor near the bench with an opponent looking down on her, and finally standing on

the court again, as if headed into action. Though the majority of Hanna Cavinder's Instagram content did not feature her in competition-adjacent settings, the use of this particular sequence of photos and the popularity of this post demonstrates that NIL branding for women is far more complicated than simply a reproduction of influencers-style imagery by athletes or exclusively sexualized images (Fink et al., 2004, 2014).

All of the remaining athletes in this sample similarly posted more lifestyle content than competition-adjacent or action content on both Instagram and TikTok, though the content within their feeds also offer additional different branding models for the next generation of collegiate athlete stars. Florida gymnast Trinity Thomas, for example, posted 52 photos and videos of herself in action on Instagram in addition to her 87 lifestyle photos, and she stood out from the sample as the athlete with the greatest number of action posts during the 2021-2022 calendar year. These action photos demonstrate frontstage representation, as Thomas performed for the crowd in real time, captured that performance and reshared it through her photos and videos. The majority of Thomas' frontstage images were provided by the University of Florida, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between individual athlete brand and team brands in the era of NIL (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5). These images also generated the greatest fan interest across all of her posts, with 118,276 users liking her most popular Instagram post from December 16, 2021, which showed Thomas (2021) performing a one-arm handspring back layout series on the beam. Audience engagement is a key part of brand-building for women athletes, and the way that Thomas builds such "online visibility" as an athlete for her Instagram

followers is valuable context for understanding her overall brand in the neoliberal market (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, p. 312). The 12 most popular Instagram images for Thomas all portrayed her in action or in competition-adjacent settings. Her decision to promote the athletic side of her student athlete experience demonstrates the potential for brands to be built for women athletes around their skills and strengths in sports. Such choices align with Goffman's understanding of impression management, a process by which someone attempts to influence the way the public perceives that person "by regulating and controlling information in social interaction" (Tashmin, 2016, p. 95). Thomas chose to represent herself as an athlete more so than any other athlete in the sample, but she was not the only gymnast to show herself in athletic settings.

Sunisa Lee, the 2021 Olympic gold medalist in the women's all-around competition, presented herself exclusively as a gymnast in action far less than Thomas, but nearly 25% of her content on Instagram showed her in competition-adjacent settings, either in the gym, in the locker room or on the sidelines. These posts typically centered around a meet and showcased Lee in uniform posing with teammates or friends. For instance, Lee (2022a, 2022b, 2022c) posted multiple photo slideshows in spring semester of competition March and April standing with fellow Auburn gymnasts and captioned these photos "war damn 🧡," "took the dawgs on a walk 😊," and "tigs are hereee 🤡," denoting her attachment to her team, the spirit of the competition in her sport and her school. Lee is wearing an Auburn leotard and posing in a competition setting in all four of the total photos included across these three posts. She signals her athletic status and involvement in this elite team to the

audience, but she's not actually performing her sport in front of a crowd. This competition-adjacent setting blurs the lines between Goffman's frontstage and backstage representation and suggests a new way in which to view women's self-representation. Lee performs athleticism through her imagery but in a way that is not a direct frontstage experience. Much like Thomas, Lee still posted the greatest percentage of her content in a lifestyle setting, but her competition-adjacent content warrants such an analysis because of the way it displays her identity as a top-level gymnast to her fan base and followers without actually showing her competing. Followers represent currency on social media and hold particular value in a capitalist, influencer culture (Duffy, 2017). Lee's promotion of such content deviates slightly from Dunne and the Cavinder twins and instead shows the value she places on representing her athletic skills for her growing audience of 1.7 million.

Through their content, Olivia Dunne, Haley Cavinder, Hanna Cavinder, Trinity Thomas and Sunisa Lee demonstrate the various ways that women athletes have marketed themselves as complex figures in the neoliberal college sports ecosystem. All of these women posted more lifestyle, backstage content than action or competition-adjacent imagery, though Hanna Cavinder's competition-adjacent imagery did garner popularity, and Thomas and Lee did promote themselves as collegiate athletes in more prominent ways than Dunne and the Cavinder twins as a whole. This finding supports previous research noting that women elected to present themselves in backstage manners more frequently (Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2015; Li et al., 2017; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012), though some of the exceptions of action imagery are still notable and add depth to previous theoretical understandings of

women's representation on TikTok and Instagram in particular. The nature of these two platforms, particularly the authentic, selfie-style nature of viral content on TikTok (Abidin, 2016, Su et al., 2020b) and the filtered, curated aesthetic of Instagram (Duffy, 2017; Frier, 2021) also informed the types of representations published by these women.

The next section addresses the ways in which the women in this study expressed feminism through this content and how such feminist representations attempted to reclaim women's power in a patriarchal, neoliberal sporting context.

Neoliberal feminism, postfeminism and third-wave feminist representations

While all of the women in this study have garnered fame and attention through their backstage, competition-adjacent and action-centric content, the question remains: are such representations feminist? Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) argue that elite women athletes have attempted to express feminism by reclaiming empowerment and sexuality on social media. Gender and gender expression, however, are not monolithic, and women athletes across professional sports and the NCAA have engaged in different versions of feminist and feminine self-representation. Thorpe et al. (2017) thus advocates for a "recognition of 'the diversity and shifting nature of various feminisms and the fluidity of their boundaries'" (p. 360). This findings section acknowledges such diversity and explores how the content produced by the athletes in this study embodies neoliberal feminism, postfeminism and third-wave feminism.

Neoliberal feminism in the age of NIL

Dunne and the Cavinders, in particular, presented themselves as empowered individuals, reflecting a narrow form of neoliberal feminism in their expressions of identity and strength. Encompassed within a neoliberal marketplace, the neoliberal subject is an “individual enterprise” or her own entrepreneur (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 8). These individuals recognize the patriarchy, but in a way that suggests they can overcome such barriers through personal empowerment. Drawing on popular representation of feminism from pop culture, Olivia Dunne in particular blurs the lines between neoliberal feminism and popular feminism — a form of “‘happy’ feminism, one that is about uplift, that is decidedly not...a ‘feminist killjoy’” — in her representations to signal that she sees herself as an empowered woman (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 9).

On Feb. 11, 2022, for instance, Dunne (2022a) posted a selfie video on from her hotel room showing off her Wonder Woman-themed leotard with the caption “Wonder Woman vibez tonight ❤️🔥 #foryou #lsu #gymnastics #college.” Dunne draws attention to the leotard by running her hands down the side of the uniform before turning her hips to the camera to show off her backside. The feminist expression in the video comes from the nod to the feminized superhero Wonder Woman who Dunne channels through her purple and gold leotard design. This clip does not mention patriarchy or inequality in any way. Instead it focuses on Dunne’s body, clothing and physical expression.

Dunne references her athletic identity in this clip through her choice to wear her uniform, but, ultimately, the video aligns with much of the backstage content she

used to build up her brand in the first year of NIL. Her femininity takes center stage in her content with mild hints of feminism across some videos. Dunne straddles between self-commodification and self-empowered in her content by presenting herself as a decision-maker while also leaning into stereotypical representations of women in media by posing in passive positions in lifestyle settings. Banet-Weiser et al. (2019) suggests that such expressions of “contemporary feminism do not critique or challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism...but rather contribute to its normalization and conceit of inevitability” (p. 4). While neoliberal feminism suggests that women individually find personal empowerment through such expression (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018; Azzarito, 2018), the weight of the patriarchy still permeates the collegiate sports environment.

Sarah Fuller, a SEC soccer champion and former Vanderbilt football player, takes on more explicit representations of feminism in her content, portraying elements of both neoliberal and popular feminism in her backstage content. In a series of three sponsored TikToks posted over the course of the first year of NIL, for instance, she promoted her corporate sponsorship with H&R Block while directly addressing the issue of NIL inequity in college sport (Fuller 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). While these videos discuss inequality, they were still a form of corporate advertising, as opposed to meaningful grassroots, feminist work. The direct impact of these videos on positive change is beyond the scope of this dissertation, though Fuller’s involvement in these clips show that H&R Block identified her as a valuable spokesperson for this form of corporate, popular feminism.

The first video, posted in March 2022, featured Fuller (2022a) wearing a quarter-zip sweatshirt with her hair pulled back discussing how men earn 67% of NIL compensation for the past year. “I think this is ridiculous and needs to change...[H&R Block] saw this disparity and have created a ‘Fair Shot’ program” that will help female athletes “get every dollar we deserve,” Fuller said in the clip. This lifestyle imagery shows Fuller in control, facing the camera from the shoulders up. Her pose matches the kind of authenticity and realness rewarded by TikTok’s algorithm (Abidin, 2016), and the backstage nature of this video builds an intimacy with the audience, as she welcomes the viewer into her private life to share an announcement. The message of the ad itself contains a form of feminism that acknowledges patriarchy but does not require radical change. Fuller, like Dunne, commodified feminism in a “media-friendly” way through this clip but still did not address the “patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence” embedded in culture, and, in this particular instance, sports (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 9). Fuller’s content throughout the first year of NIL expresses feminism, even more directly than some of her peers, but she still operates within a neoliberal sporting structure. She’s a product of her culture, albeit a product who does advocate for gender equality and represents herself working to break barriers for women in sport through football flashbacks and general athletic achievements (Fuller, 2021f).

Fuller also used her platform to respond directly to fans who criticized her for her gender expression or her self-representation in general in sports media. In particular, she countered commenters through expressions of individual empowerment, a neoliberal approach to correcting sexism in sports media. Fuller

never directly named the followers who left negative comments on her content, but she did address them in two distinct ways. On July 18, Fuller (2021a) posted a selfie-style TikTok sporting a t-shirt with her hair down and mouthing the words “I’m going to let God fix this because if I fix this, I’m going to jail” with the caption reading “you know how it be.” Fuller’s (2021a) tone is slightly satirical, as if to suggest that she is not actually threatening these commenters but notes that their sexism is wrong. Thorpe et al. (2017) argue that such callouts serve as an extension of neoliberal feminism in which gender inequality is addressed, but “such inequalities are framed by neoliberal discourses of individual entrepreneurialism and economic independence only” (p. 372). Neoliberal feminism proposes that women are required to fix their own problems, or at least acknowledge them individually. Responding to such comments and calling out problematic language, however, requires an added layer of labor. Duffy (2017) explains that women content creators navigate tension online as a result of this pattern: women benefit financially from viewership, but experience more negativity as their follower count grows. She notes that bloggers, in particular, have shared that “Comments are like currency...it makes us feel like people are actually paying attention to what we put out there” (Duffy, 2017, p. 78). Such sentiments apply to social media as well. Viewership is currency, and comments, as Fuller demonstrates, inspire more content.

Women athletes recognize that they are potentially susceptible to additional criticism because of their marginalized identity in the sports space that mirrors gender inequality in society at large. Krane et al. (2010) notes that within a patriarchal culture, the identities of ‘woman’ and ‘athlete’ are seen as contradictory and “can

spark negativity from others” online (Harry, 2021, p. 669). Fuller, in particular, acknowledges such negativity and attempts to “directly counter such antifeminist attitudes and beliefs” with her casual TikTok messaging (Harry, 2021, p. 668). She calls out the sexist fans in particular as ignorant through her backstage, intimate and assertive self-representation. In a TikTok posted in September, for instance, Sarah Fuller (2021e) shows herself staring off into the distance as the text above the video reads “I can kick further than you.” The clip shows her standing from the hips up, wearing a sports bra and athletic pants grimacing at the camera (Fuller, 2021e). The caption simply says: Congratulations (Fuller, 2021e). Fuller’s video acknowledges the fans who harassed her for her kick in her first football game as a member of the Vanderbilt football team and dismisses such fan negativity as irrelevant. She profits from such content in a neoliberal marketplace by creating rebuttal content. Though the idea of profiting from sexism can be considered problematic, Fuller’s videos contain elements of feminism, particularly neoliberal feminism, suggesting a degree of personal empowerment in this process. She does not necessarily call on other individual women to solve their own problems in these clips, a trademark on neoliberalism feminism, nor does she acknowledge the patriarchy more broadly in this clip, but her ‘congratulations’ TikTok implies that she’s reclaiming her own athletic achievements through individual self-representation and dismissing those who minimize her success while generating revenue from her content.

Like Fuller, Dunne similarly acknowledged her audience, and her engagement with fans fell into two categories: responding to those who suggested that gymnastics was not a sport through expressive imagery and replying to sexual and threatening

comments through humorous videos. In both cases, she addressed the audience members but disregarded their comments as absurd primarily through backstage, informal self-representation. Her video replies to such fan comments were comedic, paired with trendy TikTok music that indirectly lessened the severity of the comment. Abidin (2016) notes that such satirical ‘call outs’ on TikTok can serve to simply pay ‘lip service’ towards an activist cause, but Dunne’s use of this particular form of content still warrants acknowledgement. For instance, on August 8th, Dunne (2021i) posted a video of herself in her car with the words “When people think gymnastics isn’t a sport,” superimposed above her head. In the clip, she’s seen moving her shoulders to correspond with a pre-recorded clip of another woman saying “I put this shoulder up, and I put this shoulder up, and then I drop them because I don’t care.” This backstage clip is similar to Fuller’s selfie-video where she talks about not electing not to respond to sexist comments she sees on her profile. Fuller’s unwillingness to address negativity from viewers on her account suggests that she’s working to reclaim her power as someone with more credibility and value than her commenters. Dunne’s response is even less assertive than Fuller’s, but she too represents herself as above the commenters, someone unfazed by their ignorance. Responding to this comment, however, let followers know that she is listening to them and their voices are being heard, even if Dunne responds to them in a dismissive manner.

Dunne’s engagement with those who left sexual comments was even more direct, as she occasionally reposted the comment in full, with the commenter’s username visible, before responding to the comment through an action. She

acknowledged her viewers, teasing them and then replying to them either through a lip-synched lyric or an expression that suggests her approval or disgust of the comment. For example, on November 8, she posted a selfie video of herself putting glasses on, drawing attention to a commenter whose note — “I wud do unforgivable things to hear you toot” — was superimposed in a text box above her head on the screen (Dunne, 2021o). The noise in the background of Dunne’s video was “The woman was too stunned to speak.” Just two weeks prior to the sexual comment about Dunne’s bodily functions, the All-American gymnast responded to a note from @meatloafparmesean on October 24, 2021, that said “10/10 would kidnap :)” (Dunne, 2021m). Dunne’s video acknowledged this comment by superimposing @meatloafparmesean’s comment over a video of Dunne locking her door and looking both shocked and thoughtful. Her caption read “stay safe y’all #foryou,” but her facial expressions expressed a comedic tone, as if she was not actually fearful but rather amused by the comment. Dunne does not ignore these commenters, in fact, she gives them airtime. Yet, she remains in control in her self-representation and does not express any sense of weakness in the video or play into any stereotypes about women’s fragility. Neither of these clips show her in action, or even in a competition-adjacent setting. She instead invites the viewers into a backstage, behind-the-scenes performance, one that is more raw, personal and particularly appropriate for the casual nature of TikTok (Abidin, 2016).

Dunne’s individual strength in these clips aligns with a sense of neoliberal feminism, the idea that she can protect herself but that she’s not necessarily taking steps to stop the patriarchy more generally or call out these commenters for their

sexist commentary. She presents herself as willing and capable of the “multiple and often contradictory demands” she experiences as a popular student athlete, and she does not express concern at the threats, however lighthearted, to her safety in these videos (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b, p. 28). Dunne is not single-handedly responsible for addressing or taking down the patriarchy. She also is not required to embody any particular form of feminism. Analyzing her content through a recognition of a neoliberal feminism framework (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019), however, helps place her within the context of other women athletes navigating comments and self-representation more broadly in the era of NIL.

Dunne and Fuller differ in their expressions of feminism more generally throughout the first year of NIL, but they both embraced TikTok trends that addressed women in college sport in 2021-2022. They also both reposted neoliberal feminist content that responded to fan discourse and promoted their participation in the broader sports ecosystem. In another example of such content, Dunne (2021n) published a front-facing selfie video on November 4, 2021, that showed her looking into the camera with her hair down and her glasses on while the audio in the background played a trending TikTok clip from Disney’s *The Incredibles*. In the clip, Elastigirl, one of the lead characters in the film, says: “Girls, c’mon leave the saving of the world to the men?” Dunne’s video included the words “Girls, c’mon leave the college sports to the men?” imposed above her head as she mouthed the words to the rest of the Elastigirl quote in which she says “I don’t think so. I don’t think so,” before editing her TikTok to cut to techno music and a series of action photos of her competing in gymnastics. Coded as action and considered frontstage representation

(Goffman, 1959) because of the time spent on the gymnastics photos, this clip again demonstrates Dunne's identity as a student athlete, someone who has business acumen but does not ignore her gymnastics expertise in her branding. Dunne captioned the clip "I do flips occasionally #foryou #gymnastics #college," and this description pokes fun at herself and diminishes the seriousness of feminism in this clip, though Dunne's call to action to other women has a clear feminist tone. Though this particular TikTok did not inspire great engagement, generating only 217.6K likes and 1014 comments, Dunne's neoliberal expression of self and feminist tone in this clip stood out amongst her 256 TikToks posted in 2021-2022.

Fuller posted the same trendy clip as Dunne on November 4, 2021, using the identical 'c'mon girls' theme music. In Fuller's (2021h) video, she's also seen speaking directly to the camera selfie-style with her hair pulled back before cutting to a clip of her pulling on her shoulder pads. The caption reads: 'Lol just cuz it's been almost a year #greenscreenvideo.' This video, while both commodifying her experience as a football kicker and a feminist, is one of the more lighthearted feminist pieces of content Fuller posted over the course of the first year of NIL. These self-style videos posted by Fuller and Dunne serve as a call to action, but such a call is individualized. These athletes call on girls (and women) to make changes, without acknowledging the structural changes necessary to create a level playing field in sports. Through these trendy TikToks, Fuller and Dunne take on the role of a feminist through a narrow framework, one where they speak to an audience about their potential to 'lean in' to solve gender inequities. Saraswati (2021) adds that, while compelling, such selfie-style videos are limited in their ability to inspire true feminist

activism. This concept of the neoliberal selfie, one which captures a feminist voice within an individualized, capitalistic society, serves as a useful framework through which to see Dunne and Fuller's effort in these particular clips (Saraswati, 2021), as it brings together performance of gender (Butler, 1990) and identity (Goffman, 1959) into conversation with her relation to the social media influencers she emulates through her digital labor.

Postfeminism, 'girl power' and feminine expectations

While Dunne and Fuller's 'c'mon girls' clips are reminiscent of neoliberal feminist themes, the use of 'girls' in both videos also hints at another form of feminism described by Gill (2008) as postfeminism. Gill (2008) explains that within this understanding of feminism "young women are hailed through a discourse of "can-do' girl power" that is often reproduced in an effort to present women "as active, desiring social subjects" (p. 442). Postfeminism, like neoliberal feminism, ultimately emphasizes individual choice and empowerment with much of postfeminism discourse "exculp[ing] the institutions of patriarchal capitalism and blam[ing] women for their disadvantaged positions" (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 16). Banet-Weiser et al. (2019) adds that the concept of personal choice links these similar expressions of feminism together, and while they have their subtle differences, the 'c'mon girls' clip posted by Dunne and Fuller can be read through both a postfeminist perspective and a neoliberal perspective. Scholars evaluating postfeminist and neoliberal self-representations do not critique individual women for any of their content; rather these scholars employ a postfeminist sensibility to enable a broader critique of the culture in which objectified images are reproduced. The

college athletes in this sample engaged in postfeminism by presenting themselves as empowered feminine subjects within a patriarchal system, without explicit acknowledgement of either the structural inequalities facing women in sport or the ways in which their content reproduced stereotypical feminine norms.

The Cavinder twins also embodied this feminist perspective in their content during 2021-2022. Their Instagram and TikTok feeds overall revealed themes of fashion, fitness and fun, as they posed in dresses or bikinis on Instagram and danced in ways that highlighted their bodies (Cavinder, 2021f; Cavinder & Cavinder, 2021c; Dunne, 2022d). Their content did not directly address feminism, but Banet-Weiser et al. (2019) argues that a postfeminist sensibility enables scholars to recognize how such content could be interpreted as empowering while still reproducing hegemonic notions and stereotypical norms.

Hanna Cavinder in particular expressed this form of postfeminist representation early in the first year of NIL. On July 3, 2021, Hanna Cavinder, featured herself far from the court, posing for the camera within a forest of palm trees wearing a bikini and an orange Bass Pro Shop hat. She does not present herself as an athlete in any way beyond the fitness she shows off through the focus on her body. In the first image, she's turned sideways, with her left leg forward, showing off her gluteal muscle. Her face is turned to the camera. In the second shot, she's posed with her right leg crossed out in front, her hips facing the camera. The last image again shows the left leg out, with the right leg extended, keeping the focus on the left hip (Cavinder, 2021a). No one else can be seen in these photos, and she's not posing for a company. She's simply presenting herself as a woman, a subject, a brand. Her next

post contains similar themes as she posed in three photos on the beach in a bikini wearing a cowboy hat (Cavinder, 2021b). These photos present her as an active agent, one who chooses to represent herself in hegemonic manners. Through a postfeminist sensibility, such images can be read as emphasizing “empowerment and independence” by capturing and assigning power to “expressions of hetero-sexy femininity that extends beyond the body to constitute a remaking of subjectivity” (Toffoletti et al., 2018, p. 4). Though culture cannot be divorced from imagery and the impact of hegemonic masculinity and historic marginalization of women in sports cannot be ignored in the analysis of such content, Hanna Cavinder, like many pro athletes before her, portrays herself as someone in control, rather than someone being controlled.

Dunne similarly expressed herself in a postfeminist manner in ways that more explicitly focused on her toned and muscular bodies. For example, in May 2022, Dunne (2022d) posted a video with @lilychee posing in a bikini flexing her arms as the lyrics “she’s buff, she’s really really buff,” played in the background. This video showed her in a gender normative setting in a gender normative way, promoting her body in a sex-positive manner, though not discussing sex or sexual preference. She posted a similar video in April 2022 with Sports Illustrated model Olivia Ponton with the caption “Stop flexing on me @iamoliviaponton 🙄 @Revolve #revolvefestival” (Dunne, 2022b). Scholars of postfeminism would suggest that such posing and promotion is a way to gain empowerment within a social structure that continues to discipline and surveil women’s bodies (Litosseliti et al., 2019; Gill, 2017). Dunne promotes herself in this manner with the knowledge that she’s a commodifiable

brand, and while she portrays herself as an empowered being, she does still operate within a system where she continues to be marginalized because of her gender.

Dunne, however, is not alone in posting such content or even using the same musical tones to convey her messages of self-representation. South Carolina basketball player Aliyah Boston (2022c, 2022d) posted two similar videos highlighting her body with the second video featuring her dancing to the same “she’s buff, she’s really really buff” song. The second video featured the following caption: “Looking mighty strong #shesbuff #poolparty #fypage #SearchForWonderMom” (Boston, 2022d). Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a)’s note that such athletes who promote themselves online in such ways that showcase their identities as a “hetero-sexy hottie” and a “successful athlete...can simultaneously generate inspiration in female followers and the attention of male followers” (p. 310). They found similar postfeminist representations in the self-representation imagery published by Serena Williams, Ronda Rousey, Alana Blachard, Maria Sharapova and Danica Patrick. Such postfeminist imagery can be an act of resistance as well, a way to reclaim sexuality and stereotypes levied against women, particularly women of color. Boston and Dunne did not add anything to their caption that would suggest that their videos are a direct response to any one stereotype or comment in particular, but their decision to position themselves in this ‘hetero-sexy’ way aligns with the patterns set by elite professional women who came before them.

Third-wave feminism and athlete self-representation

Dunne and Boston’s videos of them flexing in a bikini can also be read through the third-wave feminist perspective that women aspire to be ‘pretty and

powerful.’ While third-wave feminism generally focuses on inclusive feminist activism, Bruce (2016) defines women who create their own media to highlight agency as reminiscent of third-wave notions of empowerment. She focuses on third-wave feminism online, arguing that “Third wave feminism proposes that young women, no longer reliant on traditional media, understand the pleasure and power of popular culture” and are using digital media to tell their stories (Bruce, 2016, p. 368). Though third-wave feminism contains layers beyond self-representation, in that it calls for increased political involvement and collective action, hints of third-wave feminist imagery contained within the branding of sportswomen warrant discussion. Thorpe et. al (2017) uses third-wave feminism to evaluate the brand of surfer Alana Blanchard, arguing that images which focus on Blanchard’s strong and lean body on a surfboard can be read through a lens of “individual liberation, embrace of physicality, equality, and choice,” though Blanchard, much like the majority of the women in this study, does not push third-wave feminist forward through activism or intersectional advocacy (p. 365). The Cavinder twins similarly evoke fleeting themes of third-wave feminism, though ultimately their content is more postfeminist in that it positions them as empowered subjects reclaiming sexuality rather than as radical feminist activists. They’re pretty and powerful, but they’re pretty and powerful within an individualized neoliberal sporting structure that rewards them for these commodified representations of their athletic experiences.

Some women within this sample, however, did express notions of feminist activism through their self-representations. Oregon’s Sedona Prince, for instance, reflects elements of third-wave feminism in particular through her expressions of

gender, which challenge the traditional binary understandings of masculinity and femininity, and through her posts that call out the NCAA for inequitable treatment. Prince represents herself not only as an athlete, specifically a queer athlete influencer, but also as someone who uses her platform to promote greater equality for all. For example, on March 19, 2022, Prince posted an edited TikTok that acknowledged her transcendent video from the year before where she called out the inequalities in the NCAA women's basketball weight rooms and practice facilities. Her original 2021 TikTok included a 38-second casual, selfie-style video, and this new TikTok published in 2022, showed the improvements that the NCAA made to support the women's tournament since her previous post. Most notably, the NCAA added the branding of "March Madness" to the women's championship after a third-party investigation, prompted by Prince's 2021 TikTok, demonstrated a need for improved equity.

Prince walked by the March Madness sign in her 2022 TikTok at the women's tournament and celebrated the win with her teammates. Her caption read "#stitch with @sedonerrr a whole year and a whole lot of equality!!!" (Prince, 2022c). Prince did not label herself as a third-wave feminist in this clip, nor did she even directly call herself an athlete activist, but her self-representation in this video showed that her voice inspired change and that she was willing to continue to use her platform for social justice. Though this dissertation is exclusively focused on self-representations of femininity, feminism and athleticism, as opposed to activism more broadly, the intersection of third-wave feminism and activists efforts is relevant to understanding Prince's brand.

Feminist scholars have critiqued the media coverage of Prince's activism as neoliberal, in that she alone is seen as the catalyst for this change, reinforcing the notion that women are responsible for their own equality (Stamm & Whiteside, 2022). Such a critique of media coverage is valid, though Prince's own self-representation focuses more on a narrative of feminist activists overall, at least in this particular clip. She's celebrating a branding change that benefits the women's game as a whole, and she does not make any commentary about how women individually need to speak up. Instead, she frames her activism success as a communal win, notably using the phrase "we won," instead of "I won." Prince self-representation represents a unique combination of gender performance (Butler, 1990), third-wave feminist activism (Bruce, 2016) and lifestyle imagery, creating a complicated, standout brand in the first year of NIL.

Olivia Dunne, Sarah Fuller, Hanna Cavinder, Aliyah Boston and Sedona Prince all demonstrate the various ways in which women athletes in this sample represented themselves through neoliberalism feminism, postfeminism and third-wave feminism. These expressions of feminism are overlapping and intersecting, adding to a deeper understanding of women's self-representation and activism. Banet-Weiser et al. (2019) explains that "while postfeminism, neoliberal feminism and popular feminism are all sensibilities that exist simultaneously, they are also engaged in a cultural conversation with each other" (p. 10). Such representations for these women in particular came primarily through backstage, lifestyle content, though the women in this sample also produced photos and videos of them in competition-adjacent settings that aimed to respond and challenge commenters who minimized

their value. The findings from this section further demonstrate the diversity of content produced by women in the NIL era and the ways in which such content can serve to both empower and objectify elite collegiate women on TikTok and Instagram.

Intersectionality, sexuality and identity in athlete branding

Gender, sexuality and race are never invisible or irrelevant in the self-representation of an athlete, celebrity or individual online. Within the U.S. context of women's college sports, identity remains omnipresent in the representation and self-representations of athletes, even when not directly discussed by the athletes themselves. Crenshaw (1991) argues that “interlocking axes of power grounded in gender and race” (Barak et al., 2018, p. 742) marginalize women of color. Bruce (2016) similarly notes that patriarchal culture “reinforces and normalizes Whiteness, heterosexuality and an exceptionally narrow range of body types as representing ‘ideal’ femininity,” leading women who align with these traits, such as these three early NIL adapters to generate more branding, media opportunities and fame (p. 372). Such privilege stems from broader social and cultural histories which again amplifies whiteness and places women of color, in particular, at an intersection of gendered and racial oppression (Crenshaw) in which they are undervalued and underrepresented.

Building on Crenshaw’s work (1991), Isard and Melton (2021) found that women athletes of color received less media attention in the WNBA than their White counterparts, even if the Black athletes scored more points. Race, gender and intersecting identities impacted the way reporters told the stories of these professional basketball players, and such factors also influence the ease at which collegiate

athletes can capture fan attention and build a brand. The whiteness of Dunne and the Cavinder twins in particular remain deeply connected to the cultural impact of their brand. McClearen (2021) argues that “hierarchies of visibility in women's sports give greater exposure to traditionally beautiful, straight, White women even as women of color and lesbians are recognizable as having their own degrees of visibility” (p. 29). These issues in inequality in athlete branding are amplified on social media in particular, as Kennedy (2020) explained that TikTok intentionally suppressed videos of anyone “deemed to appear ‘abnormal’, ‘ugly’...and ‘slummy’” (Kennedy, 2020, p. 1072). Consequently, those who presented images of “young, white femininity” were rewarded by the algorithm (Kennedy, 2020, p. 1072). Dunne and the Cavinder twins align with this expectation. By focusing primarily on their personal lives and behind-the-scenes experiences, Dunne and the Cavinder twins invite viewers to see them as ‘traditionally beautiful, straight, White women’ who also compete at a high level of collegiate sport.

Dunne and the Cavinder twins benefited from fitting into preconceived notions of popular femininity and racial identity in the United States. This is not to suggest that athletes of color did not express themselves in heteronormative feminine ways during the first year of NIL, but rather to demonstrate the ways in which Dunne and the Cavinder twins, much like UFC star Ronda Rousey, had the freedom to “exhibit particular ideals of emphasized femininity, such as Whiteness, conventional attractiveness, and hyper-feminine clothing” (McClearen, p. 7). Aliyah Boston (2022b), South Carolina’s women’s basketball star, similarly emphasized her femininity and heterosexuality, though Crenshaw would suggest that Boston faced

additional scrutiny and marginalization simply because of her identity as a Black woman.

Boston did not directly address race in any of her TikTok or Instagram content. Fellow women's basketball star Paige Bueckers, however, did make one comment in one Instagram video acknowledging her Whiteness and her privilege that warrants analysis. In a sponsored post in collaboration with StockX (2022), Bueckers talked about her basketball mindset and her commitment to supporting others in the sport. She said, simply: "White women get more opportunities than Black women, so for us to speak out and use just your white privilege to help that, I think that's really huge." Bueckers did not mention whiteness again on Instagram or TikTok over the course of the 2021-2022 season, but her comment about her own racial identity and the benefits she's received because of that identity in this video is notable. Carrington (2008) argues that "whiteness...has...become the default, unmarked, normative position" (p. 427). Bueckers' acknowledgement of her own racial privilege brings visibility to these inequalities in sport and presents her as someone using her platform to advocate for change. She has previously been outspoken about inequalities in the sport of basketball, using her 2021 ESPYs speech to give praise and attention to her Black teammates and peers (WBB, 2021). Her activism, while rare in this specific sample of social media posts, remains part of her identity.

Boston, similarly, did use her platform to position herself explicitly as an ally, and one of her videos in particular demonstrated her support for the LGBT community, a group historically discriminated against in sports and in society. In a

clip posted on October 28, Boston (2021b) used intention language to provide visibility to lesbian and queer athletes, asking her teammates “who on the team would you not let date your brother or sister?” The question, which offers a twist on the trending ‘who on the team would you not let date your brother,’ challenges that assumption of female athletes as exclusively straight or exclusively queer. The video is particularly important in rejecting stereotypes of athletic women, particularly athletic Black women, as masculine, gay or asexual (Collins, 2005; Tredway, 2018).

Oregon’s Sedona Prince similarly challenged gender norms through her self-representations, though Prince’s expression of inclusion concerned her own experience as a queer woman in basketball. For instance, in a TikTok video posted on January 29, 2022, Prince steps back from the camera to show off black tank top, army green pants, black boots and a gray beanie in a lifestyle-centric clip (Prince, 2022a). As she slowly inches away from the camera, she puts her hands in her pockets, shrugs her shoulders and sets her head back. The caption reads “Tall queer reporting for duty.” Her representation as a proud, out athlete came through in both subtle and explicit ways in this video and her TikTok account as a whole throughout the 2021-2022 season. Butler (1990) explains that representations of queerness challenge heteronormativity, particularly in sports. Social norms create a form of discipline in which gender, male or female, is written on to a subject at birth, and Butler (1988) suggests that there are “strict punishments” for pushing the boundaries of gender (p. 531). Yet, subverting this gender binary is possible — gender remains socially constructed and potentially fluid.

TikTok, in particular, has created a more open space for athletes to blur gender expressions on the platform, inspiring a virtual community of creators who can openly discuss sexuality and gender (Boffone, 2022). Donohoe (2022) explains that TikTok created added visibility for the queer community and offered a way for users to “rewrite or revise their own gender identities” through videos on this platform (p. 23). These individuals expressed their identity publicly, constructing and maintaining expressions of queerness that challenged mainstream representations of the gender binary of the queer community. While some scholars (Simpson & Semaan, 2021) suggest that TikTok’s algorithm still reproduces some harmful stereotypes of the LGBT community, Prince found a voice and a community on TikTok that has allowed her to speak openly about her lived experience as a queer woman and her achievements on the basketball court.

In a TikTok posted on October 27, for example, Prince (2021b) posted a video featuring childhood photos with graphic text that read “Pretending I was straight and into boys in high school.” The caption read “That closet was glass and my 6’7 self barely fit lol #coming #out.” The first photo in this video features Prince in a competition-adjacent situation, standing on the court in a t-shirt while the next series of photos show her in lifestyle settings, posing with family and friends. The most notable image from the video slideshow features Prince in a prom dress that came down just past her knees, a photo that she further commented on later that day in a second video after receiving a comment from a viewer that said “i feel like that dress was meant to be full length.” Prince (2021c) notes that she won prom queen in that dress before taking her crown to her girlfriend’s house and kissing her. Prince

performs gender in these videos, explaining her relationship to femininity and athleticism, as two intersecting parts of her lived experience.

Prince expressed a fearlessness in representing her gender identity as a queer woman. Butler (1990) would argue that such personal expression and performance of gender is “a kind of becoming or activity...and repeated action...that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex” (p. 152). Butler’s theory of gender performance suggests that the construction of gender is ultimately “both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (1990, p. 190). Building on Butler’s theoretical framework, Messner (2022) argues that TikTok is a ripe space for such gender construction, as the platform enables users to not just express an identity but create one through “stylized performative acts that communicate an idea about the performer to their audience” (p. 37). Prince leaned into the affordance provided by TikTok to share her story with a broad audience during the first year of NIL, and she did so in a way that created more visibility for the LGBT community, even within a neoliberal sporting structure.

Prince’s voice is distinct, as she’s the only athlete in this sample to address her own sexuality and experience as a queer woman. Dunne (2021c), Boston (2022b), the Cavinder twins (2022) and Fuller (2021g) expressed their heterosexuality through references to their boyfriends or interest in men, but Prince was the only athlete in this sample to name her sexuality directly. Prince (2021d) expressed her full self in her TikToks, and she directly comments on the nuances of her identity in a TikTok

video posted on November 24 with the phrases “I am human, I am fearless, I am sexy, I’m devine, I’m unbeatable, I’m creative, Honey, you can get in line” that accompany photos of Prince throughout her day, on the court, in the parking lot and with her girlfriend. Butler (1988) suggests that “gender is a basically innovative affair,” a performance of repeated acts expressed with “anxiety and pleasure” (p. 531). Prince performs a layered gender identity in this clip, one that is uniquely hers. Her videos also create a brand that accurately reflects her relationship to gender expression and her athletic expertise.

Boston, Bueckers and Prince demonstrate the ways in which athlete branding in the age of NIL can be used to push gendered boundaries and bring visibility to those who have been historically marginalized. Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality and Butler’s theory of gender performance provide useful frameworks through which to analyze such content as Crenshaw explored the ways in which marginalized identities, particularly race and gender, create a double-bind of oppression of women of color, and Butler (1990) noted the ways in which culture informs performances of gender in relation to sex. This section in particular explored the ways in which Boston, Bueckers and Prince discussed race and sexuality and used their platform to represent themselves and their teammates as women athletes in the age of NIL. Though the athletes in this sample rarely directly addressed race directly in their content on TikTok and Instagram, Bueckers did acknowledge her White privilege in her StockX (2022) video, and Prince and Boston both challenged the gender binary through their content. These athletes demonstrate that “there is no one way to be a woman,” with Prince in particular commenting humorously on the way she’s

navigated the gendered sporting space as a tall, queer White woman (Snyder, 2008, p. 185). Ultimately, Prince, Bueckers and Boston's brands, like many of the women in this sample, are nuanced. Their content cannot be separated from the neoliberal sporting context in which it is produced, but an intersectional lens allows for the analysis of their posts in a way that highlights how they've navigated increased marginalization because of their race and sexuality.

Conclusion

The women in this sample ultimately represented themselves in a range of ways on TikTok and Instagram during the first year of NIL, showing off their bodies, beauty and athletic participation. While they generally promoted themselves in backstage ways that align with previous research on women's self-representation in sports (Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2015; Li et al., 2017; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012), they also did emphasize their position and capital as Division I student athletes through competition-adjacent content. Olivia Dunne and Haley Cavinder in particular found success through lifestyle imagery, though their audiences still resonated with athletic-centric posts. Boston, Lee and Thomas also generated fan engagement through action photos and competition-adjacent content that blurred the lines between their frontstage and backstage representations. Several of the women in this sample also presented postfeminist and neoliberal tones in their complex imagery, aligning with previous research on women's self-representation in a capitalist, patriarchal sporting system and literature on the gendered labor of digital celebrity (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a). The work involved in such branding efforts cannot be dismissed in

the assessment of athlete storytelling (Duffy, 2017, Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a), neither can the efforts these women took to engage and correct fans who offered offensive responses to their brands and their voices.

TikTok and Instagram presented different opportunities for women to self-represent themselves in the first year of NIL, with Instagram serving as a home for curated, filtered, posed photos and TikTok operating as a platform to create trendy, spontaneous dance moves and music videos. The findings in this chapter thus make the case that NIL has created vibrant, yet complicated new opportunities for women across platforms. This chapter, however does not posit that it is “incumbent on women to create effective ways” of seeking individual equality or having their voices heard, as suggested by the neoliberal feminist perspective (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 425). Instead, this project builds upon previous feminist work (Thorpe et. al, 2017, McClearen, 2021, Cooky, 2018) by focusing on the self-representation of individual female stars through the lens of neoliberalism, feminism and intersectionality and explains how women have had to overcome gendered challenges online in the era of NIL.

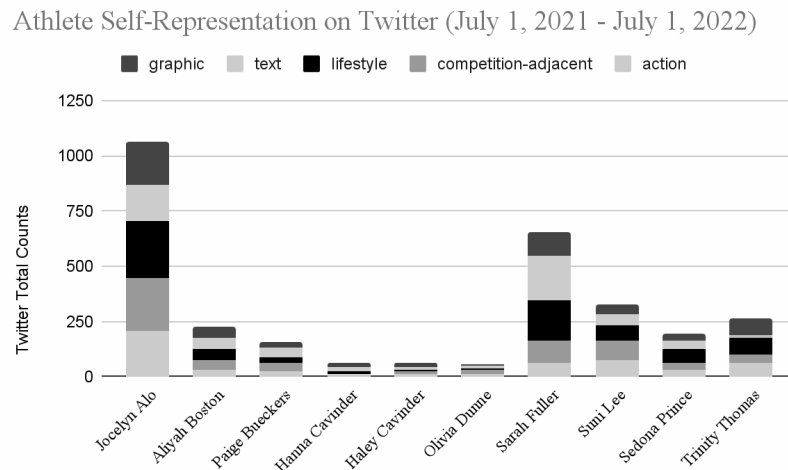
Chapter 5: Twitter as a storytelling tool for athlete self-representation

Modern athletes sit at the intersection of celebrity culture (Fisher, 2021; Duffy, 2022) and sports culture (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, 2018b; Thorpe et al., 2017). The previous chapter explored this intersection by analyzing the relationship between digital influencer culture and the nuances of self-representation for top collegiate women athletes on Instagram and TikTok in the NIL era. This chapter further addresses gender, sport and digital media through an analysis of NCAA athlete self-representation on Twitter, a platform where the women in this sample interacted with sports communication institutions to create brands for themselves that expanded traditional representations of women in sports. Twitter's interactivity afforded women the opportunity to repost content from their university athletic departments, legacy media outlets and individual reporters who presented them as athletes. The platform also served as a place for women to speak out against reporters who misrepresented them. Social media content shared by athletes is part of a broader media ecosystem which reflects and reproduces societal understandings of sport (Hall, 1997), and this chapter identifies how Twitter (Hambrick et al., 2010) created a space for women to selectively challenge hegemonic norms through their self-representation on and off the playing field.

Athletes in this sample ultimately represented themselves on Twitter in complex ways. This first section of this chapter addresses the way athletes interacted with other entities including their universities, traditional sports media companies and

journalists to promote themselves as athletes, while the second section explores how athletes used Twitter to push back against stereotypical misrepresentations. The final section explores the future potential of Twitter as a growing platform for self-representation for collegiate athletes in the NIL era. Hall's theory of representation combined with Butler's concept of gender performance and Crenshaw's understanding of intersectionality again form the theoretical foundations for this analysis and provide useful, critical frameworks through which to view and assess this content. The women in this sample used Twitter as a space to present themselves in more athletic-centric, holistic manners that occasionally contrasted traditional media representations of women athletes as exclusively secondary in the sporting space. This result stands in opposition to the ways in which these athletes self-represented on TikTok and Instagram in the first year of the NCAA's NIL policies and offers more context on the self-representation of collegiate women in this new era.

Figure 3: Athlete Self-Representation on Twitter



Women in action: Interacting with the media to create athlete-centric brands on Twitter

The athletes in this study collectively used Twitter as their primary social media platform, tweeting a total of 3,085 pieces of content from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022. Oklahoma softball star Jocelyn Alo published the greatest number of tweets among athletes in this sample with 852 posts that included a collection of 1,065 graphics, photos, videos and text content. Sarah Fuller similarly tweeted more than 500 times, as she published 532 tweets containing 654 images, videos, graphics and text-based comments. LSU gymnast Olivia Dunne tweeted the least number of times among the women in this study, posting less than 60 times in 12 months. Even athletes like Dunne who used Twitter in a limited capacity still engaged with the platform to showcase their athleticism and personal life, and their content provides insights on the strengths of Twitter as a tool for storytelling in the NIL era for women athletes (Bilton, 2014; Kerpen, 2019). Antunovic and Linden (2014) argue that “it may be too optimistic to expect social media to challenge the discourses” that women remain secondary in this sporting space, but the athletes in this study did publish tweets that presented them in a sports-centric manner, demonstrating an effort to recreate their own brands as athletes within a patriarchal sports media ecosystem (p. 157).

Women’s sports remain significantly underrepresented on television (Cooky et al., 2021). The “media...comprise a predominant site for the construction and maintenance of the central social discourse that is sport,” and such marginalization serves to further minimize women’s value in the sports industry (Meân, 2010, p. 67).

Women athletes and women's sports fans, however, have used digital platforms like blogs (Antunovic & Hardin, 2014), websites (Crawford, 2022) and social media (Scovel & Velloso, 2022) to express themselves and assert their value in male-dominated sporting spaces. In this study, all ten athletes used Twitter to self-represent in more athletic and athletic-adjacent settings than they did on Instagram or TikTok.

Journalists, particularly sports journalists, also view Twitter as a powerful resource, a place for story-idea generation and a home of sources and audience members (Hutchins, 2011; Farhi, 2009). Gibbs and Haynes (2013) add that journalists consider Twitter to be "the most used and influential social-media platform in sport media relations" (p. 399). In fact, the site has been labeled "the most disruptive platform" in the sports industry (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013, p. 399). While Facebook and YouTube may have more users, and TikTok may be rising among a Gen Z population (Auxier & Anderson, 2022), Twitter still serves as a valuable news source and remains a critical space for sports journalists, athletes and fans.

The interactivity potential between athletes and their communities on Twitter and speed at which news travels on the platform makes Twitter so notable and powerful in the digital age. Twitter offers athletes the opportunity to "create positive exposure for themselves, engage fans, and increase their own visibility" (Pegoraro, 2010; Hull & Abeza, p. 15). Athletes have the potential to use Twitter to "point their followers to stories that they believe are valuable," particularly those that focus on an athlete's success (Hull, 2014, p. 255), or challenge reporters and mainstream narratives on their account instead. Twitter is fundamental in giving athletes "more control over the release of sports news while also increasing their self-presentation

management” (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011, p. 114). While some athletes still underuse this platform, those who engage with fans and journalists on Twitter can strengthen their image in a positive way (Hull, 2014). Digital sites like Twitter are ultimately “central to the construction of lived social and cultural worlds, creating new categories of action and shared understanding” (Couldry, 2012; Hutchins, 2014, p. 125). For athletes who opt to use Twitter as a tool to bypass traditional media, Hutchins (2014) notes that Twitter can be a transformative site for representation. The purchase of Twitter by Elon Musk in 2022 (just after the end of data collection for this project) has brought change and disruption to the platform, but this is beyond the range of this study.

Curating team content

Of the action content posted on Twitter by the women athletes in this study, 39.7% came from official Twitter accounts associated with their respective teams. The remainder came primarily from a combination of journalists, fans, sponsors and media companies. College athletic departments served as an in-house marketing operation for each of their respective varsity programs, and Latimer and Dabbs (2021) argue that promotion material posted by schools on Twitter enables the university to share “real-time game information, forge fan connections, and market its brand” (p. 146). The findings from this study suggest that women who seek to represent themselves in action turn to their athletic department for such content on Twitter. Dunne, for instance, re-posted action shots of herself exclusively from the @LSUGymnastics account. The photos show Dunne experiencing success, hitting near-perfect bar routines and competing on floor (LSU Gymnastics, 2022a, 2022b).

Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) note that celebrity women athletes in particular may feel a societal pressure within a patriarchal sporting structure to present themselves in effortless manner when expressing athleticism. They describe this decision-making process as gendered labor, an added process that women athletes undergo in an effort to present as “palatable and desirable commercial sporting subjects” (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, p. 307). Popular elite women athletes often carefully select athletic imagery that shows them ‘doing what they love’ as opposed to openly representing “the primary forms of labour” involved in sporting events, such as “the relentlessness of training, the monotony of traveling during competition, the pain of injury, negative emotions triggered by losing” (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, p. 307). Dunne’s content aligned with this pattern, as all of her action clips showed her competing and practicing with ease, as opposed to visually representing her grimacing, sweating or even expressing discomfort.

Evers (2018) argues that male athletes undergo a different form of athletic labor. Men are expected to promote “mental toughness” and portray an image of themselves “manning up” and “inspir[ing] others” (p. 1704). Evers (2018) studied surfers and explained that these men felt compelled to hide their emotion and instead present “enthusiastic masculinity” (p. 1704). Though such generalizations of male and female athlete branding expectations certainly do not apply to all athletes and are largely a result of patriarchal expectations of men and women athletes, Dunne’s action-centric content on Twitter aligns Toffoletti and Thorpe’s (2018a) description of the ‘athletic labor of femininity’ and suggest that she prefers to be seen in action exclusively when her performances present her as an effortless star.

Twitter interactivity makes the platform an ideal space for women athletes to find, curate and share such content that presents them in action (Coche, 2014, 2017). Hull and Lewis (2014) explain that Twitter enables athletes to communicate immediately with fans and followers, updating them on behind-the-scenes information and personal news. Mainstream mass media are not able to foster such interpersonal relationships between athlete and fan in the same way. These connections formed on Twitter make the platform an ideal space for increasing visibility for athletes and growing their brands.

In addition to supporting the growth of women's athletic brands, Twitter has the potential to become an online “space of resistance where women’s sports can thrive and female athletes are perceived as athletes” (Coche & Haught, 2018, p. 380). Antunovic (2022) adds that social platforms such as Twitter have the capacity to “serve as a ‘counter hegemonic discursive practice’ for women athletes, but media content in general cannot be divorced from “ideologies [of] gender and race” (p. 13). Dunne’s feed demonstrated this point, as she represented herself in action and action-adjacent settings through her LSU reposts, but gendered themes still came through in the content she elected to share. Dunne’s decision to repost content by athletic departments is just one example of women athletes interacting with sports communication establishments in the age of NIL to build themselves into athletic brands, but this relationship is notable in that it counters hegemonic norms of women athletes as passive, but it did so within particular gendered boundaries.

Traditional, hegemonic media representations create a framework through which individuals understand themselves and the world around them (Hall, 1984;

Bruce, 2012). Self-representation is thus important because it contributes to a media ecosystem that sets “the boundaries within which people can make sense of their culture” (Bruce, 2012, p. 126). Dunne’s expression of herself as a desirable sporting subject and influencer on the visually-centric apps of Instagram and TikTok allowed her to build a brand as a traditional, expected feminine icon. Dunne did not radically alter her self-representation on Twitter, although her engagement with her university’s social media feed to highlight particular images of herself in action shows an interest on her part in creating a more visible, albeit still limited, athletic brand.

Like Dunne, Haley Cavinder similarly reposted almost all of her athletic-centric content from her team’s account, as eight of her 13 action images originated on the @FresnoStateWBB feed. She and her sister Hanna Cavinder published a combined 23 action photos and videos on Twitter, and over half of that content came from their associated schools. Such decisions to selectively present themselves as athletes through university-sponsored content differ from the self-representation choices the Cavinder twins made on TikTok and Instagram where they did not directly share a single image from the Fresno State athletic department. Such self-representation differences across mediums are not unprecedented though. For example, Coche (2017) found that women embrace their athletic identities in their Twitter bios and “highlight their femininity through visuals” (p. 105; Antunovic, 2022, p. 17) in profile photos. This study expanded beyond assessing bios and profile pictures and analyzed the ways in which women, through their Twitter feeds as a

whole, challenged or reproduced hegemonic norms and feminine expectations historically represented in the media.

Both Cavinder twins, and Haley Cavinder even more so, continued using team content to express themselves in athletic-centric ways following their transfer to the University of Miami in the spring of 2022. Haley Cavinder, for instance, posted four total action tweets (Fresno State WBB, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022) throughout her entire 2021-2022 season with the Fresno State Bulldogs, but she posted two highlight clips of her workouts with the Hurricanes Women's Basketball (2022a, 2022b) team within her first two weeks at Miami, expressing a strong connection to her new team and showcasing the athletic side of her identity through university-sponsored content. Su et al. (2020a) suggest that "athletes joining a new team, especially a high-profile team, can benefit from changing their affiliation within a network of connected brands, gaining exposure and connections to new consumers..." (p. 42). While Su et al.'s (2020a) findings focused exclusively on the growth of male athlete brands, this study explores how such patterns apply to women athletes and how they express their athleticism, femininity, and feminism in the digital space. The Cavinder twins in particular, while notably expressive of their femininity on Instagram, quickly embraced representations of athleticism on Twitter following their transfer, immediately showing themselves in action as athletes within their new program.

Sports cultural theorists propose that counter-narratives, such as those promoted by the women in this study that show them in action or competing with intensity, have the potential to empower such athletes. Women athletes have been

“decentered, obscured and dismissed by hegemonic forces” (McDonald & Birrell, 1999, p. 295), but social media creates new opportunities for holistic self-representation and expression. The Cavinder twins did not overwhelmingly present themselves as exclusively athletes on Twitter, but they did engage with the official Miami Hurricanes Women’s Basketball Twitter account and the Fresno State Women’s Basketball official Twitter account to promote themselves in action. They also posted competition-adjacent imagery of themselves from their schools’ accounts, and such content shows the interest of the Cavinder twins in expressing a professionally-produced part of their athletic identity to their Twitter audience.

Dunne and the Cavinder twins were not the only athletes to heavily engage with team-produced content to show themselves in action. Sedona Prince, in particular, relied almost exclusively on team content for her branding, posting 27 of her 33 action shots from the @OregonWBB account. The other six action shots included one post from Swish Apparel (2022), one from journalist Lindsay Schnell (2022), one from the Pac-12 Network (2022), one from sports reporter Ryan Ballis (2021) quote-tweeting Overtime, one from women’s sports fan Antonio Garcia (2022) and the last one from Prince (2021a) herself. Prince ultimately posted more action imagery on Twitter than she did on either of her other two public accounts on TikTok and Instagram, as she published a combined three action images and videos across TikTok and Twitter and posted 33 pieces of action content on Twitter. The content that Prince retweeted from Oregon Women’s Basketball, though, not only stands out because of its quantity but also because of its quality. Prince shared content from the Oregon account that contained language and imagery representing the

‘grind’ of Division I sports. She reposted action clips with words like “work” and “battle” active language that implies grueling efforts in a way that contrasted with the curated perfection posted by Dunne from the LSU feed (Oregon Women’s Basketball, 2021a, 2021b, 2022) and differed from the ‘athletic labor of femininity’ demonstrated by other postfeminist elite athletes (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a) who focused on perfection and ease both in action and lifestyle settings. Prince’s content did not fit neatly within gendered boundaries, and her action-centric imagery from Oregon’s official account challenged hegemonic norms even more so than her peers in this study by centering her labor and effort on the court more than the perfection and ease expressed in performance.

Of all of the athletes in this sample, Oklahoma softball star Jocelyn Alo posted both the greatest number of action photos and videos and the greatest percentage of action imagery. Nearly half of her action photos, though, also came from her school, with Alo publishing 96 images and videos of herself in action through reposts from @OU_Softball. She also published a notable 43 lifestyle images from that same account that included everything from award ceremony photos to team trips to autograph signings. She shared 83 competition-adjacent images from her school as well, and such photos included images of her celebrating after the game, posing with a trophy, being interviewed by the press. Harry (2021) argues that “athletics departments should continue to advocate and support their athletes in all their endeavors whether that be athletically or socially” (p. 669), and while Alo shared images of herself in all three settings, she leaned into her active identity in her reposted Oklahoma Softball content. This dissertation is less focused on why athletes

elect to post on particular platforms and more on what the self-representations of athletes on these platforms convey about their storytelling and identity, Alo's frequent use of school-produced content suggests a strong affiliation between her brand and the brand of her university. She engaged with Oklahoma Softball content far more on Twitter than on Instagram, and she was not alone in that approach.

Like Alo and Prince, Florida's Trinity Thomas also posted nearly triple the amount of team-produced content as most of her peers in this sample, trailing only Alo overall in this category. Thomas introduced fans and audiences to her athletic identity almost immediately, as her second tweet of the NIL era featured her performing a perfect bar routine in a clip posted by the University of Florida Gymnastics team account (Gators Gymnastics, 2021a). The caption read: How about a perfect 10.0 ending to your week @Gym_Trin claims her first of two 2021 uneven bars 10 in this Season Rewind from 🌿🏡 home finale. #GoGators. The following month, Thomas retweeted a similar clip from Florida, showing her completing a 10.0 floor routine (Gators Gymnastics, 2021b). The @GatorsGymnastics account built Thomas into a star through such fast-paced action clips throughout the season as well, and these videos contained dramatic music and enthusiastic broadcaster tones, conveying importance and value associated with the athletes' brands. Such editorial decisions from the @GatorsGym account contrast the more matter-of-fact or gender-bland sexism conveyed through coverage of women on SportsCenter (Cooky et al., 2021) and instead present Thomas as a successful athlete. Thomas endorsed such content through her retweets, adding to her self-representation as a gymnastics champion. Thomas did also show herself in competition-adjacent and lifestyle

settings through university-produced content, but action-centric imagery represented the largest category of University of Florida Gymnastics content reposted by Thomas. Such content serves to highlight Thomas' identity as a gymnast and pushes back against notions of women athletes as passive or weak, stereotypes built through decades of 'othering' in sports media (Schell & Rodriguez, 2000).

This athletic-centric representation of women athletes on university-sponsored social media accounts offers individuals the chance to present themselves as active athletes, as previous research suggests that athletic department accounts serve as valuable alternatives for individuals who remain marginalized in traditional media. Johnson et al. (2022) evaluated the representation of women and men on the social media accounts of 20 Division I programs and found that not only do athletic department social media managers present women in action in equal proportion to their male counterparts, but audiences respond equally to women's and men's athletic-centric content. Their research focused on Instagram in particular, but the findings about action-centric representation remain relevant. Women are still underrepresented on university accounts from a quantity perspective, but when athletic departments do post about women, these women are generally seen in action. Johnson et al. (2022) argue that the positive interest and engagement on action-centric posts about women athletes "strengthen audience research that signals that sports fans want more coverage of female athletic events" (p. 675). Such content also serves as a counter to historical representations of women in which they were portrayed by the press in ways that highlighted "stereotypical and traditional conceptions of femininity that supersede[d] their athletic ability" (Fink & Kensicki's, 2002, p. 317; Johnson et

al., 2022). The findings from this dissertation are focused on athlete self-representation as opposed to audience interest or the norms of production for such content, but the fact that athletes in this sample elected to repost more action-centric material from their schools suggests that they aim to present a version of themselves as athletes to their digital followers, a base that potentially is equally interested in such representations, according to Johnson et al. (2022).

Table 6: Standout Athlete Use of Team Content

STANDOUT ATHLETE USE OF TEAM CONTENT										
	TRINITY THOMAS		SUNISA LEE		PAIGE BUECKERS		JOCELYN ALO		ALIYAH BOSTON	
CODES	TWITTER	INSTA GRAM	TWITTER	INSTA GRAM	TWITTER	INSTA GRAM	TWITTER	INSTA GRAM	TWITTER	INSTA GRAM
Action	31	23	12	6	4	—	96	2	4	—
Competition										
-Adjacent	13	7	6	3	3	—	85	—	17	—
Lifestyle	23	2	5		9	—	43	1	3	—
Graphic	38	10	15	1	9	—	47	—	23	—
Text	2	—	1	—	1	—	3	—	—	—

While athletic departments and team-specific accounts serve as a notable source for athletic-centric content and promote women in action equally to men (Johnson et. al, 2022), they cannot be divorced from the patriarchal norms to define sports media more generally (Smith, 2011). Scholars have previously found that women are still continuously underrepresented on athletic department Twitter feeds compared to their male peers, despite Title IX regulation mandating proportional publicity (Johnson et al., 2022; Burroughs et al., 2022). Johnson et al. (2022) add that even as the quality of women’s representation on athletic department social media pages improves, women still receive significantly less attention than their male counterparts, as they made up just 25% of all posts in Johnson’s et al. (2022) study. The content produced by athletic departments that was reposted by the athletes in this

study does highlight positive athletic moments, and the high level of athlete engagement with such school accounts in general suggests increased potential for branding opportunities if universities offered more equitable publicity for women and created more content for these athletes to repurpose.

Building athlete brands through selected media content

While the schools provided most of the action-centric content repurposed by athletes, the women in this sample did also share highlight clips and photos posted by legacy media outlets as part of their action-centric and competition-adjacent self-representations. Kane et al. (2013) found that women athletes exhibit a preference for images that feature them in action or expressing “a high degree of physical ability,” though media outlets have historically represented women in ways that “sexualize and marginalize them” (p. 291). Alo’s engagement with ESPN matches this pattern. She reposted 17 tweets from ESPN — the broadcast rights holder to the Women’s College World Series — and 14 tweets from ESPNW during the first year of these new NIL policies, nearly all of which showed her on the field or in action. Additionally, she shared four posts from ESPN PR (Aronowitz, 2022; Alo, 2022a; Thiessen, 2022; ESPN PR, 2022), mostly in connection to a cover story about her published in ESPN Magazine, as well as one post from ESPN Images (2021) and one post from ESPN Stats and Info (Alo, 2022b). Though this study only examines Alo’s engagement with ESPN’s content, as opposed to the representation of women athletes as a whole on ESPN’s Twitter feed during the first year of NIL, Alo’s amplification

of ESPN content that showed her in action or in competition-adjacent settings sends a message about the high value she places on her athletic identity.

Such media representations express power. Hall (1997; Davis, 2004, p. 89) notes that media representations generally “embody the dominant definitions” and “[reproduce] the given ideological structures,” even when individual reporters do not intend to reproduce such dominance. Within sports media, the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in sports has marked the industry “male territory,” creating a landscape in which women are devalued while men are presented as dominant (Bruce, 2012, p. 132-133). ESPN, one of the most prominent sports networks in the United States, represented women just 5.7% of the time as recently as 2019, though there are signs of improvement (Cooky et al., 2021). ESPN, however, has made a recent investment in softball (Patricof & Kempf, 2021), women’s gymnastics (Brooks, 2021) and women’s basketball (Brooks, 2022) in the last several years, and this intentional decision by the network has inspired increased engagement for the networks and increased revenue for schools. Sports economist David Berri (2019) notes that this attention from national broadcast networks has pushed sports such as softball past the ‘non-revenue’ label, and “softball teams -- and their players - - are [now] major attractions for universities' sports fans.” The same conclusion can be applied to gymnastics, with programs such as Auburn selling out arenas for all home meets in 2021-2022 and nearly doubling the average ticket price, a change that coaches have credited to channels such as ESPN’s SEC Network that have committed to building fandom through branded media (Perenson, 2022).

This added media attention has also created more accessible highlight clips for athletes to repurpose on social media. Athletes who repost such slick, professionally-produced action-centric content from these networks counter the “status-quo ideology of women as different and inferior athletes in comparison to men” (Fink & Kensicki, 2002, p. 325). For instance, on June 4, 2022, Alo shared a tweet from ESPN (2022) in which she is hitting a home run and adding to her NCAA home run record while the announcers in the clip yell: “And there’s a rocket, and that is launched deep to left and out of here! A two-run..shot for Oklahoma!” while Alo ran around the bases. The second broadcaster adds: “So much power...six steps down the line and in, and she’s already firing up her dugout.” The action and excitement in this clip stand in contrast to the type of matter-of-fact announcing of women’s sports seen in the NCAA women’s basketball tournament (Cooky et al., 2021; Musto et al., 2017). Such “fast-paced...action-packed language...dominant descriptors...and lavish compliments” used in the clip about Alo symbolically construct interest, something historically lacking in broadcast coverage of women’s sports (Musto et al., 2017, p. 581). Alo’s promotion of action-centric content from companies such as ESPN suggests an endorsement of such coverage and demonstrates how traditional media and athlete branding can intersect to generate holistic self-representation options that do not minimize women’s involvement in sports.

Women’s gymnastics stars Trinity Thomas and Sunisa Lee similarly used content from traditional media companies to build their brands as elite women’s gymnasts. Lee, in particular, entered the NIL era in a unique situation, as she had just qualified for the U.S. Olympic Team when the NCAA passed its new legislation July

1, 2021. She came into her first season as a college athlete in the NIL era as someone who had already built a brand as a professional athlete, and much of Lee's early content centered around her experience as a Team USA member and Olympic champion. Bruce et al. (2010) argue that women's sports experience a boost during the Olympics, and Angelini and Billings (2010) note that women's gymnastics, in particular, generates significant attention from NBC during this period every two years. For Lee, the increased national media attention meant that she had more opportunities to repost content from outlets such as the *New York Times* (Lee, 2021b) and *NBC Olympics* (2021a, 2021b) that highlighted her athleticism, in addition to her personal life. Of her first ten photos and videos posted on Twitter in the NIL era, five featured her in action, showcasing her skills on beams and bars (Lee, 2021a; NBC Olympics, 2021a, 2021b; Inside Gymnastics, 2021; Team USA, 2021). While much of the timing of these posts likely related more to her participation in the Olympic Games and the increased attention and spotlight that comes from that opportunity as opposed to her experience as a college athlete, she nonetheless signaled to her audience through her content in early July 2021 that her athletic identity was a primary part of her self-representation on Twitter. Lee continued to post action shots throughout the season too, ending the first year of NIL with 74 action photos and videos across her individual sample of 327, a dramatic increase in percentage of action imagery compared to her Instagram page where she posted just 11% of content in an athletic-centric manner. This increase in action-centric content is notable, particularly in a society in which the press has historically underrepresented women's sports outside of the Olympic cycle.

Like Lee, Thomas also amplified media that showed her in action, and while she did not compete in the Olympics, her status as an NCAA All-American created attention and hype, particularly from smaller gymnastics-centric publications like *GymCastic*, *Inside Gym* and *Gymnastics Now*. Thomas retweeted all of those accounts during the 2021-2022 season, as well as more traditional media giants like ESPN and *Sports Illustrated*. For instance, on May 25, 2022, Thomas reposted a quote tweet from @GatorsGymnastics of a *Sports Illustrated* cover story in honor of the 50th anniversary of Title IX that included a cutout image of Thomas in action on the floor alongside images of other elite women in sports history such as fellow gymnast Simone Biles, tennis legends Billie Jean King and Serena Williams, South Carolina championship coach Dawn Staley among others (Florida Gators, 2022). Previous scholars have noted that *Sports Illustrated* has famously historically underrepresented women, particularly on the cover of the magazine (Weber & Carini, 2012; Frisby, 2017). Nearly all of the women on the cover promoted by Thomas, however, are shown in a competition situation, a departure from the traditional representation of women in sports as passive figures or models. While this example certainly does not suggest that *Sports Illustrated* no longer engages in sexist media practices, this particular magazine cover and Thomas' retweet of the image shows how athletes use their platform to endorse representations from media companies that align with their values and identities as athletes.

Given the lack of media attention given to women's sports (Cooky et. al, 2021), the ability for athletes to communicate positively with the press and use media content to promote a active representation of themselves as well as competition-

adjacent, sports-centric identities suggests that NIL offers more than just financial opportunities for women: it gives them increased space to add nuanced, holistic representations of themselves to a sports media industry that has historically excluded them. These findings suggest that Twitter can be a “media [site] of change,” a place where “visibility for women’s sport is being created and fan communities [are being] established that have been invisible in the mainstream press” (Bruce, 2012, p. 133). Twitter provided sportswomen the chance to interact with media members and amplify holistic content that portrayed them as valuable collegiate athletes. While not every woman in this sample exclusively promoted her on-field experience, the women in this study overall did piece together sports-centric content from a range of publications and media outlets to promote an athletic side of themselves on Twitter more so than on Instagram or TikTok.

Amplifying positive media content from individual reporters

The women in this sample also amplified individual reporters who created content that aligned with the athlete’s brand as part of their self-representation. Alo, for instance, retweeted and quote-tweeted content from ESPN college softball broadcaster Holly Rowe nearly a dozen times over the course of the first year of NIL, promoting Rowe’s content about Alo’s on-field performance and Rowe’s commentary on Alo’s legacy. After Alo was named the National Player of the Year, Rowe (2022b) tweeted her congratulations to Alo and posted a photo of a t-shirt featuring Alo that fans could buy. Rowe (2022c) also suggested that Oklahoma build a statue of Alo on campus following Alo’s graduation. Alo retweeted all of these

posts. She also reposted a video from Rowe (2022a) in which the broadcaster interviewed Alo in the press room ahead of the Women's College World Series, informing fans of how to correctly pronounce Alo's last name. Much like that press room interview clip, most of the posts that Alo retweeted from Rowe did not necessarily show a softball star actively playing her sport, but they all connected back to Alo's experience with softball, highlighted her athletic credentials, and, primarily, occurred in a softball-centric setting, such as on the field, the stands or the aforementioned press room. While traditional media outlets have long ignored or dismissed women's sports, Alo's endorsement of Rowe's posts in her brand building suggests that she values this athletic side of her identity and supports reporters who cover her in this way. O'Shea and Maxwell (2022) suggest that social media platforms such as Twitter "provide sportswomen with a powerful context in which they can construct themselves as empowered subjects" through "creating and controlling their public image" (p. 80). Women athletes like Alo are able to use their Twitter feeds in the age of NIL to promote journalistic content that presents them in more positive ways and potentially increase interest in their sport and their brand.

The women in this sample also engaged with individual reporters as well who covered their sponsorship deals or promoted them as businesswomen. Sarah Fuller, for instance, sent out six posts from *Front Office Sports* reporter Amanda Christovich, a sports business journalist who commented on NIL legislation and Fuller's experience monetizing her brand as a history-making football kicker. Christovich's first post retweeted by Fuller came on August 30, 2021, via an article Christovich wrote titled "Sarah Fuller's NIL Power One Year After Making History." The

thumbnail featured Fuller in her Vanderbilt football uniform, actively kicking during a game. Fuller (2021b) quote-tweeted this story, writing “Thank you @achristovichh with @FOS it was great talking with you about NIL! #NIL #TeamWass #GoMeanGreen.” The remainder of the tweets Fuller reposted from Christovich focused more on NCAA policy, but her engagement with this reporter and the press in general suggests a positive relationship with at least some of the individuals who cover her as an athlete. Schwartz and Vogan (2017) explain that athletes primarily choose to engage on social media and promote their own content online because they see “mainstream media as a threat” and believe that their representation in the press “fails to provide the same degree of authenticity, insight, or fairness” that they desire (p. 47). This is a heightened issue for women athletes, as they have historically been underrepresented in the press (Cooky et al., 2021) or presented in overly sexual ways that highlight their role away from the action (Fink, 2014), in more backstage settings, as opposed to being celebrated as influencer stars. Yet, the results from this study suggest that when media outlets do cover women’s athletic achievements or involvement in athletic-related news, such content has the potential to be repurposed by the athlete, drawing more attention to the coverage and increasing their representation as athletes in the male-dominated sporting space.

Athletes ultimately benefited from interacting with the sports communication institutions in their self-representation during the first year of NIL. They repurposed action-centric content from their universities to represent themselves as athletes, they amplified legacy media clips that challenged notions that women’s sports lacked excitement, and they endorsed content from individual journalists that enhanced their

multifaceted personal brands. Antunovic (2022) notes that “athletes’ social media strategies matter because these images and content shape audience perceptions, which could then have implications for interest and investment in women’s sports” (p. 17). The findings from this chapter explore the ways in which these select ten women athletes add to the media ecosystem through Twitter and challenge the notion that sport is a “male terrain, a ‘cultural center of masculinity’” whereby women’s athletic achievements are either trivialized and marginalized or ignored altogether.” (Kane et al., 2013, p. 270). These women selected content to show off their sport and their personal lives, adding layers and nuance to the general representation of women in sports. The next section addresses some of the ways athletes used their platform to push back against the media and express their gender, race and athleticism in even more nuanced ways.

Intersectionality, gender performance, identity and self-representation

While Twitter offered athletes the opportunity to promote positive self-representations of themselves in action through content provided to them by media companies, schools and individual reporters, the women in this sample also employed Twitter’s interactivity features to call for more inclusion and less division in women’s sports (Hambrick et al., 2010). They used their voices to speak up about causes of racial justice and critique journalists who they argue did not provide fair and accurate representations. This section further explores athlete self-representation through the lens of Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality (1991) and Butler’s understanding of gender performance (1990) to address how one standout athlete and one early NIL

adopter addressed media coverage of themselves. Race, gender and sexual orientation remain overlapping identities for all of these women. The way in which these athletes address such aspects of their identity in their self-representation as athletes adds to a more complex understanding of women's self-representation in the digital age.

As the 2022 NCAA most valuable women's basketball player, Aliyah Boston received significant complimentary media coverage throughout her journey, much of which she retweeted. She shared content from the SEC Network (2021), ESPN (Boston, 2022a), NCAA March Madness (2022), *Newsweek* (2022; Boston, 2022g) and CBS Sports (Boston, 2022e), demonstrating an appreciation for the media companies that promoted her experience. But she also recognized the need for more inclusive coverage, and she expressed this through several notable tweets. For instance, on November 2, Aliyah Boston retweeted Dawn Staley (2021), the head coach of South Carolina's women's basketball team, and amplified her critique of ESPN for repeatedly using photos of Boston that conveyed negative, racist connotations. The Gamecocks coach noted that ESPN either showed Boston looking frustrated or crying, tropes that reinforce the 'angry Black woman,' or the 'emotional athlete trope.' Such frames have been applied to Black women in sports and in media representations more generally, despite the fact that Black women have been consistently calling for "more holistic and humanized media depictions...that authentically [represent] their experiences" (Leath et. al, 2021, p. 272). Boston's retweet of Staley's content further shows that athletes and their coaches did not shy away from calling out representations that presented them in stereotypical ways.

The ‘angry Black women’ trope in particular has been used by sports journalists in the past, but such stereotypes serve to devalue the athletic achievement of these individuals and open them up to further scrutiny and discipline. This negative framing also “connect[s] to a larger history of racism and sexism targeting Black women and girls” which marginalizes them for both their race and their gender, identities which cannot be separated (Lindsey, 2017, p. 43; Crenshaw, 1991). Hall (1997) adds that athletes experiencing marginalization as a result of gender and/or racial identities are, in hegemonic culture, read as a “spectacle of otherness,” a space considered to be one of little power and agency (p. 231-232). Boston’s willingness to address this marginalization and use her platform to promote more inclusive representation for herself and Black women in sports more generally was not a one-time situation.

Boston (2022f) later expressed that Staley’s voice inspired her to be confident enough to share her own voice and speak out on issues of representation that matter to her, and she used her platform to retweet an article from *Newsweek* that she wrote about media representation of women in sports. She explained in her article that her goal in sports is to be a visible role model for young Black women and inspire them to pursue their goals. Boston (2022f) particularly emphasized the importance of being “able to see a Black person or someone that looks like you getting awards or in high positions.” Previous research shows that women in the NCAA women’s basketball tournament (Cooky et al., 2021) are covered far less than men, and Black women in professional basketball in particular are covered half as often as their white peers (Isard & Melton, 2021). Boston’s quote acknowledges this disparity and addresses the

urgency needed to fix such an issue. She used her platform during the first year of NIL not only to represent herself as a competitor and a teammate but also as someone to demonstrate that she recognized the marginalization she and her teammates of color faced in a patriarchal media culture and wanted to address such issues, particularly on Twitter.

Boston was not the only person to engage with the media and correct misrepresentations. Haley and Hanna Cavinder also used their platform to address perceived misrepresentations and employ their voice and platform to call for more holistic storytelling. The Cavinder twins did not address racial disparities in their self-representation in particular, but they did push back on those who critiqued their social media presence and expressions of femininity. Crenshaw (1991) argues that race and gender are always overlapping, and the Cavinder twins thus face less marginalization in sports media because of their whiteness. Nevertheless, Hanna Cavinder did speak out in late August to make a statement in response to an article published by the *Washington Post*'s Candace Buckner (2021) about the current state of NIL for female athletes. The article — headlined “Brands are taking notice of female athletes. Now let’s move beyond their sex appeal” — states that the Cavinder twins’ are “ballers” but that their “NIL value comes from their profitability as social media influencers.” Buckner (2021) suggests that advertisers who reward women like Hanna and Haley Cavinder for their “bikini photo shoots” as opposed to their “big games on the court” are “placing less value on female athletic achievement and more on sex appeal.” Buckner (2021) is not wrong that systematic sexism has historically rewarded women in the media for expressing themselves in heteronormative, feminine ways. In fact,

Butler (1990) suggests that cultural norms prompt such behavior from women, as society disciplines women and men into expressing hegemonic representations of gender through a combination of praise and criticism. The Cavinder twins built a brand around their experiences as basketball players and digital celebrities, but their participation in this culture as blond, White, straight women cannot be divorced from the understanding of their image (See Chapter 4). Buckner makes these points in her column.

As individuals, though, the Cavinder twins took issue with Buckner's argument. In an August 22, 2021 tweet, Hanna Cavinder (2021c) quote-tweeted Buckner's article with a note about how she appreciates that NIL is "not based solely on athletic achievement" and provides athletes outside of "Power 5" programs the opportunity to earn revenue. She did not shy away from acknowledging the pride she takes in her femininity, but instead called out Buckner for critiquing her self-representation. Cavinder's (2021d, 2021e) engagement with Buckner's column continued and became more pointed throughout her Twitter thread response, as she further argued that "it should never be okay to belittle or judge how a female chooses to showcase herself on her own social medias." Haley Cavinder retweeted Hanna Cavinder's thread as well. The Cavinder twins' response to Buckner suggests that, like other elite sportswomen, they recognize the "pressures and expectations that women athletes face to gain greater visibility for themselves and their sport" but simultaneously "[demonstrate] a culturally valorized model of contemporary femininity whereby women are not victims or objects, but seemingly do what they love" (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 370). Their comments in this tweet suggest that they do

not see themselves defined as solely athletes or solely as influencers. While this study is exclusively focused on the types of content posted by these athletes as opposed to the justification or strategy surrounding such choices, this particular Twitter exchange also highlights how social media both became the focus of criticism and served as a platform for expression, demonstrating the multifaceted affordances of social media for sport, media, and self-representation.

The remaining potential for Twitter as a space for self-representation in the NIL era

Olivia Dunne and the Cavinder twins created viral content on TikTok and built themselves into public figures on Instagram, but they tweeted far less often and drew much lower engagement on their tweets in comparison to their peers in this sample. Dunne, for instance, posted just 43 times on Twitter during the year and generated a following of 69.4K whereas she created an audience of 7.2 million followers on TikTok and provided them with 256 pieces of content in the same year. She also maintained 3.7 million followers on Instagram, serving them a total of 124 photos and videos over 12 months. The Cavinder twins similarly invested less branding power into Twitter. Twitter was the only platform in which they did not have a joint @cavindertwins account. Instead, they operated two independent @CavinderHaley and @CavinderHanna accounts, tweeting 71 and 64 pieces of content respectively over the course of the year to an audience of 14.5K and 13.7K respectively. In contrast, their joint TikTok account @cavindertwins reached an audience of 4.3 million, and their combined Instagram account @thecavindertwins has 128K followers. Su et al. (2020b) suggest that Twitter, Instagram and Facebook — apps considered more traditional social media spaces in comparison to newer

platforms like TikTok — have evolved into curated platforms, spaces where athletes “project [their] professional side” (p. 444). In the case of this sample, both Instagram and Twitter served as performative, filtered spaces for these two athletes where they posted fewer photos and videos than their more raw, informal TikTok profile, but lack of interest from the Cavinders and Dunne in particular on Twitter demonstrates the differing social media habits between the women in this sample as well as their contrasting approaches to digital storytelling and self-representation.

Table 7: Early NIL Adopters Self-Representation on Twitter

EARLY NIL ADOPTERS				
CODES	OLIVIA DUNNE	HANNA CAVINDER	HALEY CAVINDER	TOTAL
Action-Game	8	6	10	24
Action - Practice	1	7	3	11
Competition-Adjacent - Uniform	7	2	0	9
Competition-Adjacent - Team Gear	15	1	8	24
Competition-Adjacent - Streetwear	2	5	6	13
Lifestyle- Uniform	0	6	0	6
Lifestyle- Team Gear	2	0	2	4
Lifestyle- Streetwear	3	6	4	13
Lifestyle- Object	0	3	1	4
Text	12	17	13	42
Graphic	5	18	17	40
Totals	55	71	64	190

Olivia Dunne (2021h) addressed her lack of interest in growing her brand on Twitter in a TikTok posted on July 29, 2021. In this clip, which generated 578K likes, 4,492 comments and 23 shares, Dunne nodded along to trending music in the video, complimenting Instagram, TikTok and VSCO as ideal platforms while expressing her disinterest in Twitter by frowning to the beat of the song. When questioned by a commenter why she dismissed the platform despite being loved by “Gymernet” on Twitter, Dunne (2021h) replied: “Twitter is a frightening place.” Previous research suggests that athletes who avoid Twitter may do so because of the potential to see

negative messages from fans on the platform (Sanderson & Browning, 2013), though Fuller (2021c, 2021d) imply in a series of tweets that she found the “meanest” followers and commenters on TikTok. Su et al. (2020b) suggest that sites such as Twitter and even Facebook may be seen by some athletes as too professional or inauthentic. Twitter’s interactivity (Hambrick et al., 2010), however, separates it from apps like TikTok, and even the popularity of these apps shift, Twitter’s distinct features still enable the site to hold value, particularly within the sports media industry. Coche (2017) argues that the “public aspect of Twitter and its popularity among sports stars” has increased Twitter’s “status in the sports world” (p. 92). The app has become a thriving space for athletes to interact with journalists and promote representations of themselves that best align with their identity, even if some athletes are finding success in other places.

Twitter has been extensively analyzed in sports media, though most studies focus on professional athletes (Coche, 2014a, 2014b; Hull, 2014). Previous research suggests that women athletes have historically embraced Twitter as a space to “build a multifaceted identity,” one that integrates their personal, professional and athletic lifestyles in a public holistic way (Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2015, p. 192). The findings from this study add to this understanding of self-representation on Twitter and challenge the notion that women use the platform to exclusively promote lifestyle imagery or non-sporting content (Hambrick et al., 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Instead, these results show that Twitter has great potential to draw interest and serve as a platform for athletes to share their lived experiences as athletes while pushing back on media that misrepresents them.

More than Instagram or TikTok, Twitter brings athletes more regularly into contact with the traditional institutions of sports communication, including athletic departments, schools, and sports journalism. As a result, Twitter becomes an important locus for the remediation of the image of women athletes, particularly given the power afforded elite student athletes in the dawning era of NIL. Hall's theory of self-representation (1997) provided a valuable framework through which to view such athletic-centric and sports-adjacent content on Twitter, though a recognition of Crenshaw's understanding of intersectionality (1991) and Butler's concept of gender as a performance (1990) also enabled the analysis of Boston's posts as well as Haley Cavinder's interaction with Candance Buckner. This chapter overall demonstrates the way that identity differs by athlete and by sport but how, generally, all of these athletes engage with their teams, the media and reporters to present themselves in ways that both reproduce and reject traditional media representations of women in sports.

Chapter 6: Reporters' use (or lack thereof) of athlete-produced social media content

While the athletes in this sample engaged frequently with reporters on social media, and reporters occasionally responded back to athletes on Twitter (See Chapter 5), athlete content was rarely absorbed or integrated into the print and digital media coverage of these same athletes. Of the 3,630 articles published about the ten athletes in this study from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022, only 33 included embedded social media posts from the athletes themselves.

Hall (1997) argues that media play a role in influencing culture by reproducing the perspectives of those in power, and this chapter explores the relationship between journalists — the traditional storytellers in sport — and the content produced by the athletes during the first year of NIL. This chapter analyzes the way in which reporters incorporated athlete-produced content into their media coverage and how athletes were then represented in such coverage. Previous research suggests that reporters frequently write articles about information contained in athlete social media posts (Sanderson et al., 2015), but this chapter goes further and assesses not just when journalists report on athletes' posts but when they embed athlete posts into their articles. This chapter ultimately answers the second research question concerning journalistic use of athlete voice through social media and concludes that hegemonic norms and expectations run through both athlete self-representation and the limited reproduction of that self-representation in traditional media.

The intersections among hegemony, gender and sports demonstrated through media coverage of these athletes serve as a focal point of this chapter. The first part of this chapter discusses how rarely journalists embedded social media clips produced by early NIL adopters Haley and Hanna Cavinder and Dunne in their coverage. Journalists who selected to embed social media clips and links from Dunne and the Cavinders' accounts exclusively chose photos and videos that showed Dunne and the Cavinder twins in competition-adjacent or lifestyle settings, never in a game or practice. This representation matched the themes of self-representation promoted by the Cavinder twins and Dunne generally across their social media feeds, suggesting a mutual relationship between the athlete and the reporter that served to further representations of hegemonic norms.

The second section of this chapter further explores the role and representation of the athlete influencer, addressing when and how journalists repurposed content from basketball stars Sedona Prince, Paige Bueckers and Aliyah Boston. All three of these athletes came to be defined by the press in different ways, with race and gender playing a role in these portrayals. The final section of the chapter explains how participation in a mega-sporting event such as the Olympics can inspire more engagement with women athletes. Through a case study of Sunisa Lee, the only athlete in this sample to compete in the Olympics, this last section evaluates how Lee's self-representations of her Olympic experiences were reproduced by the press even before she began her college career and how reporters wrote about those self-representations in ways that further gendered Lee in the sporting space. This chapter overall analyzes instances when journalists used athlete social media directly, as

opposed to a more general content analysis of all coverage of these ten athletes. The relationship between athlete self-representation and the reproduction of that self-representation by journalists is the key focus of this analysis. The chapter ultimately contributes to the broader understanding of women's representation in sports media, identifying the still largely untapped potential for athletes to impact media coverage of themselves through social media in the age of NIL.

Reducing early NIL adopters to the 'influencer' label

Olivia Dunne saw her popular social media content picked up by journalists and embedded just twice in the 71 total stories about her during the first year of the NCAA's new NIL policies (Ifeanyi, 2022; Weiss, 2021). Similarly, Hanna and Haley Cavinder, who also earned attention for signing early NIL deals, had their social media content repurposed by journalists three times in the articles about them published during the same time period (Boost Mobile, 2021; Niesen, 2021; Towey, 2021). In all of the articles about Dunne and the Cavinder Twins that included their own content, journalists focused primarily on the 'influencer' status of Haley and Hanna Cavinder and Olivia Dunne. Their success in the NIL era, which was presented as initially unexpected or surprising because of their gender, was consistently attributed to their TikTok fame, as opposed to their on-the-court results or even a combination of their athletic acumen and digital savviness. This finding aligns with previous research that suggests women have been 'othered' in sports media and presented in ways that diminish their athleticism (Fink, 2014; Daniels, 2012; Bruce, 2012), but these case studies complicate this understanding further by

exploring the ways in which such ‘othering’ by journalists reflects sentiments from the self-representation of these three athletes themselves.

A patriarchal sports media culture values, highlights and amplifies male athletes, particularly those who align with cultural expectations of masculinity and strength (Bruce, 2012). This ingrained gender hierarchy led sports officials and legal experts to assume that men would quickly outpace women in the NIL era of college sports, potentially raising Title IX concerns (Boston, 2021a). Jessop and Sabin (2021), however, demonstrated that such hypotheses would likely be unfounded given the success of women athletes in building brands on social media more generally. They cite the United States Women’s National Soccer Team (USWNT) as a historical example of a group of women who successfully used social media to market themselves as a brand more well-known than their male counterparts. The USWNT was able to increase interest in the sport of soccer, grow an audience and negotiate more substantial contracts because of the power and fame the team gained through self-promotion online. Women college athletes, while not able to negotiate professional contracts, have a similar potential to increase their fan base and generate revenue through social media at a rate equal or beyond their male counterparts. NIL offers women athletes in college the opportunity to “enter the market and align themselves with companies, agencies, and representatives who want to invest their capital to generate the most value for the women’s sport athletes,” creating a new platform and audience for women athletes and women’s sports (Jessop & Sabin, 2021, p. 282). They are no longer reliant on external sources for representation in the

NIL era. Instead, women athletes have the potential to create their own content and find great success.

Dunne and the Cavinder twins demonstrate just how marketable women athletes can become in the NIL era. Despite their popularity, however, reporters still presented their fame as something unexpected, different and unique. For instance, in an article published in *FastCompany* on March 3, 2022, journalist KC Ifeanyi (2022) introduced readers to NIL policies through the lens of college basketball player Adrien Nunez, a starter for the University of Michigan. Ifeanyi explained that “it’s clear to see a path toward lucrative NIL deals for athletes in Division 1 schools, particularly in sports such as football and basketball.” Ifeanyi presents the success of men’s sports and male student athletes as natural and assumed. This hegemonic perspective is rooted in a narrative of male exceptionalism that serves to position women as ‘other’ simply because of their gender (Kane & Park, 1992).

Ifeanyi did ultimately introduce athletes like Dunne and the Cavinder twins in his NIL reporting, all of whom have more followers than Nunez and have earned similar athletic accolades, by linking to their social media accounts. His general thesis, though, that male athletes are likely to excel aligns with cultural norms, expectations and other media coverage suggesting the men are more interesting and valuable subjects in sports, a narrative that Kane (1988) argues is ideologically structured as opposed to natural or permanent. Such representation of women athletes as secondary in sports “have worn very deep representational grooves that...are difficult to ‘break, contest or interrupt’” (Bruce, 2015, p. 383; Grossberg, 1986). Thus

media members contribute to the reproduction of such hegemonic norms and expectations, reinforcing the gender hierarchy in society (Hall, 1997).

Even stories that introduced athlete NIL opportunities through the perspective of women athletes expressed surprise that such individuals were finding success. For example, in an article titled “Why women and social media stars are becoming college sports’ big winners,” Joan Niesen (2021) wonders if fans would see “dollars fall easily to football and men's basketball stars and leave women and athletes in smaller sports scrambling for loose change?” in this new era. This assumption is likely informed by messaging from other sports media outlets and networks that promote male athletes as popular and profitable (Cooky et al., 2021). Niesen, however, does note that, in the case of NIL opportunities, women are not only leading the way, but they “stand to benefit the most from the NIL rules” because “unlike big name basketball and football stars, they will not go on to lucrative professional sports careers.” She describes the Cavinder twins as two of the athletes likely to continue to thrive in this new era, and she offers readers a summary of their brand by describing a series of TikToks posted by the Cavinders in March of 2020, during COVID, where the twins are dribbling in sync at their home. These videos were the “domino effect” for the Cavinders’ careers: the clips went viral, attracting a wave of new viewers and prompting the twins to create more competition-adjacent and lifestyle content (Niesen, 2021). Niesen did not discuss the Cavinders’ basketball identities in her reporting, and the twins did not focus on this aspect athletic in their self-representation either.

In explaining her popularity to Niesen, Hanna Cavinder did not address her athleticism or sporting expertise. Instead, she said: “I just think people really like twins.” Cavinder does not credit her business sense or her basketball skills in this comment, but she does go on to acknowledge (and express pride in) the fact that the popularity of her and her twin counters trends of male athlete popularity in sports though. “We’re not male athletes,” Cavinder said. “So [we] kind of just [show] the younger generation, it doesn’t matter what gender you are or sport you play, you can make a brand for yourself” (Niesen, 2021). This series of quotes show that the Cavinder twins have an awareness of the hegemonic norm of male superiority of sports. They position themselves as an exception to the norm, though neither they nor reporters suggest that followers were drawn to them because of their skills, likely a result of a general hegemonic expectation surrounding women’s and men’s potential for popularity in athletics. Beal’s (1996) suggests that female athletes have “internalized the dominant ideology of sport as a male social role” (p. 212) and thus reproduce such notions of athleticism through gendered lenses in their own way. The media coverage of the Cavinders’ fame and the ways in which the Cavinders talk about such fame demonstrates the pervasiveness of the patriarchy in sports and the impact on such hegemony in women’s understanding of themselves as athletes.

Because of the patriarchal norms within sports media, women who did go on to find success in the NIL era were then presented by reporters as popular stars because of their social media activity and their femininity, as opposed to because of the status that comes from being Division I athletes who *also* have social media accounts. For instance, Ifeanyi explained that the reason women could have success is

because “a substantial portion of influencer deals are in industries that typically lean more toward a female audience, e.g. fashion, beauty, and lifestyle,” suggesting that women athletes who expressed femininity were more likely to become popular for brands than women who distanced themselves from this gendered expectation. Despite the fact that the NIL policy itself served to create opportunities for college *athletes*, Ifeanyi’s quote represents Dunne, in particular, as an influencer first and an athlete second.

To demonstrate his point about the marketability of Dunne, Ifeanyi embedded a TikTok video of Dunne (2021p) doing ‘beach-nastics,’ performing a back handspring in the bikini on the beach. This clip was far from Dunne’s (2021f) most popular TikTok and generated 223.7K likes in comparison to her most viewed clip, a video of her answering fan questions in a crew-neck hoodie in her dorm that generated 1.8 million likes. The ‘beach-nastics’ clip, however, serves to *show* Dunne’s femininity in a visual way, representing her femininity and her athleticism in a defined, gendered manner. Dunne’s self-representation across her TikTok and Instagram accounts convey a similar message (See Chapter 4), as she showcases her athleticism in a way that is filtered to present perfection and femininity. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a, 2018b) argue that such self-representations are common amongst elite women on social media, though little research has explored the impact of such self-representation on the media coverage of these athletes, particularly in the NIL era. Ifeanyi’s use of this particular clip of Dunne’s presents her as someone with athletic skill but also someone who clearly aligns with feminine expectations and thus, he argues, serves as a marketable figure in the NIL space.

This tension between expressions of femininity and expressions of athleticism — and the notion that these two traits are independent — consistently came through in much of the media coverage about Dunne and the Cavinder twins, particularly in stories that reported on their NIL deals and introduced these athletes to the mainstream media audience. For instance, in a story titled “American Eagle Launches Student Athlete Influencer Program After NCAA Relaxes Rules,” the journalist Geoff Weiss (2021) explained that Dunne, along with two football players, signed an endorsement deal with American Eagle. This signing generated news coverage because it represented one of the first deals signed by collegiate athletes in this new era of NCAA sports. However, Dunne was not introduced in the same way as her male counterparts. Southern California football player Kedon Slovis and Auburn football player Tank Bigsby were identified to readers as a “USC Trojans quarterback” and an “Auburn Tigers running back respectively.” Dunne, on the other hand, was identified as an “LSU gymnast (and TikTok star)” (Weiss, 2021). Weiss (2021) then linked to Dunne’s TikTok, directing viewers to consume her content, though he did not comment on any one specific post.

Weiss’ article was short and did not include any additional information about Dunne, Slovic or Bigsby. The fact that Dunne was introduced as an athlete and a social media personality while her male counterparts are introduced simply as athletes, however, is notable. Meân & Kassing (2008) argue that male athletes, regardless of their actual athletic performance, are viewed as biologically elite and superior, logical choices for a company looking to sponsor an athlete. Dunne’s description as both an athlete and a social media star, on the other hand, highlights the

challenges facing women athletes who have to have extra traits that make them ‘ideal.’

This labeling of Dunne as desirable because of her social media following requires further evaluation. Though her added biographical information is accurate and even complementary, the fact that the label only applied to Dunne stands out as distinctive. Weiss (2021) suggests that her role as an athlete was only part of the reason why American Eagle signed her, while Bigsby and Slovis were signed because of their athleticism. Dunne’s achievements on the gym floor match, if not exceed, her male counterparts, but she is defined by her social media account equally to her athleticism in this article. Dunne’s popularity on social media did attract attention and may have been *one of* the reasons why companies signed her, but *Business Insider* journalist Stenberg (2021), in contrast to Weiss (2021), summarized Dunne’s appeal for businesses in a different way. Stenberg (2021) noted that Dunne is also a marketable ambassador because of her athletic skills, specifically her role as “an LSU gymnast and former member of the USA national gymnastics team.” He presents her as an elite athlete, one perfectly suited for NIL opportunities in collegiate sport. While this dissertation does not analyze why companies signed particular athletes, it does address branding through the lens of how women athletes self-represented themselves in this era of collegiate athletics and were, in turn, represented as brands or otherwise by journalists. The ways in which women athletes are represented during this early frenzy of NIL deals suggests to companies and the public which athletes have star power and why.

While Stenberg's (2021) representation of Dunne's athleticism is not particularly revolutionary or radical, his description of Dunne's role as an *athlete* stands in contrast to Weiss' (2021) representations of Dunne as an *athlete influencer*. In a hegemonic, male-dominated sporting culture, football players such as Bigsby and Slovich, those mentioned by Weiss, are presented and amplified as appropriate, expected ambassadors because of their participation in an Americanized, masculine sports. Media outlets have historically promoted men as ideal sporting figures and the most interesting, profitable and notable stars in culture. These representations ultimately "[rearticulate] dominant power" (Park & Shin, 2022, p. 40) and "[play] an important role in constructing the ideological meanings of femininity in sport" (Markula, 2009, p. 6), positioning women as secondary.

Journalists, however, continued to wrestle with labeling and defining these athletes, even in the rare coverage of their on-the-court activities. When Haley and Hanna Cavinder decided to transfer to Miami, for instance, Tim Reynolds (2022) of the Associated Press announced their decision by writing that "Basketball's Cavinder Twins say they'll transfer to Miami." Jenna Rothenstein, on the other hand, headlined her article about the move as "Social media sensations Haley and Hanna Cavinder commit to Miami" to describe the basketball players. Rothenstein (2022) was one of the few journalists to embed or directly quote from a social media post from the twins into her story, exposing readers to the Cavinders' self-representation and expression right away through a graphic from Instagram. The graphic showed the twins in a basketball uniform, posing in front of a Miami logo (Cavinder, 2022c). The combination of the graphic and the headline conveyed to readers that these "social

media sensations” are also basketball players, but the particular way in which this information is presented suggests that the social media element of their identity is how they are defined (Rothenstein, 2022). Daniels (2012) argues that women athletes have historically been portrayed in the media in one of two ways: either for their performance or for their sex appeal. Though Dunne and the Cavinder Twins were not necessarily sexualized in either of these two articles, the sentiment that women athletes are either seen by reporters as ‘women’ *or* ‘athletes,’ rather than both is expressed in this content. Given that the Cavinders, in particular, told reporters that they wanted to be seen as leaders with a “sporty side and [a] girly side” (Steinberg, 2021), media coverage that portrays those identities as contrasting is neither unexpected nor inherently problematic (as it suggests a representation authentic to the Cavinders), though it does present women as individuals who inevitably experience tension in their sporting identities. This is in contrast to male athletes, who by default are not problematized in this way within a hegemonic culture that associates masculinity with athleticism (Wolter, 2021).

Haley and Hanna Cavinder, much like Dunne, did gain fame and attention through their social media platforms in addition to their on-court performances, but the decisions of journalists to select one identity over another in their coverage of these athletes is notable. All three women were ultimately celebrated for their achievements through a gendered lens. Kane and Maxwell (2011) explain that sports journalism, in particular, “reproduce[s] gendered relations of power, values, and ideologies in the coverage and promotion of women's sports” (p. 202). In the case of this sample, Dunne and the Cavinders were presented as influencers first and athletes

second, an identity that cast them as ‘other’ and different from their male peers. This representation of Dunne and the Cavinder twins as lifestyle stars does not differ radically from the self-representation of these athletes, though future studies should continue to assess the complex ways in which women athletes are building their brands to incorporate all aspects of their personality, their femininity, their athleticism and their feminism.

Race, gender and influence in media engagement with women basketball players

Much like the Cavinder Twins and Dunne, Oregon’s Sedona Prince was similarly celebrated for her social media content, though her brand was presented slightly differently in articles that embedded her content. Prince was not described by her femininity or her potential to sign beautyware contracts. Instead, she was consistently introduced as the person who posted a viral, transcendent TikTok in March of 2021 highlighting the inequalities of the men’s and women’s tournament before NIL. In fact, of the 209 articles published about Prince from 2021-2022, 31 introduced Prince by mentioning her TikTok though only four of those articles actually embedded the video. This pattern is notable given that Prince remained active on social media from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022, but did not see any of those more recent posts embedded as often as her 2021 video. In addition to analyzing reporters’ use of Prince’s posts, this section also addresses the ways in which the self-representations of the two remaining basketball players in this sample, Paige Bueckers and Aliyah Boston, were included in their media overall representations. The gendered and racial connotation conveyed through such representations will also be addressed in this section.

Prince (2022b) self-identified as an influencer athlete on her own platforms, and she was praised by journalists for using her influence in media coverage from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022. Her praise, however, always tied back to her role as a basketball player, specifically her role as a basketball player in March of 2021. For example, in an article pushed by *Insider* on March 15, 2022, containing Prince's viral video, journalist Meredith Cash (2022) previewed the 2022 NCAA women's basketball tournament by rewinding back to 2021, linking to Prince's TikTok and identifying Prince as the "Oregon Ducks star" who exposed inequalities. Kane et al. (2013) notes that representations of women athletes that highlight 'competence' best align with how women athletes prefer to be represented. While Prince is not performing her sport in her viral video that became so popular in media coverage, even a full year later, the language used by journalists in coverage of this social media post portrays Prince in this empowering way, promoting her, her brand and women's sports more broadly. Notably, though, journalists almost never linked to Prince's content from the NIL era. She posted a total of 88 TikTok, eight Instagram photos and 197 tweets during the first year of NIL, including an anniversary tweet to celebrate her viral TikTok from 2021. Journalists did not express interest in this content. Prince became defined by her 2021 social media account during the first year of NIL, but, unlike Dunne and the Cavinder twins, at no point was her role as an athlete influencer presented in a way that took away from her identity as a basketball player.

Prince's posts were embedded more often than articles about fellow basketball stars Paige Bueckers and Aliyah Boston, but both of those athletes were covered

frequently overall more than Prince. Bueckers generated 897 articles about her in the 2021-2022 calendar year, while Boston inspired 729 articles. Social media posts from both athletes were included in these articles a total of four times, all of which came in articles published in March and April 2022 during the championship season for collegiate women's basketball. The social media posts included in these stories related both to the athletes' performance on the court, and, notably, the racial inequality and privilege in media representations of women's basketball. Boston, in particular, published an article of her own in *Newsweek* in June 2022 in which she discussed the inequalities facing Black women in sports and linked to her Instagram account. She wrote in her article: "Sometimes, as Black female athletes, we don't get the attention that we deserve, when it comes to the media and even some awards. On social media, some people always have something to say. I try not to look at those things, but it's a reality, so it's something that Black female athletes have to think about" (Boston, 2022f). Previous research suggests, in the WNBA in particular, White athletes receive twice as much coverage as Black players, even when Black players outperform White players (Isard & Melton, 2021). Boston presented herself through this article as someone who recognizes these disparities but is committed to making positive change on the court and in the media.

Boston's (2022f) *Newsweek* article was one of just two articles across the 729 stories about Boston published during this year that included a reference to her social media content, and while this number is on par with athletes like Dunne and the Cavinder Twins, Boston was not promoted as an influencer in the same way that her peers were. The only other mention of her social media accounts came in a *Yahoo*

article in which she joked with fans through an Instagram comment about breaking the rebound record. Boston maintained an active social media presence throughout the first year of NIL, posting 52 Instagram photos, 40 TikToks and 229 tweets. She also used her Twitter account throughout the first year of NIL to push back on stereotypes and misrepresentation at various points throughout the year as well. Yet, no journalist included her in the conversation of top NIL prospects in the first month of July 2021, and her NIL potential was not mentioned until September. Her tweets also did not generate news coverage in the way that Sanderson et al. (2015) suggests that they have for other athletes. While she was not explicitly marginalized in any of the coverage that included her tweets, she also was not presented as marketable or as popular as other star women athletes in the immediate days of NIL.

Boston received less coverage, and less early NIL attention, overall than standout women's basketball star Paige Bueckers, even following a season in which she outperformed Bueckers and won a national title. Bueckers came into college as one of the most highly-regarded players in the game and was someone tagged early in 2021 as an ideal NIL ambassador. Bueckers publicly recognized the role that race played in women's basketball coverage and her own promotion as a celebrity. Bueckers' social media content was shared by reporters just twice, the same amount as Boston, but the content included in such posts offers insight into how Bueckers was perceived by reporters and how she elected to present herself. For instance, in a *Women's Wear Daily* article published on April 1 with the headline "Men's and Women's Fashion NIL Deals in March Madness 2022 So Far," Bueckers, along with five other athletes, were highlighted as stars "who scored NIL deals in fashion"

(Widjojo, 2022). The reporter elected to include a video from Bueckers' Instagram in this article, and the clip went beyond fashion (and sports), offering readers a glimpse into Bueckers' mindset. Bueckers is seen sitting on a stool in this clip, describing her perspective on the phrase "built different." Nearly halfway through the clip, when talking about supporting her teammates and peers, Bueckers, unprompted, discusses the inequitable treatment of Black women in the sport of basketball. She expresses a desire to use her "white privilege" to help amplify the stories and experiences of her peers who may not have the same platform or receive the same attention (StockX, 2022). This quote expresses Bueckers' awareness of the impact her whiteness has on media coverage of her as an athlete as well as her likelihood to secure sponsorship deals. McClearen (2018) explains that "Straight, white, able-bodied, powerful femininity maintains its 'marketability'" and this trend can be seen across sports (p. 944). Bueckers' whiteness and the whiteness of other NIL leaders, however, often went undiscussed in the media coverage surrounding the start of the NIL era (Moore, 2021). Athletes like Dunne and the Cavinder twins were boxed into the role of social media influencers, while Bueckers, who was presented more athletically than her peers, still benefited both in coverage and in expected NIL success because of her race. Boston, on the other hand, was not seen in this way. She was an athlete and not even covered equally to Bueckers in that role.

Though this chapter focused on the relationship between self-representation and representation and the way athletes were presented in articles that included their social posts, as opposed to the general media coverage of these athletes, issues of race cannot be ignored. Bueckers was represented as a star, a calm, confident, intense

leader who respected the game and acknowledged her privilege. For example, in an article by *USA Today*'s Nancy Armour (2022) on April 2, 2022, Bueckers' on-court success became the frame through which her story was told. Bueckers was not, as is often the case with women athletes, presented as overly emotional, vulnerable or focused on appearance. Instead, she was "as big a superstar as any professional athlete in Minnesota," someone whose celebrity was "next level" (Armour, 2022). This athleticism, combined with Bueckers' celebrity status, made her an ideal NIL candidate, and Armour (2022) notes that "Her NIL deals, including one with Gatorade, are believed to be worth close to seven figures." In telling Bueckers' story of success, Armour (2022) embedded a tweet from Bueckers from high school to visually represent her presence on the court. That tweet showed Bueckers in 2020 through four photos, one of her standing on the court, one of her playing, one of the fans, and one of her and her teammates in a lifestyle setting. The coverage of Bueckers in this particular example highlights her skills, her strength and her personality and serves as an example of the kind of holistic coverage that could continue as NIL grows and women's voices are given more weight in the media.

However, the findings from this study also suggest that media coverage of women more generally in the NIL era remains ingrained in the issues of racism and patriarchy that have come to define women in sports media over the last several decades (McClearen, 2018; Moore, 2021). Women are marginalized, but women of color are marginalized even further (Crenshaw, 1991). The few examples of holistic, positive media coverage in this sample came in stories about women such as Bueckers and Prince, despite the fact that all of the women in this sample created

their own media that expressed their ideal self-representation. Further research is needed to see if this social media content produced during the NIL era has an impact on representation in the years to come or if the trends from this study — that athlete content is not frequently reproduced by journalists to challenge hegemonic norms — continues.

Much like Dunne, Haley and Hanna Cavinder, Paige Bueckers, Sedona Prince and Aliyah Boston rarely saw their social posts embedded into articles about them, yet the posts from their accounts that were included presented them in a different light than their early NIL adopter peers. Sedona Prince was represented almost exclusively through the lens of her viral 2021 TikTok that highlighted the inequalities between the men's and women's basketball tournaments, while UConn's Paige Bueckers was lauded as the face of NIL for the sport because of her success in the 2020-2021 season. Boston, who would go on to win the 2022 NCAA women's basketball tournament, was seen almost exclusively as an athlete, rather than an influencer, though she was portrayed as someone expected to have NIL success later, particularly during the NCAA tournament. Both Boston and Bueckers addressed the racial inequalities in women's basketball, and while their voices were not extensively reproduced through traditional media, demonstrating a weak connection between the press and content produced by athletes in the NIL era, the representations that were reposted provide further insight into how reporters viewed these athletes in a patriarchal sports media environment.

The Olympic exception

Of the women in this sample, Auburn's Sunisa Lee is the only one to have competed in the Olympics, the biggest stage for women's gymnastics and one of the few arenas where women are represented more equitably, at least on television. Rooted in nationalism and patriotism, the Olympics provide a unique period where women are more frequently embraced by their home country and promoted as national icons. Reporters published 1,225 total articles about Sunisa Lee from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022, and engaged with her social media posts nearly twice as often during this time period compared to any other woman in this sample, likely a result of her participation and success in the Olympics. O'Shea and Maxwell (2021) argue that "media coverage of women's sport is often enhanced in the build-up to and during the Olympic Games" because "nationalistic values and pride can overshadow gender norms and alleviate some of their limiting effects" (p. 67; Wensing & Bruce, 2003). Cooky (2021) agrees, explaining that "nationalism can sometimes trump sexism, or even gendered racism in media coverage of women's sports" (p. 14), leading to "celebratory" coverage "generally of high quality," focusing on the athletes who won as opposed to misrepresenting or representing poorly athletes who lost (Cooky et. al, 2021, p. 16). The following section explores the media coverage that surrounded Lee during this season, particularly the ways in which reporters used her social media posts to complement their coverage of her athletic expertise and lifestyle, and how such coverage challenges and reinforces notions of hegemony and nationalism.

The first article to repost one of Lee's social media posts came on July 28, nearly a month after the NCAA passed its new NIL policy and just after Sunisa Lee

joined Simone Biles, Jordan Chiles and Grace McCallum as an Olympic silver medalist in the women's gymnastics team final. The journalist described Lee as the "youngest member of the squad and the group's uneven bars specialist," and included an Instagram post from the Minnesota native that included the following caption: "olympic silver medalists. the fighting 4 ❤️ beyond proud of this team. in my heart, we are winners. we fought til the end and didn't give up. tonight may not have gone how we wanted it to but we stepped up to the plate and give it our all. best team i could've asked for" (Cash, 2021). Lee would go on to earn bronze on bars and win gold in the women's all-around, but, in this moment, her relationship with her team served as the focus of the article.

This particular article did not contain any of the sexist elements that Bruce (2016) has identified as historically problematic. Andrews (1998), however, notes that Olympic coverage of women athletes on NBC has historically focused on their relationships and emotions, as opposed to their athletic performance. This editorial decision decreased the spotlight on the athletic achievements and physical feats of these individuals, though the Olympic branding seen in Lee's embedded Instagram post did add a symbol of athletic expertise to the representation. While this particular article about Lee ran in print and not on television, the focus on teammates and friends stands out. The journalist did not address the specifics of each athlete's performance but instead used the social media posts from the athletes to capture their voices and emotions and share those feelings with readings.

While the representation of women in the Games is more equitable than in non-Olympic events, the Olympics still reproduces hints of gendered stereotypes and

narratives (Andrews, 1998). An article published by *The Independent* on July 29 titled “People are obsessed with Sunisa Lee winning gold medal while wearing acrylic nails and fake eyelashes” demonstrates this tension in a particularly striking way (Ritschel, 2021). The reporter, who published the story after Lee’s championship all-around performance, celebrated the champion but did so in a way that recentered the story around her visual appearance with the following lede: “Team USA gymnastics fans are applauding Sunisa Lee after the 18-year-old Minnesota native won a gold medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics while wearing acrylic nails and eyelash extensions” (Ritschel, 2021). Lee’s own perspective on her performance, which did not address her nails or eyelashes directly at all, was included near the end of the article via an Instagram post of her kissing her gold medal (Lee, 2021c).

The embedded tweets from fans who called attention to her looks came first in this article though. The fan tweets included comments like “I can barely make it through normal tasks without breaking a nail but Sunisa Lee is out here absolutely nailing routines with a full set” and “Her NAILS have Olympic Rings on them. She did all that with THESE NAILS. Y'all. We Stan a Queen. suni lee just won the all around gold medal with a full set of nails. my queen.” Media coverage such as this *Independent* article that focused on appearance for women served to ‘other’ them and cast them as different (Fink, 2014). One commenter whose tweet was included in article recognized that Lee should not be defined by her nails but still applauded the athlete for her appearance, writing “Obviously this is secondary to her phenomenal talent but the fact that I can't even open a seltzer can with acrylics on and Suni Lee just won gymnastics gold with these nails... a true icon.” This fan tweet came by way

of a quote tweet of ESPN, and ESPN's original tweet contained a photo collage of Lee celebrating her Olympic gold within a competition-adjacent setting by the gym floor. Andrews (1998) notes that media coverage of the Olympics overall have served as a "[manufactured] a stereotypical *feminine*...spectacle" since 1996, particularly on television, in an effort to capture a greater female viewership (p. 11). Though the media coverage in this sample is focused on digital reporting, as opposed to television reporting, the theme of a 'feminine spectacle' comes through in this particular article.

The Olympics do not represent a perfect media space, as patriarchal traditions of sports media still linger, but reporters who use athlete posts, both to amplify their voice and provide an alternative perspective, can give women even more of a platform to share their experience. For example, even in *The Independent* article that primarily discussed Lee's nails and eyebrows, Lee's embedded Instagram post allowed readers to see her own thoughts about her achievement. Lee's photo showed her in a competition-adjacent setting in her Team USA uniform with a gold medal around her neck, with a caption that read: "OLYMPIC ALL-AROUND CHAMPION. so surreal. i can't thank you all enough for the love and support. thank you to everyone who has believed in me and never gave up on me. this is a dream come true 🥹💖 WE DID IT 🥹" (Lee, 2021c). She showed herself as an athlete first and foremost, a theme that aligns with Smith and Sanderson's (2015) findings on athlete self-representation on social media. Lee is not in action in this photo, but she signals to her viewers that she's a competitive gymnast, one who wins medals on the world stage. While the Olympics in particular represent a unique space for women athletes to generate coverage, and, as this dissertation demonstrates, to have their own voices

included through their social media posts, the Olympic media members do still occasionally focus on “beauty rather than brawn” (Creedon, 2014, p. 714) for women athletes. Lee’s post contrasted with the theme of the *Independent* article highlights this reality.

Social media plays a notable role in athlete branding and digital storytelling, but Lee told a journalist at *Indy100.com* that she planned to stay offline after taking bronze because she wanted to focus on her performance. Interestingly, this article provided some insight on how Lee views social media as a whole. Twitter, she said, was the most distracting platform. "I'm probably going to delete Twitter. Instagram is not as bad because I can't really see what people say, but [on] Twitter it's just so easy to see everything. So I'm probably going to have to end up deleting that," she said (Sinay, 2021). TikTok, though, served as a “getaway app” for the star. Lee posted 162 times on Instagram, 326 times on Twitter and 70 times on TikTok overall during the 2021-2022 season, with nine of her Instagram posts, 46 of her tweets and 13 of her TikToks coming during the two-week Olympic period from July 26 - August 11, 2022. One of her TikToks, a video from July 29 showing her holding her gold medal and eating pizza in her Team USA sweatshirt, was included in this *Indy100.com* article as a way to show Lee’s point about the fun nature of TikTok (Sinay, 2021; Lee, 2021d). *Rolling Stone* also used her TikTok to promote a documentary series about Lee (Chan, 2021). The social media content from Lee included by reporters showed her in both competition-adjacent and lifestyle ways, though she represented Team USA in all of these clips. The Olympic stage and Lee’s role as a member of Team USA undoubtedly contributed to a greater spotlight on the gymnast. Though the Olympics

do show that media companies can cover women more extensively, gender differences and hegemonic masculinity continue to varying degrees across such coverage.

While Sunisa Lee saw her social media posts populated in the greatest number of articles from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022, some athletes did not have any of their posts repurposed by journalists or integrated into media coverage about themselves. For instance, reporters did not use any content from Jocelyn Alo's account, despite the fact that she was the most frequent tweeter in the entire sample. Journalists (Aber, 2022) did embed Oklahoma Softball (2022a, 2022b) tweets that Alo retweeted, but none of the posts came originally from Alo's account. Sarah Fuller and Trinity Thomas, both active users of TikTok, Instagram and Twitter, also did not have any of their social posts reappear in traditional media coverage. Fuller and Thomas compete in two distinct sports, soccer and gymnastics, but both of their sports remain popular in the United States, particularly during the major international events, such as the World Cup and the Olympics (O'Shea & Maxwell, 2021; Wensing & Bruce, 2003; Coche & Tuggle, 2016; Cooky, 2018). Neither Fuller nor Thomas competed in those kinds of events during this study, though their accounts still told nuanced stories about their experiences as collegiate athletes and representatives of their universities.

Twitter, Instagram and TikTok all serve as publicly available information sites for these reporters and create an opportunity for journalists to engage with women's voices and self-representation to a larger degree. Previous research suggests that journalists rely on Twitter as a way to "tap into the private sphere of well-known or

newsworthy people, ranging from celebrities to politicians” (Broersma & Graham, 2013, p. 460), and while their study focused on news media coverage more generally, as opposed to sports coverage only, the same principles apply to sports news. Journalists monitor social media sites as part of their day-to-day operations. Tweets and other social posts do not dominate media coverage, but Paulussen and Harder (2014) found that tweets of athletes, in particular, appeared in news stories 13% of the time. None of the athletes in this sample, not even Olympic gold medalist Sunisa Lee, saw their posts used to this degree. Athletes engage with reporters on Twitter and amplify content from journalists that they admire, but journalists rarely reciprocate in their traditional media coverage. The content produced by athletes may still inform coverage, and journalists have written notable, controversial articles about the self-representation of women in this sample (Bucker, 2021; Streeter, 2022), but the findings in this study show that the exact photos and videos produced by athletes are only occasionally included directly in such coverage.

This chapter ultimately demonstrates that, despite the success of women athletes in the NIL era and the active involvement of these athletes in telling their stories on social media, reporters hardly ever incorporate women’s social media posts in their coverage. These findings only address media coverage of these ten athletes from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022, and thus do not suggest that media coverage of women athletes has decreased since NIL. Rather, these findings demonstrate that content posted by women during NIL has not necessarily led to a significant inclusion of women’s content in media coverage of these athletes.

All of the ten women generally represented themselves primarily in lifestyle across all three social media platforms during the first year of NIL, with hints of athleticism coming through across platforms in various ways, and reporters reflected this in their coverage in the rare instances when they incorporated social media into their coverage. Bruce (2012) suggests that “entrenched gender ideologies and dominant representations of sport have remained highly resistant to change” (p. 128), and the findings in this study, particularly the findings concerning media representation of Dunne and the Cavinder twins, mirror this conclusion. Such dominant ideologies and representations of women permeated throughout both the self-representation and the representation of these athletes in this study to some degree, though some women in this sample reproduce traditional gender norms more so than others (See Chapters 4 & 5). Future research is needed to see if and how athletes increase their impact on the reporting about themselves as NIL continues or if reporters continue to engage only sparingly with athlete content in their writing.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

When the NCAA passed its new NIL policies on July 1, 2021, reporters speculated that this change would upend college sports and transform the NCAA forever (Smith, 2021; Hurt, 2021). In the short term, however, these updated NIL rules made just one major change: they gave athletes the ‘right to publicity’ to their own brands. Palmieri (2021) explains that the phrase ‘name, image and likeness’ encompasses “an athlete's ability to ‘sell [his or her] NILs to entities for a host of activities other than in-game broadcasts: including endorsements, advertisements, items of clothing, appearing at clinics, appearing in video games, or commercializing an athlete's social media site’” (p. 1610). This concept of ‘right to publicity’ made NIL a subject worth studying from a media perspective. The ways in which athletes told stories, promoted themselves and engaged a fanbase influenced their ability to generate profits.

Women athletes quickly emerged as leaders in this new space. Olivia Dunne, Haley Cavinder and Hanna Cavinder launched themselves to the top of the list of most followed athletes on social media on July 1, 2021, signing early deals and gaining vast popularity (Rovell, 2021; Top college athletes on Instagram, 2022; Top 100 college athletes with the biggest Instagram followings, 2021). Auburn gymnast Suni Lee also translated her Olympic success into college fame, and transcendent athletes like Sedona Prince and Sarah Fuller finally had the opportunity to convert their historic, record-breaking moments from the year before into revenue-generating opportunities. The policy change further enabled NCAA champions Trinity Thomas, Jocelyn Alo and Aliyah Boston to sell merchandise and create profitable content.

Paige Bueckers, the top woman athlete in the NCAA in 2021, created her own trademark 'Paige Buckets' after the updated NIL rules passed. All ten of these women built digital media brands online and capitalized on their name, image and likeness to generate profit.

This dissertation explored the way these women navigated these NIL opportunities and analyzed how they promoted nuanced self-representations of themselves on social media in this new era of college sport. This study also assessed how their self-representations were absorbed (or, more accurately, not absorbed) by traditional media outlets who covered these athletes. The goal of this study was to understand how women athletes challenged hegemonic norms and worked to claim their own power online. Hall's theory of representation suggests that visibility creates power, and the ways in which people, institutions and concepts are represented convey their role in society. This dissertation showed that women created their own representations, though much of their imagery still aligned with hegemonic representations of women in sports media. All ten athletes published more lifestyle content than athletic-centric content on TikTok and Instagram (see Chapter 4), but they did still symbolize their athletic involvement and expertise through photos of themselves in team gear or uniforms.

The athletes in this study maximized the features of each social media platform and altered their self-representation accordingly, posting more selfie-style trendy videos on TikTok talking about lifestyle, fashion and sports while simultaneously publishing filtered, curated, posed content on Instagram that further highlighted their life primarily away from the field of play. On Twitter, they

expressed their athletic identities more directly, engaging with media outlets, their own athletic departments and individual reporters to share scores, photos and videos from their athletic events with fans (see Chapter 5). Goffman's theory of self-presentation, particularly his concept of impression management, served as a useful framework through which to understand women's expressions of self on social media within a hegemonic, patriarchal culture. Additionally, Butler's understanding of gender as a performance and Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality were also critical in this analysis by providing a lens through which to view these repeated acts of cultural femininity online. This dissertation ultimately addresses how influencer culture, intersectionality, gender theory and media representation came together in the self-representation of collegiate women and how such identities are produced and reproduced within a patriarchal, capitalistic collegiate sports environment.

Much of the self-representation shared by the women in this study followed the complex patterns established by elite professional athletes such as Alana Blanchard, Serena Williams and Ronda Rousey (Thorpe et al., 2017; Cooky, 2018; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, 2018b; McClearen, 2021). The athletes in this dissertation profited from representations of traditional femininity, gaining financial capital and fame through the process. Varying themes of postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, third-wave feminism and popular feminism manifested in the content, with postfeminist imagery representing much of the material posted by Dunne and the Cavinder twins. Prince, on the other hand, expressed a more activist, third-wave feminist tone in some of her TikTok content as she created visibility for the queer community and blurred traditional gender boundaries in her content. Butler's theory

of gender performance enabled such an assessment of these representations of feminism and femininity. All of these self-representations, however, must be considered within the neoliberal, capitalist culture of the United States. McClearen (2021) argues that the “hierarchies of visibility” reward particular notions of femininity and value specific imagery of white, heterosexual women (p. 115). Individual women who elect to represent themselves in this way are not problematic themselves. Rather, they are replicating selected norms that allow them to express themselves and fit within cultural expectations.

Such self-representations, however, also generated media critique. After Dunne and the Cavinders in particular signed early deals, reporters used the thriving social media accounts of these women as a way to minimize their athletic achievements. They were presented as TikTok sensations or social media stars, while male athletes mentioned in the same articles were referred to as quarterbacks or basketball players (Weiss, 2021). Criticism continued for Dunne, in particular, following the completion of this study. In November 2022, the *New York Times* ran an article arguing that Dunne’s popularity only occurred because “sex sells,” and her content, according to the reporter, fit this trope (Streeter, 2022). Dunne, however, responded by reposting the image of her that ran in the *New York Times*, questioning if her leotard was “too much” or too sexy for the *Times* reporter (Hamilton, 2022). This exchange between Dunne and the reporter highlights the value of athlete self-representation in challenging media narratives.

The idea that athletes would use their platforms to share alternative representations of themselves inspired the research questions in this study, though

much of the findings suggest that athletes only rarely present themselves in ways that counter hegemonic norms directly. Instead, their self-representations as feminists, or even as exclusively athletes, were more subtle. Dunne (2021n) and Sarah Fuller (2021h), for instance, both advocated for empowerment through forms of popular feminism by critiquing sexist commentary and calling on women to ‘save the world’ through trendy TikToks. Their feminism represented palatable empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2019), as it came wrapped in humor and selfie-style clips, as opposed to more serious messages about inequality. Again, this is not to suggest that Dunne, Fuller or any of the women evaluated in this study bear responsibility for individually addressing and correcting the patriarchy. Their feminist content, and much of the feminist content produced by all of the athletes in this study, though contains specific, notable elements that must be assessed within a cultural context.

The data and findings from this dissertation make a number of notable contributions to literature on women’s representation in sports media. First, these conclusions expand on previous work conducted on women athlete self-representation to explore the way collegiate athletes expressed themselves on TikTok, Instagram and Twitter during an historic moment in the neoliberal sports market. Capturing women’s self-representation during the first year of the NCAA’s new NIL policies enables a deeper understanding of how women present themselves as athletes, influencers and feminists, and how all of those labels intersect in their expressions of self. The women in this sample both rejected and reproduced hegemonic norms, and this dissertation takes an intersectional feminist lens in the

evaluation of this content, addressing the ways in which race, gender and sexuality impact the self-representation produced by the women.

Additionally, little research exists on the ways in which college women athlete self-representation and social media imagery is then used by journalists in the reporting on these athletes, but this study provided insight into the rarity of such posts being repurposed (see Chapter 6). Further, this study shows that even when such content is included, that content can be used to uphold hegemonic norms. Previous scholars have used Hall's theory of representation (Bruce, 2015), Butler's understanding of gender performance (Meân & Kassing, 2008), Crenshaw's understanding of intersectionality (Isard & Melton, 2021) and Goffman's theory of self-representation (Hayes Sauder & Blaszk, 2015; Smith & Sanderson, 2015) in sports studies, but few studies have brought these theories together to assess athlete representation and self-representation in tandem, nor have scholars extensively studied the way such theories can inform understandings of collegiate athlete identity expression on social media in this new era for the NCAA. Women's self-representation and subsequent representation in the press during the first year of the NCAA's NIL policies is complex, nuanced and layered. This dissertation explores these intricacies for ten women athletes in particular and identifies how their self-presentation efforts and digital storytelling differed from one another and varied across platforms but still overlapped on key themes of feminism, femininity, power and athleticism.

Limitations

Studying this key sample of athletes provided specific insight into how a select group of individuals who signed early deals, experienced a historic moment, or achieved unprecedented success represented themselves during the first year of new NIL rules. To further explore the relationship among gender, media, sport and power in the collegiate space, future research should consider a larger sample across a range of college campuses and sporting environments. In particular, future research should consider the ways in which athletes at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) engage in athlete branding opportunities. This study explored the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and self-representation, though all of the athletes in this study competed at predominantly White institutions. Evaluating athlete self-representation with a larger sample of athletes who compete at HBCUs would potentially offer more robust insights on the role of race and identity in self-representation.

Previous scholars have explored the lived experiences of athletes at HBCUs (Cooper & Newton, 2021; Cooper, 2018), and future research could continue to assess the ways in which athletes at HBCUs have embraced personal storytelling and self-expression on social media. Gill & Hart (2015) argue that branding and brand exposure at HBCUs, particularly for football and basketball teams, is attractive and “unparalleled” because of the rich history associated with these programs and the culture surrounding these particular sporting events (p. 188). While HBCU teams lack the budget of predominantly White Power 5 Division I programs, the two strongest HBCU conferences have branding power that is “as strong proportionally” as any top

program in the country (Gill & Hart, 2015, p. 182). Analyzing the impact of NIL opportunities on athletes' brands at HBCUs would provide a more inclusive, richer analysis of the branding and brand growth for these athletes.

This study not only exclusively analyzed the self-representation of athletes at predominantly White institutions but the sample also only included only women. I made the decision to exclusively study women because women athletes are vastly underrepresented in traditional media (Cooky et al., 2021), and thus women's self-representation on social media serves a primary form of storytelling for these athletes. This study also addressed the ways in which these athletes engaged with elements of feminism in their self-representation and expressed themselves within a patriarchal sporting structure. Future research, however, could consider a comparative study between the self-representation of men and women. Further study should also be done on the self-representation of non-binary athletes and transgender athletes in the NCAA.

Additionally, this study only included athletes at the Division I level. NIL opportunities, however, are not reserved only for athletes in this category. Cocco & Moorman (2022), for instance, evaluated the NIL market for community college athletes in California, determining that male college athletes had the potential to make more money than women college athletes but that women community college athletes could generate a higher rate-per-post than their male counterparts. Their study concluded that community college athletes had the ability to monetize their name, image and likeness, thus future research also should continue to consider the ways in

which NIL also applies to DII, DIII, NAIA and community college athletes at both predominantly White institutions and HBCUs.

Much like Cocco & Moorman (2022)'s study, this dissertation did not include interviews with the athletes themselves or attempt to discover the exact mechanics of brand management for elite women college athletes. Seven of the ten athletes in this study link to a brand management company email address in their Twitter or Instagram bio, suggesting that they have a team supporting them in content creation or digital strategy. The role of these companies in athlete self-representation was not assessed in this study. This study also did not analyze the role of universities and their athletic departments in managing social media content for their athletes.

Instead, the 5,382 pieces of content generated by the athletes on social media in this study were collected and analyzed to generate conclusions about the self-representation of women in the age of NIL rules and the degrees to which such content reproduced and rejected hegemonic norms. Future research, however, should consider qualitative interviews with athletes to further understand their editorial choices and the decision-making process that they underwent before posting a given photo or video. Scholars could also opt to interview journalists about their reporting process when covering these athletes to further understand why and when they elected or did not elect to include athlete content in their articles. Though this study exclusively involved a content analysis as opposed to individual conversations with the athletes and reporters assessed in this project, the findings from this data do still provide a snapshot into the ways in which women athletes told their stories through images and videos and how they chose to represent themselves as public figures.

It also might be useful for future studies to consider the broader nature of how sport journalists may use social media content in their reporting without actually embedding social media content, i.e. whether journalists are influenced in their coverage by what they see on athletes' social media accounts or in fan comments and reactions. Lastly, this study captured one moment in time: the first year of the NCAA's new NIL policies. The ways in which the trends in women athletes' content changed and shifted over time as they solidified their brands and established their preferred business relationships and promotions would provide further context on how women athletes in particular navigate this new arena. The athletes in this study represented themselves to a growing audience of 50,000 or more fans online during their early 20's. They grew up in the public eye as prominent athletes while also setting models for the next generation in terms of NIL strategy and potential. Future research should explore the ways in which these varying self-representation and branding strategies have been reproduced by high school athletes and incoming college freshmen who hope to take advantage of NIL opportunities.

Implications for future research

All ten athletes in this dissertation continued on in their athletic careers following the completion of this study and remain valuable subjects for future study beyond the time frame assessed in this project. Their self-representation during the first year of updated NIL rules offered insight into their branding approach and their identity expression, but more research that considers the impact of these NIL policies beyond athlete self-representation of athleticism, femininity and feminism could

further contribute to an understanding of the impact of NIL changes in college sport. The findings from this study prompt additional questions about the impact of athlete self-representation on audience interest, improved equality in professional sports and athlete activism.

Audience and/or fandom studies evaluating interest in women's gymnastics, in particular, is a clear next step for this research agenda, given the success of the sport's top athletes in the NIL space and the growth of the sports in terms of participation and media coverage. Two of the ten athletes in this study, Suni Lee and Trinity Thomas, each completed their collegiate careers in gymnastics in 2023, with Lee forgoing her final two years of eligibility to pursue her goals of qualifying for a second Olympic Games and Thomas ending her NCAA experience as an All-American in the 2023 NCAA women's gymnastics championships. Both Thomas and Lee were pivotal in helping to draw attention and interest for their programs and selling out their home gyms. Olivia Dunne, the third and final gymnast in this study, also ended her 2023 season at the national championship with the LSU Tigers, where the team finished fourth in the country behind Oklahoma, Florida and Utah. Dunne now has the potential to come back for two more years of collegiate competition. Since the completion of this study, she, like Lee and Thomas, has helped sell out arenas, notably prompting the need for extra security after being mobbed by fans after her opening meet against Utah in Salt Lake City in November 2022. This study only evaluated athlete representation and self-representation through the lens of Hall, Goffman, Butler and Crenshaw's theoretical frameworks. Assessing content through these frameworks proved valuable, but the exact relationship between athlete-

produced content and increased fan interest was beyond the scope of this study.

However, audience interest and engagement offers an avenue for future exploration.

Outside of the Olympics, professional opportunities for gymnasts are limited. Media coverage of the sport is also rare outside of the collegiate season and the Olympic finals. But, athletes like Aliyah Boston, Jocelyn Alo and Sarah Fuller have opted to pursue professional careers in basketball, softball and soccer and now generate media coverage beyond their collegiate careers to varying degrees. Previous research suggests that media representations of women athletes in the WNBA in particular continue to be racialized in media coverage, leading to continued marginalization (Isard & Melton, 2021). Boston was drafted No. 1 in the WNBA after concluding her collegiate career by leading the South Carolina Gamecocks to the Final Four, and she'll likely be a prominent name in women's basketball as she continues her career. Scholars have also found the professional athletes in general typically represented themselves in ways that aligned with the athlete self-representation in this study: backstage, lifestyle-centric with some references to feminism and occasional references to athleticism (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, 2018b). The continued representation of athletes in professional leagues, including the WNBA, and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) and Women's Professional Fastpitch League (WPFL) — the organizations in which Fuller and Alo competed in after ending their collegiate careers in 2022 — from an intersectional perspective warrants further study.

Athletes who have opted not to go pro but continue to create their own media content also serve as notable sites of study. The Caviner twins, for instance, elected to

forgo their final season of collegiate eligibility and sit out the WNBA draft to pursue other business interests. They've expanded their brand beyond social platforms as well, launching a podcast called Twin Talk that could provide a site of future study. Previous research has assessed athlete-driven media networks such as *The Players' Tribune* and found that stars are driven to publish in these outlets with the goal of creating a more authentic image than the one created for them by traditional media (Schwartz & Vogan, 2017). Given the complexity of the Cavinder twins' self-representation demonstrated in this study, and the ways in which their imagery upholds Butler's theory of gender performance in the digital age, their next media ventures would also be worthy of study. The discussions between the Cavinder twins and their guests about business and entrepreneurship, similarly male-dominated industries, on their podcast and the way that they address ongoing conversations about NIL opportunities in college sport could further add to the understanding of the Cavinders' branding approach and identity expression.

Athlete use of media served as a key focal point of this dissertation, though the research questions in this study looked exclusively at how these ten women represented their athleticism, femininity and feminism. Feminist activism was noted in this study, but the potential for more research on athlete activism in the NCAA during the era of NIL remains an area ripe for additional study. Prince, who became famous when she called out the NCAA's inequitable treatment at the 2021 women's basketball tournament, will return to the court for her final year of eligibility as a member of the Texas Christian University (TCU) women's basketball program following her graduation from Oregon. Previous scholars have explored how Prince's

TikToks and activist voice challenged power structure within the NCAA (Scovel & Velloso, 2022) but her activism can also be read through a neoliberal lens (Stamm & Whiteside, 2022). The degree to which Prince continues her activist efforts would be a notable study.

Similarly, UConn's Paige Bueckers, who sat out this season with a knee injury, will return in the fall for at least one more season and has expressed elements of activism in her self-representation and in external media interviews. Though athlete activism was not directly assessed in this study, the results from this study suggest that a similar codebook could be used to assess representations of activism as a way to further contribute to the literature. Numerous scholars have previously studied the motivations and actions of athlete activists (Kluch, 2023; Martin et al., 2022), with Zirin (2022) noting that athlete activism on college campuses notably increased after both the 2016 Colin Kaepernick protest and the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020. Research should continue to address the ways in which athletes express activist identities, particularly in the era of NIL.

Feminist reflexivity

I approached this dissertation with the goal of understanding the nuances involved in the self-representation of elite women athletes in college sports during the era of these updated NIL rules. My perception of this subject, and my subsequent research, however, is no doubt shaped by my own experience as a college athlete and my background as a former social media coordinator with the NCAA. As a white, straight, cis-gender woman, my collegiate athlete journey presented far fewer

challenges than most. Hextrum (2021) notes that the college sport recruitment process, and the college sport experience in general, serve to support white, middle-to-upper class suburban students who pursue Olympic sports. Jackson (2018) offers a similar argument, explaining the NCAA's structure enables white women in Olympic sports to experience the benefits of a well-rounded student athlete experience while other athletes, namely Black and Brown male athletes in football and basketball, continue to be exploited for profit. The role of the media in perpetuating this system through coverage of certain sports and specific athletes cannot be ignored, but, nonetheless, the current structure of the NCAA does sustain a system in which some athletes experience inequitable benefits while others face additional expectations and challenges.

I recognize the privilege that I experienced as a college swimmer and acknowledge that my own experiences of feminism, femininity and athleticism are shaped by a narrow perspective of the life of a student athlete. Thus, I worked hard to set aside any judgment or critique of the women in this study whose self-representation I assessed. My codebook, informed by Goffman's theory of self-presentation, did not assign any more or less value to images of women in bikinis on the beach, photos of women winning national titles or anything in between. I applied the feminist perspective that there's "there's no one way to be a woman," to my analysis of this data (Synder, 2008, p. 185), understanding that such expressions of self are personal, layed and informed by individual lived experience. Each woman in this sample expressed herself in a unique way, and these representations together

demonstrate the range of digital storytelling possibilities for athletes in the age of NIL.

In an effort to further account for the added marginalization experienced by queer women and women of color in the NCAA in particular, I applied an intersectional approach to my analysis (Crenshaw). This step does not eliminate bias in the data analysis, as feminist research is never fully void of personal influence (Leavy, 2007), though it does aim to address the ways in which race, gender and sexuality influenced athlete self-representation situate the self-representation of these women within the broader context of collegiate sports culture.

Despite my efforts to diversify my sample and capture a range of student-athlete voices through an intersectional analysis, much of this dissertation still remains focused on Olivia Dunne, and her fellow early adopters, Haley Cavinder and Hanna Cavinder, three white women who found immediate success in the NIL era. These athletes hold great influence and reach a mass audience, but they are far from the other college athletes succeeding in this space, a point I aimed to make in this dissertation while still likely over-representing Dunne and the Cavinder twins in my analysis. Since completing this study, I've wrestled not only with the extent to which I write about Dunne and the Cavinder twins but the way in which I write about them.

All three women are unquestionably worthy of study as three of the most followed athletes in this NCAA. But describing them as 'early NIL adopters' felt less comfortable the further I went in the writing process. I critique journalists in Chapter 6 for reducing these three women to an 'influencer' label. I argue that describing them as TikTok 'sensations' or 'social media stars,' decreases the emphasis on their

athleticism, though I likely contributed to this norm by assigning them the ‘early NIL adopters’ label (Niesen, 2021; Rothenstein, 2022). Dunne and the Cavinder twins reproduced gender norms in much of their social media content, building a brand that expressed a performance of womanhood (Butler) in line with dominant expectations. Their content, however, also expressed a lived experience beyond their early NIL deals. While there is justification to include them in an ‘early NIL adopters’ category because of their fame on July 1, 2021 (Cavinder & Cavinder, 2021a, 2021b; Dunne, 2021a, 2021b), my instinct and decision to define these women by their social media suggests that I too was influenced by the narrative that their popularity stemmed from their visual appearance and popular videos, as opposed to their skill on the court. This dissertation, however, ultimately demonstrates that these women express a self-representation that is more complex than my initial assumptions and more nuanced than reporters implied in their initial coverage of these athletes.

All ten of the women in this study have had more success in the college sphere than I ever came close to achieving athletically, and all ten have voluntarily put themselves in the public eye. They faced their own unique challenges, some of which they’ve been public about (Boston, 2022f; Prince, 2021b), and, some, surely, that have remained private. The ways in which they choose to represent themselves and use their voice in this space, particularly in an era in which they can profit from their voice, is their choice. This dissertation aimed to explore those choices and amplify the ways in which women in the NCAA have engaged in NIL during this first year. Given that this project takes a feminist perspective on such analysis, such a feminist reflection is necessary.

Conclusion

This dissertation adds depth to what has been a simplified, reductionist and sensationalized national dialogue about women's representation in the NIL era (Streeter, 2022). The narrative that women athletes exclusively rely on the idea that 'sex sells' ignores the nuances of athlete representation and dismisses the ways in which women express themselves as feminists, athletes and college students. Though the women in this sample did represent themselves most frequently away from athletic action, their athletic identity was never absent in their branding.

Overall, the ten women in this dissertation published content that aligned with the affordance of each social platform. They promoted personal lifestyle videos on TikTok, posted posed imagery on Instagram and highlighted their life in and out of sports settings on Twitter. The finding that athletes frequently engage with their athletic departments in particular on Twitter to present themselves as athletes serves as a call to action to universities to continue promoting women in action on school-sponsored accounts for the benefit of the athlete and the school. The media content promoted by the women athletes in this study has the potential to shift cultural understandings of women in sport, and while not all of this content pushes back against stereotypes or hegemonic norms, the self-representation of these athletes still carries meaning and amplifies the lived experience of a group of athletes who remain vastly underrepresented in the traditional press (Cooky et al., 2021). The multifaceted athletic and lifestyle identities of these women should not be overlooked.

The contributions from this study are timely. July 1, 2023, marks two years since the NCAA first passed its NIL rules, and the ongoing media coverage about the

impact of these policies on women's sports as well as the opportunities for women collegiate athletes beyond sport continues to demonstrate the public interest in this subject (Richardson, 2023; Mechling, 2023). The complex, layered findings from this study, though, suggest that reporters, scholars and the general public should avoid falling into the trap of defining any athlete, particularly a female athlete, by a single social media post or even a string of social media posts. These women have nuanced identities that reproduce and reject traditional stereotypes of gender norms on TikTok, Instagram and Twitter. They are representing themselves as students, athletes and women leaders, and their collection of posts demonstrate the layers involved in each of these brands. With Dunne, Prince and Bueckers all returning for the 2023-2024 college sports season and a new group of talented rookies and veterans joining the list of notable athletes with prominent NIL potential to watch (including, of course, LSU 2023 NCAA champion Angel Reese and Iowa's 2023 Associated Press National Player Caitlin Clark who maximized their brand during the 2023 NCAA women's basketball tournament), the implications from this study remain relevant and critical to broader understandings of collegiate athlete self-representation in the digital era.

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NCAA March Madness [@MarchMadnessWBB] (2022, May 3) month since we crowned [@GamecockWBB](#) national champions! Take a look back 🏀🔥 [#MarchMadness](#) x [#NationalChampionship](#) [Tweet] Twitter.

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Prince, S. [[@sedonaprince](#)] (2021a, September 15) I edited an add on iMovie in 2 hours by myself without ever using the software before. It's not the best, but

I'm proud.[Tweet]. Twitter.

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Prince, Sedona [@sedonerrr] (2021b, October 27) That closet was glass and my 6'7 self barely fit lol #coming #out [Video]. TikTok

https://www.tiktok.com/@sedonerrr/video/7023777002477948165?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&lang=en

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Prince, Sedona [@sedonerrr] (2021d, November 21) Been wanting to do this but not with the I am woman sound so I guess this is me kind of coming out [Video]. TikTok

<https://www.tiktok.com/@sedonerrr/video/7034301320098041135?lang=en>

Prince, Sedona [@sedonerrr] (2022a, January 29) Tall queer reporting for duty [Video]. TikTok

https://www.tiktok.com/@sedonerrr/video/7058512646567611694?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&lang=en

Prince, S [@sedonerrr] (2022b, February 9) These days are long but worth it #athlete #vlog [Video] TikTok

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Rowe, H. [@sportsiren]. (2022c, Jun 10). I can't wait to see a statue of

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right next to the Heisman winners! Am I right? [@OU_Softball](#) [Tweet].
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https://twitter.com/Lindsay_Schnell/status/1504836774744535045

SEC Network [[@SECNetwork](#)] (2021, November 22) ▪ 22 Pts ▪ 15 Reb [@aa_boston](#) put on a SHOW in [@GamecockWBB](#) 's win 🏆 [Tweet] Twitter.
<https://twitter.com/SECNetwork/status/1462874896770473986>

Staley, D. [[@dawnstaley](#)] (2021, November 2) Hey [@espn](#)! Add these to your photo library and replace the ones you always seem to use for [@aa_boston](#)! Sincerely yours, All of WBB but especially [@GamecockWBB](#) and FAMs [Tweet] Twitter. <https://twitter.com/dawnstaley/status/1455718048804052996>

Swish Appeal. [[@SwishAppeal](#)] (2022, March 10). Nobody knows better than Sedona Prince the gender gap that has existed in the NCAA. [@sedonaprince_](#) and [@Cpav15](#) spoke with Swish Appeal about their partnership with [@TIAA](#) to address inequality not just in college but all the way through retirement. [Tweet] Twitter.
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Stock X [[@StockX](#)] (2022, March 23) Being "Built Different" is all about mindset for [@paigebueckers](#). You can be a relentless competitor and still make sure everybody eats. That's how Paige is pushing herself, the industry, and her people forward. [Photograph] Instagram
<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbc8ilyjKIX/?hl=en>

Team USA [[@TeamUSA](#)] (2021, July 19) Uneven bars queen. [@sunisalee](#) x [#TokyoOlympics](#) [Tweet]. Twitter
<https://twitter.com/TeamUSA/status/1417239374689800195>

Thiessen, E. M. [[@erinmiller48](#)] (2022, May, 25) I am SO emotional watching & reading this cover story. [@78jocelyn_alo](#), you're an incredible woman. I'm so lucky to know you & be your [#soonersister](#). [Tweet] Twitter.
<https://twitter.com/erinmiller48/status/1529489934691745792>

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