

Background

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The new and evolving landscape of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) in collegiate sports has begun offering new challenges and opportunities for athletes, especially around their personal brand identity. This study investigates the impact of NIL on how collegiate athletes perceive their own brand identity. We hypothesize that the athletes will have a higher perception of their brand identity if they have higher scores on the Athlete Brand Identity Scale. (ABIdS) We will be focusing this study on NCAA Division 1 athletes at Liberty University. Among the rapid growth of the NIL, athletes are challenged with navigating their personal brand, a concept that has become increasingly more popular in this digital era.

The purpose of this research is to explore collegiate athletes' perceptions of their identity in the context of NIL. With the help of Liberty University's Department of Athletics, we distributed a Google Forms survey to all Liberty University NCAA D1 athletes, which resulted in a total of 139 responses. The survey sought out to collect data on athlete brand identity using a series of questions based the validated Athlete Brand Identity Scale which also has demographic questions to enhance understanding of the athlete's perspective. This validated scale identifies four different dimensions of athlete brand identity which consist of athletic integrity, athlete success, fan engagement, and character traits (Linsner et al., 2020). These four different dimensions explain how athletes perceive their identity. Athletic integrity shows how athletes feel about their integrity and moral attitude in regard to sports, athletic success expresses how athletes feel toward their performance related achievements, fan engagement refers to the athletes' interactions with the media, fans, and sponsors, and character traits include character and personality traits of the athletes.

As stated above, data collection was facilitated through Google Forms surveys, with the Athletic Department's approval ensuring an organized approach to participant engagement. This survey was sent out through three separate emails with the goal of maximizing our response rates.

Introduction and Research Question

Introduction

Officially established on July 1, 2021, following a ruling by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), "NIL refers to the rights of college and high school athletes to monetize their name, image, and likeness through product endorsements and other activities" (Daugherty, 2024, para. 2); a landmark decision that will forever alter the scope of college athletics. As previously eluded to, student athletes may now operate similarly to that of their professional counterparts in the financial marketplace. The most prominent marketing opportunities athletes have at their disposals include, but are not limited to, endorsement deals (generally by use of social media platforms), merchandise licensing, public appearances, and even video games (most notably: EA NCAA Football).

Through the development of our research project, we desire to gain understanding of how these athletes perceive their own personal 'brand identities'. This study can contribute to scientific knowledge and improve professional practice. Through the application of the validated Athlete Brand Identity Scale, our intention is to offer insights into athletes' self-awareness as it applies to their brand identity.

Research Question

How do athletes perceive their brand identity, as measured by the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (ABIdS)?

Hypothesis

Athletes' possess a higher perception of their brand identity if they record higher scores on the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (ABIdS).

Methods

Method

Our research utilizes quantitative data to objectively measure athletes' perceptions of their "brand identity" on a validated scale with a 7-point likert range. Our research is descriptive, portraying our sample and we have primary data which we have collected ourselves.

Cross-sectional Survey

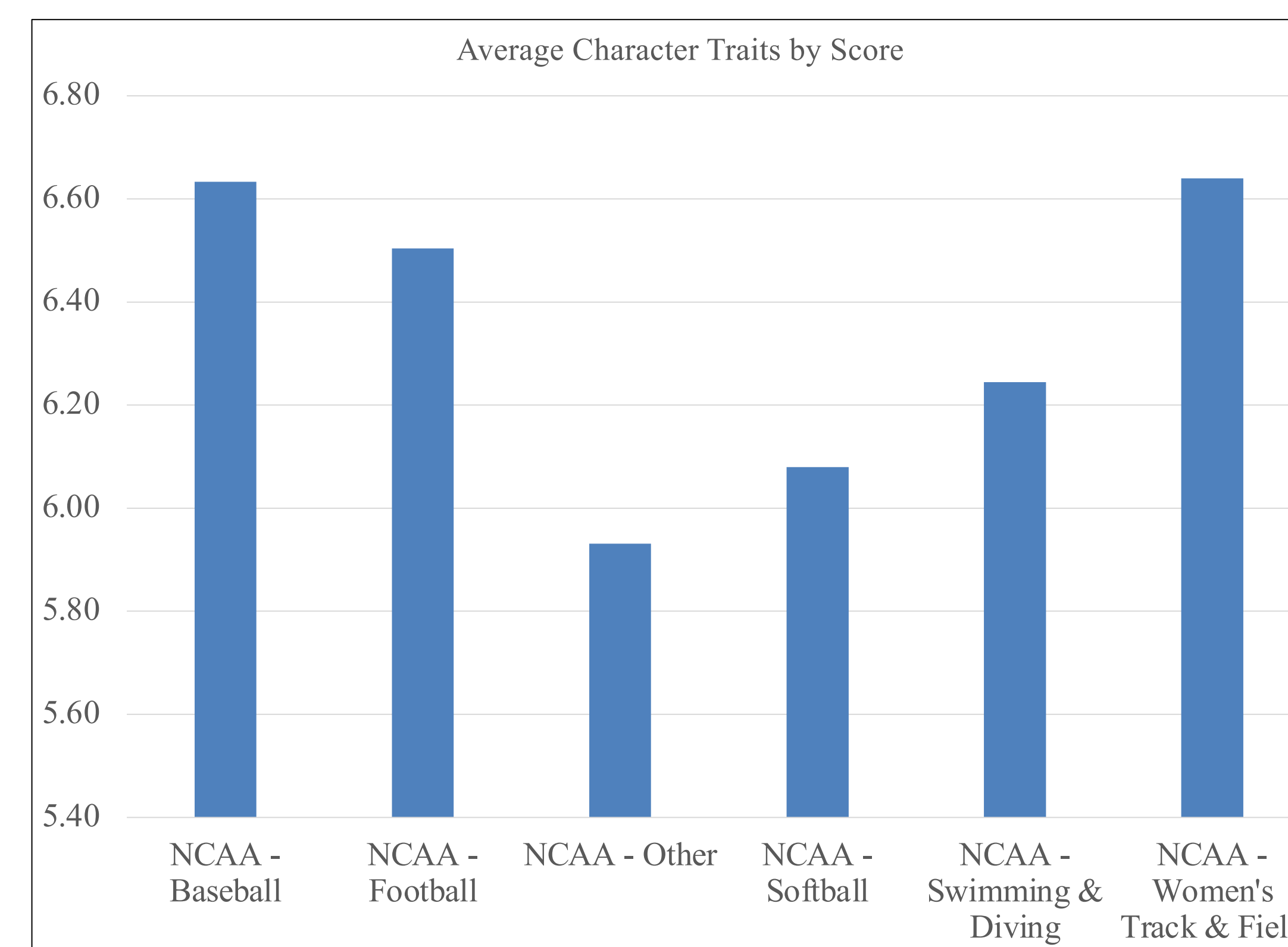
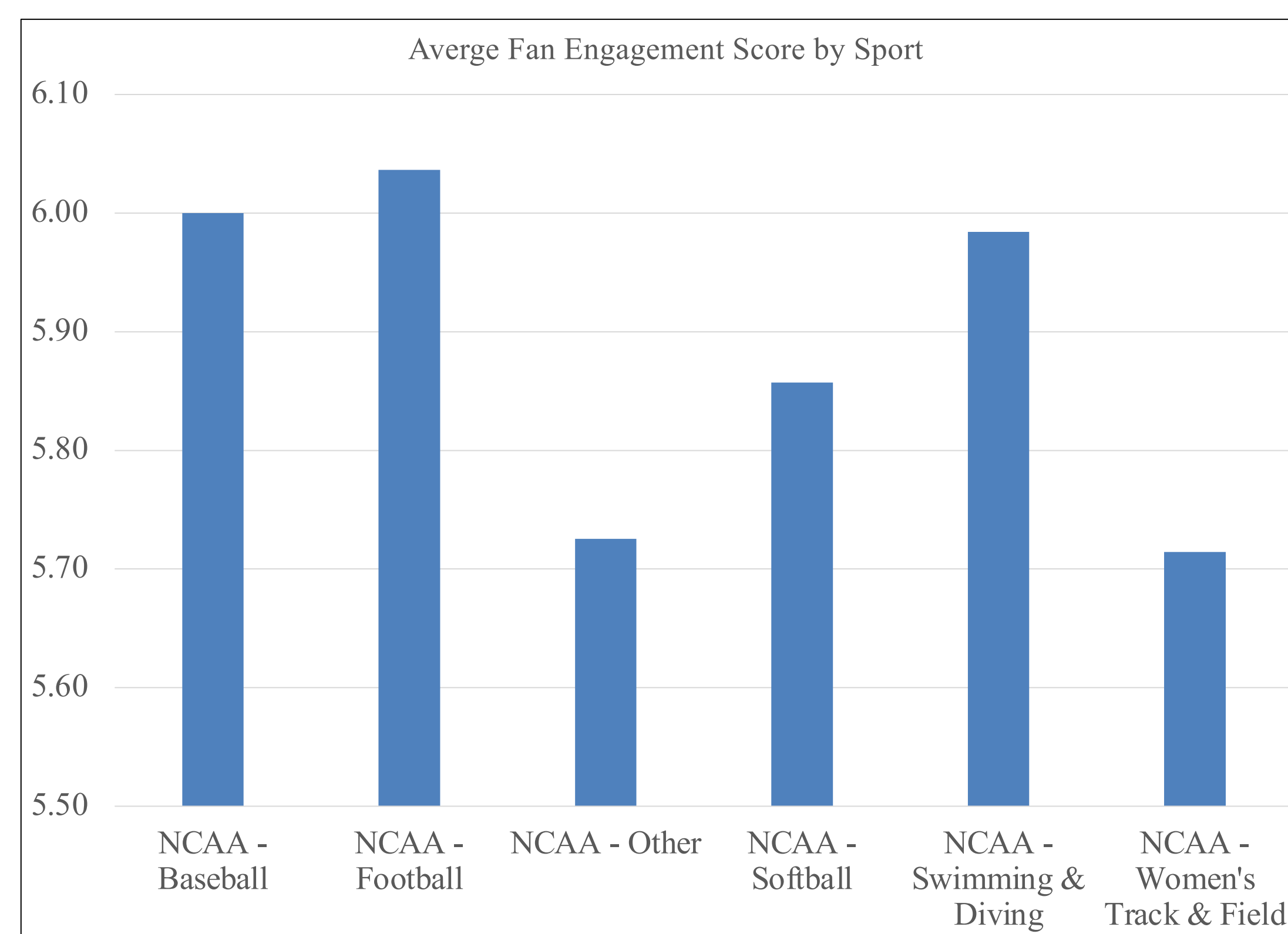
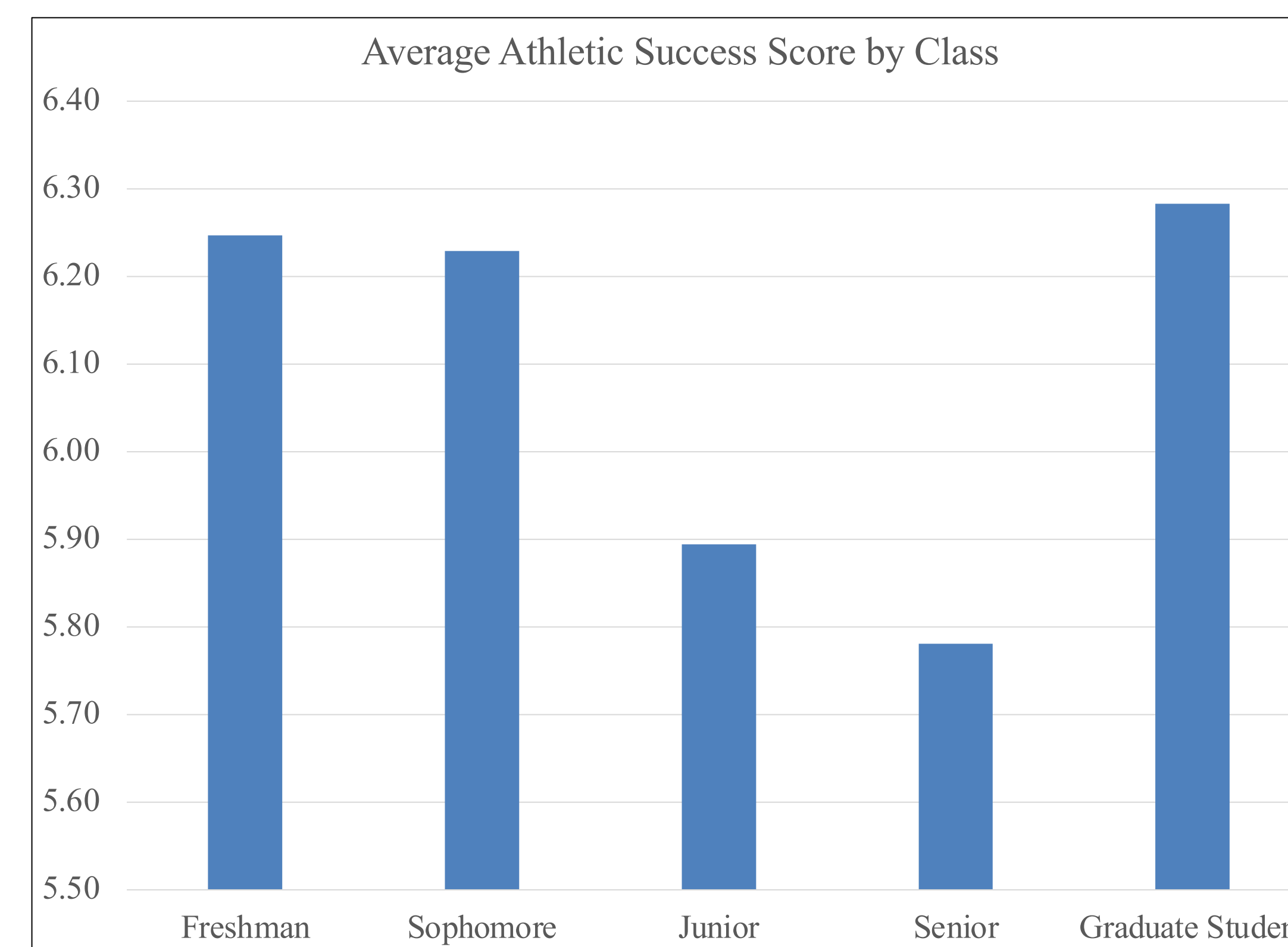
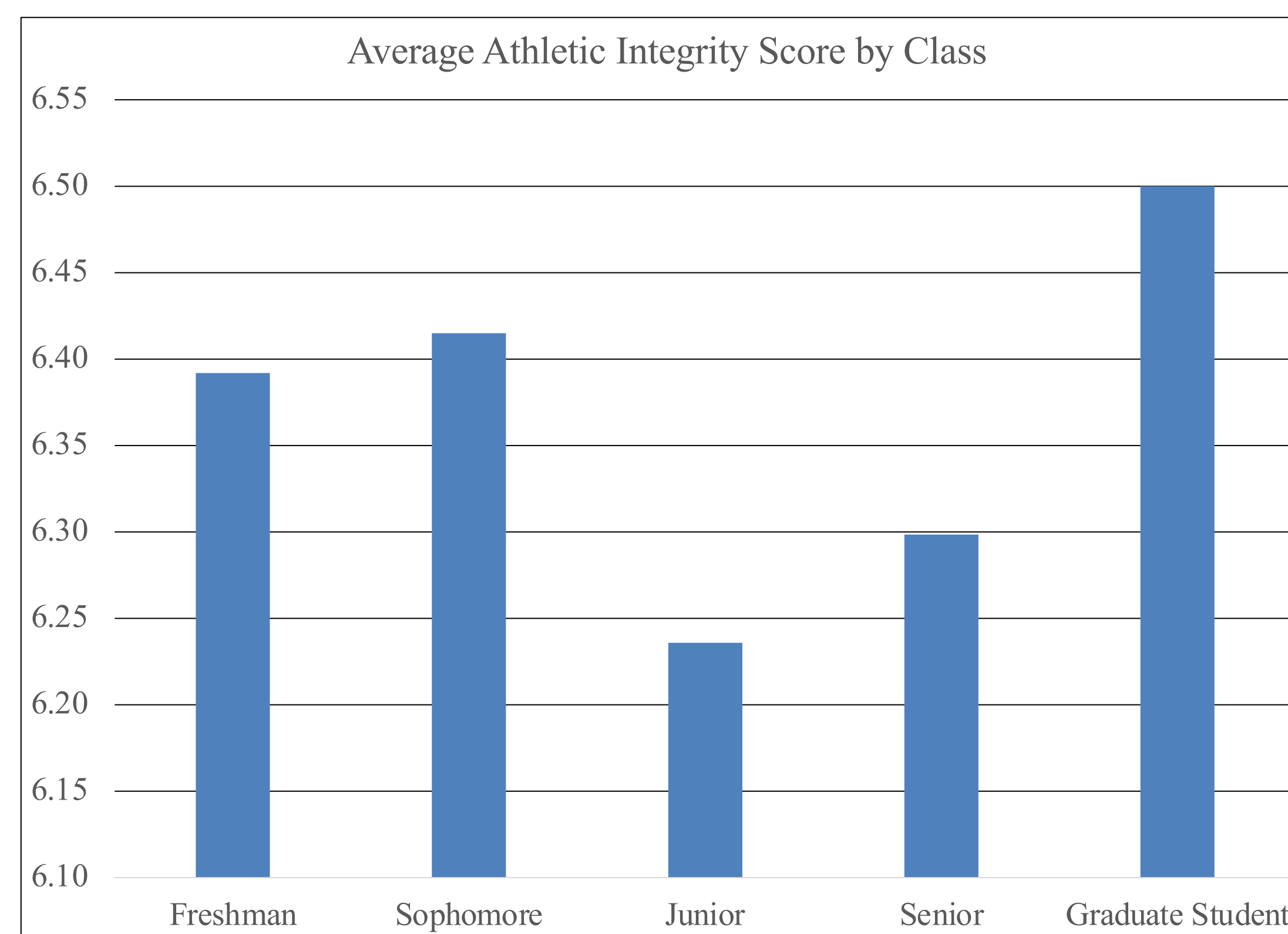
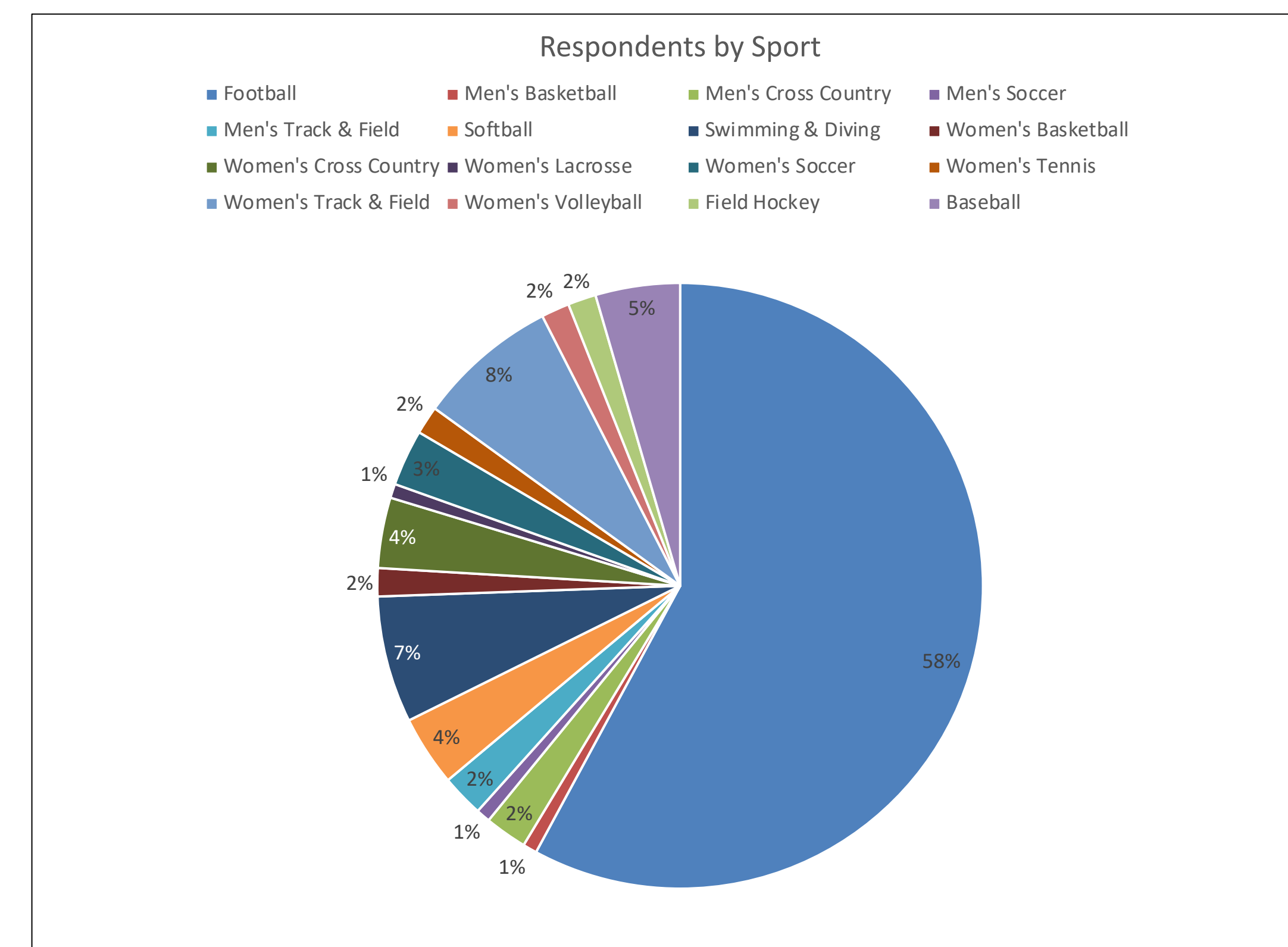
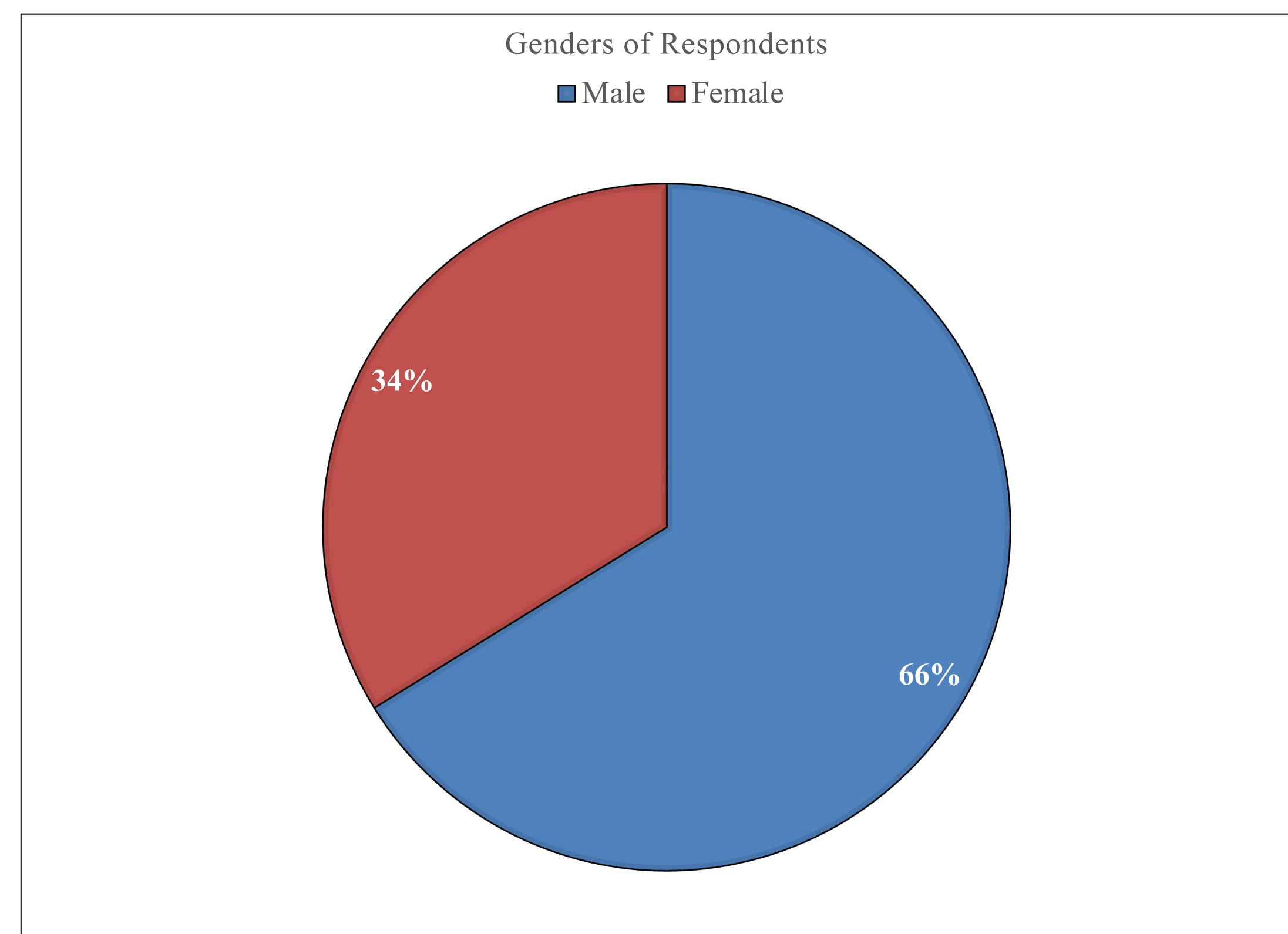
The cross section in our research encompasses the diverse profiles of athletes surveyed. These variables include demographic factors such as gender (male vs. female) and sport type (basketball vs. football), among others.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variables are the athlete's individual, reflective perceptions of themselves which are indicated by the ABIdS. With the assistance of Liberty's Athletic Department, we distributed Google Form surveys to 597 of the universities' NCAA D1 athletes; resulting in a 23% response rate.

Theory

Our study employs the Social Identity Theory which reiterates how oneself categorizes and relates themselves in a group of people (Linsner et al., 2020). This theory offers insight into how individuals perceive themselves within a social group, considering both behavioral and psychological factors. The Social Identity Theory is applicable because our participant athletes are regularly in group settings with their sport teams, and they potentially engage in social comparison.



Results and Conclusion

Results

Our results indicate that these athletes have a high perception of their brand identity, since they scored high on the Athlete Brand Identity Scale (ABIdS). This validated scale identifies four different dimensions of athlete brand identity which consist of athletic integrity, athlete success, fan engagement, and character traits (Linsner et al., 2020). Results demonstrate a 6.3 average score for athletic integrity, 6.2 average score for athlete success, 5.9 average score for fan engagement, 6.4 average score for character traits. Our participants averaged the highest score on character traits and averaged the lowest on fan engagement. This indicates that these athletes have a higher level of importance for their character traits and athletic integrity, while having a lower level of importance for their fan engagement and athlete success.

Conclusions

The study taken at Liberty University to explore the perceptions of NCAA Division 1 athletes regarding their brand identity in the context of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) landscape had brought forward insightful information. Through the administration of a survey designed around the Athlete Brand Identity Scale, (ABIdS) along with demographic questions, we gathered data reflecting these athletes' views across four crucial dimensions: Athletic Integrity, Athlete Success, Fan Engagement, and Character Traits.

The results revealed a strong sense of brand identity among the athletes, as shown by the high average scores across all dimensions that we measured. The athletic integrity dimension scored an average of 6.3, indicating that athletes feel a significant alignment between their personal brand and their athletic role. Similarly, the athlete success dimension scored an average of 6.2 which suggests that athletes perceive their achievements and capabilities as central to their brand identity. The fan engagement dimension is slightly lower but still scored an average of 5.9 which reflects a healthy level of interaction and connection with fans, which is crucial in the new era of NIL. Our highest score we observed was in the character traits dimension, at an average of 6.4, highlighting the athletes' belief that their character traits and qualities are essential to their brand.

These findings highlight the various aspects of brand identity among collegiate athletes, showcasing the importance of athletic performance, personal character, and fan engagement as components of their personal brand. The data show that Liberty University's NCAA Division I athletes are actively managing their brand identities, showing a strong sense of self-awareness and strategic engagement in the NIL domain.

Future Work and Limitations

Future Work

Future research that could be worked on is qualitative interviews on these participants, as well as conducting case studies. This would obtain a more in-depth insight on the athlete's perceptions of their identity and gain an understanding of why athletes perceive themselves in this way. Another future work that would add onto this study would be longitudinal research, which would allow us to examine these athletes' changes in their brand identity over a longer period.

Limitations

Limitations of this research include sampling bias, self-report bias, and resource constraints. Sampling bias is due to the research sample size being only from one college. Self-report bias is a limitation because participants could have provided inaccurate or biased responses. Lastly, resource constraint is a limitation for our research because of the lack of responses gained.

References and Acknowledgments

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