

It IS a Fashion Show: A Pilot Analysis Investigating How Collegiate Female Athletes Develop their Personal Brands

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Keywords: appearance management, fashion through sport, female athletes, personal brand

This work advances the research about intersectionality of being an athlete and being female with a new lens addressing the research question: How do collegiate female athletes develop their personal brands that evoke fashion communication and style narratives?

Historically, girls and women practicing sport, and particularly sports that have been viewed as part of a male domain (basketball, volleyball, softball, field hockey, soccer, etc.) have navigated a contested terrain (Malcom, 2003). Throughout the 20th century, as women gained rights at the polls and in the workplace, and with the passage of Title IX in 1972, their opportunities in sport, and therefore their roles as athletes, have increased. Girls who watched the US Soccer Team reach world domination in 1991 (and subsequent years) have been encouraged to pursue athletic competition, seeing role models in women such as Mia Hamm and Brandi Chastain. In the 21st century we have seen women's sports take (and take over) the spotlight, from a record-breaking sold-out volleyball game in 2023 at the University of Nebraska's Memorial Stadium (Williams, 2023) to capacity crowds in basketball venues across the U.S. as fans clamored to watch Caitlin Clark making scoring history in 2024 (McGuire, 2024). The increasingly high profiles of female athletes present opportunities for them to develop personal brands that are a marketable commodities – and position them as fashion influencers.

Purpose and Rationale. Fashion often emerges from sport. In 1988 Olympian runner Florence Griffith Joyner's dramatic nails were heavily scrutinized; 1999 Women's World Cup (soccer) championship team member Brandi Chastain famously pulled off her jersey after scoring the game winning goal; in 2024 LSU basketball player Angel Reese's 'Bayou Barbie' nickname reflected her prominence as an athlete with strong and unique fashion sense. These are just three examples of how popular culture has looked to female athletes for fashion news, inspiration, and even criticism. The purposes of this research are to (1) make the case that women's highly visible athletic competition is in fact a celebration of fashion and (2) to analyze how female collegiate athletes are navigating the development of their personal brands in response to their roles "on the stage" (or court or field).

Notably, the recent emergence of Name, Image, Likeness (NIL) income eligibility for athletes at the collegiate level has further empowered female athletes to develop and 'cash in on' their personal brands (Maniece, 2024). Fashion, appearance, and personal style go hand-in-glove with personal brand, and fans (and haters alike) eagerly consume fashion information produced by their favorite athletes and coaches. This high visibility of athletes, and the evolutionary role of women personifying feminine attributes in their historically male-dominated sports, has fueled the opportunity for athletes who are women to bring fashion show expectations to sport.

Theoretical Framework. The intersectionality of being female and being an athlete has been widely studied (Jones & Greer, 2001; Malcom, 2003; Wolter, 2013); however, the way

female athletes develop and present their personal brands is a new approach to this phenomenon. The purpose of this research was to gain insight about and document the voices of collegiate female athletes as they describe their personal brand development. We drew from Merton's (1957) role theory and Goffman's (1973) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* to study the ways collegiate female athletes engage in appearance management for the purpose of developing and defining their personal brands, reflecting upon their intersectional roles as women in sport.

Method. This research employs a qualitative design and is exploratory. Four participants were recruited for this preliminary study through use of personal connections (generating a convenience sample), focusing on a network of women who fit the population of interest – current NCAA athletes. One of the researchers is herself an NCAA athlete so her credibility as a research recruiter enhanced connection with participants. The four participants were aged 21 to 24; two were white, one was African American, and one was bi-racial. They reported starting their primary sport at ages 6 to 11.

A set of interview questions were designed that facilitated data collection about the way the participants self-identify as both female and athlete as well as to explore whether (and if so, how) their roles, specifically as a performance and competitive athletes, informs their appearance management practices and the building of their personal brands. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2023 using an online platform. The interviews lasted between 26 and 42 minutes. The recorded interviews were transcribed then content analysis using constant comparative method was completed.

Results. The women in our study confirmed their role identities as athletes. Specifically, when asked what roles they hold, they typically stated daughter, sister, and friend, yet and all focused on their athletic role, elaborating on its related responsibilities and clarifying it as currently “primary.” One participant replied “I’m a leader, I’m a captain for my team.” Another reflected that she “tries to be the best teammate I can be.”

In their roles as athletes, the participants acknowledged the high visibility that they themselves wield and reflected on ways that their individual styles evolve into personal brands. They reflected on fashion styles both during athletic competition (e.g. as donning certain apparel items such as long sleeves or leg sleeves that are always part of their look and carefully managing their hair, makeup, and nails) and during everyday appearance. All described specific ways that they manage their appearances in recognizable and consistent ways as they prepare for public competition – and noted that their fashion styles also continue in consistent ways when away from public competitions. For example, one basketball player described her personal appearance plan when playing, “I usually wear my natural hair and a cute puff and edges [using hands to show side of forehead], and then just wear headband” and elaborated that when not competing, “I have a real big interest in customizing clothes. When I wear outfits most of my teammates think I dress over the top sometimes ‘cause they’re wearing sweatpants, and then I come out with a trench coat...” Another basketball player talked about the importance to her of wearing bronzer to bring color to her very white skin. A soccer player noted that she thinks about her appearance because “... you know, you get pictures on the field and it’s nice to not look crazy in your picture – I mean you’re gonna be sweaty [but] you still want to look good!”

All participants stated that if they look (or feel) good, they have greater confidence and play better. In terms of having a personal brand related to their role as athletes, they revealed the realization that preparing for a game is like getting ready to go to work. Some reflected on

activities that have become part of those jobs – such as signing autographs, serving as role models to young girls (and boys) and seeing social media comments about themselves. One participant articulated that seeing “millions of views” demonstrates how big their stage really is.

Implications. The insights from these interviews provides guidance for continued data collection about female athletes’ fashion and brand development. Coaches and other support personal who work with elite female athletes will benefit from understanding how appearance management and subsequent development of personal branding is part of athletic competition preparation. Parents of aspiring female athletes will benefit from understanding, through the lens of collegiate female athletes, how appearance is part of the ‘whole package’ of the athletic competition. Society at large benefits from the information generated through this research, particularly as people contemplate the importance of sport in our fashion consumption patterns.

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