

Rhetoric and Identity in NIL Athletics

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Introduction

Abstract:

My Capstone Project examines how the top three NIL-earning athletes at the University of Alabama employ visual rhetoric on social media to negotiate identity, amateurism, and professionalism. While there has been existing research that has explored branding and self-presentation in collegiate sports, little attention has been given to how elite athletes' visual texts function rhetorically to construct their identity and interpret shifting legal boundaries in the NIL era. Using a rhetorical analysis situated within an interpretive paradigm and guided by Social Identity Theory, this study analyzes athletes' social media posts to identify patterns of self-concept, group affiliation, and ongoing identity negotiation. By coding visual and textual elements and comparing across athletes, the project expects to show that NIL success is tied to rhetorical strategies that blend team identity, personal branding, and professional aesthetics, revealing how athletes both reinforce and destabilize what has been considered to be the traditional category of "student-athlete."

Purpose of Project:

This project examines how the top three NIL-earning athletes at the University of Alabama use visual self-presentations on social media to negotiate identity, amateurism, and professionalism. Grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, it approaches these self-presentations as subjective expressions rather than measurable outcomes. By applying Social Identity Theory, the study explores how these elite athletes balance their roles as students, team members, and public figures while responding to the legal, cultural, and market pressures that shape their public personas in the NIL era.

Significance and Justification:

This study is significant because it examines a unique and highly visible population whose public self-presentations have not been systematically analyzed, providing a new lens on how elite athletes negotiate identity in the NIL era. By focusing on their visual social media content, the project reveals how legal frameworks, cultural expectations, and market pressures shape athlete behavior and identity construction. These insights have broader implications for understanding the evolving boundaries between amateurism and professionalism, guiding institutions, policymakers, and the public in promoting fairness, equity, and well-being within collegiate sports and the communities that engage with them.

Project Question:

In what ways do the top three NIL-earning athletes at the University of Alabama employ visual rhetoric in their self-presentations, and how can rhetorical criticism show how these texts construct identity and interpret the legal boundary between amateurism and professionalism?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

A Theory of Identification (Lewisch, 2003). Peter Lewisch presents identification theory as a framework for understanding how rhetoric shapes meaning and motivates action. He argues that people interpret the world through frames and identify with actors, transforming detached observation into meaningful engagement. In politics, for example, voting becomes a rhetorical act of solidarity rather than a purely rational choice. This theory helps explain how communication constructs identity and motivates behavior, relevant to how athletes and audiences connect in NIL contexts.

A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory (Hogg, 1995). Michael Hogg compares Social Identity Theory with Self-Categorization Theory, showing how one emphasizes intergroup relations while the other focuses on cognitive mechanisms of group perception. He argues the two theories complement one another in explaining how self-concept and group behavior interact. This framework illuminates both bias and identity construction, offering insights into how athletes balance group affiliation and individuality in NIL branding.

Name, Image, and Likeness and the Health of the Young Athlete: A Call to Action for Sports Medicine Providers and the Athletic Healthcare Network (Hollabaugh, Jeckell, and Diamond, 2023). This clinical commentary highlights the lack of research on how NIL affects youth athletes' mental health, academics, and well-being. The authors warn that NIL introduces new stressors—including financial pressure, media scrutiny, and team conflict—that could exacerbate exploitation, burnout, and inequities. They argue that sports medicine providers and athletic healthcare networks must prepare to support athletes and families navigating the risks and responsibilities of NIL.

Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory (Stets and Burke, 2000) Stets and Burke bridge Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory, emphasizing their shared view of the self as socially constructed. They distinguish role-based from group-based identities but argue both are essential for understanding identity activation and behavior. Integrating the two theories offers a fuller account of how identities are shaped by roles, groups, and social structures. This is especially useful in NIL, where athletes must manage overlapping roles as students, teammates, and brand representatives.

Social Identity Theory and Mass Communication Research (Harwood and Giles, 2005) Harwood and Giles apply Social Identity Theory to mass communication, linking audience behavior to identity processes. They argue that media consumption involves not just seeking information or entertainment but also resisting, reinterpreting, and negotiating portrayals tied to group membership. Their framework shows why media representations matter for identity construction. In NIL, this highlights how athletes' media self-presentations influence both individual branding and group narratives.

Social Media in Sport: A Systematic Review and Research Agenda Using the Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methodology Framework (Rai, Kajla, and Itani, 2025) Rai systematically reviews 203 articles on social media in sport using the TOCC framework, highlighting the dominance of consumer engagement themes, the reliance on qualitative methods, and a lack of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approaches. The study finds limited theoretical grounding in existing research, with UGT, SIT, and relationship marketing most frequently applied. Rai calls for greater methodological diversity, integration of multiple theories, and expanded geographic focus, while also outlining practical implications for sport managers in curating authentic, engaging content on emerging platforms like Instagram and Snapchat.

Issues and Functions of Code-switching in Studies on Popular Culture: A Systematic Literature Review (Nazri & Kassim, 2023). Nazri and Kassim review code-switching research in popular culture using PRISMA across five major databases. They find that identity, meaning-making, advertising persuasiveness, and language style are the most frequently analyzed issues. The review highlights how code-switching performs referential, directive, expressive, metalinguistic, and poetic functions that shape emotion, style, and identity in discourse. This underscores the versatility of code-switching as a tool for social and cultural expression.

The Nexus of Sports Fandom and Sports Wagering: A Scoping Review (Mastromartino, Naraine, & Wear, 2025). This scoping review analyzes 14 studies on the intersection of sports fandom and betting, highlighting how team identification and emotional loyalty shape betting motivations beyond financial gain. The authors emphasize ethical concerns over marketing practices that normalize gambling, particularly among vulnerable fans. They find a heavy reliance on quantitative methods and call for more qualitative, longitudinal, and cross-demographic research, especially as sports betting expands in North America.

Rhetorical Techniques

I used visual rhetorical criticism to analyze the social media posts, focusing on how images, layouts, symbols, and text work together to communicate meaning. I examined how athletes use visuals, like game photos, brand logos, and practice images, alongside captions and hashtags to construct identity, signal group membership, and negotiate the boundary between amateurism and professionalism. This approach allowed me to see how visual elements persuade audiences and reinforce the athletes' credibility, emotional appeal, and personal branding.

Data Analysis

I analyzed my data by first documenting and coding each social media post for rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) and Social Identity Theory components such as self-concept, role salience, and social comparison. I then grouped the coded elements into themes, identifying patterns in how athletes construct identity, balance team and personal roles, and negotiate the amateurism–professionalism boundary. Finally, I compared posts across the three athletes to highlight similarities, differences, and the strategies they use to engage audiences and reinforce credibility.

Results



In analyzing these posts, I noticed that each athlete presents a dual self: the student-athlete and the brand representative. Williams's "Built by Bama" and Simpson's "Fueled by Gatorade" connect personal credibility to Alabama's reputation, showing how identity is shaped through teams, sponsors, and audiences. Their posts shift depending on context, game-day photos highlight collective pride, while sponsorship content focuses on individuality and polish, revealing the tension between amateurism and professionalism. Emotional appeals like gratitude and faith resonate most; Simpson's "Thankful for these guys! #Unbreakable" feels authentic and drives engagement, while overly promotional posts often receive mixed reactions. This pattern suggests that authenticity, not self-promotion, anchors NIL success. Overall, through the lens of Social Identity Theory, I see how these athletes use communication to balance belonging and individuality, shaping a new kind of "collegiate professionalism" that blends personal identity with institutional pride.

Using Social Identity Theory, the top NIL-earning athletes at Alabama employ visual rhetoric to construct identities that balance group belonging and personal distinction. Their posts use ethos and authentic self-presentation to align with in-groups like Alabama and sponsors while asserting individuality, creating a hybrid identity that blurs the boundary between amateurism and professionalism.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

In addition to my studies, Tom Hickman (2025) found that fan engagement with NIL collectives is driven by social identity and perceived importance, highlighting the need for tailored strategies to connect with different fan types. Also, Xue and Karuturi (2025) similarly showed that relationship strength and post engagement increase audience response to athlete-sponsored content. My study adds to this literature by showing that NIL athletes' rhetorical strategies not only shape fan behavior but also reinforce their personal and social brand identities.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

NIL athletes' social media posts actively shape their identities, balancing team affiliation, personal branding, and professional credibility. Friends, family, and fans can better understand the pressures athletes face and the strategies they use to maintain authenticity while promoting themselves. Athletic departments should create mentorship programs connecting NIL athletes with alumni or marketing professionals. This guidance can help athletes manage social media, balance team and personal identity, and navigate NIL opportunities responsibly.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of this study is the small sample size, as it focused only on the top three NIL-earning athletes at Alabama, which limits how broadly the findings can be applied to other athletes or programs. Moving forward, I would like to explore how rhetorical strategies in social media posts affect NIL-earning athletes more broadly, including their behavior, opportunities, and public perception. Additional research could investigate how these self-presentations influence endorsements, fan engagement, and identity development across different sports and athlete populations.

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