

**Consumer Perceptions of NIL Athletes, Social Media Influencers, and Celebrities
as Endorsers in Social Media Marketing/Advertising**

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Purpose

Social media influencers and NIL (Name, Image, Likeness) Athletes have emerged as powerful strategies in social media marketing and advertising for how companies and brands alike reach and engage with their audience. Marketing strategies have long relied on endorsers, such as celebrity endorsements, and now include social media influencers and NIL athletes. An **influencer** can be defined as a person who is able to generate interest in something (like a consumer product, for example) by posting about it on social media (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Influencer marketing, commonly where brands partner with individuals who have established credibility and a following on social media platforms to promote products or services, relies heavily on perceived credibility and trust (Sprout Social, 2026). The addition of NIL in July of 2021 has further expanded the marketing landscape by allowing college athletes to act as somewhat influencers themselves, endorsing brands while leveraging their personal identities and fan relationships. **NIL** allows student-athletes to earn money from their name, image, and likeness while maintaining eligibility as defined by the NCSA (2026). Opportunities for NIL athletes include brand endorsements, social media promotions, paid appearances, running camps or clinics, and monetized content like videos or blogs (NCSA, 2026). As a result, NIL athletes occupy a unique space using elements of both traditional celebrity endorsements and social media influencer marketing.

It is important to understand consumer perceptions of different endorsers, with **credibility and trust** as widely recognized determinants of advertising and marketing effectiveness (Ohanian, 1990). Source credibility theory suggests that an endorser's perceived expertise and trustworthiness influence how persuasive a message is to consumers. Research on advertising credibility suggests that ad trust is a key dimension of credibility and is commonly defined and measured through concepts such as trustworthiness, truthfulness, and believability (Soh et al., 2009). Consumers' engagement can also have an outcome on purchase intention and brand attitudes (Schivinski et al., 2016).

This raises an important question regarding which category of endorser is perceived as most credible and trustworthy (i.e., are NIL athletes and social media influencers more so than traditional celebrities), and how endorser type may ultimately influence consumers' purchase intentions.

Review of Literature

Social Media Influencers and Influencer Marketing

Brands seeking to connect with consumers in more authentic and engaging ways have turned to influencer marketing as a key strategy. Unlike traditional celebrities, whether it be actors, musicians, etc., influencers utilize social media platforms to reach their audience.

Influencers who are active on more than one social media platform have a broader reach, and working with influencers of different sizes (mega, macro, micro, and nano) can be beneficial to specific campaigns (Haenlein et al., 2020). Influencer marketing effectiveness highlights the importance of how consumers interpret influencer endorsements. Breves et al. (2019) found that when followers (consumers) perceive a strong influencer-brand match, they also perceive the influencer as more credible, trustworthy, and persuasive. When an influencer is deemed as a

personality and image fit with a brand, they are assumed as trustworthy and authentic. One study examined the impact of influencers' credibility (attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise) on purchase intention in the aesthetic dermatology industry. In this case, it was found that the influencers' attractiveness and deemed expertise were motivators for consumers to have a positive purchase intention (AlFarraj et al., 2021).

Looking into the livestream commerce area of influencer marketing, influencers with both larger and smaller followings positively affect product sales, highlighting the value of influencer-driven campaigns (Gu et al., 2024). These findings altogether suggest that influencer marketing effectiveness is closely connected to consumer perceptions of credibility and trust, reinforcing the importance of examining these variables when evaluating endorsers.

NIL Athletes

There is limited research on NIL athletes due to its recent emergence in 2021. NIL shows that personal branding and institutional factors impact the social media NIL value of collegiate athletes (Cocco et al., 2023). Similar to social media influencers, NIL athletes must create a presence online to receive brand deals and endorsement opportunities. While institutional size and visibility may influence exposure (e.g., an SEC school giving more visibility than a Division 3 college), analysis of Twitter and Instagram data demonstrates that many collegiate athletes generate significant engagement and visibility through their own personal activity and audience interaction. As a result, their social media presence can be monetized in ways comparable to traditional influencers (Kunkel et al., 2021). Schartel Dunn and Nisbett (2025) found that athletes should lean into their sports-focused identity online, as sports-focused social media content generated higher perceptions of credibility and stronger behavioral intention when wishful identification and perceived homophily were high. Participants also reported a greater likelihood

of adjusting consumer behaviors based on sports-themed posts, including a higher likelihood of purchasing products endorsed by the athlete and following them on social media. NIL athletes are particularly interesting in terms of “celebrity” status, as they are not professional athletes, but they are also not known solely for their online presence. Carlson and Donovan (2013) suggest that athletes are perceived as “human brands” with unique personalities, which may influence consumers’ perceptions of their credibility and trustworthiness compared to celebrities and other social media influencers.

Celebrity Endorsements

A key theoretical foundation for understanding endorser effectiveness is source credibility, which refers to the perceived positive qualities of a communicator that influence audience acceptance of a message. Ohanian (1990) developed and validated a widely used scale that measures celebrity endorser credibility across three variables: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. By conceptualizing credibility to be multidimensional, this framework allows researchers to evaluate the characteristics that make an endorser persuasive. The model has been widely adopted in advertising and influencer marketing research, as it provides a structured way to analyze how different endorser traits influence consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions. In the context of this study, Ohanian’s framework offers a useful foundation for examining perceived credibility and trust across influencers, NIL athletes, and traditional celebrity endorsers.

In an online context, Corina’s (2006) study applied Ohanian’s framework to examine consumer perceptions of online social marketing programs. Using variables of trust, expertise, credibility, and attractiveness, it was found that the efficiency of social programs depends on the level of incorporated elements of social theories in the design, content, and structure of the

website. This application of the Ohanian framework supports its broader use in current research on influencer marketing and NIL athlete endorsements, where credibility and trust are key in thus understanding consumer attitudes and purchase intentions.

Schimmelpfennig and Hunt (2020) reviewed more than 50 years of celebrity endorsement research and concluded that endorsement effectiveness is complex and highly context dependent. They argue that a brand's value proposition determines which endorser characteristics are most influential in driving effectiveness. They showcase a comprehensive celebrity endorsement strategy framework and explain in their conclusion that characteristics such as expertise, trustworthiness, similarity, likability, familiarity, and other personal traits have been shown to impact brand awareness, recognition, brand image, perception, and purchase intention. However, these relationships vary depending on factors such as product category, level of consumer involvement, and perceived risk. This research highlights why it is important to look at factors like trust and credibility when comparing different endorsers.

Rationale

Despite the growing use of social media influencers and Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) athletes in social media marketing and advertising, limited research has compared consumer perceptions of these endorsers to traditional celebrities. Specifically, there is a lack of research examining how trust, credibility, and attractiveness differ across these endorser types and how these perceptions relate to consumer purchase intention. Therefore, this study sought to examine the following research questions:

Research Questions

RQ 1: Are social media influencers and NIL athletes as endorsers deemed to have the same levels of credibility and trustworthiness as traditional celebrity endorsers?

RQ 2: How do consumers' perceptions of social media influencers, NIL athletes, and celebrities influence purchase intention?

Method

Participants/Sample

A total of 50 survey responses were obtained. One response was excluded due to duplication, resulting in a final participant size of 49 participants ($n = 49$). There were nine male participants and 40 female participants. The majority of participants ($n = 47$) reported attending a Southeastern Conference (SEC) school, while 3 participants indicated attending a non-SEC institution. Participants included are at least 18 years old. No restrictions were placed on major or other demographic characteristics beyond age. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 36 years (Mode = 23), with 17 participants reporting age 23. The sample included undergraduate students, graduate students, and recent graduates, with the most common group being individuals who had graduated within the past four years ($n = 28$). Participants reported using social media multiple times a day, every day ($n = 45$), or at least daily ($n = 4$). Participants were recruited through social media platforms and direct outreach.

Procedures

Three versions of the same survey were created and distributed, with the only difference being the order in which the endorser types (NIL athletes, social media influencers, and celebrities) appeared within the Source Credibility Scale sections. The survey questions, wording, and materials remained identical across all versions. This was done to reduce potential order of effects and response bias related to the sequence in which participants evaluated each endorser type.

The survey was administered online through Google Forms and took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete (see Appendix B). The first page of the survey included an informed consent form, and participants were informed that completion of the survey indicated their consent to participate (see Appendix A).

Efforts were made to distribute the three survey versions as evenly as possible. One version of the survey was shared through an Instagram Story, while a second version was distributed through a LinkedIn post. The third version was shared with individuals within the University of Texas athletics marketing, as well as through university classes. Additional participants were contacted directly through text message, using all survey versions. Participants were also encouraged to share the survey with others, allowing for further distribution and snowballing through participant networks.

Measures

A combination of quantitative and qualitative questions were used to measure participants' perceptions of credibility and trust across three types of endorsers: celebrities, social media influencers, and NIL athletes. Purchase intention was inferred from participants' responses to three short-answer questions near the end of the survey.

Three verified scales were used to ask likert-scale questions. The Source Credibility Scale from Ohanian (1990) was used to measure participant trust, credibility, and attractiveness of the three endorser types. The ADTRUST scale was adjusted for social media advertising in order to gather participants' opinions on information conveyed in social media advertising (Soh et al., 2009). The Engagement scale was used to measure participant engagement on social media with each endorser type (Schivinski et al., 2016). The summated averages for the likert-scale

(scale of 1-7) responses were found for three scales with multiple dimensions and endorser types, with t-Tests run to find any significance in the mean differences of endorser types.

The Source Credibility Scale by Ohanian (1990) was used to assess perceptions of trust, credibility, and attractiveness across the three endorser types. The scale included 15 items, with five items corresponding to each dimension (trust, credibility, attractiveness). For each participant, summated averages were computed for each dimension and endorser type, and these values were then averaged across participants to obtain overall mean scores.

Analysis of the trust dimension revealed that NIL athletes were perceived as the most trustworthy ($M = 3.29$), followed by social media influencers ($M = 2.99$), with celebrities rated as the least trustworthy ($M = 2.93$). To find significant mean differences, paired t-tests were run to compare each endorser type.

Analysis of the attractiveness dimension revealed that celebrities were perceived as the most attractive ($M = 4.30$), followed by NIL athletes ($M = 3.96$), with social media influencers slightly behind NIL athletes ($M = 3.90$). To find significant mean differences, paired t-tests were run to compare each endorser type.

Analysis of the expert dimension revealed that NIL athletes were perceived to have the most expertise ($M = 3.64$), followed by social media influencers ($M = 3.08$), with celebrities following behind social media influencers ($M = 3.02$). To find significant mean differences, paired t-tests were run to compare each endorser type.

The ADTRUST scale, adapted for social media advertising, was used to assess participants' perceptions of the information conveyed in social media advertisements (Soh et al., 2009). The scale consists of four dimensions: reliability (nine items), usefulness (four items), affect (three items), and willingness to rely on (four items), totaling to 20 items. To find

significant mean differences, paired t-tests were run. Analysis of the ADTRUST scale revealed a total mean for the scale (M = 3.59) with the affect (M = 4.00) and usage (M = 3.71) dimensions showing the highest mean scores.

Adtrust scale	3.586826531
Adrel	3.3930839
Aduse	3.714744898
Adaft	4
Adwill	3.58494898

Means of ADTRUST Scale and broken down by dimensions (Top to bottom: total scale, reliability dimension, usefulness dimension, affect dimension, willingness to rely on dimension)

The Engagement scale was used to measure participants' social media engagement with each endorser type. The scale includes 15 items across three dimensions: consumption (two items per endorser type), contribution (two items per endorser type), and creation (one item per endorser type), resulting in a total of 15 items (Schivinski et al., 2016). Analysis of the Engagement scale revealed a total mean for the scale (M = 3.36) with celebrities having the highest engagement mean (M = 3.61).

Engment scale NIL	2.955102041
Engment scale SM	3.52244898
Engment scale celb	3.612244898
Engment scale	3.363265306

Means of Engagement Scale and broken down by dimensions (Top to bottom: NIL Athletes, Social Media Influencers, Celebrities, total scale/all endorsers)

There were five multiple-choice questions in the beginning of the survey asking about social media usage, primary social media platform used, and interest in the three types of endorsers. There were three short-answer response questions near the end of the survey that asked participants opinion questions directed towards trust of endorsers, perceptions of endorsers, and purchase influence. The short-answer response questions in the survey helped

answer RQ 2 about consumers' perceptions of endorser types influencing purchase intention, with additional claims of trust and credibility in the three different endorsers to support RQ 1 and

RQ 2:

1. What qualities make you trust an endorser in an advertisement?
2. Do you perceive influencers, college athletes (NIL), and celebrities differently as endorsers? How so?
3. Can you describe a time when an endorser influenced your opinion about a product or brand? Was the endorser an influencer, celebrity, or NIL athlete?

Results

Quantitative

Quantitative results answered RQ 1 (levels of trust and credibility) and were applied to RQ 2 (perceptions influencing purchase intention) as well. t-Test results indicated a statistically significant difference in trust between NIL athletes and celebrities ($t = 2.16, p = 0.036$), with NIL athletes receiving higher trust ratings. However, the difference in trust between NIL athletes and social media influencers was not statistically significant ($t = 1.50, p = 0.141$). This concludes there is a higher trust in NIL athletes as endorsers and a lesser trust in celebrities as endorsers, with social media influencers not being significantly more or less trustworthy than NIL athletes. This answers the trustworthy component of RQ 1.

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>SMtrstsum5</i>	<i>Celbtrstsum5</i>
Mean	2.991836735	2.926530612
Variance	1.506598639	1.282823129
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.494686622	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	0.384441593	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.351174588	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.702349177	
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>NILtrstsum5</i>	<i>Celbtrstsum5</i>
Mean	3.289795918	2.926530612
Variance	1.608435374	1.282823129
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.522754395	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	2.157245626	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.018011197	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.036022394	
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>NILtrstsum5</i>	<i>SMtrstsum5</i>
Mean	3.289795918	2.991836735
Variance	1.608435374	1.506598639
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.376814726	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	1.496734109	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.070504782	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.141009564	
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

Top left: Social media influencer trust and Celebrity trust, Top right: NIL trust and Celebrity trust, Bottom left: NIL trust and Social media influencer trust.

t-Test results indicated a statistically significant difference in attractiveness between celebrities and NIL athletes ($t = -2.34, p = 0.023$), with celebrities receiving higher attractiveness ratings. There was also a significant difference between celebrities and social media influencers, with celebrities again showing higher attractiveness ratings ($t = -2.22, p = 0.031$). These results indicate that celebrities were perceived as more attractive endorsers compared to both NIL athletes and social media influencers, answering the attractiveness component of RQ 1.

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>NILatrvsum5</i>	<i>Celbatrvsum5</i>
Mean	3.959183673	4.302040816
Variance	1.484965986	1.890204082
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.693426948	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	-2.340303528	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.011736245	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.02347249	
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>SMatrvsum5</i>	<i>Celbatrvsum5</i>
Mean	3.902040816	4.302040816
Variance	1.445204082	1.890204082
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.529529789	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	-2.224044118	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.015442084	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.030884169	
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>NILatrvsum5</i>	<i>SMatrvsum5</i>
Mean	3.959183673	3.902040816
Variance	1.484965986	1.445204082
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.44717224	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	0.314269681	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.377339069	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.754678138	
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

Top left: NIL attractiveness and Celebrity attractiveness, Top right: Social media influencer attractiveness and Celebrity attractiveness, Bottom left: NIL attractiveness and Social media influencer attractiveness

t-Test results indicated a statistically significant difference in expertise between NIL athletes and celebrities ($t = 3.29, p = 0.002$), with NIL athletes receiving higher expert ratings. There was also a significant difference between NIL athletes and social media influencers, with NIL athletes again showing higher expertise ratings ($t = 2.45, p = 0.018$). There was no significance found between social media influencers and celebrities ($t = 0.31, p = 0.76$). This

concludes that there is a higher expertise seen in NIL athletes as endorsers when compared to celebrities and social media influencers. This answers the credibility component of RQ 1.

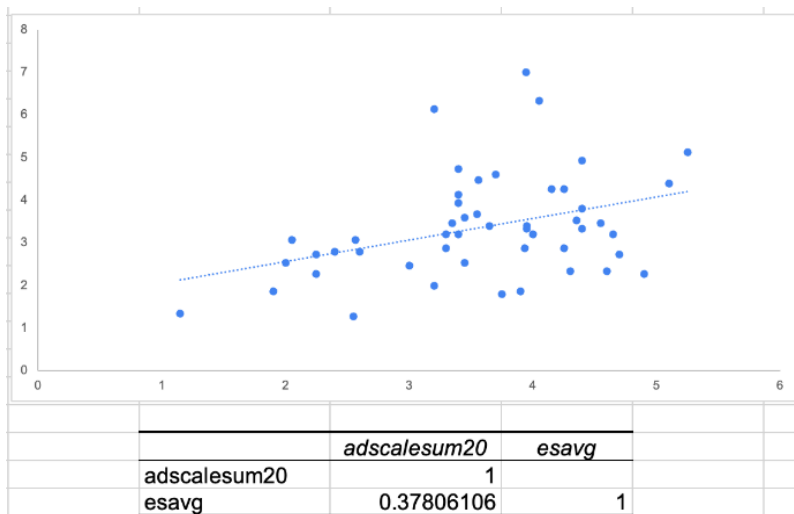
t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	SMexprtsum5	Celbexprtsum5
Mean	3.07755102	3.016326531
Variance	1.664693878	1.474727891
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.375198614	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	0.305835981	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.380526029	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.761052059	
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	NILexprtsum5	Celbexprtsum5
Mean	3.644897959	3.016326531
Variance	1.885442177	1.474727891
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.471818683	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	3.291780809	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.000936059	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.001872117	
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	NILexprtsum5	SMexprtsum5
Mean	3.644897959	3.07755102
Variance	1.885442177	1.664693878
Observations	49	49
Pearson Correlation	0.263285645	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	48	
t Stat	2.454847822	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.00884927	
t Critical one-tail	1.677224196	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.017769855	
t Critical two-tail	2.010634758	

Top left: Social media influencer expertise and Celebrity expertise, Top right: NIL expertise and Celebrity expertise, Bottom left: NIL expertise and Social media influencer expertise

A correlation between ADTRUST and Engagement scales found a positive insignificant correlation between participants ADTRUST and Engagement scores ($r = 0.378$).



ADTRUST scale total means column compared with Engagement scale total means column

Qualitative

Qualitative analysis of short answer questions helped answer RQ 2 (perceptions influencing purchase intention) and were also applied to RQ 1 (levels of trust and credibility). Three themes were found in short answer question one; endorser reputation, credibility paired with expertise, and honesty paired with trust. The endorser's reputation comes from their personality and personal brand recognition, while when the endorser showcases the product in an authentic way or perceived to use the product themselves, it makes them come across as more authentic in their usage, furthering participants' perception of credibility. Some examples include: "If I can believe they use actually the product they're more trustworthy," "If it's something already used in everyday life for them..." "If I can tell the user truly uses the product and actually like it," "If I truly believe they use/ benefit from the product." It was also noted that the words "genuine," "sincere," and "honest" came up when referring to trust within an endorser.

Short answer question two revealed participants' perceptions of the three endorser types. It was found that being older in age was sometimes related to perceived expertise: "They're still young and not versed in the world of advertisements," "Also I take their age into consideration when I see certain ads."

Promotion within niche correlated to perceptions mainly relating to NIL athletes. Examples include, "I'm more critical on influencers and athletes when they promote something that doesn't match their vibe, it feels disingenuous," "I see NIL athletes as promoters of health and wellness products," "I think it depends on different products, like I would trust NIL more on sports-related thing, influencers' recommendations on food or lifestyle good are more attractive, and I would buy celebrities products because of I'm their fan," "I think athletes have more experience with their product and I generally like athletic brand products/use athletic products."

NIL athletes were found to promote products typically within their niche, according to participants, making them seem more authentic and trustworthy.

Reputation and the endorsers' own concern with perceived appearance, typically in relation to celebrities, was also relayed: "I think I perceive celebrities differently because one bad endorsement could ruin their career," "they must trust the brand they are endorsing well enough to risk their reputation by endorsing it in front of their entire fan base," "I think celebrities have a higher reputation to uphold," "I value celebrities way more than influencers and even athletes, since they are putting their valuable name and brand on the product. Athletes and influencers don't have the same brand, they're just fulfilling their deal," "More likely to worry about their perceived appearance for using product."

Short answer question three was found to mainly be social media influencers, and around a third of the celebrities mentioned were high-profile athletes (e.g., Ronaldo and Lebron). The response from participants was related to earlier themes found in short answer question one, where social media influencers actually showing use of a product then they are more likely to trust them. Examples include, "When Halley Kate, an influencer, shows her empties [empty products used], I feel more influenced to buy them because she's showing what she actually uses," "I usually only take recommendations from influencers, because it's their job to test products and recommend things. They often post casual content of them using the product," "I tend to trust beauty influencers on make up/skin care recommendations as I believe they use the products that they promote enough to endorse them," "I like to view the video or post from daily lifestyle influencers, so sometimes I buy something they use in their videos," "I bought new balance shoes because of a fitness influencer. She wasn't obviously advertising the shoes though, so I think the fact that she was an authentic model of the shoes showed that those were reliable

good shoes,” “When an influencer on TikTok...posted about her favorite eyelash growth serum. After seeing the positive review and obvious results in her video, I purchased the eyelash serum.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether consumer perceptions of trust and credibility differed across three endorser types (NIL athletes, social media influencers, and celebrities) and also how these perceptions influenced purchase intention. Specifically, the research questions were aimed to see whether NIL athletes and social media influencers were perceived as equally credible and trustworthy as traditional celebrity endorsers, and how these perceptions shaped consumers' likelihood of purchasing endorsed products/brands viewed through social media marketing and advertising.

The results and overall findings confirm that NIL athletes should be considered a distinct endorsement category, rather than grouped with social media influencers, particularly due to differences in perceived trust and credibility. Participants described them as more authentic and believable because most of the products the athletes promote are in direct connection to a sports-related context. For example, “I feel like athletes usually have more to do with whatever they're endorsing...” was a common statement from participants. These findings support previous research suggesting that athletes who maintain a sports-focused identity online produce stronger perceptions of credibility and greater behavioral intention among consumers (Schartel Dunn and Nisbett, 2025). This also supports prior research showcasing that college athletes operating within NIL partnerships hold a unique position between traditional celebrity endorsers and social media influencers (Carlson and Donovan, 2013).

Results indicate that brands should prioritize NIL athletes when the goal is to increase consumer trust and purchase intention. NIL athletes were not only higher in trust, but higher in expertise as well when compared to both social media influencers and celebrities. Participants reported being more likely to purchase products recommended by athletes because they perceived them as promoting products in their niche, which increased both trust and purchase intentions.

Social media influencers proved to be effective endorsers following NIL athletes, particularly due to relatability and accessibility. Many participants described influencers as more similar to everyday consumers, which increased perceived authenticity and trust. However, influencers received mixed responses regarding credibility, as many participants associated influencer endorsements with sponsorship bias or insincerity. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that authenticity plays a major role in influencer marketing effectiveness (Haenlein et al., 2020). Influencers may be successful as endorsers, but only when consumers perceive their recommendations as genuine and as them actually using a product or brand, rather than purely financially motivated. Age was also a factor in perceptions of social media influencers and celebrities, so something for managerial consideration when choosing endorsers.

Participants most frequently identified social media influencers when describing a time an endorser influenced their opinion of a product or brand or led to a purchase. This may be explained by participants' high levels of daily social media use (every day, $n = 45$; at least daily, $n = 4$), which increases exposure to influencer content, sponsored posts, and product links. Because influencers are integrated into everyday social media consumption, participants may encounter their endorsements more frequently than those of NIL athletes or celebrities. Although NIL athletes and celebrities also maintain a presence on social media, their endorsements may

appear less often in participants' daily feeds compared to influencer-driven advertising and promotional content.

Celebrities, while rated highest in attractiveness, were perceived as the least trustworthy and least credible endorsers overall. While celebrity endorsements can help generate attention, visibility, and their status usually has a personal brand recognition, participants often viewed celebrities as endorsers as less relatable and overly promotional. This lower level of trust appeared to reduce their influence on purchase intention. Celebrities are worried about their personal brand recognition, only endorsing products or brands they find to not damage their reputation and image based on qualitative results. These findings suggest that their perceived high levels of attractiveness are likely not enough to drive purchasing behavior when credibility is lacking. As a result, brands may benefit more from selecting endorsers based on trust and credibility levels rather than purely on attractiveness and visibility.

Limitations

Although three versions of the survey were created to reduce potential order of effects by varying the sequence of endorser types presented in the Source Credibility Scale, the use of multiple survey versions may still have introduced some variations in responses across participants. Future studies could implement different survey questions for survey versions or other operations for controlling the order of effects.

Another limitation was the lack of diversity within the sample. The majority of participants were female, attended Southeastern Conference (SEC) schools, and fell within a similar age range, with most participants being recent graduates or current students. This limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Future research should expand to

larger and more diverse samples across gender, age, educational backgrounds, and universities to better represent consumer perceptions across different demographic groups.

Additionally, future research should examine whether fan loyalty to athletes or teams influences perceptions of NIL athletes as endorsers. Strong identification with a university, team, or athlete may increase trust and purchase intention, particularly for NIL endorsements.

It would also be beneficial to investigate how different product categories, such as sports apparel, beauty products, or technology, affect the effectiveness of NIL athletes, social media influencers, and celebrity endorsers, as endorsement success could be hypothesized to vary depending on product relevance. Potential future research could provide valuable insight into how brands should select endorsers based on product type or brand fit. Schimmelpfennig and Hunt (2020) suggest that more research is needed to cover a combination of brand/product and endorser characteristics. As proven in this study, NIL athletes were deemed credible when promoting products within their sports-related niche, suggesting that alignment between the endorser and the product category may strengthen trust, credibility, and purchase intention.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent for Student Class Projects

Consumer Perceptions of Influencers, NIL Athletes, and Celebrities (Endorsers) in Advertising/Marketing

Amy Kingston, Strategic Communication Option III Master's Program

amymk@utexas.edu, 817-908-4238

The University of Texas at Austin

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. René Dailey, 512-471-4867, rdailey@austin.utexas.edu.

You are being asked to take part in a study for a student class project. The purpose of this project is to learn more about **consumer perceptions of Influencers, NIL Athletes, and Celebrities in advertising/marketing**. If you choose to take part, we will ask you to **fill out basic demographic information and survey questions**. We expect that it will take about **10 minutes** of your time to complete **the survey**. You can contact the researchers at the above address and phone number to discuss the project.

The risks of participating in this project are no greater than everyday life. There are no costs for participating. You will not directly benefit from participating. The information you provide today will not be shared outside of the classroom during this semester. **No names will be collected or used, this is an anonymous survey.**

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You may decide not to participate, choose not to answer any question, or stop participating at any time **without any penalty**. If you want to withdraw from the project, simply stop participating. If you have any questions, contact the faculty member listed above. Your decision whether or not to participate will have no affect with your relationship with the University of Texas at Austin.

If you have any questions about the study, please call **Amy Kingston** at **817-908-4238** or send an email to **amymk@utexas.edu**.

This is not a research study. It has not been reviewed/approved by the University Institutional Review Board. This is a class project for educational use only.

Please note that your participation in this survey indicates your consent to participate.

Appendix B

Likert scale questions for survey (all on a 1-7 scale)

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Disagree, 4 = Undecided/Neutral, 5 = Somewhat Agree, 6 = Agree, 7 = Strongly agree

Source Credibility Scale *Ohanian, R. (1990)*

NIL Athletes

Trustworthiness

- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be dependable?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be honest?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be reliable?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be sincere?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be trustworthy?

Attractiveness

- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be attractive?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be classy?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be handsome/beautiful?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be elegant?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be sexy?

Expertise

- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be experts?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be experienced?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be knowledgeable?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be qualified?
- Do you find NIL athletes as ad endorsers to be skilled?

Social Media Influencers

Trustworthiness

- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be dependable?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be honest?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be reliable?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be sincere?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be trustworthy?

Attractiveness

- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be attractive?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be classy?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be handsome/beautiful?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be elegant?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be sexy?

Expertise

- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be experts?

- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be experienced?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be knowledgeable?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be qualified?
- Do you find social media influencers as ad endorsers to be skilled?

Celebrities

Trustworthiness

- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be dependable?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be honest?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be reliable?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be sincere?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be trustworthy?

Attractiveness

- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be attractive?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be classy?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be handsome/beautiful?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be elegant?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be sexy?

Expertise

- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be experts?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be experienced?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be knowledgeable?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be qualified?
- Do you find celebrities as ad endorsers to be skilled?

The ADTRUST Scale *Soh et al., (2009)*

Information conveyed in social media advertising (#ad, sponsored, partnerships, deals) is:

Reliability

- Honest
- Truthful
- Credible
- Reliable
- Dependable
- Accurate
- Factual
- Complete
- Clear

Usefulness

- Valuable
- Good
- Useful

- Helps people make the best decisions

Affect

- Likable
- Enjoyable
- Positive

Willingness to rely on

- I am willing to rely on ad-conveyed information when making purchased-related decisions
- I am willing to make important purchase-related decisions based on ad-conveyed information
- I am willing to consider the ad-conveyed information when making purchase-related decisions
- I am willing to recommend the product or service that I have seen in ads to my friends or family

Engagement Scale *Schivinski et al., (2016)*

Consumption

- I follow NIL athletes on social media
- I follow social media influencers on social media
- I follow celebrities on social media
- I read/view posts about NIL athletes on social media
- I read/view posts about social media influencers on social media
- I read/view posts about celebrities on social media

Contribution

- I “like” posts where NIL athletes promote products/brands/services
- I “like” posts where social media influencers promote products/brands/services
- I “like” posts where celebrities promote products/brands/services
- I share or repost posts where NIL athletes promote products/brands/services
- I share or repost posts where social media influencers promote products/brands/services
- I share or repost posts where celebrities promote products/brands/services

Creation

- I post about social media influencers
- I post about NIL athletes
- I post about celebrities

Other questions

Multiple Choice

1. Social media usage frequency
 - Multiple times per day
 - Daily

- A few times per week
 - Rarely
2. Primary social media platform used
 - Instagram
 - Tiktok
 - X/Twitter
 - Youtube
 - Other: _____
 3. Interest in college sports/college athletes
 - Very interested
 - Somewhat interested
 - Not very interested
 - Not at all interested
 4. Interest in social media figures (influencers)
 - Very interested
 - Somewhat interested
 - Not very interested
 - Not at all interested
 5. Interest in celebrities (actors, musicians, traditional celebs)
 - Very interested
 - Somewhat interested
 - Not very interested
 - Not at all interested

Short Answer Questions

1. What qualities make you trust an endorser in an advertisement?
2. Do you perceive influencers, college athletes, and celebrities differently as endorsers? How so?
3. Can you describe a time when an endorser influenced your opinion about a product or brand? Was the endorser an influencer, celebrity, or NIL athlete?

Demographic Questions

1. Age (just the number, example: 21) – *this is short answer*
2. Gender Identity (ex. male, female, nonbinary, etc.) – *this is short answer*
3. Current status
 - Undergraduate
 - Graduate
 - Recent graduate (within last 4 years)
 - Other: _____
4. School affiliation

- SEC university
- Non-SEC university