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A COMPARATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF NIL LEGISLATION'S IMPACT ON THE INSTAGRAM POSTING HABITS OF COLLEGIATE WOMEN'S GYMNASTS

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A COMPARATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF NIL LEGISLATION'S IMPACT ON THE INSTAGRAM POSTING HABITS OF COLLEGIATE WOMEN'S GYMNASTS

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Abstract

In 2021, legislation regarding Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) was enacted, giving American collegiate athletes the opportunity to profit from brand deals and sponsorships. Despite most NIL deals going to male athletes, female collegiate gymnasts have also begun earning deals from brands and posting about these partnerships on social media. Given the recent rise in viewership and popularity in women's collegiate gymnastics, this study found female collegiate gymnasts present themselves differently today on social media than they did before NIL legislation was enacted. Through brand identity theory, self-presentation theory and impression management theory, gymnasts competing post-NIL legislation promote themselves and their sport on Instagram less than pre-NIL gymnasts did. Findings suggest future collegiate gymnasts should establish strong brand identities by posting professionally shot photos, sponsored posts, more carousels and videos than single photos, and using positive language, emojis and hashtags in the caption.

Keywords: collegiate gymnastics, women's gymnastics, self-presentation, brand partnerships, Instagram, NIL legislation

Chapter 1: Introduction

Women's artistic gymnastics is one of the most-watched sports at the summer Olympics every four years. But what happens to those gymnasts after the Olympics? Or better yet, where do high-level gymnasts go who did not train for the Olympics but want to continue their sport at a competitive level? Collegiate gymnastics, sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for male and female gymnasts, was once a place where high-level gymnasts, elite-level gymnasts, and Olympians went to finish their gymnastics careers. Since gymnastics' transformation in the 1980s, there has also been a shift in gymnasts' retirement experiences (Williams, 2012). In recent years, particularly after the 2016 summer Olympics, this "model" has evolved. Now, some gymnasts elect to return to elite competition after finishing their collegiate eligibility, some compete collegiately for a period of time before leaving to pursue elite gymnastics again, and some choose to train at the elite level and collegiately simultaneously. These changes in how, when, where, and in what order gymnasts compete in their sport has led to increased media attention on collegiate gymnastics. Because fans are noticing their favorite Olympians transition from representing their country to representing an academic institution, they are beginning to follow collegiate gymnastics more closely as opposed to only tuning into the Olympics. In fact, according to Sports Business Journal (2026), the Collegiate Quad on ABC on January 10th, 2026 marked ESPN's most-watched live regular-season college gymnastics meet on record with an average 838K viewers.

Collegiate gymnasts are relevant now because of the sport's rise in popularity given the recent success both the U.S. women and men achieved at the 2024 Olympic Games. "For elite-level athletes of women's artistic gymnastics (WAG) looking to transition to the NCAA ranks,

they belong to a one-of-a-kind situation where they enter a popular NCAA league having already established their fame" (Davis, 2022). Relevance like this has the potential to boost other women's sports too. "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" (Scovel, 2023).

Since gymnasts were included in the name, image, and likeness (NIL) legislation in collegiate athletics that was passed in 2021, female collegiate gymnasts have begun profiting off this newfound exposure by garnering brand partnerships, receiving public relations (PR) packages, and partnering with companies in exchange for mentions on the gymnast's social media platforms. Female collegiate gymnasts have acquired these partnerships more than male collegiate gymnasts simply because the sport is more popular when women are the ones competing. In a 2021 gender equity report completed on various NCAA sports, a case study on gymnastics compared the popularity differences between men's and women's collegiate gymnastics. For example, the study found that while the men's national championship sells around 4,500 tickets, the women's championship, hosted at a much larger venue with more signage, sponsorship opportunities, and broadcast coverage, sells up to 44,000 tickets (Kaplan Hecker & Fink LLP, 2021). The report found that "it is undisputed that women's gymnastics has a larger fan base than men's gymnastics," (Kaplan Hecker & Fink LLP, 2021).

Given the dramatic contrast in exposure when comparing men's and women's gymnastics and the difference in number of NCAA programs, it is understandable that female gymnasts experience more pressure to present themselves in a desirable way online. On social media, research shows that women athletes receive higher levels of social media engagement than what men's sports typically receive relative to follower size (Summers, 2022). Women understand this

and are increasingly using social media to increase fan bases for themselves, their team, and their sport through commercial opportunities and brand worth (Brice et al., 2025). This added pressure might cause gymnasts to employ different self-presentation tactics to present themselves on social media in a manner that is deemed acceptable by the brands. However, according to Scovel (2025), the exact relationship between profit and branding for women athletes in college athletics is relatively ambiguous.

This new territory brings new possibilities for how young gymnasts competing in collegiate gymnastics publicly develop their social identity and market their brand to potential sponsorship partners. However, social media has not always served these functions for collegiate athletes. It was once a place for previously amateur collegiate athletes to socialize, post training updates, and post about what it was like to be a college student participating in NCAA athletics. For example, former UCLA gymnast and national champion Christine Peng-Peng Lee vlogged her sixth and final season as a collegiate gymnast for her YouTube channel which gave viewers behind-the-scenes access of meet days, off-days, practice days, and occasional content unrelated to gymnastics. Although Lee was not able to profit off her YouTube videos as her final competitive year was 2018, it was a platform that allowed her to express who she was on her terms while providing a new perspective to viewers at what life was like as a Division I athlete. Today, other college gymnast YouTubers like Clemson junior Paige Anastasi vlog their daily lives but now hire editors to edit the videos for them; perhaps to save time while ensuring a professional consistency across all the posts. While these gymnasts competed in different eras, both Lee and Anastasi used these platforms to take a more active part in their public presentation and share more aspects of their identity than what is shown in mainstream media and broadcast coverage (Smith, 2015) with Anastasi able to profit off her efforts. Thus, the reasons and

motivations behind how gymnasts choose to present themselves to potential stakeholders has changed over time, particularly when NIL legislation was passed.

Keeping this in mind, this study was informed by impression management and brand identity theory. When people are presenting themselves to others in a certain way, they must first establish their own identity before managing how others view them, which is impression management. More specifically, self-presentation theory posits that it is "not just how an individual portrays themselves but also how audiences respond to the identity being portrayed" (Wanzer, et al., 2024). This is essentially framing since the person presents (frames) themselves in a way they desire at that moment. This study was interested in understanding if female collegiate gymnasts who competed before NIL legislation was enacted "frame" themselves differently than the gymnasts who competed after the legislation was passed. This new method of framing came because the NIL legislation has made it possible for gymnasts to profit off their online presentations through brand deals and partnerships. When a gymnast repeatedly manages how she comes across online, this can turn into more of a behavior which is considered impression management. Impression management theory posits athlete image similarly in that it is "any behavior by a person that has the purpose of controlling or manipulating the attributions and impressions formed of that person by others" (Tedeschi, 1981).

Thus, this study sought to find how collegiate gymnasts presented themselves differently on social media, particularly the app Instagram, before NIL legislation was enacted compared to after. This study analyzed differences between gymnasts who competed collegiately pre-NIL and post-NIL by examining Instagram posts from the accounts of 14 gymnasts: seven who competed in collegiate gymnastics before the NIL legislation passed and seven who competed after the NIL

legislation was enacted. Findings from this study will inform future collegiate gymnasts and help companies form successful brand partnerships that are authentic to the gymnast.

Research Problem: Female collegiate gymnasts use social media for personal branding, socialization, and self-expression. Since the NCAA passed Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) legislation in 2021, collegiate athletes were able to begin profiting off their name, image and likeness. Male athletes were able to obtain these partnerships immediately with the first three athletes to secure NIL deals being male football players starting at midnight (Ramsey, 2022). Since then, both female student-athletes and brands benefit from this new legislation. In fact, women athletes now represent 32.2% of all NIL deal submissions and are 2.8% more engaged in the NIL process than men (Sports Business Journal, 2025). For female gymnasts specifically, NIL helps gymnasts stay relevant and profit even in non-Olympic years. Gymnastics is a unique sport in how it has four events, gymnasts begin in the sport as young as three years old, and the sport's media attention peaks every four years at the summer Olympic games. Because gymnastics is not a linear sport and not all high-level gymnasts train on the path to the Olympics, social media and brand partnerships can propel these gymnasts into notoriety no matter what path they take. Although research has been conducted regarding the effects NIL has had on all collegiate athletes, there is a gap in research pertaining to gymnasts specifically, much less any research that examines how female gymnasts present themselves on social media.

Purpose Statement: Now that female gymnasts are receiving more brand partnerships and understand brands are watching, are they adjusting how they present themselves on social media, specifically on Instagram, to these brands and other stakeholders? The purpose of this research is to compare how female collegiate gymnasts portray themselves on Instagram for self-presentation, social identity, and impression management pre-NIL legislation compared to post-

NIL legislation/current day. A qualitative content analysis of Instagram with posts made by collegiate gymnasts who competed pre-NIL and post-NIL uncovered themes regarding their presentation habits. This study examined themes emerging from content and captions posted by the gymnasts. The themes found from this analysis can inform how today's college gymnasts who fit in the post-NIL group present themselves online for potential brand partnerships. Today's collegiate gymnasts who are more informed about successful ways to frame themselves online to obtain brand partnerships can help increase fan and media exposure to their sport.

Chapter 2: Background

While there is existing literature that focuses on social media use as a core part of how athletes present themselves online to brands and fans, little research examines collegiate gymnasts and related issues. The following chapter will introduce elite gymnastics, which is a competitive level of gymnastics that can serve as a predictive indicator for how well a gymnast will perform in collegiate competition. The chapter will also introduce the history of the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) bill.

Elite Gymnastics

Elite gymnastics is a path that high-level gymnasts can choose to take once they have successfully competed in all 10 developmental competitive levels governed by USA Gymnastics. If a gymnast chooses to begin training elite, she acknowledges the demanding training schedule and potential increase in media coverage as elite gymnastics is the competitive level that Olympians compete in. Reaching the level of elite gymnastics involves sacrifice and dedication, often times preventing gymnasts from pursuing opportunities outside of gymnastics. Gymnasts pursuing the elite track understand the assumptions that they will not be able to compete in any other sports, have substantial time to learn new hobbies, and in some cases, attend public school. Elite gymnasts typically train around 35-40 hours a week with some elite gymnasts starting at 13 years old (Brown, 2003).

Each year, hundreds of American gymnasts who compete elite vie for a spot on the national team. Of the hundreds who compete at elite competitions, approximately 30 gymnasts are selected for a spot on either the junior or senior elite national team, depending on the age of the gymnast, before being sent to compete on international assignments. “Gymnasts qualifying for a spot on the U.S. National Team represent the United States at major national and

international competitions" (Brown, 2003). This includes the Olympics and annual world championships. Beginning in 1996 with the U.S. women's gymnastics Olympic team who won the first team gold ever for the United States, the U.S. has become the most dominant gymnastics team in the world (Friedman, 2016). Due to this consistent success, today's elite gymnasts named to the national team are thrust into the spotlight (Brown, 2003) and immediately deemed prominent in the eyes of the media. This increase in media coverage combined with the pressures of competing very difficult skills at high-stakes competitions can make for a stressful time in a gymnast's career. However, if an elite gymnast chooses to compete collegiately, this media coverage and strong brand identity has a good chance at following her into college which increases her chances of acquiring more brand partnerships and media exposure once there.

History of NIL

Ever since the NCAA was created, participating athletes have been required to play as amateurs, otherwise they are deemed ineligible. This is because the NCAA insisted that competing at the amateur level provides the student-athletes with the time and opportunities to stay focused on their academics (Czekanski & Siegrist, 2024). According to Czekanski and Siegrist (2024), the NCAA was asked "to implement new bylaws allowing athletes to generate revenue for themselves based on their name, image, and likeness (NIL)". NIL is "…the term for the way in which a college athlete may monetize and publicize their personal brand through endorsements, sponsorship and ad deals" (Gerson, 2023). These new bylaws and an eventual policy came about after years of college athletes being forbidden to get paid by the exposure their athletic performances brought to their university despite those schools, especially those with popular men's athletic programs, generating huge profits off of their student-athletes' performances (Gerson, 2023). Because the NCAA hesitated in making any bylaws, state

legislatures took it upon themselves to make their own laws granting student-athletes in their state these privileges. “However, after mounting public pressure from scholars, activists, and athletes themselves, the NCAA changed its rules in July 2021” (Scovel, 2025). This nationwide imbalance of equitable NIL laws caused the NCAA to reexamine its existing bylaws, and after external pressures from various stakeholders, the NCAA enacted several bylaws defining exactly how student-athletes could maintain their eligibility while profiting off their talents. After more court cases and additional bylaws were created, the United States Supreme Court reached a decision on June 30th, 2021: student-athletes in every state could begin generating money from their NIL.

The next day on July 1st, 2021, collegiate athletes were officially granted the ability to profit off their name, image, and likeness, which prompted athletes to begin choosing how they wanted to portray themselves on social media. This led the NCAA to institute a new interim NIL policy (Czekanski & Siegrist, 2024). The interim bylaws had four parts: student-athletes could participate in NIL activities as long as they followed the parameters set by the state they attended college in. Next, if a student-athlete’s college was in a state that did not have NIL laws, they could participate in NIL activities without penalty. Penultimately, student-athletes were able to sign with professional representation to navigate this new landscape. Lastly, student-athletes were required to work within the state laws and institution guidelines as long as they reported all NIL-related activities to their respective athletic departments (Czekanski & Siegrist, 2024). Today, all American athletes competing in the NCAA, besides students enrolled in military academies, have the opportunity to engage in NIL opportunities (Scovel, 2025).

Since the current NIL laws were enacted, companies and organizations can now partner with student-athletes they deem fit enough to represent their brand. Companies choose student-

athletes based off the student-athlete's brand personality. "Athlete brand personalities are formed through observable characteristics such as media depictions, endorsed product associations, and sports associations" (Carlson, 2013). One of the most prominent student-athletes among all collegiate sports to reap the benefits from this legislation is former Louisiana State University gymnast Olivia Dunne. After NIL legislation was enacted, Dunne obtained partnerships with American Eagle and Vuori among others. She also started her own NIL collective to generate revenue called the Livvy Fund which supports female student-athletes at LSU (Adkerson, 2025). LSU has capitalized on Dunne's success by using her in marketing campaigns and recruiting pitches across several LSU sports. "As LSU sees it, to win over the next highly acclaimed football or basketball recruit, they need to demonstrate that LSU is a place where NCAA athletes can maximize their earning potential in the form of NIL deals" (Davis, 2022). Dunne is now retired and is more of an influencer than an athlete. "Social media offers female athletes an opportunity to amplify their voices and grow their presence: they are the newest group of social media influencers" (Osborne, 2023). Dunne's financial success and visibility reaching beyond the athletic world supports Scovel's (2025) point that the opportunity to share stories to a digital audience is a driving factor that motivates young elite female athletes to being posting on social media.

Individuals who identify with an athlete demonstrate behavioral consequences that demonstrate how they are associate to the athlete because associating with a public figure like an athlete enhances a person's self-concept (Carlson, 2013). "Although many companies find it appealing to be associated with a professional athlete, it is the culturally derived meanings (i.e., brand personality attributes) associated with the athlete that makes such associations profitable" (Carlson, 2013). This illustrates the idea that the products or services an athlete is promoting will

influence the consumer simply because the athlete is attached to the product or service. The NIL legislation seeks to capitalize on this by helping the athlete financially benefit while the brand behind the product or service gets publicity from the well-known athlete. Athletes with strong personal brands and reputations among fans create the biggest win-win for both parties and is what makes NIL so appealing to young athletes. This is because in NCAA women's gymnastics, gymnasts are arguably more high-profile and have a larger following than their own program (Davis, 2022). Not only do the brand and athlete benefit from this, but the consumer does too. By engaging in purchasing whatever the athlete is promoting, the consumer feels like they are a part of the in-group. According to Carlson (2013), individuals who perceive membership in a group are motivated to exhibit behaviors and intentions that are consistent with group norms.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Social Media Use in Student-Athletes

Student-athletes spend a significant amount of time on social media in college. Research shows that athletes use higher volumes of social media consumption than the average person with athletes reporting they are on social media an average of four hours per day (Merrill & Faustin, 2023). This time is not all wasted. “Social media provides unique opportunities for athletes and teams, and these applications are often used to enhance athlete status and careers” (Levy et al., 2025). For gymnasts, social media means sharing the behind-the-scenes of practices, travel days, competition days, and competition results through videos, pictures, text and other creative formats on social media as an inside look to fans. A study found that athletes also use social media to receive information from their management which illustrates how various stakeholders in athletics use social media as fundamental communication platforms (Hayes, et al., 2019). Many athletes use social media for these reasons as it helps them connect with other athletes who can relate to what they are going through. Other reasons that athletes use social media fits within six motives: interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, promotional, and fanship (Hayes, et al., 2019). According to Scovel (2023), the type of social media platform an athlete chooses to use impacts how they choose to express themselves. While some platforms like X or LinkedIn may be more formal platforms for athletes to express ideas and original thinking, others like TikTok or YouTube may be better for athletes looking to show off their creativity. Nevertheless, these platforms are appealing to users as almost all are free to use. These motives help establish community and belonging between athletes and fans online, leading to a safe space where stories can be shared.

Since student-athletes represent not only themselves and their team but also the university every day, the NCAA has created rules for student-athletes to abide by with some of these rules pertaining to student-athlete social media. The NCAA sets rules and regulations for what student-athletes post online and if these rules are not followed, the NCAA disciplines the student-athlete and their institution (Richardson, 2018). This illustrates how NIL has opened new opportunities within athletics compliance. If a gymnast posts a photo on her social media page of her with alcohol in the background or her jumping in a straddle position during a routine (which might be viewed sexually), this might be interpreted poorly on the university. According to Scovel (2023), "New NIL policies in college sports 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 allows female athletes to present a multifaceted, holistic version of themselves to fans on social media (Scovel, 2025).

Previous research has found that student-athletes are typically able to identify both positive and negative implications of social media use. In a qualitative study by Brougham in 2021, respondents were asked whether they believed social media had a positive or negative impact on their daily lives. Of the responses, results that pointed toward a positive effect were communication, stress relief, and motivation. Participants said they believed social media helped them communicate with other users they might have lost touch with otherwise, helped temporarily relieve stress, and helped motivate them toward future successes by viewing others' profiles and whereabouts. Participants who believed social media had a negative effect on them listed procrastination, loss of sleep, and vulnerability as effects. Participants believed social media helped them procrastinate other more urgent tasks, made them feel more tired as they stayed up late to consume content on social media, and made them feel judged by other student-

athletes when posting vulnerable posts (Brougham, 2021). Self-worth and self-confidence may also be affected by an individual's online social presence (Sanchez, 2023). While there are both negative and positive effects when it comes to using social media, these effects often correlate with users' consumption and production habits. The amount of content a social media user and/or student-athlete posts online and the engagement they receive in return affects how much they are impacted by the effects above.

A study by Wang et al. in 2015 found that among non-student-athletes, "lower classmen were more likely to be continual and heavy users of social media, whereas upper classmen were more likely to be light and occasional users of social media." This could potentially be attributed to freshmen feeling the need to build social capital once arriving on campus in order to prevent being socially placed into any outgroups. Social media also serves a way to develop college students psychosocially by forming social ties with others and maintaining long-distance friendships (Wang et al., 2015). The same study found that upperclassmen used social media less often in order to fulfill academic obligations and to prepare for their lives after college. Overall, student-athletes use social media in a variety of ways to present themselves to fans, connect with friends, and express themselves. This study adds to the body of social media use in collegiate athletes by specifically addressing how student-athletes use social media to present themselves to not only fans, but also to other stakeholders like potential brands looking to partner with the gymnast.

Brand Identity

The varying uses for social media lead to differences in the appearances of student-athlete social media pages. Because student-athletes are unique people who have different motives when presenting themselves online, they each have their own social identity. Social

identity theory posits that individuals are motivated to associate with entities that enhance their self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Brogan (2015) suggests that "aspects of personal brands, including motivation, design, and execution differ from everyday people to celebrities." For college athletes looking to earn brand partnerships, creating a personal brand that is authentic to the character and value of the athlete is a sign of a strong and competitive personal brand (Park et al., 2020). "Well-branded athletes who carry symbolic messages can attract companies seeking effective endorsers" (Arai, et al., 2014). Since gymnastics does not have a professional league (elite gymnastics is not a league), partnering with companies is not only a way gymnasts can make money, but it is also a way for gymnasts to demonstrate which entities they want to associate themselves with (the gist of social identity theory.) Female athletes in action and non-action sports must rely on personal branding to acquire these partnerships. "Personal brands, unlike product brands, often benefit from their brand equity by becoming endorsers or spokesmen for some product, service, or cause" (Parmentier, 2012). Athletes know their public image is being watched. The invention of the Internet and social media specifically has helped athletes exert more control over how their identity is perceived (Smith, 2015).

When it comes to acquiring sponsorship from brands, athletes with strong brand identities have been found to benefit more when securing brand partnerships than athletes who do not develop strong brand identities. An athlete has a strong brand identity when they have high counts of likes on their posts, sponsored posts with brands/partners on their Instagram profile, and posts with professionally captured content.

RQ1: Does brand support increase fan support when comparing likes on Instagram posts from pre-NIL and post-NIL gymnasts?

Likes: The number of likes a user receives on a post can serve as a measure of validation and self-worth (Prichard et al., 2024). In fact, a study by Chua and Chang (2016) found that girls use the number of likes on their Instagram posts as an indication of popularity when comparing themselves with their peers' posts. If anything, likes are a form of social currency, representing the user's popularity and status (Wallace & Buil, 2023).

H1: Gymnasts in the post-NIL group should have more sponsored posts on their profile.

Sponsored posts: Since gymnasts were not allowed to receive sponsorships before the NIL legislation, sponsored posts were not seen on the profiles of these gymnasts. After the NIL legislation was enacted, gymnasts were able to post and signify in their posts or captions that their posts were sponsored.

RQ2: Have posts containing professionally shot photos/videos increased since NIL?

Professional photos and videos: Now that collegiate universities employ full-time creative employees to photograph only its teams, athletes and gymnasts are able to post professional photos of themselves easier than before when there was not a designated person to do so. Posting these professional photos can enhance an athlete's recognition and reinforce the branding dimension of their professional identity (Gönkek & Gencer, 2023). Since gymnastics is not a mainstream sport that social media outlets regularly cover, posting these professional photos is a huge asset for gymnasts as it is often their only means of promoting their personal brand (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016).

Successful brand partnerships can also last into an athlete's retirement. According to Arai, et al. (2014), well-branded athletes can leverage their brand value through their post-athletic career. "Of those choosing to participate in collegiate athletics, many student-athletes will graduate without the option of entering the professional level" (Williams, 2012). This is true

for sports that do and do not have professional leagues no matter if they are revenue-generating sports. “Gymnastics is not a high-profile sport compared to football or basketball, however there are student-athletes who will soon enter the career world and unfortunately not all will transition in a healthy way” (Williams, 2012). In the question of “what’s next?” that many collegiate athletes who do not go professional face once running out of NCAA eligibility, brand partnerships acquired and sustained throughout an athlete’s college career that have the possibility to last after retirement might offer one potentially sustainable route.

Self-Presentation Theory

Self-presentation theory explains that there are two ways individuals deliver themselves: frontstage and backstage performance of self (Wanzer, et al., 2024). Frontstage performance of self focuses on how an individual presents themselves in public or more formal places whereas backstage presentation of self is the “behind the scenes” personality, which is often the personality an individual possesses in a relaxed setting (Wanzer, et al., 2024). Individuals, especially those who are public figures, are intentional with emphasizing what aspects of themselves they want others to notice about them, hence the frontstage performance of self. Self-presentation in athletes includes a variety of these frontstage and backstage presentation behaviors, with examples like athletic performance, interpersonal interactions, and social media use comprising how they present themselves (Wanzer, et al., 2024). Collegiate athletes walk the line between both groups: in the classroom they are regular people and in their sport, they are celebrities. Given the abundant attention on collegiate athletes, social media is a primary way these athletes can control their frontstage performance of self to all stakeholders.

Online, collegiate female athletes face significant responsibility in their self-presentation as they face the social responsibility of maintaining their femininity through their athletic

accomplishments (Sailofsky, 2024). This could be due to the fact that elite female athletes have expressed that they feel they must conform to more gender stereotypes when presenting themselves online when compared to male athletes (Harris & Brison, 2024). Also known as "the athletic labor of femininity," this process feels as if they are in a constant state of self-surveillance and must curate their appearance and personal brand accordingly (Sailofsky, 2024). Scholarship has been mixed with how female athletes respond to these pressures online. Some scholars found that high-earning collegiate female athletes were more likely to post content that emphasized their "attractive appearance" (Wanzer, 2024) while other scholars found elite female athletes did not express these pressures and instead, view their social media as a way to post about their personal lives (Harris & Brison, 2024).

These varying ways to use social media reflect how versatile these platforms can be for female athletes. However, what remains on both sides is the control the female athletes have. For example, the platform Instagram is used frequently by gymnasts to inspire, witness, and interact with others (Amore, 2023). "The most important part about Instagram is that it gives female athletes the *choice* to present themselves in whatever way they want" (Amore, 2023). Thus, the following questions aim to understand how the above concepts play a role in the self-presentation of gymnasts on Instagram:

RQ3: What angles is a gymnast willing to show their publics in their Instagram posts?

Content types: Gymnasts are able to post content in whatever medium they desire whether it be a singular photo, a video, or a carousel which is a posting option where the user can upload several photos at once in a gallery slideshow (Suminto, 2017). Each type has its different offerings with carousels and videos typically providing more opportunity for information than

single photo posts. “Both carousel and videos possess features-and consequently, potential for information richness-that are superior to those of photos” (Ashfiya, 2018).

RQ4: How do gymnasts use emojis and hashtags to present themselves to publics?

Emojis and hashtags: In the captions of these posts, gymnasts can type whatever message they want, sometimes using hashtags and emojis to encapsulate their thoughts. Prior research has found that including emojis and hashtags are key in self-presentation. “Emoji are essential features of online self-presentations that can be employed to portray both personal and group level identities and affiliations” (Marko, 2023). Hashtags work similarly with self-presentation but more so in a way to establish status of the user making the post. One study that researched how influencers use hashtags found that hashtags help illustrate social capital and status of the user. “Users who chose Instagram to seek status, were largely driven by self-presentation motives, which in turn increased the propensity to add hashtags and use many hashtags in a post” (Erz et al., 2018).

RQ5: How do gymnasts show they are contributors to their collegiate team through frontstage and backstage content?

Frontstage and backstage content: Assuming posts containing frontstage content of the athlete are more influential to brands looking to partner with the athlete, elements in the content like athlete performance, popularity, character, and represented school (O’Reilly et al., 2023) can all be factored into how likely an athlete is to receive an NIL deal.

Impression Management

As a reminder, impression management theory is defined as “any behavior by a person that has the purpose of controlling or manipulating the attributions and impressions formed of that person by others” (Tedeschi, 1981). This means impression management is an ongoing,

intentional pattern of actions that a person takes to control how they are perceived by others. Part of this process involves the person choosing how they want to appear to others, otherwise known as self-presentation, and acting according to that persona from there. Self-presentation's purpose is to assign definitions of the situation and social identities to the actors which influence what types of interactions are appropriate and inappropriate for the interactants in the situation (Tedeschi, 1981). Although there is no formal rulebook for how to use social media, self-presentation theory infers that people know what is and what is not appropriate to post because they do not want to be socially placed in the outgroup.

Social identity research aids self-presentation theory in discussing ingroups vs. outgroups. According to Tajfel & Turner (1985), people feel an urge to distinguish themselves from outgroups while simultaneously demonstrating a commonality with the ingroup. Tedeschi further explains that people use self-presentation strategies for two reasons: not only to avoid blame and social disapproval by disassociating themselves from negative actions and outcomes but also by gaining credit and social approval from associating themselves with positive ones.

"The actor must determine the extent to which others attribute responsibility, credit, and blame to him and how they evaluate the consequences of his actions" (Tedeschi, 1981). For collegiate student athletes, this means balancing the pros and cons of posting a photo on Instagram of them partaking in risky, yet typical college behavior. According to Richardson (2018), behaviors of this nature have caused the NCAA to monitor and sometimes limit social media use by student-athletes. Given college athletes are public figures on a team, this behavior could risk damaging the athlete, team, program, and school's reputation. "Consumers identify with famous athletes because they are perceived to be symbolic of desirable reference groups" (Carlson, 2013). If an athlete is using social media in a way that does not reflect a positive image

onto their team, that team is no longer desirable to consumers. One way collegiate athletes manage their impression is through the wording of their Instagram captions. Since athletes want to be considered part of the ingroup and maintain a positive image as representatives of their university, athletes are careful when wording their Instagram captions. Aspects like tone, personality, humor, and gratitude vary with each caption depending on how the athlete wants to present themselves.

In the case of gymnasts posting NIL deals on social media, impression management serves as a reminder that collegiate gymnasts compete more for their team than for themselves. According to Tedeschi (1981), from an impression management point of view, "what matters most to the actor is not how he views his own behavior and their consequences, but rather how others view him." Posts on social media made from a collegiate athlete and gymnasts specifically serve as a reflection of the program as a whole. Through these concepts, the following research question seeks to learn how gymnasts use impression management theory in their Instagram post captions:

RQ6: How are collegiate gymnasts talking about themselves in the captions of their Instagram posts?

Tone: The mood and word choice found in a post's caption are important in determining what effect the gymnast is trying to convey.

Personality: Through aspects like punctuation, wording, emoji usage, capitalization, and length, gymnasts have the opportunity to show their personality through their captions.

Meet promotion: Since gymnastics is not a mainstream sport, gymnasts rely on promoting their own competitions online in order to gain fan attention which can eventually turn

into fan attendance. They do this by providing the details of their upcoming competitions like the day, time, and location of each meet in the caption of their posts.

Dedication to others: By competing on a collegiate team, gymnasts are surrounded by their teammates, friends, and coaches all the time. By dedicating a post to someone they care for and writing a caption about that person, gymnasts use captions to shine a light on others who are important to them.

In summary, this study is informed by brand identity, self-presentation theory, and impression management theory to examine and compare how successful collegiate gymnasts used Instagram before NIL legislation was enacted and how different successful collegiate gymnasts used Instagram after. Using brand identity theory, identifying differences in likes, sponsored posts, and types of captured content from both groups will show how gymnasts develop a strong social media presence to attract potential NIL partnerships. Using self-presentation theory, finding themes in types of Instagram posts made, emojis and hashtags usage in captions, and frontstage and backstage content will show how gymnasts in both groups choose to present themselves to multiple stakeholders. Lastly, identifying themes like tone, personality, dedication to others, and meet promotion in the captions from both groups will show how gymnasts talk about themselves and their teams using impression management theory. The findings demonstrate how gymnasts display themselves on social media today now that they have opportunities to obtain paid brand partnerships. The findings also help inform both gymnasts and companies in securing brand partnerships that feel authentic to the gymnast.

Chapter 4: Methods

Design

This research used a qualitative content analysis, specifically a textual analysis of collegiate gymnasts' Instagram posts to answer the research questions. A qualitative content analysis is the best choice for this study because this study focuses on the meaning within texts and analyzes their communicative content (Kuckartz, 2014). The focus of the analysis was on the text from the captions of the posts, but visual aspects can assist in providing details important to the thematic and textual analyses. While the term qualitative textual analysis could imply a strict analysis of only text and words, this analysis was conducted on non-text items as well, which Kuckartz indicates can be "applied to images, movies, and other products of culture and communications" (Kuckartz, 2014). Since this study was looking for the ways collegiate gymnasts choose to present themselves to publics and potential brand partners, it was fitting to analyze the content the gymnasts have already posted on Instagram as opposed to creating a focus group or interviewing the gymnasts.

This study's content analysis featured a blend of Hopf & Schmidt's approach and Kuckartz's (2014) general analysis approach. In the Hopf & Schmidt approach, an inductive category construction approach is used. "Constructing categories based solely on the empirical data is often referred to as inductive category construction" (Kuckartz, 2014). According to this approach, the researcher created categories and guidelines for the analysis before coding the data and setting up tables to interpret the data in-depth. The steps for this method of qualitative textual analysis encompassed careful scrutiny of the data, formulation of case summaries, establishment of categories, coding of data into these categories, creation of subcategories, secondary coding to reinforce the identified themes within the findings, and finally, the analysis

and presentation of the findings (Kuckartz, 2014). The general analysis approach is similar; however, it is a deductive process. “Constructing categories based on existing theories about the subject and existing hypotheses is called deductive category construction” (Kuckartz, 2014). General analyses go beyond the initial gathering of the content to reach more general and theoretical conclusions (Kuckartz, 2014). This process takes place after the analysis concludes. First, the researcher searches for similarities among the data to build generalizations and find differences in the content. Then, the researcher examines what similarities and differences they found before interpreting the data in a way that best answers their original research question or theory. With these approaches in mind, research question one, research question three, and hypothesis were coded whereas research questions two, four, five and six were thematically analyzed.

After compiling posts from gymnasts, categories began to emerge inductively. The second step involved coding the themes and texts from these posts into categories, using Excel as a tool for coding and organizing the data. Although some quantitative elements were recorded such as the numbers of likes and comments on each post, these numbers were not factored into the thematic or textual analyses. The third step of analysis entailed a second round of coding where 10 more posts were recorded for each gymnast to find how each one paced her posts differently. This extra data analysis also allowed for posts to be coded that were posted after the competitive season ended which allowed for potential non-gymnastics related (backstage) posts to be analyzed. Subcategories were added in the fourth step of analysis to better analyze the caption and tone of comments under each post. Lastly, each post went under a three-step classification process which can be found in figure 2. First, each post was classified as either frontstage or backstage. Then, if a post was classified as frontstage, it was further broken down

into one of three color-coded frontstage categories: gymnast is competing in-competition (green), gymnast is in a competition wearing hair and makeup suited for competition but is not actively competing (yellow), and gymnast is wearing hair and makeup suited for a competition but is not in a competition setting (orange). All other posts that did not fit these three categories or clearly featured the gymnast in a non-gymnastics setting were classified as backstage (blue).

Population

The analyzed content came from gymnasts in two groups, with the intent to compare the two groups' posts made on Instagram. Group one is comprised of seven successful gymnasts who finished competing collegiately prior to the NIL legislation coming out on July 1, 2021. Group two is comprised of seven successful gymnasts who began competing collegiately at least one year after July 1, 2021. Each gymnast in both groups competed for at least two collegiate seasons. These gymnasts were selected due primarily to their high placings in NCAA women's gymnastics postseason competition but also because of their popularity to fans both in and out of the gymnastics community. Eleven of the 14 gymnasts in this population competed elite gymnastics which not only helped boost their popularity in mainstream media but also helped them become somewhat of celebrities within the gymnastics community.

Coding posts exclusively on Instagram was the best choice for this analysis because Instagram is a platform widely used by athletes, especially as a branding tool (Doyle, 2020). Given its more than one billion monthly users, Instagram provides athletes with an opportunity to personally upload what they want which allows them to convey just exactly how they want to be portrayed to fans, brands, and other athletes. "Visual platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat are becoming increasingly popular, with some industry analysts positing that Instagram

is the fastest growing social media platform" (Smith, 2015). The platform's interface is also easy to navigate when searching for posts to analyze.

The content being coded came from each gymnast's personal Instagram page. Twenty-five posts were coded in each group except for one gymnast who did not have twenty-five posts within the time frame. Coded posts for group one began from January 1, 2017 and ended on June 30, 2018. The ability for collegiate athletes to profit off their name, image, and likeness began on July 1, 2021. Coded posts for group two began from January 1, 2022 and ended on June 30, 2023. These year-and-a-half ranges included two competitive collegiate gymnastics seasons each which allowed the researcher to notice any differences in how gymnasts from group two posted from one season to the other assuming they altered their posting habits for NIL posting purposes.

The posts were analyzed over a four-month period, beginning in January 2026 with the final round of category coding ending in April 2026. Interpretations from each category were crafted after the category coding concluded. By combining the subcategory coding with the findings from this classification process, more meaningful themes emerged from the data which provided the insights needed to answer the research questions.

Unit of Analysis

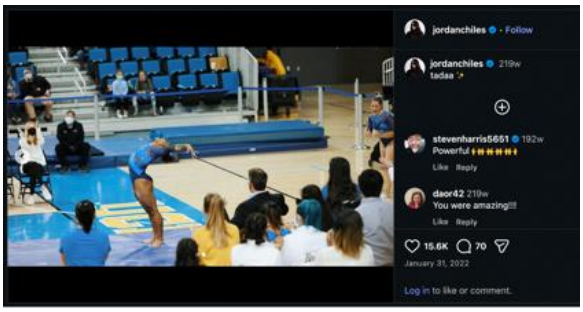
The unit of analysis for this study are Instagram posts. In this study's context, Instagram posts are pieces of content (either one single photo, a video, or a carousel of several photos/videos) uploaded to an Instagram user's profile page. Instagram posts contained content of the gymnast competing, in a competition setting but not competing in the photo, wearing hair and makeup for a competition but not in a competition setting, and not in a gymnastics-related setting/wearing competition hair and makeup at all. Because this unit of analysis entailed

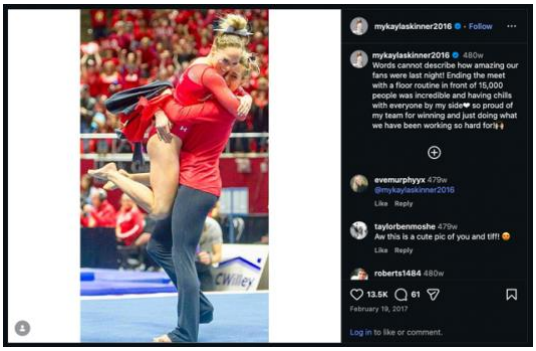
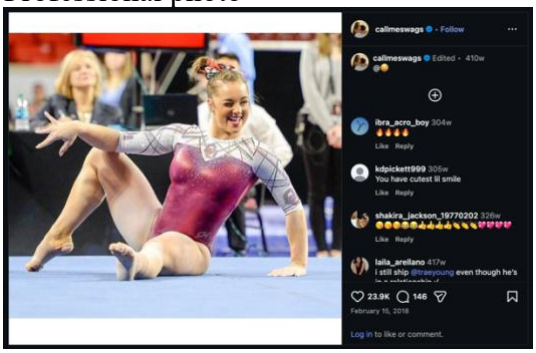
identifying themes from publicly available images and text, no humans were needed therefore an IRB protocol was not necessary for this study.

Measurement Scoring Units and Coding Book

Categories in the spreadsheet included the numbers of likes, the type of content (single photo, carousel, video), how the content was captured (professionally, on iPhone, digital camera), the caption and any caption-specific notes, the image and any image-specific notes, whether the post was sponsored, the number of emojis and hashtags, and the presentation of self. Each of these categories correlate to a theory and were either coded or thematically analyzed. Brand identity theory was examined using likes, sponsored posts, and how the content was captured (see Table 1 below).

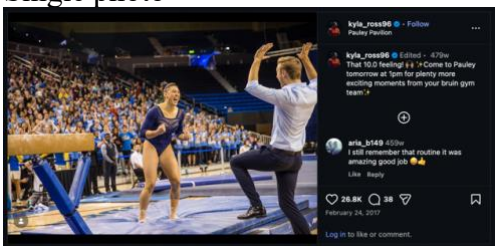
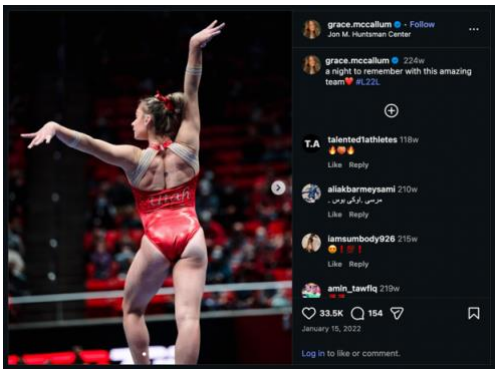
Table 1.
Summary of content characteristics using brand identity theory

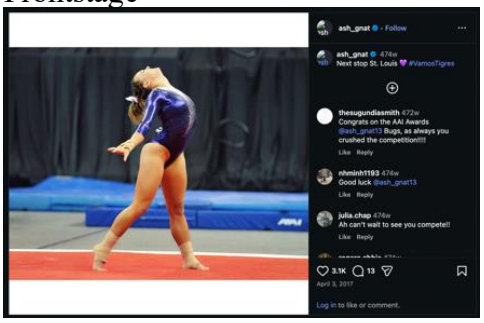
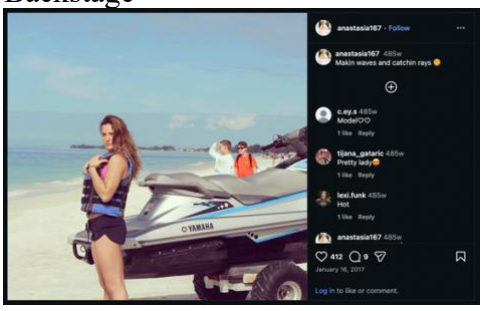
Themes	Definition of code	Example of content
Likes	Number of likes listed at bottom of sidebar.	15.6K 

Sponsored post	A post that has a product being featured in it or has an indicator that a brand is paying the gymnast to make the post.	Present  Not Present 
Content captured	A professionally shot photo is one that was taken with a professional or digital camera whereas a nonprofessional photo was taken by anyone and is usually edited less than a professional photo.	Professional photo  Non-professional photo 

Self-presentation theory was examined using post type, emojis and hashtags, and image content themes such as frontstage and backstage content (see Table 2 below).

Table 2.
Summary of content characteristics using self-presentation theory

Themes	Definition of code	Example of content
Post type	A carousel differs from a single photo or video in how it is a gallery slideshow that can contain photos and/or videos.	Carousel  Single photo  Video 
Emojis and hashtags	Emojis are individual visual symbols and hashtags are a word or a phrase preceded by a hash sign. Ex: ♡, 🔥, 💍 Ex: #L22L, #ODD, #nattychamps	Present 

		Not Present 
Presentation of self	Frontstage presentation of self is defined as a gymnast wearing competition leotard, hair, and makeup either competing in competition, in a competition setting, or intentionally wearing them for a photoshoot/other promotional purpose. Backstage presentation of self is all other instances.	Frontstage  Backstage 

Impression management theory was examined using caption themes (tone, personality, meet promotion, dedication, etc.) (see Table 3 below).

Table 3.
Summary of content characteristics using impression management theory

Themes	Themes of codes	Example of content

Competition time	Serious, locked in, motivational	IT'S NATTYS TIME ⏳🔥#abouttime
Meet promotion	Date, time, location of upcoming meet	me when i see all of your beautiful faces in pauley tomorrow 😬 see you @ 1 pm bruins👊 #packpauley
Happy college girl	Content, excited, appreciative to be in college	Meet season = hug season😂
Short and sweet wording	One or two word captions, one sentence captions	I need tissues.
Dedication post to someone else	Appreciation to another person, missing another person, wishing good luck to another person	Happy Birthday to my fave Canadian sista💝 today I'm extra thankful for student Visas and Smarties... life would be dull without you👽 #AR
Humor	Cheeky, sly, funny	the amount of love i have for this family is far stronger than any college rivalry (still burned the shirt later though😜)
Gratitude	Appreciation, sweet, grateful	Love the feeling of being back on floor ❤
Brand/partner post	Caption written by brand about product for gymnast to post	🌴Florida heat + @yasso = happiness! 😋 #ad #workingwithyasso #greekyogurtbar 🔗 https://yasso.com/collections/greek-yogurt-bars
Caption made by collaborator account	Another account talking about the gymnast's recent performance, accolade, award	That 🅵🅸🆁🆂🆃 10.0 feeling! 🏵 #L22L | #GoUtes

By conducting this content analysis of latent and manifest content, the researcher gathered a clearer picture of how the NIL legislation affected collegiate gymnasts' posting habits and content on Instagram. Repeated themes within the types of content posted were found such as professional photos vs photos taken by a nonprofessional, training videos vs. scripted/staged

videos, non-gymnastics posts vs. gymnastics-only posts, etc. These findings will help create recommendations on how gymnasts and companies can form successful brand partnerships in the future that feel authentic to the gymnast. The full findings are presented in chapter four and discussions regarding the findings are presented in chapter five.

Chapter 5: Findings

This study wanted to learn how collegiate female gymnasts posted on Instagram before and after NIL legislation was enacted in 2021. After coding 175 Instagram posts from the pre-NIL gymnasts group and 170 Instagram posts from the post-NIL gymnasts group, the six research questions were answered and the hypothesis was proven.

Brand Identity Theory

RQ1: Does brand support increase fan support when comparing likes on Instagram posts from pre-NIL and post-NIL gymnasts? When combining all likes from every gymnast in the pre-group and comparing all likes from every gymnast in the post-group, it was found that pre-NIL gymnasts had a combined total of 1,520,883 likes whereas the post-NIL gymnasts had 6,062,365 likes. Although one post-NIL gymnast significantly contributed to this number, even without her likes, the post-NIL group still had 492,298 likes more than the pre-group.

H1: Gymnasts in the post-NIL group should have more sponsored posts on their profile. When analyzing only the post-NIL group, it was found that sponsored content posts were more often than not scripted by the brand and given to the gymnast. For example, many sponsored posts were shot on an iPhone with the gymnast in the frame either posing with the product or flipping with it. The caption would usually tag the brand, provide a discount code, or speak positively of the brand with sometimes all three of these themes present in the caption. Of the analyzed posts made by the post-NIL group, 9% of the posts were sponsored.

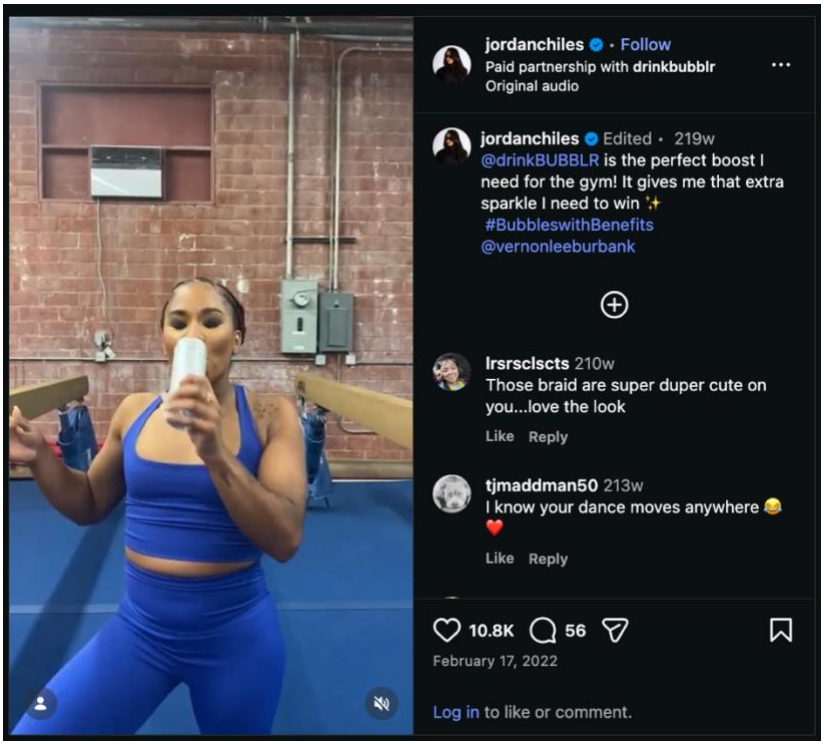


Figure 1. *Example of sponsored post. @jordanchiles on Instagram*.

RQ2: Have posts containing professionally shot photos/videos increased since NIL?

The post-NIL group was more likely to post edited nonprofessional photos and professional photos and videos taken by full-time university-employed creative staff as a way to promote their season. Of the analyzed posts, the pre-NIL gymnasts group had 105 professionally-shot photos or videos in their posts whereas the post-NIL gymnasts group had 272 professionally-shot photos or videos in their posts.



Figure 2. *Example of a post coded "professional photo." @ash_gnat on Instagram.*

Self-Presentation Theory

RQ3: What angles is a gymnast willing to show their publics in their Instagram posts? Of the pre-NIL gymnasts group, 147 posts (84%) were a single photo, 15 posts (8%) were a video, and 13 posts (8%) were a carousel containing photos or videos. In the post-NIL gymnasts group, 44 posts (26%) were a single photo, 20 posts were a video (12%), and 106 (62%) were carousel posts.



Figure 3. *Example of a post coded "single photo." @sydneysmittth on Instagram.*

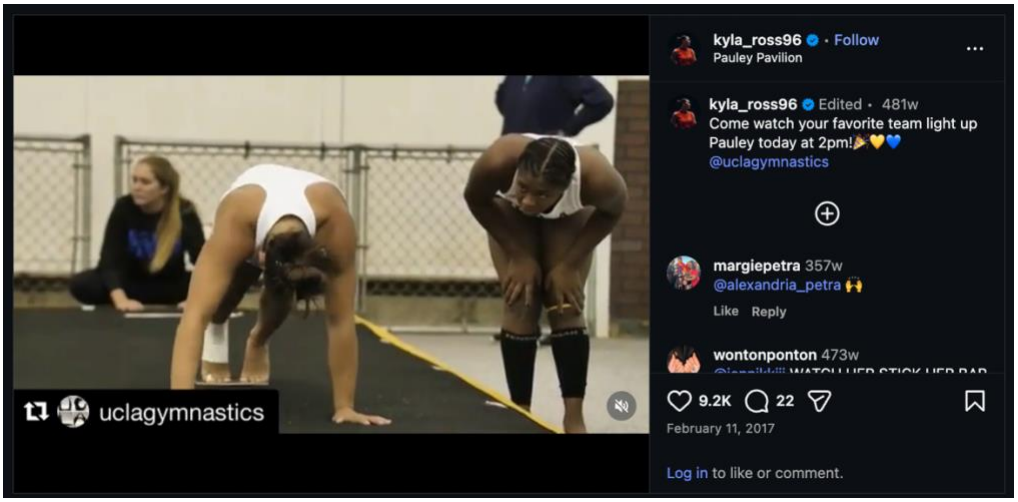


Figure 4. *Example of a post coded "video." @kyla_ross96 on Instagram.*

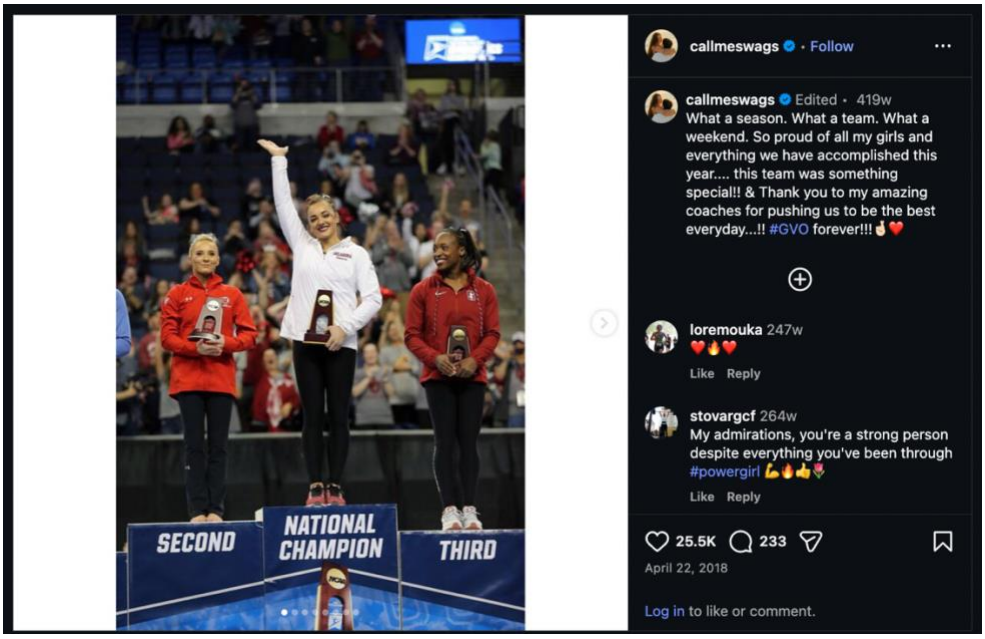


Figure 5. *Example of a post coded "carousel." @callmeswags on Instagram.*

RQ4: How do gymnasts use emojis and hashtags to present themselves to publics?

Gymnasts from both the pre-NIL gymnasts group and post-NIL gymnasts group used emojis with the major difference being the pre-NIL group often using multiple emojis at a time or using manual emojis. When the post-NIL group used emojis, they tended to use one emoji in their caption. With hashtags, the pre-NIL gymnasts group used hashtags frequently in their posts and used long hashtags to add an extra level of information to their posts. The post-NIL gymnasts group rarely used hashtags and when they did, it was a team hashtag or a cheeky hashtag that went along with the post like #happyvalentinesday or #beatbama.



Figure 6. *Example of a post with emojis and hashtags in caption. @jadecarey on Instagram.*

RQ5: How do gymnasts show they are contributors to their collegiate team through frontstage and backstage content? Assuming frontstage content is more influential to brands, it was found that pre-NIL gymnasts' posts were 55% frontstage whereas 72% of post-NIL gymnasts' posts were frontstage. Therefore, pre-NIL gymnasts' posts were 45% backstage whereas 28% of the post-NIL gymnasts' posts were backstage.



Figure 7. *Example of a post coded "frontstage." @mykaylaskinner2016 on Instagram.*



Figure 8. *Example of a post coded "backstage." @sunisalee on Instagram.*

Impression Management

RQ6: How are collegiate gymnasts talking about themselves in the captions of their Instagram posts?

Tone: Gymnasts from both groups expressed themes of being grateful for their team and ability to do gymnastics at the collegiate level.



Figure 9. *Example of a post coded "gratitude." @grace.mccallum on Instagram.*

Personality: In terms of captions, both groups enjoyed posting short and sweet captions. However, the pre-NIL group used more emojis and exclamation points whereas the post-NIL group used more lowercased words, one-word, or one-sentence captions.

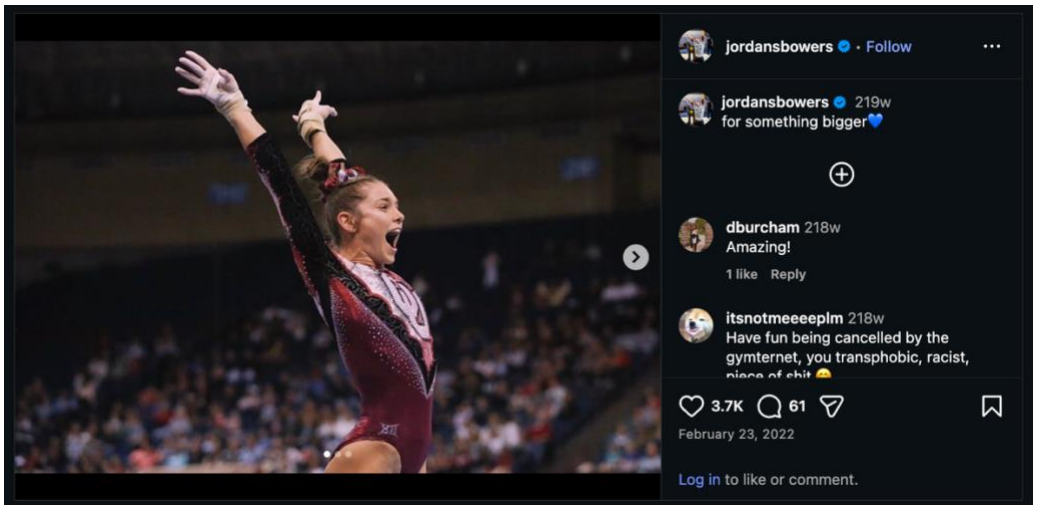


Figure 10. *Example of a post coded "short and sweet." @jordansbowers on Instagram.*

Meet promotion: When comparing the Instagram posts of pre-NIL and post-NIL gymnasts, pre-NIL gymnasts were more likely to promote their own gymnastics meets through posts made on meet days, promoting the days, times, and location of their next meet in the caption, or including a video of them performing in a previous competition.



Figure 11. *Example of a post coded "meet promotion." @gracie.kramer on Instagram.*

Pre-NIL gymnasts were also more likely to use screenshots of news press releases detailing their accomplishments to show their peers that they were succeeding in their sport and that they wanted more fans in attendance for their next meet.

Dedication: In the pre-NIL group, more dedication posts meant more captions tagging one person and talking only about the person they were dedicating the post to. In the post-NIL group, gymnasts still made dedication posts but instead used one word or one sentence captions. By mentioning other people in their Instagram posts, gymnasts showed that they have people who support them, therefore they are in the ingroup.



Figure 12. *Example of a post coded "dedication." @katelyn_ohashi on Instagram.*

Chapter 6: Discussion

Through coding Instagram posts through categories that aligned with brand identity theory, self-presentation theory, and impression management theory, findings showed how collegiate female gymnasts' Instagram posts changed after NIL legislation came out. These findings are important for future collegiate gymnasts as they enter college and prepare to potentially receive attention from brands. This study's main findings found that compared to the post-NIL group, the pre-NIL gymnasts used multiple emojis and longer hashtags in their captions, showed more backstage content in their posts, were more enthusiastic in their captions, promoted their own meets more, and had more dedication posts. These findings are supported by research that says emojis and hashtags help "portray both personal and group level identities and affiliations" (Marko, 2023). This study's main findings found that compared to the pre-NIL group, the post-NIL gymnasts had more likes on their posts, more sponsored posts, more professional photos and videos in their content, and posted more carousels and videos than single photos. These findings align with the idea that because pre-NIL gymnasts did so much promotion and marketing of themselves and their sport on social media, that the post-NIL gymnasts are now receiving those benefits through things like TV viewership and increased brand attention, meaning they have to do that promotion and marketing much less. This also supports the idea that now that collegiate gymnasts have the opportunity to profit off their posts, they post more content of themselves competing in their sport and showing they are competing enough that they are active contributors to their teams. Additionally, given the post-NIL group had more likes and professional pictures than the pre-NIL group, professionally shot photos have increased the gymnasts' credibility, professionalism, etc. These findings suggest that future

collegiate female gymnasts should follow a list of best practices to better set themselves up for success in receiving brand partnership offers.

In addition to the main findings, it was also found that when comparing posts that were sponsored versus ones that were not, gymnasts who acquired brand partnerships had strict guidelines to follow in their posts which were probably determined by the brands. This uniformity could be attributed to the infancy of NIL rules at the time these posts were published. Brands did not want to mess with athlete eligibility, so each sponsored post and corresponding caption looked similar and focused on showing the gymnast in a relaxed, non-gymnastics setting with the product in hand to show that although they are busy student-athletes, they still have time for the product in their everyday lives. This uniformity may change in the future as NIL guidelines progress, especially as more former elite gymnasts commit to NCAA programs. "The combination of NCAA gymnastics and highly acclaimed elite level gymnasts who can now wield the full power of their brands due to NIL has created a situation that is unprecedented elsewhere in the college sports world" (Davis, 2022). It is also interesting to note that some gymnasts posted their NIL opportunities during the season whereas some did not post any at all, even after the season. This could be either because the gymnasts did not receive any NIL partnerships or if she did, she did not want to divert her attention away from the competitive season to post about the partnerships online.

The results of this study provide specific findings for how collegiate gymnasts' Instagram post contents and captions have changed since NIL legislation was enacted, findings that are not typically researched on. Because NIL deals are commonly offered to male athletes first (Ramsey, 2022), the findings from this research can help collegiate gymnasts gain an edge over other athletes in competing for those brand partnerships. Additionally, since gymnastics does not have

a professional league for gymnasts who have exhausted their eligibility, using the best practices from this study can help gymnasts build a strong brand identity they can hopefully use to financially sustain them after athletics (Williams, 2012).

The pre-NIL gymnasts group in this study were found to be promoting their own competitions to grow fan attention and attendance which supports prior findings that found sportswomen "are expected to do more unpaid promotional work to 'build' the game" (Brice et al., 2025). However, it's important to note that this is not the only way gymnasts are growing attention on the sport. Two of the post-NIL athletes analyzed, Sunisa Lee and Jade Carey, competed in the Olympics before entering college. "The arrival of Sunisa Lee at Auburn and Jade Carey at Oregon State instantly propelled two mid-level programs to the top of the NCAA gymnastics echelon" (Davis, 2022). Having these gymnasts enroll at programs that were not known for recruiting such high-level athletes skyrocketed the programs' media coverage, relevance, and home meet attendance. In Lee and Carey's instance, their individual achievements before competing in collegiate gymnastics were more of a passive way they were able to grow the sport.

As for practical application, brands want athletes who are serious about their sport, not ones who seem like potential risks to the brand's reputation. By following the best practices, female collegiate gymnasts can get a head start at preparing themselves for potential brand partnerships:

1. Gymnasts can limit any backstage content of themselves to prevent themselves from coming across as partiers or reckless.

2. Underclassmen gymnasts can use more emojis and hashtags to establish status than in their upperclassmen years.

3. If gymnasts post content of themselves competing in or on the sidelines of a competition with their team, the content should be shot professionally.

4. Gymnasts should continue to post any sponsored posts they may receive in order to fulfill contract obligations from brands.

5. Gymnasts can increase engagement by posting carousels and videos.

6. Gymnasts can remain positive, enthusiastic, and grateful in the captioning of their posts since multiple stakeholders are watching their online presence.

Limitations/Suggestions for Future Research

Some limitations of this study include the sampling, timeframe of data collection, and focus on publicly available data. The sample of this study was independently compiled by who the researcher felt had the most followers and was the most athletically successful in each group. A future study could select gymnasts in a more concrete way to ensure fairness by selecting gymnasts from a list or analyzing the top contributor from each team in each group. Additional depth could be added by conducting interviews with gymnasts to get them to reflect on their social media practices. The random sampling of posts that were analyzed could have been improved. The original period of posts that were being coded was a year and a half but due to time constraints, that period was shifted instead to looking at the first 20-25 posts per gymnast in each timeframe. This sampling was not random as every post starting at the beginning of each timeframe was analyzed. This prevented the researcher from seeing any long-term trends in the content. Lastly, a more robust mixed-methods approach could be valuable where taking quantitative data like post likes and comment numbers into consideration with the qualitative findings would provide an extra layer to the findings.

While this study initially included a category in the codebook pertaining to the potential sexualization of the analyzed Instagram posts, it was determined that the sexualization of gymnasts is a far wider topic to explore than what this study originally sought out to find. Future studies could expand on this and examine Instagram post content and/or captions for themes or tones of potential sexualization in the comments. Future studies could also compare the tone of the posted content to the tone/reactions from commenters. This study found a variety of non-sexualization related themes in the comment sections of the analyzed posts as well. These themes included commenters posting only emojis and no words, fans sending their words of support to the gymnast on her recent or upcoming performance, and little girls saying they look up to or idolize the gymnast. Finally, as research has been conducted about the growing fandom of gymnastics, a future study could expand on the differences in student-athlete experience using interviews with male and female collegiate gymnasts.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify how the name, image, and likeness (NIL) bill of 2021 changed the posts or posting habits of collegiate female gymnasts through the lens of brand identity theory, self-presentation theory, and impression management theory. By comparing posts and identifying themes from the content and captions of female gymnasts before and after the bill was passed, it was found that gymnasts became more selective with what they posted and how they phrased their captions on Instagram given brands were able to offer potential partnerships to them. As both the popularity of gymnastics and NIL's role in the sport are likely to continue growing, these findings can assist female collegiate gymnasts in their future decision-making processes when crafting social media posts as well as brands looking to partner with collegiate gymnasts.

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