

Abstract and Background

Background: The rise of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) in NCAA athletics has fundamentally changed how athletes approach their careers. This newfound ability to capitalize on their personal brand presents exciting opportunities, but many athletes lack guidance in building and managing their brand identity. Understanding how athletes perceive the importance of different brand aspects is important for maximizing the potential benefits of NIL. Additionally, athletic departments play a vital role in equipping and assisting athletes when building their brands. Understanding how these athletic departments perceive their role in the process provides needed context to the research. **Methods:** Using a survey adapted from the validated ABiDS scale (Linsner et al., 2020) this study assesses a number of NCAA athlete self perceptions related to personal brand aspects. **Results:** The results included responses from 145 NCAA Division One athletes from Liberty University. The responses included answers to 33 brand identity questions, as well as responses to nine demographic questions. These questions ranged from age, to interest in NIL deals.

Introduction and Research Question

In the ever-evolving landscape of NCAA athletics, Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) opportunities are transforming how athletes approach their careers. However, many athletes lack guidance in building their personal brands, potentially limiting their ability to capitalize on these new opportunities. This study employs a mixed methods approach to explore how NCAA athletes perceive different aspects of their brand identity, as well as how athletic departments perceive their role in athlete branding.

Quantitative Research Question: How do NCAA athletes perceive different aspects of their personal brand?

Qualitative Research Question: How do athletic departments perceive their role in the personal branding process?

By investigating both athlete and athletic department perspectives, this research aims to provide valuable insights for maximizing the potential benefits of NIL and branding in college athletics.

Methods

This study utilized a convergent mixed methods design to gain a preliminary understanding of athlete brand identity in the NIL era. The quantitative component involved a survey distributed to 597 NCAA Division I athletes at Liberty University. The survey assessed their perceptions of various brand identity aspects through a validated Likert scale. Using the ABiDS scale adapted into a Google forms survey, participants were asked 33 questions. The survey prompted participants to rate areas like “Being respected” and “Being emotionally stable” on a 1-7 Likert scale, based on the importance this area has in their brand. This approach allowed for statistical analysis to identify which aspects athletes valued most and to explore potential demographic differences (age, year, sport, NIL deal) in these perceptions.

Additionally, the qualitative component involved conducting semi-structured interviews with five senior staff members from Liberty Athletics. The interviews delved into how athletic departments viewed their role in supporting athlete brand development and explored the ways they currently assisted athletes in navigating the NIL and branding landscape. By triangulating these quantitative and qualitative data sources, this research aimed to provide a richer and more advanced, albeit preliminary understanding of both athlete and athletic department perspectives on athlete brand identity.

Figure 1.

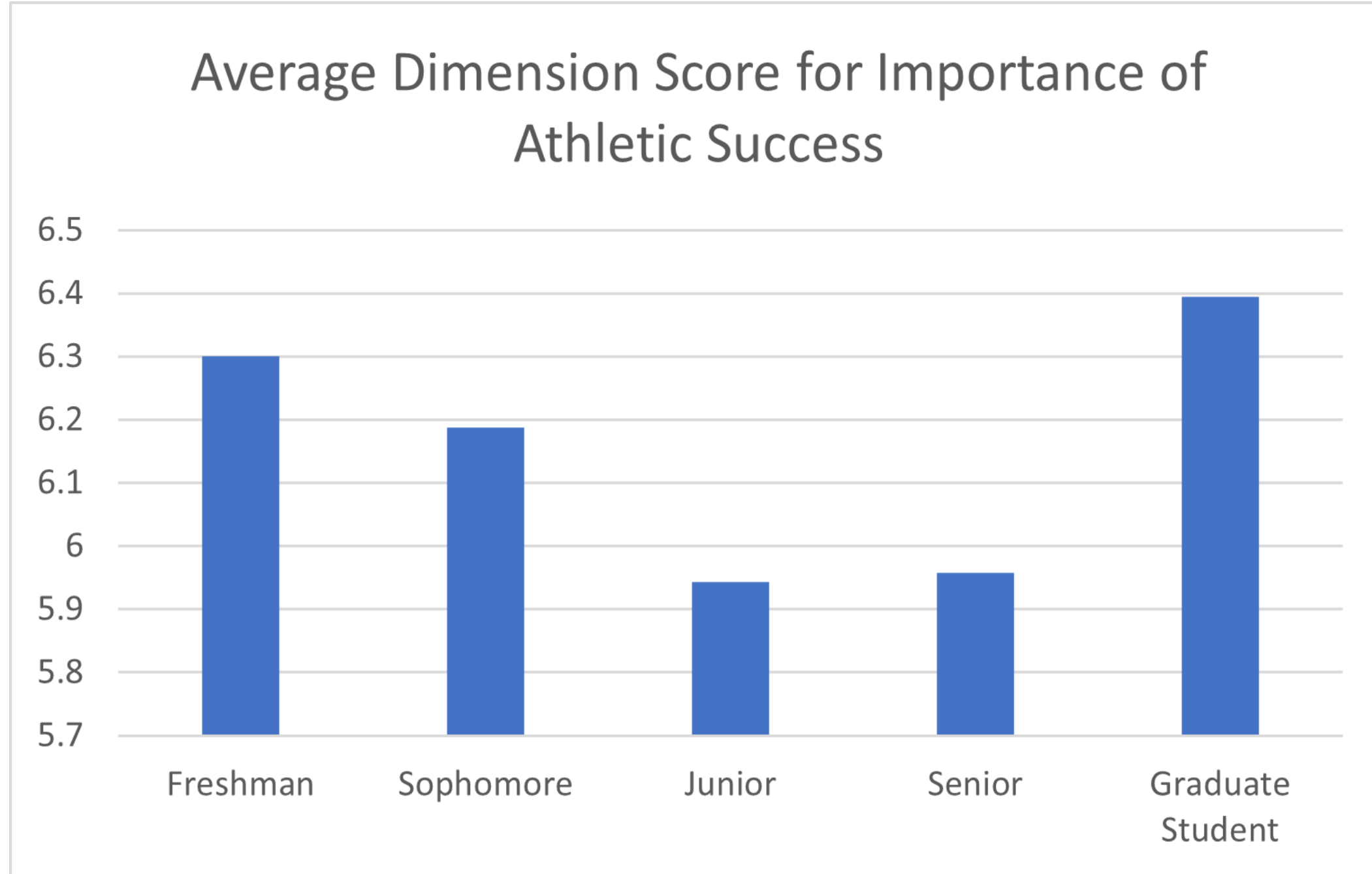


Figure 2.

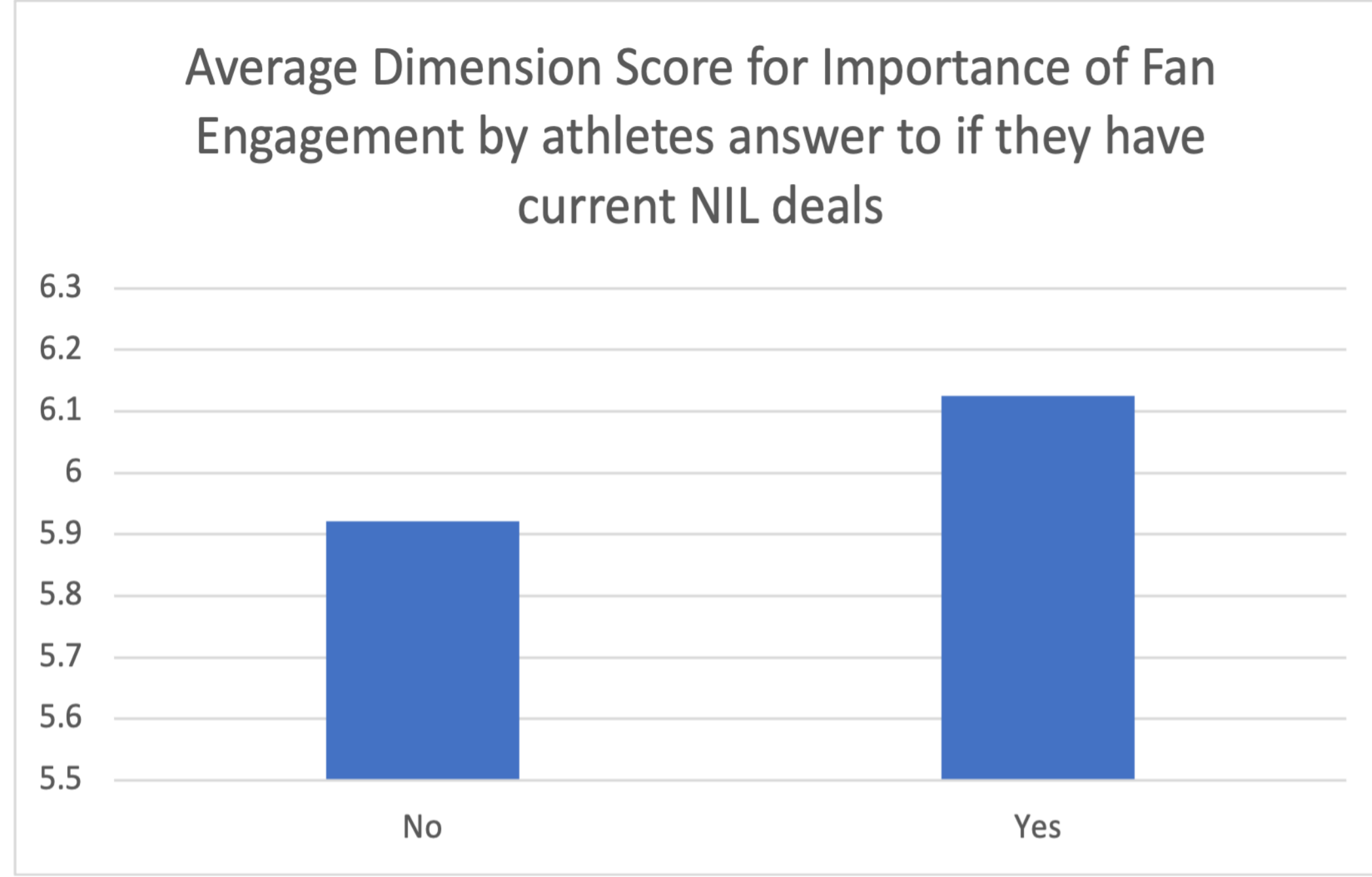


Figure 3.

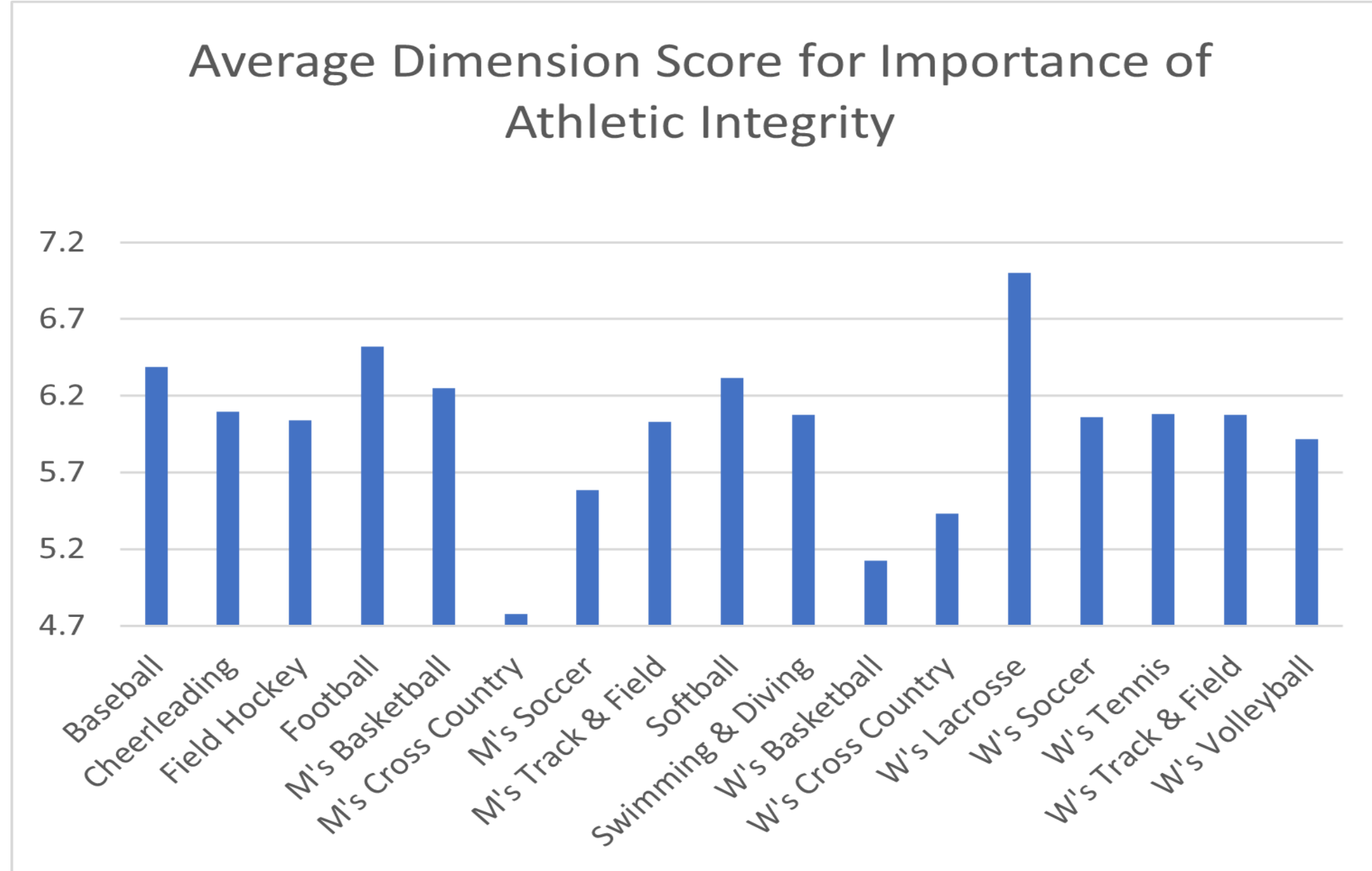
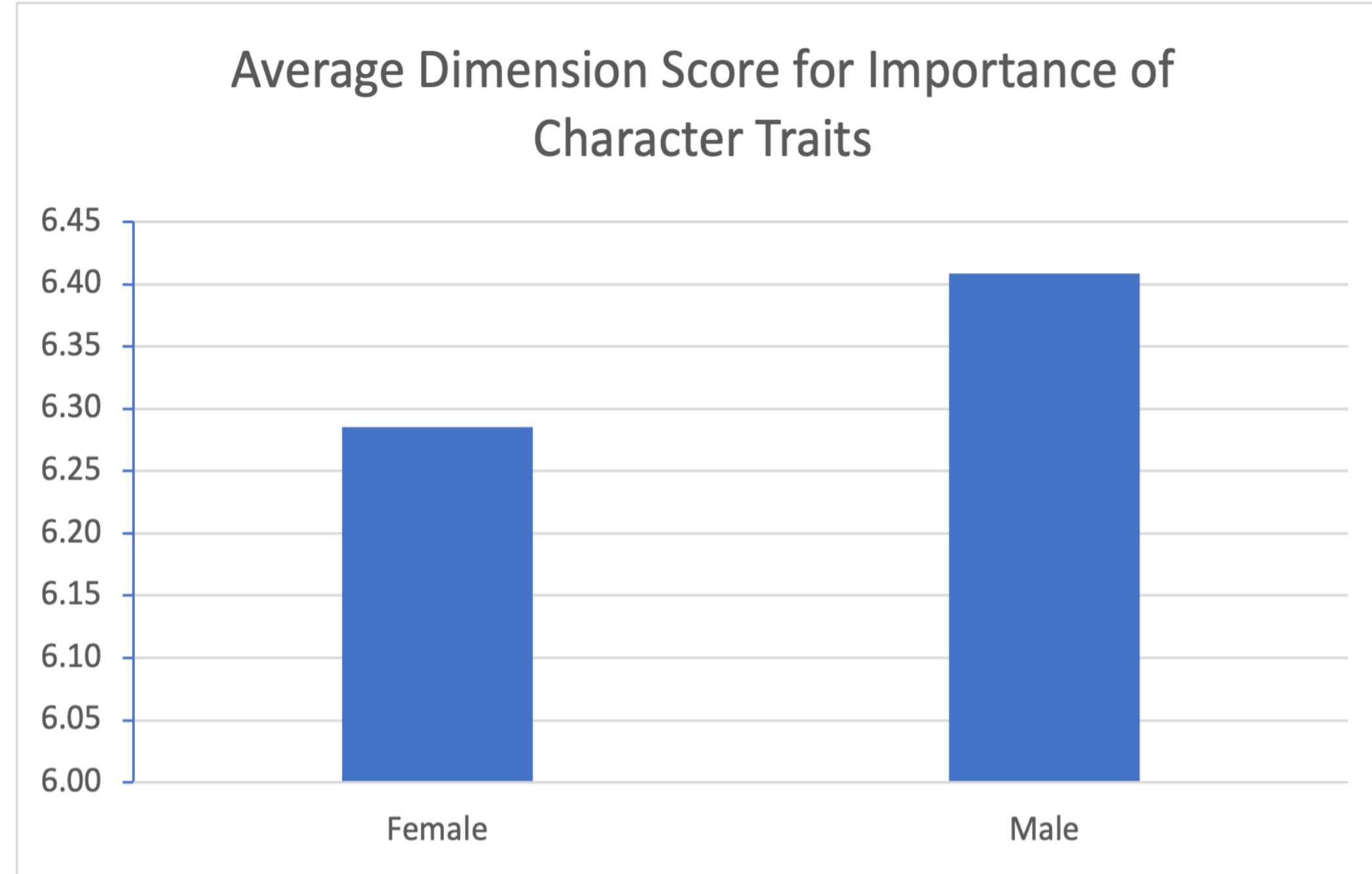


Figure 4.



Sub-themes coded through quotes from interviews with Liberty University senior level athletic staff members

“To train Champions for Christ, provide high quality student athlete experience and achieve victory with integrity.”

Program Intentions

“Every day we're trying to help our student athletes get better as athletes perform well academically, grow spiritually and develop in character.”

“I think you have to first understand who you are and who do you want to represent? And then take that and build upon that.”

Development of Identity

“Focus on what you're passionate about. Don't focus on the money aspect of it. Don't sell your soul type of thing. If you don't believe in it, don't have it be part of how people perceive you.”

“We have build your brand (classes), we had negotiating contracts, we brought in someone from the law school and tried to teach our athletes of key things to look at in contracts.”

Tools for Building

“We are here to educate students...we help them navigate, you know, legal contracts, obligations? Working with an agent working with a marketing agency, what is their brand, how do they put their brand out there?”

“The hope is that, at some level, whether it's from the NCAA level or conference level...somebody steps forward. Makes sure that there's an even playing field for everybody and most importantly, what's best for the student athlete as well.”

Changes in Landscape

“I think we will see a complete shift in athletic departments and a lot more staff will be needed and probably a whole new NIL department within the institution.”

Results and Conclusion

Results

The study yielded data consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data focused on exploring how demographic characteristics (e.g., age, year, sport) might influence athletes' responses to the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (ABiDS) survey. This validated survey comprises 33 questions divided into four sub-scales: Athletic Integrity, Athletic Success, Fan Engagement, and Character Traits. Each sub-scale groups related questions and calculates a dimension score, which essentially represents the average response for all questions within that sub-scale.

Interestingly, **Figure 1** reveals that athletes in different grade levels placed varying importance on Athletic Success, while **Figure 2** suggests involvement in NIL deals might influence how athletes approach Fan Engagement. Additionally, **Figure 3** highlights potential differences in how athletes on various sports teams perceive Athletic Integrity, and **Figure 4** explores how male and female athletes might differ in their responses about Character Traits.

The qualitative data was analyzed using the concept coding style adapted from (Saldana, 2021). This coding style involved analyzing the interview transcripts and allowing themes to emerge from the thick descriptions. The analysis resulted in four sub-themes emerging from the transcripts. Each of these sub-themes help answer the research question and establish the landscape of NIL involvement.

Conclusions

The findings, based on both quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews with Liberty Athletics staff, revealed variations in how athletes perceive brand identity aspects. While 'Athletic Integrity' and 'Character Traits' received the highest average scores, athlete demographics like sport seem to influence these perceptions. The qualitative data suggests a connection between Liberty Athletics' emphasis on athletic integrity (Program Intentions theme) and the higher importance athletes in some sports place on this aspect. Overall, this research highlights the interplay between athlete demographics, program priorities, and the development of brand identity in the NIL era. Understanding these dynamics can inform strategies for both athletes and athletic departments. Athletes can tailor their brand development efforts based on their unique strengths and values. Athletic departments can refine their support systems to encompass not only athletic achievement but also academic success, spiritual growth, and character development, while also equipping athletes with practical tools like legal guidance and brand-building workshops to navigate the ever-evolving NIL landscape.

Future Work

1. Assess donors, sponsors and consumer perception on athlete brand image.
2. Assess how athlete brand identity affects NIL negotiations.
3. Assess how athletes brand image affects consumers decisions.

References

Saldana, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage Publications Limited.

Arai, A., Ko, Y. J., & Kaplanidou, K. (2013). Athlete brand image: Scale development and model test. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 13(4), 383–403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2013.811609>

Linsner, A., Hill, B., Hallmann, K., & Sotiriadou, P. (2020). Developing an athlete brand identity scale using Rasch analysis. *Sport, Business and Management*, 10(4), 431–449. <https://doi.org/10.1108/sbm-09-2019-0075>