



Fall 2023

## Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z and Their Digital Associations

Jordan C. Basso  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship)



Part of the [Marketing Commons](#), and the [Sports Management Commons](#)

**Share feedback** about the accessibility of this item.

---

### Recommended Citation

Basso, Jordan C., "Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z and Their Digital Associations" (2023).  
*Student Publications*. 1114.  
[https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/1114](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/1114)

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z and Their Digital Associations

## Abstract

This study addresses the intersection between sports marketing and branding among Generation Z, investigating the challenges, opportunities, and evolving dynamics in the digital realm. The problem at hand revolves around the intricate web of issues faced by athletes and stakeholders, including the implementation of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) rules, ethical considerations, and the transformative impact of social media. Background information was gathered from peer-reviewed literature. Using a qualitative research method, five participants from diverse sporting backgrounds provided insights through interviews. The participants were asked questions in a semi-formal setting about their personal experiences, background and understanding, education on these topics, ethical and legal considerations, impact on underrepresented groups, challenges, and future trends and predictions. The study illuminates the need for educational initiatives to empower athletes in navigating this digital landscape. Looking forward, the conclusion emphasizes the continued growth of sports marketing through social media. As Generation Z shapes the future of sports engagement, this study provides a snapshot of the current landscape while paving the way for future explorations into the evolving dynamics of sports marketing in the digital age.

## Keywords

Sports, Marketing, Digital Media, Gen Z, Endorsements

## Disciplines

Marketing | Sports Management

## Comments

Written for MGT 405: Advanced Topics in BOM.

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

**Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations**

Jordan Basso

Department of Management, Gettysburg College

MGT405: Advanced Topics in BOM: Critical Perspectives on Business

Patturaja Selvaraj

November 15, 2023

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 2**

### **Abstract and Key Words**

This study addresses the intersection between sports marketing and branding among Generation Z, investigating the challenges, opportunities, and evolving dynamics in the digital realm. The problem at hand revolves around the intricate web of issues faced by athletes and stakeholders, including the implementation of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) rules, ethical considerations, and the transformative impact of social media. Background information was gathered from peer-reviewed literature. Using a qualitative research method, five participants from diverse sporting backgrounds provided insights through interviews. The participants were asked questions in a semi-formal setting about their personal experiences, background and understanding, education on these topics, ethical and legal considerations, impact on underrepresented groups, challenges, and future trends and predictions. The study illuminates the need for educational initiatives to empower athletes in navigating this digital landscape. Looking forward, the conclusion emphasizes the continued growth of sports marketing through social media. As Generation Z shapes the future of sports engagement, this study provides a snapshot of the current landscape while paving the way for future explorations into the evolving dynamics of sports marketing in the digital age.

**Key Words:** sports marketing, branding, Generation Z, digital marketing, Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL), athlete endorsements, ethical considerations, educational initiatives, qualitative research, social media impact, sports engagement digital age.

### Introduction

In the fast-paced, ever-connected world of the 21st century, the nexus between sports, marketing, and the digital landscape has become a defining feature of contemporary athletic culture. This paper embarks on a journey to unravel the complexities and connections between sports marketing, branding, and the digital associations of Generation Z. From social media to instant access to global sporting events, Gen Z's digital fluency shapes and reshapes the landscape of how athletes craft and amplify their personal brands. The traditional ways of sports marketing have undergone major shifts with the adaptations and implementation of digital media. This paper explores how Gen Z, as both consumers and creators, engages with sports marketing strategies. As this generation becomes the spearheading force in the consumer market, their preferences, values, and online behaviors redefine the strategies employed by athletes, teams, and brands. From influencer culture to the strategies of sports engagement, the digital associations of Gen Z are integral to understanding the contemporary dynamics of sports marketing. This paper primarily focuses on Gen Z athletes, who not only participate in sports but who are also creating a major online presence. Examining how they leverage social media, streaming platforms, and emerging technologies to shape their personal brand and interact with other organizations and brands, this paper dissects the relationship between athletes and their digital audience. The exploration encompasses the challenges and opportunities inherent in this digital frontier, shedding light on the strategies employed by Gen Z athletes to navigate the complexities of sports marketing. The aim is to provide insights into the multifaceted landscape where sports, digital media, and individual identity converge. By unraveling the digital tapestry woven by Gen Z, we seek not only to understand their preferences and behaviors but also to

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 4**

anticipate the future trajectories of sports marketing in an era defined by constant connectivity and digital influence.

### **Literature Review**

Sports marketing and branding among young athletes have completely changed in recent years with the rise in social media usage and potential for monetization. Members of Generation Z have taken new approaches to sports marketing to maximize their exposure and engagement which can lead to financial compensations or other forms of payment. This paper gives an overview of what sports marketing and management is and examines how newer generations are adapting to best use it to their advantage. It discusses the changing nature of sports marketing due to revised laws among collegiate sports and what sports marketing and branding mean for athletes. The included sources refer to name, image, and likeness (NIL), engagement and sponsorships, personal brand management, and skills and knowledge associated with social media use as ways that alter marketability success. The sources are not limited to any specific type of athlete, so male and female athletes of any sport (including Esports) are referenced. There is a lot of potential in sports marketing because it is increasingly more popular, so knowing how to utilize it properly as individuals, teams, and organizations is very relevant currently and will continue to be in the future. Sports marketing is evolving quickly because of the opportunities social media provides, and members of Gen Z athletes are learning to capitalize to gain a following and potential compensation.

#### **What is NIL?**

It is important to have definitions of what NIL, endorsements, sponsorships, and digital marketing are to understand how they have changed and how sports marketing is being altered. The NCAA is a big business. Reported revenue from the NCAA in 2019 was \$18.9 billion, none

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 5**

of this going to the student-athletes themselves. Up until 2021, student-athletes could not receive more than athletic scholarships in return for their talents—no photo shoots, signings, or endorsement deals of any kind (Perloff, 2022). Now, the bans on NIL deals have been lifted and collegiate athletes can benefit from their own name, image, and likeness through partnerships, endorsement deals, social media posts, and any other utilization of their NIL (O'Brien, 2021). NIL has revolutionized collegiate sports because “today’s college athletes grew up with social media, [however] most did not envision a future in which social media was important to their financial well-being in tandem with success in their sport” (Golden, 2023, par. 8). When athletes endorse a brand, they are paid to highlight what the product is and the positive aspects of it. When an athlete is sponsored by a brand, it is more of a partnership where a brand will sponsor an individual, team, or event, and they will pay for the individual or group to highlight the company. This could mean placing the brand’s logo on a uniform or placing ads during a certain team’s sporting event (Hodgson, 2023). For athletes and organizations, it is important to know what the rules and regulations of NIL are, as well as the types of deals and contracts that they could be involved with to maximize their opportunities throughout their collegiate careers. This new era of NIL could potentially be very beneficial to collegiate athletes but also brands have an entirely new pool of athletes that they can partner with, which can be a game changer for these brands to connect with fans of college sports (O'Brien, 2021). Along with this, the rise of social media platforms is creating much more awareness about these opportunities as well as much more access to these potential deals for all athletes, not just the top talent.

### **The Impact of Social Media Marketing**

Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are rapidly growing channels that allow athletes to learn more about how to acquire deals, get in contact with companies, and share

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 6**

their content to receive compensation. Generation Z is the generation of social media and online connections, so most collegiate athletes now already have a background in these platforms, making it a very accessible and comfortable way for them to get involved in sports marketing and advertising of themselves. In a study conducted by Deloitte, they discovered that for 71% of respondents, live events were their favorite type of sports content, but this drops to 58% for Gen Z and millennials. Also, more than 90% of Gen Zers “use social media to consume sports content, including game clips and highlights, live events, athlete interviews, and posts from athletes” (Dixon, 2023, par. 4). The Sports Business Journal points out how fans crave engagement, and Gen Z is the first group that has been fully immersed in social media, video games, and online interactions, giving them a lot of knowledge and skill in how to create content that will get high engagement without requiring them to do a lot of extra work. (Bilodeau, 2022). It has also been proven that “Social media is one of the most effective tools for promoting modern brands of goods and services of global companies, which can increase brand awareness, quickly and adaptively share company news with customers, and quickly find new target segments of the consumer market” (Fayvishenko, 2022, p. 30). In today’s digital economy, companies are aware that social media plays a major role in the awareness and success overall of their company, making the idea of partnerships and sponsorships very enticing. Social media marketing has quickly proven its importance and its power in creating positive outcomes for brands in many different industries, including sports. However, there are also potential negative impacts that could come along with increasing sponsored posts. Some studies show that there is a negative relationship between sponsored posts and engagement (Naraine, 2022). This requires sponsored groups and individuals to be strategic about their posts, including what type of content they are sharing, to who, how often, and when. This isn’t to say that there is only a negative



## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 7**

relationship however—engagement on sponsored content has steadily been increasing in recent years. For collegiate athletes, many of them have a lot of knowledge in posting and social media use, so they can quickly learn to develop and share content that will maximize benefits for both them and the organizations they create deals with.

For TikTok specifically, it is proving to be one of the best tools for athletes to market themselves and for brands to post sponsored content. TikTok is the fastest-growing social media platform so far, creating a user base that is the size of Instagram's in less than half the time. Being the newest and most popular social media platform right now, TikTok is where younger generations, including current collegiate athletes who can now be paid for endorsing brands, have flocked to and become the most proficient at using (Butler, 2022). A large portion of consumers depend on influencer recommendations when making purchases and connecting with brands, and TikTok users spend about half an hour on the app every day—this creates a cycle for Generation Z individuals. As they spend more time on TikTok every day, they are exposed to more brands that they could invest in, but they are also exposing themselves to different influencers, which may inspire them to get involved in TikTok marketing themselves.

### **Knowledge, Skills, Competencies, Attitudes**

There are certain characteristics that current collegiate athletes should possess to capitalize on the potential of sports marketing to the best of their abilities. They require a certain level of knowledge of social media and digital marketing, as well as a strong work ethic and ability to perform in the classroom. Skills do not necessarily refer to their athletic ability but to their ability to market themselves, network, and make connections in order to sell their brand. Athletes require a high level of mental toughness and willingness to market themselves and become involved in the world of NIL and sports marketing. Adding on the workload of this

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 8**

while playing professionally or while being a full-time student also takes a lot of dedication, commitment, and optimism to carry out, especially knowing that not every brand they try to connect with will be successful. Competencies combine all three of the other characteristics because these athletes need to be able to take their KSA and shape them to perform the task efficiently and successfully. In the systematic review discussing sports management growth, they were able to gather information on different sports management-related occupations and generate a skill set with important knowledge, skills, and competencies. The skill set includes having a thorough understanding of the field of sports management. This includes all the branches of organizations in sports management, such as finance, HR, event planning, marketing, legal, and strategic and sports policies. It also includes having the knowledge and competency to plan, organize, implement, and analyze different tasks, projects, and resources within the organization. Next, the individual needs to be able to think of the organization as a business and behave like an entrepreneur to create new ideas and how to put them in place and how to operate as a profit-seeking organization. They also need to be understanding and aware of cultural competencies and create an environment that fosters diversity. The last few items in the skill set revolve around building leadership, networking and professional skills, teamwork and conflict management, and the ability to interact with different individuals within and outside of your organization (Guidotti, 2023). This skill set can be altered very fluidly to apply to athletes pursuing sports marketing. Athletes need to understand the organizations that they are trying to engage and collaborate with. Also, before the formation of the NCAA, collegiate athletics were very unregulated and the laws were loosely enforced (Thompson, 2022). Now, it is crucial that athletes and institutions abide by these laws, especially in the age of NIL. For collegiate athletes, knowledge also involves understanding the laws they need to follow and what they can and cannot do. For professional

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 9**

athletes, they also need to understand the rules and regulations of signing contracts and making deals. They also need to be able to strategically market themselves on social media. This includes what platforms they are using, what type of content they are sharing, who and what they are including in their content, their posting schedules, and many more details that they must analyze the success of and alter as necessary. Like sports management organizations, athletes need to act as entrepreneurs and try to sell their personal brands like a business would. It is also important for athletes to be aware of how the things that they are posting and saying could be interpreted by different people. They need to post content that is socially and culturally respectable and inclusive to continue to be attractive to fans and brands. Having leadership capabilities and the ability to act professionally when presenting themselves online and when discussing contracts and deals is a very important skill for athletes. Athletes who are very visibly able to hold themselves to high standards and work well with others are much more likely to be wanted by brands. Having strong and correlated KSA will greatly benefit athletes' success in creating and executing a plan to market themselves in the digital realm.

### **Opportunities and Diversity**

Digital sports marketing has created a lot of opportunities for collegiate athletes to be rewarded for their efforts, and certain groups that have previously been left behind are benefitting the most. In the past, it was the star players who would receive all the attention during their collegiate careers and then go on to play at the professional level and be paid for their play. Now, these star players are still receiving benefits, but there are other groups that may be seeing greater change from digital marketing and NIL, including women and eSports players. For female athletes, the opportunities at the professional level are less frequent and less financially rewarding than those offered to men. Because of this, the most marketable time in a

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 10**

female athlete's career is typically during college (O'Brien, 2021). Along with this is the fact that many female athletes have a larger social media following than male athletes, and the rise of influencer marketing is a perfect opportunity for these female athletes to engage with their fan base and use their platforms to leverage themselves among brands looking for athlete partnerships.

ESports athletes are another group of individuals who are not being neglected with the rise of digital marketing. Online content and entertainment have been consumed by customers at a much more rapid rate in recent years, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduced amount of live and in-person events. Generation Z is the age that is most prevalent on gaming platforms, with hundreds of millions of global viewers each year, the fan base is larger than those of the NFL and the MLB (Lehnert, 2022). Esports players and teams are often endorsed and sponsored just like regular athletic teams can be. Oftentimes, players are sponsored by the streaming sources, such as Twitch, to share and monetize their content, because solely competing in gaming tournaments is typically not enough to live comfortably. This demonstrates how much of an impact digital trends and social media have had on Generation Z. They can make money off the games they have been playing for a large portion of their lives, resulting in a high level of satisfaction and quality of life for those participating in digital marketing. In 2018, there were more than 21 million eSports fans in the U.S. and of those, 84% were under the age of 35 (Lehnert, 2022). Esports athletes have created a space with a lot of potential for digital marketing, as their audience is one of the largest out of any other sport, and their athletes are very well-equipped to create and stream their own content as well as sponsored content and engage with fans. Although there are plenty of positive outcomes from digital sports marketing

and NIL among younger generations, there are also challenges and obstacles associated with this new era.

### Challenges

There are many positive outcomes of digital sports marketing and social media use of athletes, but there is also a range of challenges associated with it. First, it can be difficult for individuals to learn and develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to be a successful sports marketer, especially if what you are marketing is yourself. It is much harder to be desirable to brands and to be active on social media in the influencer space for those with more introverted personalities. Another difficult part of sports marketing is getting consumers and fans to engage and view content. Gen Zers tend to move on quickly from different programs, social media platforms, and apps, always looking for the next best thing, so grasping their attention and retaining can be difficult. This is evident in the way certain organizations are creating content to interact with Gen Z. Sports Illustrated is trying to reach younger audiences by creating a Snapchat Original to attract their interest. The majority of younger generations are much less interested in regular television programs and are partial to shorter bite-sized content, such as TikTok. The Sports Illustrated Snapchat Original “America’s Best Sports Videos” features content from users in short TikTok-like clips. (Kelly, 2021). This goes to show that from a business perspective, brands must do much more in order to gain a consumer base among younger generations. Multiple organizations have stated that a major challenge they face in using social media is creating content that is of value to viewers because of the high level of personalization and targeting (Williams, 2014). Engaging with online fans and having the skills and strategies to stay up to date and to stand out for both the business and their sponsored athletes comes with its challenges.

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 12**

COVID-19 in its entirety poses many challenges and has greatly changed the game of sports marketing. Athletes faced a variety of challenges during the pandemic, including the reduced ability to play their sport and emotional distress. Many athletes were able to address these issues and leverage them on their social media platforms, but COVID-19 did hinder many of the normal marketing opportunities available to athletes. Professional athletics tend to be short-lived careers, so for many athletes, the pandemic was career-ending, and they were not able to capitalize off of sports marketing and being endorsed by brands anymore. Even if the pandemic did not coincide with the end of an athlete's career, maintaining relevance through this interruption was a great challenge because athletes could not continue with their pre-pandemic content. A major part of athletes' content is the actual action of them playing their sport, so with the stoppage of content in this respect, it was difficult for many athletes to figure out how to get around this problem and continue creating content to engage with fans (Bredikhina, 2022). Similar challenges to stoppages in content could be injuries, pregnancies, or other physical and emotional stressors that may prevent athletes from sharing content from their participation in competitions and from having the willingness to frequently be present and vocal on social media platforms.

The paper emphasizes the evolving nature of sports marketing due to social media, and sheds light on the fact that athletes should be encouraged to act as entrepreneurs and develop skills other than the skills necessary in their sport to find the benefits of being a young athlete now. Understanding the details of digital marketing, being present on different social media platforms, and evolving with the changing online trends are crucial for athletes and brands aiming for successful partnerships. The paper highlights the transformative impact of social media and NIL

regulations on sports marketing, providing both opportunities and challenges for athletes and brands searching for deals. With the barriers of traditional marketing broken down, athletes, especially those from previously underrepresented groups, now have the chance to harness the benefits of digital sports marketing of their personal brands. This requires athletes to develop certain skill sets, knowledge, and attitudes. They must be very adaptable, flexible, and up to date in order to strategically and creatively engage with their audience and potential sponsors. Social media, sports marketing, and NIL signify a new era where athletes are not just competitors but also influential content creators and entrepreneurs.

### **Gaps, Questions, and Further Research**

Despite the comprehensive examination of sports marketing and branding among young athletes, there remain several gaps and avenues for further research. The information collected and examined in the literature review is beneficial in setting the foundation for future research, as the topics are fairly new. One notable gap pertains to the complex and unexplored effects of social media marketing on athlete brand image and long-term fan engagement. While the articles acknowledge the potential negative impact of sponsored posts on engagement, a more in-depth analysis of the factors influencing this relationship, particularly in the long term, would add great value. Additionally, the literature review touches upon the challenges faced by athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises but does not delve deeply into the strategies employed by athletes to overcome these challenges and maintain a digital presence. Exploring how athletes navigated disruptions such as the pandemic, injuries, or other personal stressors to sustain or adapt their online content creation could offer valuable insights for both athletes and researchers. Furthermore, there is a need for research that explores the intersectionality of athlete demographics, including gender and sport type, to understand how these factors influence the

effectiveness of digital marketing strategies. Investigating the varying impact of NIL opportunities on different athlete populations and whether there are disparities in sponsorship and endorsement deals could provide crucial insights into the inclusivity of the evolving sports marketing landscape. Overall, future research should aim to fill these gaps and address these questions to contribute to a more thorough understanding of the dynamics between athletes, digital marketing, and evolving societal trends.

### **Methods**

#### **Research Design**

The research and data collection for this study were based on many past studies and many factors. The research design is a qualitative approach to examine the thoughts and opinions of those connected to marketing, sports, digital media, and/or Generation Z. The research design for this study is based primarily on the methods found in “Athlete Interrupted: Exploration of Athletes’ Personal Brand Management in Times of Crisis” (Bredikhina, 2022), “The Impact of Brand Social Media Marketing on the Dynamics of the Company’s Share Value (Fayvishenko, 2023), “The Impact of Sponsorship on Social Media Engagement: A Longitudinal Examination of Professional Sports Teams” (Naraine, 2022), and “Knowledge, Competencies, and Skills for a Sustainable Sports Management Growth: A Systematic Review” (Guidotti, 2023). Semi-structured interviews were conducted among interviewees to gather data regarding a variety of topics discussed in the literature review. The information found in the literature review was crucial in creating talking points and specific questions for the interviews. However, the majority of the peer-reviewed articles referenced in the literature review did not contain interviews. Most of the references conducted their studies based on prior research, social media content, and the history and changing nature of sports marketing in news and current events.



### **Data Collection and Participants**

The study features semi-structured interviews with athletes, coaches, and individuals with careers in advertising and media. Hearing the unique experiences of individuals of differing backgrounds and with different experiences in sports marketing and digital media was very valuable information for the study. With social media and digital trends being such a large feature of the study, it was important to ask about experiences and knowledge of these technologies and their characteristics, benefits to people and brands, and their overall impact on different organizations, groups, and industries (Fayvishenko, 2023). The interviews took place during October and November of 2023. The window that these interviews were conducted is important mainly because of the year. The interviewed individuals are aware of the changing nature of sports marketing in recent times, particularly among the collegiate athletes interviewed regarding NIL. The impact of COVID-19 was also an aspect that interviewees could consider when discussing the interview questions. The interviews were semi-structured, giving the interviewees the ability to branch away from the specific questions asked to add more opinions or creative liberties (Bredikhina, 2023). Using a semi-structured interview method allowed the conversations to flow naturally and allowed participants to be as descriptive and comfortable as possible.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews and the literature were the primary sources of data for this study. The data analysis followed an inductive analytical approach, starting with the thesis and using the interviews and literature to support it. Inspiration for this approach was mainly drawn from the research done by Bredikhina et al. who used interviews as their primary source of data in finding themes. Using this foundation, the research done in this paper adds a deductive approach was

further develop the findings and themes discussed in the literature review. The interviews were analyzed individually and also as a whole to help generate specific ideas and general themes.

## **Findings**

### **Interview and Participant Background**

The five participants in this study did know about sports marketing and NIL but to varying degrees. They also acquired their knowledge in different ways— from high school athletics, collegiate athletics, coaching, their careers, and social media and current events in general. There were some commonalities among the participants' responses, but there were also differences in personal experiences and understandings, challenges and impacts, the what the future should hold for sports marketing and digital trends, putting particular emphasis on NIL and social media. For simplicity and clarification in this paper, each participant will go by Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, and Participant E. Participant A is a current college coach for women's lacrosse. Participant B is currently a senior at the University of Rochester and has been a member of the Women's Soccer Team during her collegiate career. Participant C is currently pursuing a sports communication degree with a minor in brand communication and has been exposed to sports organizations, social media analytics, and NIL through her coursework at Clemson University. Participant D is a college first year at Elon University and was a former high school athlete. They are familiar with sports marketing, social media, and NIL but only have a limited scope of knowledge. Lastly, Participant E is a recent graduate and former student-athlete. Having participated in collegiate athletics during the changing NIL rules, they have not done a lot of research on it to have a lot of knowledge about it. They do, however, think it is a good opportunity for athletes.

**Understanding, Background, and Personal Experience**

Four of the interviewed participants were collegiate athletes currently or had been during their college careers. All of the candidates were involved in sports in some way during their high school or college careers. Participant A became more familiar with NIL, endorsements, and social media marketing since being a college coach. During her time as a college athlete, there was much less awareness about these topics, and when she became a college coach many of these concepts have adapted, forcing her to have to keep up to date with the trends and rules. She mentions that she was not a fan of the Name, Image, and Likeness NCAA rule changes when they first occurred in 2021. She says that did not think there would be a fair way for certain people who play certain sports to ever benefit from NIL deals, but she felt that student-athletes work incredibly hard and should be able to get compensated for all the work that they do. She believes that it is important for athletes that are not in the most popular and large conferences to represent themselves on a large platform. She also mentions that NIL and social media marketing in sports allow athletes to have creative liberty and create a business out of their athletic careers.

Participant B does not have a lot of experience in marketing, besides having taken an introductory course during a previous year at college. She does have marketing knowledge from the perspective of a student-athlete during the era of digital media and collegiate endorsements. She follows along with multiple professional sports teams and their social media pages and points out that she notices the social media marketing of these teams. She is aware of the changing NIL rules and knows college athletes with endorsements, but does not have any of her own. She mentions that she has a friend who works for the social media marketing team for the MLS team, Columbus Crew. She says that this friend has directly benefitted from sports marketing and digital media because she studied these topics during college and was able to gain

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 18**

experience in her college's athletic department, which ultimately lead her to a career in sports marketing, which is an industry that did not exist not too long ago. Participant B mentions multiple positives that have come out of athletes being able to monetize their brand and the benefits of NIL changes and sports marketing. She thinks that it is great that athletes, considering the hard work that they have put into create their name, image, and likeness brand, can now receive compensation. Even though she is an athlete herself, she says that from the perspective of a general sports fan, it is good that more resources are being poured into sports marketing. She goes further into this by discussing how sports marketing and digital media can lead to increased viewership, sponsorship, and overall support. Participant B describes that social media is very important in enhancing the marketability and brand image of athletes. Social media is a new and major way to spread knowledge of an individual and having a strong social media platform can easily increase the notoriety of an athlete and lead to a strong and more valuable brand image. Apart from the benefits that this participant mentions, she also brings attention to the negative outcomes that could arise from sports marketing, including athletes posting inappropriate or controversial content on social media which can lead to lost deals, consequences with their organizations, institutions, and teams, and overall negative effects to their careers in athletics.

Participant C has a lot of knowledge on the newer sides of digital media and sports marketing, being that she is currently a student pursuing a degree that focuses on these topics. Participant C is currently enrolled in an NIL special topics course that dives into all things NIL and how student-athletes can market themselves. She doesn't have a lot of experience from a student-athlete perspective, but she has become well-versed in all of these topics. Participant C says she thinks that NIL rule changes are providing a great opportunity for athletes to have access to financial opportunities, which for many of them is very helpful because they may not

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 19**

have the time to have a job while being a full-time student and competing in collegiate athletics. She does mention that NIL changes will probably benefit high-profile athletes more as they already have large followings and high engagement on their social media accounts. She says that social media is a great way for athletes to show their personal brand and who they are outside of being an athlete. She thinks that it is important for athletes to show their values and who they are as a person on their social medias. She says that the potential for personalization of social media (ex. Posts, comments, stories, likes, comments, etc.) gives viewers more insights on who athletes are other than being athletes, which can enhance their marketability and brand image. She goes into detail about the endorsement experiences of a Clemson football player. She says that social media platforms play a big role in sports marketing because they can connect with a bigger audience, while having a lot of control of the content that is shared. Similar to Participant B, she says that social media can hurt athletes' careers depending on the content that they choose to share.

Participant D has the most different perspective from the other participants. Participant D does not have any actual connections to sports marketing. He is a former high school athlete, and is passionate about sports, but is only familiar with NIL on a very limited level. Participant D is in support of new NIL regulations and says that social media is the single most impactful concept for building a marketing brand as an athlete. He does not know anyone personally who has benefitted from NIL contracts, but pays attention primarily to NIL in relation to college football, as it is their passion. In regards to athletic careers and social media, Participant D gives the example of the University of Southern California's quarterback, Caleb Williams. Williams has almost 300,000 followers on Instagram, and is projected to be a first-round draft pick in the NFL. This example ties social media and athletic careers well.

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 20**

Participant E mentions a debate that they have briefly become aware of regarding NIL. She mentions that there is a debate as to how the potential for NIL money is taking away the authenticity behind college sports and competition. She gives an example that athletes may commit to a college where NIL money is more welcomed and encouraged, even if it is not the best academic institution, the dream school of the student, or if the student will not be a key player on their team. Participant E also slightly contrasts this by saying social media is a key place for athletes to build up their image and brand. She says that TikTok and Instagram are two of the best platforms for athletes to share relatable content that is easy to access and quick to consume for everyone. She mentions athlete and influencer, Moobie (Maddie Schrader, a Marist Women's Lacrosse Player and intern at Barstool Sports), who is relatable because of her "day in the life" videos. She mentions that she does not know a lot of people with NIL deals because, having been a Division III athlete, she realized that a lot of companies do not invest in Division III athletes because they typically don't have a large social media following compared to Division I athletes. She says that athletes that are growing their personal brand through endorsements and social media are acting as entrepreneurs and may stand out to future employers because of their ability to manage school, sports, and their own business. Sports marketing says a lot about work ethic of athletes who are managing their time and developing a portfolio of skills and connections.

### **Challenges, and Ethical and Legal Considerations**

Some of the challenges that were mentioned multiple times in interviews were the pressure, inexperience, and potential lack of access to this new way of marketing. Another challenge was understanding of the brands that these athletes are representing. The athletes may be too concerned about the financial aspects, rather than researching the brands they are

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 21**

representing. Considering the financial aspect, there could also be concerns and challenges of unfair compensation. Many of these athletes are still young adults and may not be educated enough on these topics to sign deals and make contracts on their own. Another challenge is that the NIL rules and regulations are so new, that there is a lot of grey area, and brands, organizations, and individuals will knowingly or unknowingly try to get around these rules for personal benefit. Participant E used a specific example of a UNC tennis player who won certain matches in the US Open and could have received money for her wins. She was told by the NCAA that she could accept this money and be ineligible for playing for her university for her senior year, or she could turn down the money and play her senior season. The tennis player compared her win money (which was over \$10,000) to the millions of dollars that top collegiate football players were making through NIL, which created a lot of argument over similar events to this. This situation pertains a lot to the clarity and structure of the new rules proposed by the NCAA.

Ethically, the participants highlighted the idea that athletes should not represent brands through sports marketing that they are not passionate about and do not support the values of. Participant B mentions that when an athlete accepts an endorsement from a company, they are now tied to this organization. This means that the content they share can affect the organization, and the content that the organization chooses to market will affect the athlete as well. If there is negative press or legal issues of the organization, this could potentially be tied to the athlete as well. Doing research on the brands before they choose to endorse them is very important for athletes to ensure that they align with the values of the organization. Athletes also need to make sure that they are doing the right thing and avoiding negative press that they can avoid and control. If they are doing things that put them in a negative light, it will be more difficult to

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 22**

market themselves online without receiving backlash. Legally, athletes need to gather as much information as they can about any deals they are making before they are made. This could include how much money they are making, how their personal brand is being used, and the time required of them. Athletes need to be aware of any terms and conditions listed in their endorsement deals. Participant C mentioned taxes, contract terms, school and NCAA regulations, and licensing—all of which are important topics to have a thorough understanding of when conducting deals and signing contracts for athletes.

### **Impact on underrepresented groups**

Participants discussed their thoughts on how digital marketing has impacted underrepresented groups. People within this group could include females, eSports players, those with disabilities, or Division II and Division III athletes. All of the participants said that they believe that digital marketing has had a positive impact on underrepresented groups. They mentioned how these athletes were now given the similar opportunities to the athletes in powerhouse programs and divisions to be noticed and create a name for themselves. Participant C said that she believed there would still be certain athletes and sports that would have an easier chance at being successful but underrepresented groups, particularly females, have a great chance and channel to build awareness and visibility of their athletic career and personal brand. Participant D discussed basketball star Caitlyn Clark. He says that without sports marketing and her and her team's social media presence, he would most likely not know who she is. He says that he is not a fan of women's basketball but is impressed with and does acknowledge her success because of social media. Participant E mentions an alumnus of her university that was also a collegiate athlete. She said that this alumnus had a great interest in sports marketing and



## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 23**

NIL and now teaches classes about it. This is a success story as this athlete was a Division III player and is now educating others on the potentials of NIL. Participant C said she is aware of a lot of female athletes with endorsement deals and that are involved in social media marketing, such as Mackenzie Steele, who is a cross country and track runner at Clemson University. She has her own custom gear with clothing brand Vapor Apparel. Multiple of the participants mentioned Livy Dunne, an LSU gymnast who has greatly benefitted from sports marketing and NIL. Being a woman and participating in gymnastics—not one of the most highly represented sports—Dunne could be characterized as a member of the underrepresented category. She was able to develop a large social media following and in 2022 was named to be the highest-valued women's college athlete. Livy Dunne is the highest female athlete, but is also one of the highest-valued athletes overall, demonstrating that social media marketing can reduce gender boundaries in athletics.

### **Education**

All of the participants said that there is a need for educational systems or support systems to help athletes navigate digital sports marketing. Educating all athletes would be beneficial to help create an equal playing field for all athletes, not just the top performers. From the interviews, it was gathered that there should be educational systems put in place to educate on creating and maintaining a personal brand and then separately to educate on endorsement deals, NIL, and signing professional contracts. Regarding the resources that would benefit athletes in terms of social media marketing, Participant A said that it would be beneficial to sit down and discuss with athlete who have already had success in this area to share knowledge and advice about how to go about this process. She also mentions that universities should have specific people or departments who can work with student athletes for NIL and compliance. At Clemson,

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 24**

Participant C says that they do have someone who helps navigate this, the Assistant AD of Talent Brand Management. Beside this, Participant C says that being enrolled in NIL classes herself, she believes that all athletes should take this class to be educated on the legalities, ethics, and best practices to succeed.

### **The Future**

The participants of this study acknowledge that there will always be risks and negatives associated with social media to some degree, but that sports marketing is growing and increasing for the better because of digital marketing and social media platforms. Because sports rely heavily on streaming services already, shifting more towards social media marketing and use will be beneficial for athletes. Participant B suggests that digital platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok will increase team, organization, and player awareness as well as popularity of their sports and endorsed products. She also was curious about the increasing popularity of sports betting and how this will impact athletes' engagement in social media and marketing. Increasing the money potential for players and teams, especially at the collegiate level could be greatly impacted through sports betting. Participant C added that Youtube is become an increasingly popular platform for athlete marketing and that it could be a great tool for branding products, services, and people. Overall, the participants agree that social media marketing for athletes is going to continue to grow, and because of this future generations will become savvier in the industry, creating a continuing cycle.

### **Overarching Themes**

Having the perspectives of diverse participants is very beneficial in creating thorough and well-rounded themes surrounding this topic. Each of these individuals brings a unique perspective based on their experiences in sports, education, and their career paths. Solely based

on the participants and their unique experiences, one theme from this study is that participants can gather knowledge of sports marketing, NIL, and social media through different channels. Examples of channels are high school and collegiate athletics, coaching, academic coursework, and personal experiences. Another theme based on participant responses is that NIL rule changes and the prominence of social media have provided athletes with new opportunities to monetize their personal brand. Along with this theme is that the benefits of the new NIL rules outweigh the negative outcomes. Participants highlight the positive aspects of athletes benefitting from their hard work and creativity through endorsements and digital marketing. Another theme is that with digital sports marketing being a newer industry, it can be difficult for athletes to navigate this new landscape due to pressure and inexperience. Connecting directly to this theme is the idea that because of these challenges and pressures, there is a need for educational systems to be put in place to educate on general knowledge, ethics and legal ideas, as well as how to go about NIL and endorsement deals for collegiate and Gen Z athletes. Participants also expressed a general theme that digital marketing and social media opportunities have had a positive impact on underrepresented groups, particularly mentioning Division III athletes and females. Despite acknowledging potential risks associated with social media, participants express optimism about the future of sports marketing. The shift toward social media platforms is seen as beneficial, with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube playing key roles in increasing awareness, popularity, and potential earnings for athletes and teams. Participants foresee the continuous growth of social media marketing for athletes. They anticipate that future generations will become more knowledgeable about the industry, creating a cycle of increasing proficiency in leveraging digital platforms for personal and professional growth.

### **Discussion**

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 26**

The insights gathered from the interviews with Participants A through E offer a rich tapestry of perspectives on sports marketing, NIL, and social media. These participants, with diverse backgrounds ranging from college coaches to current and former athletes, provide valuable insights into the challenges, ethical considerations, and potential impacts of the evolving landscape. The participants' backgrounds reveal a spectrum of experiences and knowledge levels, reflecting the varied paths through which individuals encounter sports marketing and NIL. Notably, their exposure through high school athletics, collegiate careers, coaching, and coursework provides a nuanced understanding of the subject matter. For instance, Participant A, a current college coach, highlights the evolving nature of NIL concepts since her time as a college athlete. This indicates the dynamic nature of the field, requiring continuous adaptation and flexibility from those looking to be involved in it. Participant B, a senior athlete, brings a unique perspective as both a consumer and a potential contributor to sports marketing. Her awareness of social media marketing for professional teams demonstrates the interconnected nature of individual and organizational branding in the digital age. Moreover, her acknowledgment of the positives and negatives associated with sports marketing emphasizes the importance of strategic considerations for athletes. Participant C, currently pursuing a sports communication degree, stands out for having structured academic exposure to the evolving landscape. Enrolled in an NIL special topics course, Participant C reflects on the opportunities that NIL changes present for athletes, emphasizing the need for athletes to showcase their values on social media. This aligns with Participant B's emphasis on the necessity for athletes to align with brands that resonate with their values. In contrast, Participant D, a college first-year student and former high school athlete, brings a different perspective, primarily focused on the impact of social media on athletic careers. This participant underscores the potential of social media

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 27**

platforms to elevate athletes' profiles, citing examples like University of Southern California's quarterback, Caleb Williams. Lastly, Participant E, a recent graduate and former student-athlete, introduces the debate on how NIL might affect the authenticity of college sports. This participant's focus on the potential division between schools based on NIL opportunities adds a layer of complexity to the overall discussion.

The participants collectively identified several challenges and ethical considerations associated with sports marketing and NIL. The pressure, inexperience, and potential lack of access to this new marketing paradigm emerge as common challenges. The participants expressed concerns about athletes being overly focused on financial aspects and insufficiently researching the brands they represent. There are also concerns that NIL deals will primarily be targeted at powerhouse division I schools, rather than being evenly distributed. Moreover, the potential for unfair compensation, given the age and educational levels of many athletes, raises ethical questions. Using COVID-19 as an example, the study conducted by Bredikhina et al. (2022), helped to support the notion that athletes can embrace these challenges and learn to adapt to still be successful. Successful athletes cope with their concerns and challenges, adjust their strategies and plans, and continue to seek opportunities to better their approaches to personal branding. There are a lot of concerns that are coming along with digital sports marketing, and there will continue to be issues, but passionate athletes are finding ways to be successful despite these hardships.

Legal considerations, such as tax implications, contract terms, and compliance with school and NCAA regulations, also emerge as crucial aspects that athletes need to navigate. The example provided by Participant E about the UNC tennis player shows the ambiguity and

## **Sports Marketing and Branding among Gen Z, and their Digital Associations 28**

complexity surrounding the new NIL rules, with potential consequences for athletes' eligibility. Based on “Maximizing NIL Rights For College Athletes” (Thompson, 2022) and the information from the Iowa Law Review, it is evident that the NCAA had to tighten its reigns when the decision to allow compensation for players’ NILs was passed. The enforcement authority of the NCAA has existed for a long time but was minimally enforced. Since 2021, there are now Name, Image, and Likeness rights, publicity rights, individual NIL rights, administration NIL rights, and more overall sports laws that college athletes, their organizations, and the brands they may choose to collaborate with need to be thoroughly aware of when creating endorsements, partnerships, and other forms of sports marketing agreements.

The ethical dimension is particularly emphasized by Participant B, who underscores the importance of athletes aligning with brands that reflect their values. The interconnected nature of athlete and brand reputation underscores the need for thorough research and ethical considerations in endorsing products or organizations. The information in the Thompson (2022) article is also important regarding ethics, as athletes can easily be taken advantage of if the new regulations and laws are not enforced and taken seriously.

The participants unanimously acknowledge the positive impact of digital marketing on underrepresented groups in sports. Female athletes, eSports players, individuals with disabilities, and those in Division II and III receive newfound opportunities to build their brands and gain visibility. Lehnert's article on the successes of eSports so far goes to show how successful diverse groups of athletes can be. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, livestreaming has greatly increased in popularity (Lehnert, 2022). This is opening up an entirely new marketing and creating a lot of opportunities that did not exist only a few years ago. New marketing

strategies are having to be developed so athletes can promote themselves on different sports streaming services, better services, and gaming services to receive compensation. Along with this are the success stories shared by the participants, such as Livy Dunne and Caitlyn Clark, who exemplify how social media can reduce gender boundaries and elevate athletes' profiles irrespective of traditional hierarchies.

All participants concur on the necessity of educational support for athletes navigating digital sports marketing. This aligns with the broader call for equalizing opportunities for all athletes, not just those at the pinnacle of their sports. The proposal for educational systems to cover personal brand creation, endorsement deals, NIL, and professional contracts underscores the multifaceted nature of the knowledge athletes require in this evolving landscape. Based on the research and results in “Knowledge, Competencies, and Skills for a Sustainable Sports Management Growth: A Systematic Review” (Guidotti, 2023), there are certain characteristics that an athlete or an organization can have that will make them more successful in the sports industry. Educating athletes on these attitudes, characteristics, and understandings that they should have can have a great impact on their success in personal branding and digital sports marketing. Knowledge, skills, and competencies in sports marketing is very important, especially now as it is transitioning to more digital methods. It is important to be aware of what is changing, how to react, and the strategies that can lead to the most success.

The participants, as well as supporting information from the literature review, foresee continual growth in sports marketing through social media. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are expected to play pivotal roles in increasing athlete and team awareness, fostering popularity, and promoting endorsed products. The potential impact of sports betting on

athlete engagement in social media also emerges as a topic of interest, pointing towards a dynamic future where evolving technologies shape the sports marketing landscape.

In acknowledging potential biases and reflecting on reflexivity in this paper, it is essential to recognize that the perspectives and insights presented by the participants are subjective and influenced by their individual experiences and backgrounds. Bias does exist in some areas as the participants were selected due to previous relationships with the researcher. Four out of the five participants were female, which may have swayed the results in a certain direction. The researcher is also a female athlete herself, participating in collegiate athletics during the era of NIL, which may have an impact on the interviews and the discussion. Efforts were made to minimize bias through transparent reporting of participant backgrounds and varied experiences. The qualitative nature of the research allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, but it is crucial to recognize that qualitative research inherently involves interpretation. As such, readers are encouraged to approach the presented information with an awareness of potential biases.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the exploration of sports marketing and branding strategies among Generation Z illuminates a dynamic landscape shaped by digital fluency and constant connectivity. The narratives of the participants, represent diverse backgrounds, and demonstrate the multifaceted impact of digital associations on athletes, teams, brands, and organizations. As the digital and social media era continues to redefine how to approach sports engagement and marketing, it becomes imperative for these individuals and groups to adapt and innovate. The challenges of navigating NIL regulations, ethical considerations, and the continuously evolving



media terrain indicate the need for comprehensive education and support for athletes. Looking ahead, the consensus among participants, and with supporting information from the literature review, is that sports marketing, anchored in social media platforms, will foster increased visibility, engagement, and monetization opportunities for athletes. The rise of platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Youtube, coupled with the potential influence of sports betting and streaming services, signals a future where Gen Z's influence on sports marketing will only continue and intensify. This study, while providing a snapshot of the current landscape, invites further exploration into the evolving dynamics of sports marketing, branding, and the digital interactions that shape the sports industry for Generation Z and beyond.

*“I affirm that I have upheld the highest standards of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.”*

References

- Bredikhina, N., Sveinson, K., & Kunkel, T. (2022). Athlete interrupted: Exploration of athletes' personal brand management in times of crisis. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 31(3), 212-227. doi:<https://doi.org/10.32731/SMQ.313.0922.04>.
- Butler, D. (2022, August 29). *Icon Source | Blog | TikTok and Sports Marketing*. Icon Source. <https://iconsource.com/blog/why-tiktok-is-the-best-nil-sports-marketing-tool/>
- Dixon, E. (2023). Study: Nine in ten Gen Z sports fans use social media to consume content as consumption habits shift. *SportsPro*. <https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/sports-fans-gen-z-millennial-content-consumption-social-media-deloitte/?zephrossoott=nnUU7A>
- Fayvishenko, D., Cherniavska, L., Bondarenko, I., Sashchuk, T., Sypchenko, I., & Lebid, N. (2023). The impact of brand social media marketing on the dynamics of the company's share value. *Verslas : Teorija Ir Praktika*, 24(1), 24-32. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3846/btp.2023.17117>
- Golden, Todd Aaron. (2023). For many student-athletes, NIL has made social media a must, not an option. *Commercial-News*. [https://www.commercial-news.com/sports/for-many-student-athletes-nil-has-made-social-media-a-must-not-an-option/article\\_c27118d2-e48f-11ed-9fe2-176a91448e71.html](https://www.commercial-news.com/sports/for-many-student-athletes-nil-has-made-social-media-a-must-not-an-option/article_c27118d2-e48f-11ed-9fe2-176a91448e71.html)
- Guidotti, F., Demarie, S., Ciaccioni, S., & Capranica, L. (2023). Knowledge, competencies, and skills for a sustainable sport management growth: A systematic review. *Sustainability*, 15(9), 7061. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/su15097061>
- Hodgson, S. (2023). Endorsement vs sponsorship, what's the difference and which is right for you? *Fabrik Brands*. <https://fabrikbrands.com/endorsement-vs-sponsorship-difference-between-endorsement-and-sponsorship/>
- How Gen Z is transforming sports marketing*. *Sports Business Journal*. (2022, December 1). Retrieved on September 10, 2023 from <https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/SB-Blogs/OpEds/2022/12/01-Bilodeau.aspx>
- Kelly, C. (2021, November 11). *Sports Illustrated launches Snap Original series in push for Gen Z*. Marketing Dive. <https://www.marketingdive.com/news/sports-illustrated-launches-snap-original-series-in-push-for-gen-z/609867/>

Lehnert, K., Walz, A., & Christianson, R. (2022). The booming eSports market: A field day for fans. *The Journal of Business Strategy*, 43(2), 122-128. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-07-2020-0159>

Naraine, M. L., Bakhsh, J. T., & Wanless, L. (2022). The e impact of sponsorship on social media engagement: A longitudinal examination of professional sport teams. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 31(3), 239-252. doi:<https://doi.org/10.32731/SMQ.313.0922.06>

*Nil opens a new era of collegiate athlete marketability*. Mintel. (2023, January 17). <https://www.mintel.com/advertising-and-marketing-market-news/nil-opens-a-new-era-of-collegiate-athlete-marketability/>

Perloff, A. (2022). College sports cartel crashes as athletes prepare to cash in on “Name, image, and likeness”. *Education Next*, 22(1) Retrieved from <http://ezpro.cc.gettysburg.edu:2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/college-sports-cartel-crashes-as-athletes-prepare/docview/2733259727/se-2>

Thompson, T. P. (2022). Maximizing NIL rights for college athletes. *Iowa Law Review*, 107(3), 1347-1387. Retrieved from <http://ezpro.cc.gettysburg.edu:2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/maximizing-nil-rights-college-athletes/docview/2645529635/se-2>

Williams, J., Chinn, S. & Suleiman, J. The value of Twitter for sports fans. *J Direct Data Digit Mark Pract* 16, 36–50 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1057/dddmp.2014.36>