Clemson University

TigerPrints

All Theses

Theses

8-2019

Phenomenological Insights Into the Recruitment Process of International Soccer Student-Athletes

Jonathan David Sutherland
Clemson University, jdsutherland@outlook.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS
OF INTERNATIONAL SOCCER STUDENT-ATHLETES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

---

by
Jonathan D. Sutherland
August 2019

Accepted by:
Dr. Angela N. Pratt, Committee Chair
Dr. Stephanie Pangborn
Dr. David T. Scott

ABSTRACT

The migration of male international soccer student-athletes to American collegiate institutions has seen an ascending trend of participation popularity. Using a phenomenological research design, I sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how male international soccer student-athletes experienced their recruitment processes with National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I institutions. Seventeen participants from various universities engaged with me in semi-structured in-depth interview conversations. Analysis of the information they shared, suggested five significant themes rooted in the communicative nature of the recruitment process: 1) Social Acceptance, 2) Sense of Belonging, 3) Acceptance vs Rejection, 4) The Incognizant Reality, and 5) Increase of Self-Awareness. These themes, which resonate with social identity theory, have the potential to offer beneficial information to institutions, coaches, recruiters and prospective international student athletes as well as to provide a qualitative framework from which future studies can be modeled.

DEDICATION

For my number one fans, my parents, I owe you everything and more; my life wouldn't be the same if it wasn't for your unwavering support.

For my brother, whose intellect and perseverance has motivated me to be more than an athlete.

For my coaches, your trust and dedication over the years has shaped my identity, morals, ethics and values as a person. Without your guidance, I would not have had the opportunities I have experienced.

For my teammates, you are the intangible support system that has kept me sane over the years.

I would never have imagined that my life would have planned out the way it has so far, and to all of you, I owe supreme gratitude.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents (Continued)

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

At just 19 years of age, my identity was shaken at its core. While most of my friends were busy socializing, concentrating on studies, and preparing for "normal" young adulthood, college, and work, I chose to head in a different direction. I had dedicated 80% of the entirety of my life to the game of football. To me, it was not just a sport – it was a life I loved, my every day, the foundation of my identity, a compass for my morals, ethos, and decisions that molded my existence. However, I was told that everything I had committed countless hours toward and for which I had made significant sacrifice would come an abrupt end. I was not going to play professional football in my home country. Born in England., I was immersed in the culture of soccer from the beginning. The game serves as a ticking heartbeat to the nation and encapsulates the richness and tradition of English sporting history. I, like many others, held dreams of playing professional soccer, carving a career from our aspirations and ambitions. The academy soccer system is the production line for many young players seeking to become a professional soccer player. These institutions serve as recruitment and development, allowing players from 7 to 18 the opportunity to fulfill their dreams. Academy soccer systems are not only centralized to the English game; they have become a globalized industry for professional and non-professional clubs to birth their own homegrown talent. However, the statistics of success for these young players paint a highly competitive reality, where the majority fall short of attaining their dreams. Of the 1.5 million athletes who are playing in organized youth soccer in England, only 180 will make it as a Premier

League professional soccer player; a success rate of 0.012% (Romeo, 2017). I, and others like me, needed a new option from which I could obtain success.

Immediately, I was thrust into the unanticipated experience of being recruited by institutions in the United States to play as an international student-athlete. This experience taught me that closed doors do lead to new opportunity. While my planned future was not possible, I had the ability to make decisions that could shape my future in profound ways that I had never before considered. Taking a huge leap of faith, I traveled 3,851 miles to East Tennessee State University which would become my new home for nearly four years. In retrospect, I see this decision as one of the best I have made in my life, but it did not come without challenge and I realize that I am fortunate to have found the best "fit" for myself through the communication processes involved while being recruited. I consider it an honor to be able to use this thesis project to share my story and those of my participants.

There is a continuously growing trend in U.S. collegiate athletics: the influx of male international soccer student-athletes. Since 2009 the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has seen a linear increase in the number of male international soccer players participating at the NCAA Division I collegiate soccer level (NCAA, 2018). While international student-athletes' involvement in American collegiate athletics is nothing new, the rise of men's soccer as a serious sport in the U.S. (see "Gaining ground", 2018, for evidence) has given birth to a new trend in international participation. Although studies on motivational factors influencing decision-making during the recruitment process have been conducted with international students and international

student-athletes, there has been limited assessment of this experience, specifically that of male international soccer student-athletes. Furthermore, the scope of previous research has been inadequate in offering in-depth perspectives of the individuals' accounts, opinions, views and experiences of this particular demographic. In this study, I use prior studies as a foundational springboard to inform my focus in this qualitative phenomenological research design to understand how male international soccer student-athletes experience the recruitment process. Specifically, I explored their perceived impressions of an institution's athletic, academic, and campus life, the ways in which those impressions are formed through communication, and how those impressions can influence their decision to join an American collegiate institution as a student-athlete.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a sparsity of previous literature focused on my specific demographic. Previous literature on international student-athletes has been predominantly quantitative in terms of analyzing which deciding factors or influencers occur most often during the recruitment phase. Few studies have used a qualitative approach to assess the experiences of international student-athletes, thus creating a space to fill by an exploratory study of phenomenological insights into the experience of male international soccer student-athletes.

The purpose of this literature review is to provide relevant information consistent with the subject of my study. In this section, I will address prior research on motivational factors that influence international student-athlete decision-making in the recruitment phases and institutional strategies and communication towards prospective recruits. The literature review is divided into sections that are recurring thematic concepts throughout previous research. Using a phenomenological approach allowed me to better understand the essence of the experience that the participants underwent during the recruitment process, the results of which resonate strongly with *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Athletic Influence

First, defining athletic influence as a factor must be addressed. This section encompasses athletic facilities, athletic reputation of the institution, success of the sport, coaching staff, athletic scholarship awarded, conference and opportunity for a professional career. Previous studies conducted on international student-athletes'

motivations to join an American institution are limited. However, Popp, Pierce and Hums (2011) studied both international student-athletes and domestic student-athletes to discern what influencing factors led to the decision-making process of joining an American college. The study used a sample size of 355 student-athletes, of which there were 192 internationals. They responded to a 39-question, seven-point Likert scale survey asking the participants questions about variables affecting their decision-making process. For the international student-athletes, the five items rated highest for level of importance were: a) the value of athletic scholarship offered, b) the personality of head coach, c) a degree from school leading to good job, d) the level of competition at which team competes, and e) the academic reputation of the school (Popp et al., 2011).

The variable recognized as the most important as an influencer towards the international student-athlete's decision was the amount of athletic scholarship awarded. International students are required to provide information about their financial capabilities when applying to study in America. A high athletic scholarship can be the most desirable factor for many individuals, and in some cases, a necessity (Popp et al., 2011). The second variable – personality of the head coach – was considered as a high motivational factor for international student-athletes. However, domestic student-athletes did not rate it as high as other motivational factors.

Domestic student-athletes are immersed in the college environment from an early age; however, for many international athletes, continuing their aspirations of a professional playing career would not have initially led them to America. Many internationals are unaware of the option to study and compete until they are in high

school (Popp et al., 2011). Bentzinger (2016) built on the previous research conducted by Popp et al. (2011), approaching a qualitative case study on a smaller concentrate of several international student-athletes. His research was based on the experience of the international student-athletes and although it did not confirm all of the findings from Popp et al. (2011), one recurring theme that connected the two was the influence of an athletic scholarship. Bentzinger's sample came from non-native English-speaking countries. His research found that an athletic scholarship from an American institution was a major factor in the decision-making process of the athletes. It must be noted that not all of the participants referenced the need of an athletic scholarship, but the data from the study implied that it had an impact on the majority of the population (Bentzinger, 2016).

<u>Academic Influence</u>

There are multiple factors that must be addressed when discussing academic influence. First, an institution's academic reputation: This can be defined as a variety of factors contributing to reputation, including admissions selectivity, accomplishments of alumni, quality of faculty, size of endowment and operating budget, number of library holdings, peer rankings, and leadership quality (Larsen, 2003). Larsen (2003) discovered that high school students rate reputation as one of the most important factors in their college choice. One reason some international student-athletes decide to come to an American institution to continue their education is that the American education system is deemed superior to that of their native countries (Bentzinger, 2016). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) determined that international students have multiple "push" and "pull" factors that

influence their decision-making process. The first "push" factor that the research discovered was the perception that an overseas course of study is better than a local one. Another factor was that the student would either not be able to gain entry to particular courses of study in their domestic country, or that the domestic country did not offer the particular courses desired (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

A second factor of academic influence is that the American higher education system also differs from many other countries' educational systems, in a way that some international students find advantageous. In the United Kingdom (U.K.) for example, many degrees are three-year courses straight out of high-school; courses and classes are designed to be specific to the degree and do not advocate for variety of class experience. This contrasts with the four-year degree of the American system, which offers more flexibility for those who are undecided on their desired degree coming out of high school. The initial general education requirements of the American system also allow for individuals to experience and alter their preferred path of degree. Other influential factors, according to Popp et al. (2011), for international student-athletes in particular, are earning a degree from a school leading to a good job, and the academic reputation of the prospective school. Altogether, these academic factors indicate ways in which the American system has proven to have an advantage over its peers in gaining enrollment from international students (Lochtie, 2016).

<u>General College Experience</u>

An important factor to consider in this study is not only the academic and athletic influencers, but that of the college experience in general. For definition purposes, *general*

college experience refers to campus life, housing and facilities, environmental and geographical location, and the size of the institution.

Popp et al. (2011) discovered that reputation of the university or college was less of an influencer than other variables, equating for a small percentage of the decision-making of international student-athletes. In comparison with domestic student-athletes, internationals are less concerned about which NCAA school they attend, with scholarship and relationship with coach being more of a priority than the reputation of the institution. Part of the U.S. college experience is to be immersed with an American westernized culture. For clarity, this also includes participants from the more westernized European cultures as well as typically and traditionally non-westernized demographics. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) discovered that this factor was one influencer in their "push-pull" model, which seeks to explain international students' motivational influencers in their decision to study abroad. Their research found that international students had a desire to gain a better understanding of the "West" and harbor the intention to migrate after graduation (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). America is seen as a popular destination for international students because of the general knowledge and perceptions people have about the country. American domination of the global media and news services in the second half of the twentieth century has aided in the process, alongside film and television (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The development of the internet and World Wide Web has fostered an increase in globalization, a perspective of widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life (Servaes, 2008).

The environment of the destination also plays a role in the decision-making process. The climate, the lifestyle, and whether the country was perceived as being quiet or studious were all factors taken into consideration in the selection process (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). According to Popp et al. (2011), when compared to domestic student-athletes, there was a significant discrepancy among international student athletes with regards to the location of the school in relation to home. This is due to the fact that international students, other than perhaps Canadians and Mexicans, would attend university in their homeland if location relative to home were a key factor in the decision-making process (Popp et al., 2011).

<div align="center">Institutional Communication</div>

The final subsection of key concepts for this study is institutional communication. This subsection considers institutional communication as a major source of communication during the recruitment process, including a combination of academic and athletic messaging. Institutional communication can be briefly defined in terms of institutional brand strength, communicative strategies, personalization of the message to the individual, marketability, and social media campaigns and management.

First, it is imperative to note how an institution brands itself. A university brand is defined by Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009) as:

> A manifestation of the institution's features that distinguish it from others, reflect its capacity to satisfy students' needs, engender trust in its ability to deliver a certain type and level of higher education, and help potential recruits to make wise enrollment decisions. (p. 14)

The latter part of this description is particularly pertinent to the specific phase explored in my own research.

Over the last decade, universities have made vast efforts to improve their corporate visual identity (CVI) and/or name (Idris & Whitfield, 2014). Having a strong brand can aid in an institution's communication by increasing their recognition within a larger demographic. A strong brand influence has the potential to directly enhance a university's prestige, student interest and aid in the recruitment process (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). Branding has become a formative process of recruitment for an institution. According to Gai et al. (2016) British universities view institutional branding as a seminal factor in differentiating themselves within international competition.

Social media has become a critical tool for institutions to communicate with prospective students. In 2007, the National Association for College Admission Counseling released a report showing that 61% of college admission offices were using social media to recruit prospective students (Turner, 2017). Greenwood (2012) found that 92% of colleges use social network sites (SNS) in conjunction with their own sites, a number likely to have increased in the past seven years. Clayton et al. (2012) researched the effect of public service announcements that universities broadcast during their respective schools' athletic competitions. The researchers discovered that there were similarities in the communication methods that institutions employed, and that there were few schools creating unique messaging. While directing a message towards one may alienate others, the result of trying to be all things to all people results in reducing the effectiveness of the message and the decreasing the efficacy of the communication

(Clayton et al., 2012). It is also important to note how messaging may vary by institution. Factors such as institution size, academic reputation or prestige, and NCAA conference affiliation could influence the way an institution strategizes its communication (Clayton et al., 2012).

Research has discovered that institutional academic discourse has gone through a process of marketization (Nasti, Venuti, & Zollo 2017). Nasti et al. (2017) determined that many universities have changed their communicative style, tending to borrow from commercial models including words from the business domain and using persuasive techniques. Their research (of U.K. universities) discovered that university websites employ interactive and multimodal communication, allowing institutions to use specific verbal and visual patterns that tend to be persuasive and dialogical. The combination of different modes, such as the use of bright colors, magnified and colored typography, videos and images, and linguistic advertising strategies contribute to promoting university courses, and shorten the distance between the institution and their potential "customers" (Nasti et al., 2017).

The Rise of Soccer

Soccer's popularity in the U.S. is on the rise, with 7% of Americans claiming it as their favorite sport (Norman, 2018). This is the highest percentage recorded to date with popularity for the game rivaling the more traditional sports, such as baseball. There has been a decline in popularity for baseball, with figures showing a 9% share of Americans claiming it as their favorite sport, the lowest percentage since Gallup first posed the question in 1937 (Norman, 2018). Recent Major League Soccer (MLS) expansion teams

have increased national and international awareness of the American soccer market. One new team that has increased the profile of the MLS is Atlanta United, who share the recently-developed Mercedez-Benz Stadium in downtown Atlanta with the National Football League (NFL) organization Atlanta Falcons. This access to a state-of-the-art stadium has placed Atlanta United 10th in best average attendance for soccer games globally (LoRé, 2019). The MLS is continuing its expansion with Inter Miami CF and Nashville SC joining the league in 2020, while Austin FC joins a year later (LoRé, 2019).

It is not just the physical attendance numbers that have seen a surge. U.S. broadcast viewership for the 2018 season saw a 6% annual increase with more than 26 million viewers across a multitude of networks (Thomas, 2018). The MLS has also seen an increase in social media influence. The league had 613 million video views across all content platforms in 2018, a 75% increase in a 12-month period. The grassroots level of soccer popularity in the U.S. has also seen a noticeable increase. Since 1990, youth players registered with U.S. soccer programs has gone up 89%, while the number of individuals participating at some level in the sport is second only to China on the international stage (Johnson, 2015).

<u>Social Identity Theory</u>

Perceived social identity resonates strongly with the socially constructed realities that the participants in my study experienced during the recruitment phase. However, social identity theory (SIT) was not used to guide the study nor which to interpret the findings; rather it was the words of the participants that associated strongly with this theory. SIT is a socio-psychological account of intergroup relations (Ward, 2017).

According to SIT, individuals define the sense of self in terms of social categories or group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For prospective international soccer student-athletes, the premise that they will be joining a team is directly linked with identifying into that certain socially constructed in-group. SIT's intergroup relations are built on the premise that humans identify as members of social groups from whose status they derive self-esteem (Ward, 2017). There are two processes for social identity formation; self-categorization and social comparison, with both producing separate consequences (Hogg, 2001). The categorization of the self is defined as, "An accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, and an accentuation of the perceived differences between the self and out-group members" (Hogg, 2001, p. 225). The second stage – social comparison – is a process of selective application of the accentuation effect, primarily to support self-enhancing outcomes for the self (Hogg, 2001). The two processes for social identity formation are particularly pertinent for the recruitment phase for male international soccer student-athletes, as they begin the process of perceiving themselves in the in-group.

Social identity is self-evaluative; it is a process primarily instigated by discrepancies between actual self-representations and normative characteristics of self-conception (Brandtstädter & Greve, 1994). The in-group defines and assigns values and focuses on establishing evaluatively positive distinctiveness for one's own group (Hogg, 2001). In SIT, the self is reflexive, seeing itself as an object that can categorize, classify or name itself in particular ways in relation to other classifications and categories (Stets & Burke, 2000). Relevant to my study is Cummins and O'Boyle's (2014) research on

SIT. They stated that individuals seeking the gratification of belonging to the in-group face two processes of self-identification. First, they self-stereotype, resulting in their motivation to discover the category meaning, identifying the norms associated with that category and conforming to those categoric group means. The second stage is that individuals share a self-stereotype – also known as social ID – with other group members, which allows members of the social group to test the perceptions of their own social realities with other members of the group.

<div align="center">Research Aims and Objectives</div>

My study's purpose was to explore the essence of the experience of male international soccer student-athletes during the recruitment phase of transitioning to an American collegiate institution. I sought to understand what influencing factors led them away from their domestic environment, how institutions strategized and communicated towards the individuals, and how they assigned meaning towards the recruitment process that ultimately influenced their decision. Therefore, I constructed the following research question on which to base my study:

RQ: How does communication received during the recruitment phase affect participants at the individual level, as well as their decision-making to commit to a NCAA Division I program?

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Although useful, most of the prior research about international and domestic student-athletes during their recruitment to U.S. collegiate athletics lacks the individual stories of those being studied. To better understand what motivates international male soccer student-athletes to leave their domestic countries, families, friends and homes to begin a new life as an American collegiate athlete needs a more investigative approach of their own perceptions, experiences and truths.

Therefore, it was imperative for me to employ a qualitative methodological approach to this study. I believe the spoken words about individuals' experiences enables us to understand important subjective truths, allowing for a rich and valuable description of the ways in which individuals make sense of the stories of their lives. Yanchar (2015) wrote that the hermeneutic view of truth and reality is significant for qualitative inquiry, by virtue of the uniquely human way of accounting for human experience and due to its implications for investigations into the complicated, yet richly meaningful, world of human activity. The goal of qualitative research is for scholars to build a complex and holistic picture, analyze words, and report detailed views of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and the participant, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I kept these aims and emphases in focus while shaping my research design, engaging with participants,

analyzing the perspectives they offered, and crafting a written account of lessons learned from their stories.

Creswell and Poth (2018) determined that qualitative research allows for an exploration of a group or population, identification of variables that cannot be easily measured, and/or the hearing of silenced voices. Heeding this advice was the cornerstone upon which I wanted my research to be founded: an exploratory study that could portray the perspectives and views of a demographic that have not been researched. My study sought to provide an enhanced understanding of the experiences that male international soccer student-athletes went through during the recruitment process, and how those individual experiences influenced their decision-making. Using a qualitative methodological approach allowed me to explore their perspectives, delve into their own accounts, gain insight into the essence of the experience of being recruited, and explore how their perspectives of communication therein affected their realities during this process. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that employing both inductive and deductive data analysis approaches can help establish patterns or themes. The province of qualitative research is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In consideration of the complexities of their socially-constructed realities, dually shaped by both their domestic home and their perceived reality of the American collegiate environment they anticipate joining, gaining detailed insights of their lived experience by means of a phenomenological research design seemed to be the most promising approach.

Phenomenology was advanced in the early 20th century by philosophers such as

Edmund Husserl. Husserl (1913/1967) states that phenomenology's sole task and service

is to clarify the meaning of the world, the precise sense in which individuals accept it,

and with undeniable right, as really existing. Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology

sought to define the essence of the objects of our perceptions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Understanding the objects of our perceptions is a process in which experience is

essential; Lyotard (1991) states that experience is the sole source for all knowledge. The

acknowledgement that the participants in the study are diverse in their demographic,

geographic, cultural and societal dimensions can mean that they function within separate

realities to the social world into which they are being recruited. In qualitative inquiry,

phenomenology refers to an interest in understanding social phenomena from the actors'

own perspectives and opinions, describing the world as individuals experience it, and

emphasizing that reality is what people perceive it to be (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Schutz (1970) discerns that it is the meaning of our experiences, and not the ontological

structure of objects, that constitutes reality. These experiences that the participants

undergo are best evaluated through a phenomenological scope of understanding.

Illuminating understanding on the meanings assigned during the recruitment phase is the

essential crux of my study. Schutz (1970) explains:

> Moreover, each of these finite provinces of meaning is, among other things,
>
> characterized by a specific tension of consciousness (from full awakeness in the
>
> reality of everyday life to sleep in the world of dreams), by a specific time-

perspective, by a specific form of experiencing oneself, and, finally, by a specific

form of sociality. (p. 253)

Understanding the phenomena in this study was at the core of why I conducted my

research. To better educate and illuminate the experience of the communicative message

process that male international soccer student-athletes undergo during the recruitment

phase of their interaction with an American college institution, a phenomenological

approach was needed. Van Manen (1997) stated:

Phenomenological understanding is distinctly existential, emotive, enactive,

embodied, situational, and non-theoretic; a powerful phenomenological text

thrives on a certain irrevocable tension between what is unique and what is

shared, between particular and transcendent meaning, and between the reflective

and the pre-reflective spheres of the lifeworld. (p. 346)

The in-depth interview process gathered these unique and shared perspectives to which

Van Manen (1997) refers. It gave me a platform on which to better understand the

individual experience and the collective shared meaning that each participant mutually

experienced. As Husserl (1907/1964) states:

If the word phenomenology were used so broadly as to cover the analysis of

everything self-given, the incoherent data would become coherent: analyzing

sense-given entities according to their various kinds – the common element is

then in the methodology of the analysis of essences within the sphere of

immediate evidence. (p. 12)

I developed a phenomenological approach to my study in order to help guide the individual experiences of the participants into a shared phenomenon. Phenomenology, as it has evolved in qualitative inquiry, is the essence of the nature and states of lived experiences (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The recruitment process for international male soccer players is conducted annually by institutions, coaches, recruiters and athletic programs. It is a paradigm of interest that is largely undocumented, especially in sports communication research. There is a shared phenomenon that my study seeks to address: The impacts of communicative messages experienced by male international soccer student-athletes during their recruitment phase.

Collecting the data from the participants who have experienced the phenomenon allowed for a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research allows for the empowerment of individuals through sharing their experiences and stories, aiding in a minimization of the power relationship between the researcher and participant. My firsthand experience of the recruitment process enhanced the intimate nature between myself and the participants of this study; we had a shared experience and they were transparent and eager to share the details of their own perspectives, which I have highlighted throughout the remainder of this thesis. Simultaneously, though, my firsthand experience also necessitated a commitment to reflexivity as I engaged in the entirety of the research process. One important aspect of the phenomenological framework I found helpful in this challenge was transcendental phenomenology which relies directly upon participants' descriptions of experience in shaping a trustworthy account of shared experience rather than upon a

researcher's interpretation of those subjective stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This methodology has also been called the epoche or transcendental reduction (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I sought to employ this feature of phenomenological methodology in order to reduce the bracketing effect of the study. It was critical that I set aside my own experience and views as a researcher who had lived many of the intricacies of the stories shared by participants; it kept me accountable to approaching my research with a fresh perspective towards the phenomenon. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained this characteristic as keeping a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about a problem or an issue, not the meaning that the researcher brings to the study from prior studies, literature or personal experience. The participants' meanings towards the phenomenon suggest multiple perspectives on the situation, meaning that the shared themes developed in the study reflect the multiple perspectives of the participants in the study.

During my research, I sought to embody the role of the researcher as much I physically and mentally could; understanding my prior knowledge, self-awareness and experience could have had a huge impact on the research process. I was aware of my own positioning within the study, obtaining a level of self-efficacy in my stance on how to best conduct my research. Thus, I sought to engage in a great amount of reflexivity during the whole process of my study, persistently evaluating my own cognitive belief system and applying my prior knowledge and experience to the research, without compromising the perspectives of the participants or implementing any preconceived biases of my own. Reflexivity is the process of engaging in mutual recognition of, and

adaption with others, enabling the researcher to manage the twisting, turning roads of qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The enactment of reflexivity enables the researcher to gather meaningful data by listening for the rich nuances in the stories shared by participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The readers of the study have a right to know about the researcher, what prompts his or her interest in the topic of investigation, to whom those investigations are being reported, and what the researcher personally stands to gain from the study. I made it a priority that each individual participant in my study knew about me, my background, my interest in the research I was conducting, and what I hoped my research efforts would add to both scholarship and practice. This vulnerability and disclosure of my own persona decreased the power relationship that appears between researcher and participant even further, constructing a level of equality between myself and my participants.

Creswell and Poth (2018) determined that data analysis of the individuals' experience can be developed with a combination of textural description (what the participants experienced) and structural description (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context) helping to convey an overall essence of their experience. The combination of these two descriptive techniques essentially guided the thematic constructs of my study. It served as the formulation of understanding their experience in a holistic manner, compartmentalizing their perspectives into a shared description of the essence of the experience. Employing a transcendental phenomenological approach to my study allowed me to liberate the structural constraints of the traditional, formal interview process. The participants were allowed to delve deep

into their experiences, without too much restraint on the structuring of the interview process. This technique allowed me to better document the in-depth interviews and gather a better understanding of their true experiences and perspectives. Without using a qualitative methodological approach, the rich description of my participants' experience would have been cloudy and potentially less genuine and meaningful. The qualitative approach allowed the participants to explore, articulate and express their memories of the recruitment process when being recruited to a NCAA Division I institution.

<p style="text-align:center"><u>Culture of Interest</u></p>

The phenomena of interest regarding my research is the essence of the experience of male international soccer student-athletes when being recruited to a U.S. NCAA Division I institution. Understanding the social construction of the world that the participants would be entering was an essential component of my research. College athletics is a social world in itself, with strong social ties that go deeper and are more intertwined than traditional college social spheres. To be a college athlete is to commit yourself to a lifestyle that requires significant temporal dedication to perfecting your craft. The majority of collegiate competitive sports are team based; even the more traditional individual sports, such as golf and track and field, are composed of a larger team structure and organization. This dedication of time and energy from the student-athletes are shared in this team structure, which essentially forming the social group into which prospective international student-athlete recruits will find themselves completely immersed. Collegiate soccer is a sport that specifically lends itself to this in-group structured social reality.

International student-athletes tend to have a strong affinity to one another, as they have all experienced a similar process during the recruitment stages. Pierce et al. (2010) discovered that international student-athletes share many of the same obstacles during their time as a collegiate athletes. Many of these obstacles are in the initial recruitment stage, such as cultural differences, language barriers, and different academic backgrounds (Hunter-Johnson, 2016). The participant demographic tends to create friendships with other international individuals over domestic American individuals, with the large majority of these relationships being with other international student-athletes (Rodriguez, 2014). For my study, I focused specifically on male international student-athletes that compete in NCAA Division I men's soccer, which is the highest level of college soccer in the U.S. There has been a linear increase in the number of international soccer student-athletes participating in NCAA Division I men's soccer. The NCAA (2018) discovered that there has been a growth from 149 participants in 2010 to 312 in 2017, a percentage increase of 109%. In 2010, international soccer student-athletes contributed to 16% of the overall participants in NCAA Division I men's soccer; that number increased to 34% in 2017. The NCAA (2018) found that during the seven-year span, the percentage of international soccer student-athletes consistently grew annually.

Seventeen participants, originating from 14 different countries and spanning five continents, engaged in this research project. In developing the research design, I chose to cast my net in a way to invite perspectives from a wide geographical, cultural, and social demographic. Doing so allowed me to learn from diverse perspectives rather than focus on specific aspects of a particular sociocultural background that inevitably shape

experience and impact perceptions of the messages that they received from American collegiate institutions during the recruitment process.

The participants in my study came from England, Scotland, Germany, Ghana, Spain, Costa Rica, Japan, Iceland, Brazil, Norway, Denmark, Nigeria, Jamaica and Slovakia. First-year male international student-athletes comprise 34% of the total population of NCAA Division I men's soccer participants (NCAA, 2018). This spread of participants' domestic geographical locations offered a wide array of individual perspectives. The participants in my study attended a multitude of NCAA Division I institutions, operating within a varied conglomerate of conferences. In my study, I also sought to include participants from a wide array of NCAA Division I teams belonging to different geographical locations, conferences, and institutions to allow for multiple messages and communications. I wanted to make sure that my participants were not receiving identical communications in their recruitment process, thus experiencing a greater variety of institutional messaging. With separate institutions and athletic programs offering different advantages and enticements to better suit their purpose of attaining the talents of prospective recruits, not limiting my participants to a sole institution was essential in gathering a multitude of participant perspectives. I decided to include only underclassmen for my study as I believed that the temporal immediacy of their recruitment experience would hold more clarity than that of a junior or senior international soccer student-athlete. Therefore, the participants in my study comprised a multitude of nations, backgrounds and demographics, and were all recruited to participate in either the 2017 or 2018 NCAA Division I men's soccer seasons.

During my research process, I considered including a multitude of alternate demographic participant options. Whether to include women's international soccer student-athletes and whether or not to include different NCAA Divisions were some of my deliberations. I decided against the inclusion of these separate demographics for several reasons. First, the U.S. is well-document as being a world leader in the development of the best women's soccer players in the world. Since its inception in 1991, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team has won the FIFA Women's World Cup a record four times and has been to a record five finals (FIFA, 2018). This dominance on the international women's soccer stage may reflect why the international women's participation percentage at the American collegiate level is not as high as the men's. In 2010, international women's soccer student-athletes competing at the NCAA Division I level comprised about 7% of the total population. Unlike the males, international women's soccer student-athlete participation percentage has had a fairly level plateau. The NCAA (2018) discovered that in 2017, women's participation percentage was at 10.3%, showing an increase, but not a significant one in comparison to their male counterparts. Throughout the seven-year span of data collection, the NCAA (2018) found that percentage of participation fluxed annually and inconsistently. Because trends in participation levels of international women's soccer student-athletes did not show great levels of significance, I decided to exclude women international soccer student-athletes from my study.

I also considered extending my study into the other divisions of collegiate soccer, including NCAA Divisions II and III. After deliberation and research on whether or not

to include these other divisions, I concluded that the elite level of NCAA Division I men's soccer was most relevant to my research. Motivational factors for international soccer student-athletes are various, though a study conducted by Popp et al. (2011) discovered that likelihood of a professional sports career after graduation resonated strongly with international student-athletes in comparison to domestic American student-athletes. In 2018, both the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) and Major League Soccer (MLS) drafts included only NCAA Division I men's and women's soccer participants in the first round (Purdy, 2018). Alongside the increased exposure to the professional leagues, an overall higher exposure of media, attention and coverage at the NCAA Division I level is much more apparent than any other division in collegiate soccer. For example, the NCAA Division I men's soccer semifinal and final matches are broadcast on ESPN, whereas the NCAA Division II men's soccer finals are only broadcast directly on the NCAA's own website, offering a much smaller viewership. For this reason, I decided that the omission of other collegiate men's soccer divisions should be omitted from my research.

<div align="center">Participants</div>

The 17 participants in the study have been attached pseudonyms as to not reveal their identities. All participants are still NCAA DI men's soccer collegiate athletes; therefore, any identification of their names may have ramifications towards their continued collegiate careers.

Miguel is a sophomore from a Central American country playing in a southeastern conference. James is a redshirt freshman from a northern European country playing in a

southeastern conference. Daniel is from an African country playing in large midwestern conference. Ibrahim is from an African country playing in a mid-major midwestern conference. Sergio is from a southern European country playing in a large southeastern conference. Kasper is from a Scandinavian country playing in a southeastern conference. Shinji is from an east Asian country playing in a large conference stretching across the Midwest. Mats is from a Scandinavian country playing in a large southeastern conference. Michael is from a northern European country and is playing in a northeastern conference. Gylfi is from a small northern European country playing in a large southeastern conference. Mario is from a large northern European country playing in a west coast conference. Andre is from a Central American country playing in a south-eastern conference. Fraser is from a northern European country and plays in a large southeastern conference. Javi is from a southern European country playing in a large midwestern conference. Manuel is from a Central American country and plays in a southeastern conference. Luke is from a northern European country and plays in a large midwestern conference.

<div align="center">Data Collection</div>

I believed that attaining a better understanding of the experience of the participants in the study should begin with in-depth interviews. Following Creswell and Poth's (2018) information on qualitative research processes, I used semi-structured interviews in order to generate a rich, thick description of the recruitment process that the participants experienced. My own involvement in NCAA Division I men's soccer gave me an advantage in the early stages of attaining interview participants for my study.

Utilizing purposeful sampling gave me the opportunity to attain the variety of international student-athletes participating in conferences throughout NCAA Division I men's soccer. I reached out through my own personal network of contacts, connecting with individuals who fit the description of the participants I needed for my study, or who themselves could connect me to others who would be appropriate. Once I had an initial list of known participants, I sought to increase the number of participants in my study with exploratory purposeful sampling. Turning to individual athletic program websites, I explored their squad rosters to find international soccer student-athletes that were either sophomores or freshmen during the 2018 NCAA Division I men's soccer season. I then reached out to these prospective participants via social media to invite them to participate in my study.

Once I had gathered my prospective list of participants, I began conducting in-depth interviews. In adherence to IRB protocol, I sent each of the participants an informed consent document in which their acknowledgement of receiving and reading the document provided their personal consent to participate in my study. Of the 17 interviews I gathered, two were conducted in-person, eight were conducted via telephone conversation, and seven were conducted via video conference. With the spatial disparity of my participants, it was impossible to conduct all interviews in a face-to-face in-person setting. Using the two other methods to conduct the in-depth interviews allowed me to attain the wider demographic of individuals that I sought to acquire going into my study. The length of interviews varied from 29 minutes to 58 minutes, with an average time of 40 minutes of interview procedure.

All of the interviews were audio-recorded for the purpose of transcription. Transcription was an essential component of my research process. According to Davidson (2009) transcription is understood to reflect theory and to help shape it, as researchers reflexively document and then reaffirm their theoretical positions. Prior to the interview process, my previous research and self-understanding of the phenomena led me to design a discussion guide that would provide a template for the interviews. This predesigned discussion guide was a guiding hand on which I could refer to, and also able to deviate from depending on the responses of my participants. I wanted to make the interview process as conversational as possible, while acknowledging that my purpose is to extract information from the participants in the most professional manner (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Heeding Kvale and Brinkman's (2009) advice, I acknowledged that knowledge is produced socially in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, and the production of this data goes beyond a mechanical following of strict guidelines and rests on the researcher's skills and personal judgement in the posing of questions. The semi-structured style of the interview process allowed me to gain a better understanding of the participants' experience during the recruitment process, as well as aid in the reduction of the power relationship between the researcher and the participant. Semi-structured interviewing allows the researcher to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Using the semi-structured interview method allows researchers to try to fit their pre-defined interests into the unfolding topics being discussed, rather than forcing the interviewees to fit their ideas into the interviewer's pre-defined question order

(Gibson & Brown, 2009). This gave me an insightful look into their own perspectives and helped monitor whether or not the predesigned discussion guide was appropriate throughout the interview process based on the responses of the participants I received. The participants' responses during this process did discernably alter my line of questioning as I discovered recurring themes via the constant comparative process during my data analysis. This changing of interview questioning led me to compile a list of member checks with three of my participants in order to follow up on several thematic concepts that I gathered from other participants during the interview process. Member checks are conducted when data, interpretations, analytic categories and conclusions are tested with participants from whom the data was originally collected, offering the researcher a crucial technique in establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Applying member checks towards my study aided in concretizing many of the thematic concepts that I extracted through my data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began at the transcription phase. Gibson and Brown (2009) state, "Transcription is not just undertaken in order to serve as a guide to data; it is also a way of analytically working through some problem or other in relation to data" (p. 111). Constantly looking for themes, concepts, motifs and key information was imperative during my transcription. Reflexively looking back upon my research, the phase of transcription was one of the most important stages in my study. It offered an initial structured platform on which I could better understand the perspectives of my participants through written text. It was a cathartic exercise in which my experience of

the situation was emphasized through a consistent analysis of their interviews enabling

me to continually learn, revise, and concretize ideas that formed throughout the entirety

of the research process. However, it was important that the data analysis procedure did

not just rely upon the transcriptions as the sole source of analyzing the data given via the

interview process. With three separate forms of interview communication – in-person, via

telephone, and via video conference – it was essential to conduct *memoing* during the

process. Memoing occurs initially at the substantive coding level and proceeds to higher

levels of conceptual abstraction as coding proceeds to theoretical saturation (Holton,

2007). Using a consistent level of memoing, noting non-verbal cues in the in-person and

video conferencing interviews, and noting any inflections or variations of tone,

excitement or negativity in all interviews was an important component of my interview

process and led to a better analysis of the data.

During the collection of my data in the interview process, I conducted a constant

comparison of my findings. As an incident is noted, it should be compared against other

incidents for similarities and differences, resulting in greater precision, consistency and

reduction of bias (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Using the constant comparative method aided

in extracting and discerning themes from one set of data to the other, building the

foundations of my thematic concepts from the very beginning of the interview process. It

also allowed me to disseminate new lines of questioning when new motifs and themes

were emerging. I employed open coding during the interview process, identifying

recurring themes between interviewees and coding the data for its major categories of

information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Upon collecting the remainder of the data, the

member checks served as a consolidation and reiteration of my findings with three earlier

participants. I conducted two member checks for additional information on themes that

had occurred in later stages of my research process, while the third member check was to

serve as a validation of representation (Thomas, 2017) to make sure that my

interpretation of their perspective was accurate.

During the coding process of data analysis, I utilized values coding and emotional

coding methodologies (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Value coding incorporates three facets

of an individual's value system: values, attitudes, and beliefs. Saldaña and Omasta (2018)

state that values coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly

for those that explore cultural values, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant

experiences and actions. This coding helped evaluate how the participants perceived

values, attitudes or beliefs during the recruitment process impacted their decision-

making. I also employed *emotion coding*, in which the researcher labels the emotional

states experienced or recalled by the participants or inferred by the researcher about the

participant. I conducted emotion coding not only in the written transcript, but upon my

memoing notes of any non-verbal sentiments during the live interview process. Saldaña

and Omasta (2018) state that emotion coding is used widely for those exploring

interpersonal and intrapersonal participant experiences and actions, especially in matters

of social relationships, reasoning, decision-making, risk-taking, and judgement.

Upon the completion of the transcription, coding and constant comparative

portions of data analysis, I conducted a *thematic analysis* of my data to construct

conceptual thematic categories in which to solidify the data into a comprehensive and

32

understandable finding. According to Gibson and Brown (2018) there are three stages of thematic analysis: examining commonality, examining differences, and examining relationships. Finding commonalities within the experiences and perceptions of the participants is essential in formulating the concept of the shared phenomenon on which my study is based. Discovering differences derives the individuality of the participants in their everyday experiences of being recruited to a NCAA Division I institution, aiming to find irregularities and peculiarities in the data. Finally, examining the relationships between the various elements of the data should be constructed and categorized by how they associate with one another. Thematic analysis has its critiques in phenomenology because of the generalization of an individual's experience. However, I sought to maintain my participants' personal perspectives, using the themes derived from the data as a useful device for narrative construction (Gibson & Brown, 2018).

As one who has a direct emotional, physical, and immediate connection to my research study I conducted, I sought to acknowledge how my positioning as a researcher functioned in multiple worlds. With an inherent association to the cultural world of the participants, and my own perspective as a researcher, it was essential that I recognized my positionality within my research (Fusch et al., 2015). The imperative for this study was the perspective and meanings of the experience of the individual participants, yet it was important to understand my own perceptions without clouding the views of the participants.

CHAPTER THREE
RESULTS

The whole experience improved me as a person. It was like a new beginning where I

finally could understand myself as not just a player, but as a person too. I'd faced some

dark and low places but being told that you were wanted… you were needed, it was a life

changing moment.

- Mario

My overarching research question was: What is the essence of the experience of

male international soccer student-athletes when being recruited to play NCAA DI soccer?

The findings of my study, including the answers to my research question, indicate that the

essence of the experience is a hopeful yet anxious orientation to a new reality, punctuated

with a constant desire for social acceptance and belonging.

The research question for my study was: How does communication received

during the recruitment phase affect participants at the individual level, as well as their

decision-making to commit to a NCAA Division I program?

After sifting through transcripts of interviews, conducting member checks with

individual participants, and comparing data sets to one another, I extracted five recurring

themes that were shared through multiple participants. The five themes were; 1) *Social*

Acceptance: the perception of the participant in relation to the new social construction

they would be entering; 2) *Sense of Belonging*: the perception of the participant in the

sense of involvement; 3) *Acceptance vs. Rejection*: the juxtaposition of the experience

between the two realities that the participant's experienced; 4) *The Incognizant Reality*:

the lack of clarity, communication and information on the social environment that the

participants would be entering into; and 5) *Increase of Self-Awareness*: the participants' experience of heightened cognitive self-awareness. These findings serve to advance knowledge in sports communication and international acculturation research, and also aid in the understanding of the recruitment phases for international soccer student-athletes.

Social Acceptance

Coming to a new country was scary. I was leaving everything that I'd known behind me; family and friends, my best friends that I don't know I would see again. This was the scary part. It took talking to the coaching staff and players on the team to help me decide that I was going to be okay. I wanted to fit in and be a part of a team, that was something important to me and (I) needed to be sure it was right.

- Miguel

Social acceptance is when other people send communicative signals that they wish for you to be included in their groups and relationships (De Wall & Bushman, 2011). It is a fundamental human need that is active in most contexts regardless of conscious awareness (Chen, 2017). Social acceptance occurs on a continuous spectrum ranging from the initial toleration of another's presence, to forming a deep emotional and physical relationship with another (De Wall & Bushman, 2011). At the individual level, social acceptance hinges on holding successful relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Chen (2017) states that individuals have two stages in relationship forming of social acceptance; the first is to impress, the second is to maintain. The participants in my study seek social acceptance in the first stage of relationship building, the impress

35

stage. When communicating with strangers, individuals are more likely to engage in self-enhancement to impress others (Chen, 2017).

To be socially accepted into a spatial environment where one resides, works, socializes and spends the majority of their time is an apparent need as a human. We are all social beings and thrive in our socially-constructed paradigm. It is a longing to be part of an in-group, society, team, or relationship that motivates humans as socializing entities. The research I conducted in this study highlights that social acceptance is a significant influence on the decision-making process during the recruitment phases of joining an American collegiate institution for male international soccer student-athletes. The majority of the participants in the study referred to being included into an environment where they would feel comfortable being themselves and being able to express themselves without fear of discrimination, subjection to judgement, and weariness of isolation as a significant element. Miguel stated that his worries about not having his friends around him, and the interpretation of forging new relationships were lessened by the interactions with the coaching staff and current players at the time of his recruitment:

> I was helped by other players. They reached out to me on Facebook and
>
> Instagram and told me what it was like. I think that helped me. It wasn't even a lot
>
> (messages) but just them speaking to me helped me.

This interaction with the current players of the college soccer team to which the participants were being recruited to appears to be a well-established technique that many of the participants' athletic programs seemed to have implemented. At least 14 of the 17

participants referenced speaking with a member of the current team during the recruitment process. Their interactions with current players varied from simple text messages or speaking face-to-face on a visit to the recruiting collegiate institution. It is not discernable or empirically measurable how important this interaction with the current players of the team is, yet it is apparent from my study that it is certainly an influencing factor.

Only three of my participants that I spoke with visited the institution to which they ended up being recruited to. All three, however, spoke of how being around the current players helped in their decision-making. James stated how the physical presence of being on campus and around the athletic program and players gave him confidence that he was making the right decision:

I knew once I walked on campus, I was making the right choice. I had been in contact with a couple of schools, but the visit made my mind up straight away.

In response I prompted him to elaborate on how the visit was different than the communication he had experienced with other prospective institutions he was communicating with:

It made everything so much clearer. It's hard to get an idea of what it is all about from pictures and videos you know? I got a better experience going to campus, seeing the facilities and speaking properly to the coaches and players on the team. I spent two days there and that was long enough for me to make my mind up and commit to the school. The lads were great around me too, like, there was a few English lads who told me it was a great place to be, the team was going to be

37

good, and the lifestyle was so much better than being at home! I had spoken to

one of them before I went out there, and he said pretty much the same stuff, but it

was better in person definitely… I guess I already felt like one of the lads,

everyone was nice to me and the guys I spoke to seemed to like me straight away.

I think that helped too. Looking back, I know it did actually.

Having the opportunity to visit campuses, meet with coaching staff in-person, and

experience the team culture and environment is something that not all international soccer

student-athletes have the opportunity to do. The 14 participants in the study who did not

get the chance to visit any institutions before they signed their commitment to the schools

had mixed reactions on whether or not going on a visit would have influenced their

decision-making in the recruitment process. Daniel and Ibrahim, both individuals coming

from traditionally economically-developing countries, stated how they were just happy to

be given the opportunity to come out to study in America. However, Ibrahim said how he

had not been in contact with any of the current players on the athletic program that

recruited him:

No, I did not speak with any (of the) players. I was nervous when coming here

because it was a new country, I was leaving friends, and I wasn't sure what

America would be like. I expected it to be different, the people to be different.

When I asked Ibrahim if speaking to a current player would have been beneficial in the

decision-making process, he affirmed:

Yes, yes, it would have been good. I wanted to make friends and did not know if

that was going to happen. If someone would have spoke to me, I think it would

have helped me.

The need for a social interaction with the in-group is a characteristic that the majority of

the participants referenced. The participants who communicated with current members of

the soccer program to which they were recruited to appeared to experience a rise in self-

worth. This increase in self-worth ties into Stets and Burke's (2000) research on identity

theory and social identity theory in which, "The increase in self-worth that accompanies a

group-based identity, however, may come not simply from the act of identifying with the

group, but from the group's acceptance of the individual as a member" (p. 233).

Although much of the interaction between the participants in the study and those current

members of the team who communicated to them is often done through computer

mediated communication (CMC), the implications of such messaging can have

immediate impacts on the social identification of the participants in the recruitment

phase.

To be part of any sporting team is to hold a membership to that team and the other

individuals that comprise the makeup and dynamics of the team. Not all of my

participants expected to have a smooth transition into the teams for which they were

being recruited. Sergio had a period of isolation during the recruitment phase in which he

rarely spoke to the coaching staff and did not communicate with any of the individuals on

the team:

I had spoken with the coaches the most, but not all that much. I don't think they

knew I was serious about coming, I think they saw that I was here (in his

domestic country) and I was happy to be here, it took (a) long time before they

spoke to me a lot. I spoke with one professor, but not for long and I didn't speak

to any of the players at all.

After hearing how little communication he had received from the institution, I asked him

how this impacted his decision-making process, and he responded:

I guess it didn't stop me going. Yeah… (pause) I think that I would have decided

earlier if I had known, but I didn't know! Speaking with the players could have

helped. I know them all now and have many friends here, and if they had spoke(n)

to me before, (during) recruiting, I think I would have been in a better place to go.

Sergio's experience of communication with the institution was at the lower end of the

spectrum, which is why his perception of social acceptance was lower, and therefore the

feelings of isolation that he experienced were more intense than other participants during

the recruitment stages.

<u>Sense of Belonging</u>

I remember having a smile on my face all the time, I already felt like it was a home and I

hadn't even been there. I just couldn't wait to get started and become one of the team. I

remember feeling a part of something, a feeling I hadn't had for a long time back home.

-   Kasper

Belonging arises from the practical matter of physical involvement in our spatial

environment and of being present in the world, alongside the embodied nature of our

40

dispositions and the necessity of their territorial location (Tomaney, 2015). The perceived sense of belonging that the male international soccer student-athletes convey is a key characteristic of their experience when being recruited. Belonginess appears to have multiple and strong effects on emotional patterns and on cognitive processes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The perceived sense of belonging ties in with social acceptance, although it is a much more individualistic, psychological process of being at ease with oneself in the world. As an individual who has dealt with self-doubt on belonging and feeling at home in the spatial environment within which I reside, it was a cognitive process of a cathartic nature to hear the perspectives of those participants who have experienced a similar unknowingness in the world. Shinji experienced his own self-doubt and fell into a chasm of cultural isolation. His reference to being in a levitated state of split identity impacted his recruitment experience and made it a difficult time period in his life. This split identity was between being culturally and socially sound in his domestic environment. The sense of belonging that he had in that environment was cultured over his whole lifetime and understandably a difficult one to detract from for a new life of unknowing and possible cultural and social isolation. Shinji was not the only individual who experienced a similar state of limbo between the two social worlds that they occupied. Mats found it difficult to make the commitment to join an American collegiate institution:

It was a difficult time for me, I knew from other people I had spoken to that it was a good choice and career for me, I just didn't know at the time. I am glad I did it

now, but I remember feeling down at times and worried. I didn't want to leave my

family, but I am happy now, so it is okay.

Mats' sense of belonging to his family made it difficult to part ways from his domestic

country, and the spatial environment within which he had grown up. Removing oneself

from one socially-constructed situation, which has been everything that the participants in

the study have known and accept as their reality, to another socially-constructed

environment that is completely alien to them is a difficult scenario for many to

cognitively process. However, the perceived sense of belonging to the place that they

would call home was something that convinced them to make that leap of faith. The

perception of being part of a team structure gave an element of social support that the

participants referenced as being an essential element in their decision-making process.

Michael stated as much:

> My brother had come out here almost three years ago, so it was an easy transition
>
> for me. I knew that I would have a strong network of people, coaches, fans,
>
> players (pause) all of that stuff really that made it so much simpler and easier for
>
> me to take when being recruited.

When prompted to explain how the sense of belonging impacted his decision, Michael

said:

> It definitely did. I think it would be the not-knowing that is the hardest thing to
>
> deal with. I visited the school before I got there which helped, and having my
>
> brother talk me through what it was going to be like on a day-to-day basis
>
> massively made it easier for me, and my parents too. I remember feeling like, I

just can't wait to get out on this pitch and play games, meet new people, and be in

that college environment you know? It was easy.

For many, the prospect of moving to America and the westernized culture that

embodies its everyday society can be a supreme culture shock. The socio-psychological

and academic adjustment of international students may not be easy, as they try to adapt to

differences in cultural and academic environment between them and the country that they

are studying in (Lashari et al., 2018). The perception of the male international soccer

student-athletes when contemplating the choice to join an American collegiate institution

coincides with Lashari et al. (2018) findings. Many of the participants I studied carried

reservations on the prospect of joining American society; whether it was religious,

perceived discrimination because of race, prejudice, or simply a detachment from their

domestic upbringing. For example, Gylfi, who hails from a small Northern European

country, stated how he was unsure during the recruitment stages whether he would

belong:

> I was nervous to be honest. I think coming from a smaller country to one the size
>
> of America I was just unsure on what it was going to be like. I was anxiety
>
> (anxious) towards the idea of living so far from home and being in this new place
>
> where I don't know if I would fit in… I think I was a mixture of nerves and
>
> excitement when I first heard that they were offering me an athletic scholarship. I
>
> really wanted to go, but I decide to join late in the (pauses to ask word choice)
>
> recruitment process. It took me talking to my family, and I eventually decided to

go. I spent a lot of time thinking about it though, because I was not sure if I would

fit in.

Although Gylfi came from a modern westernized European country, the hesitation that he

suggested he had was shared with other participants who originated from more perceived

westernized countries. However, there was no consolidating evidence from the interviews

that the participants' experience and perception of the lifestyle and culture that they

would be immersed into had any relation to their domestic country. My own perceptions

in this paradigm of interest in my study led me to hypothesize that the participants from

the more traditionally westernized European countries would have less trepidation and

fewer reservations about the culture, society and lifestyle they would be experiencing

upon moving to an American collegiate institution. I perceived that it would be the

individuals whose traditional culture is more diverse and alternate from the westernized

culture that America embodies would have more difficulty in their perception of

belonging. My own viewpoint was not validated in my study, which instead indicated a

tendency for the majority of male international soccer student-athletes from all types of

home countries to hold reservations regarding their perception of belonging when joining

an American collegiate institution.

An influencing factor that is often cited in previous literature on international

students and international student-athletes is the amount of social support offered at the

university or educational institution. Perceived social support refers to the impact that

networks have on the individual (Procidano & Heller, 1983). As referenced in the

literature review, social support can be a key characteristic of American collegiate

44

institutions' ability to aid in the assimilation and acculturation processes for their international student-athletes. The perception of the participants about the social support that they expect to receive, is pivotal in their decision-making process to join an American collegiate institution. My research has discovered that the social support networks that are offered to the individuals during the recruitment phase are often the most influential contributors in gaining their participant's agreement to join an institution. Mario stated how important having a structure where he could be successful on and off the field was to him:

> My main reason for joining the school I did was mainly football (soccer), but I wanted to get a degree, and in my home country I didn't get that opportunity. English is not my first language so I knew it would be hard to get used to school here. The coach and the teachers I spoke to when I was recruited told me that I would get the help I needed to be successful in school too.

Of the 17 participants in my study, only five had English as their native language. Those participants who did not speak English as a first language, or who were not fluent or confident in their abilities to converse in English, referenced how important a social support network was to them. For example, Shinji, who originates from an east Asian country found it helpful when the institution recruiting him mentioned the translation and tutors that they could offer for him. With two years of reflection under his belt, Shinji can now fully appreciate how important this was in his acculturation to his new environment, and how it benefitted him in his sense of belonging:

For academics, I was worried I would not catch up or understand. That was a big

thing for me in my decision to join, because they told me I would get translation

(translator) who (could) help me.

The majority of the 12 participants whose native tongue was not English referenced the

importance of having the opportunity for tutors and other social support staff that could

aid in their transition was. Academics was, by-and-large, the greatest sub-division of this

perceived social support network that was touted and highlighted to the prospective male

international soccer student-athletes during the recruitment phase. However, it was not

the only characteristic of the social support network that was offered to the participants.

The variation of schools to which the participants in my study were recruited allowed a

greater diversity of communication and institutional messaging. Individual schools had

various methods of highlighting their attributes towards prospective male international

soccer student-athletes. These attributes included academic facilities, athletic facilities

and others that are referenced in my literature review on motivational factors. An often-

overlooked social support network is that of the familial element of team membership,

something many of the participants noted as being influential in their decision-making

process. Andre, Michael and Kasper all told me that during their recruitment phase,

players and coaches alluded to the family support network that they would belong to.

Michael stated:

I guess with Joe (his brother) already out here he let me know that I would spend

a lot of time with the other lads' families. He told me that it was like being at

home away from home if you understand me. I remember during my recruitment

the head coach was very open and honest, telling me about his family and his kids even came on FaceTime during one of our conversations… Yes, I think that it made the whole situation more comfortable for me and my parents, knowing that I would be getting taken care of, not just by the school or soccer team, but by other people's families too.

Andre told me that he had several friends who had joined different American collegiate institutions in previous years. His account of their experience coincided with what Michael said, in so much that there was a sense of security and belonginess that would be waiting for him at his prospective location. He stated:

Yeah, I have friends that also play for college teams; they are at different levels, but they told me that players families love to have international players stay at their homes. With me being away from my own home, this was nice to hear and made it easier for me in deciding to come to America.

The third individual who spoke of the familial element of the perceived social support network was Kasper. Kasper derives from a large Scandinavian, family and the perception of having a similar familial association and relationships were important for him in his decision to move to America for college:

I became close with one of the boys on the team and we spoke a lot on Facebook. It was through that I learned so much about the college, the coaches, the program, the rest of the team, all of those things helped. But he spoke a lot about his family and how I would be welcomed to his home. His family welcomed a lot of players to their home and it seemed a good environment and atmosphere.

After he spoke at length of his immediate family back in his home country, I asked Kasper if his family had an outside influence on his decision, specifically regarding the perceived familial social support network that he would receive when he moved to America. Although it was not a major influencing motivational factor, he did tell me that he considered it when making his decision. However, it was hard to discern from him whether it was the familial social support network offered, or simply his direct communication with the current team member.

The perception of having a social support network when entering their new environment was a main motivational factor for the majority of the participants. The perceived social support transitioned into their overall sense of belonging and feeling part of a social construct.

<p align="center">Acceptance vs. Rejection</p>

I had come from a place where I was no longer wanted, it was so tough for me to bring myself out from that hole. It felt as if everyone had given up on me, and I think I had given up on myself. I loved the game and wanted to play so it hurt when I was told I wasn't good enough for them… I had this opportunity in America and for once I remembered how it felt to be wanted. I had teams all over asking for me to speak with them, and I remember being happy and myself again.

- Fraser

To best understand the paradigm of acceptance vs. rejection in a sporting setting, it is important to note the realities of the participants' world. As mentioned previously in the literature review, the social construct of sporting organizations is a social sphere

within itself. Sporting teams and team social identity can be viewed as an in-group where individuals attach themselves to the in-group, associating their own identity, morals, ethics and behavior towards the greater social structure of that group, often in fear of isolation from said group. Understanding these team's structures as social in-groups, can mean that social exclusion from them can result in a heightened sense of anxiety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

One element of my interviewing process that resonated strongly with me was the participants' most memorable moment in the recruitment process. It was a question that I never strayed away from, as I believed it evoked the most emotional and powerful responses from the individuals. Interestingly, an overwhelming percentage of the participants stated that it was the direct communication from the coaching staff (predominantly the head coach) stating that they wanted to offer the participants a spot on the team. Of the 17 participants studied, 12 of them stated that this was the most memorable moment. The juxtaposition and role reversal of emotions that was prompted by the head coach signaling and communicating direct interest into the individual is something that cannot be overlooked. That cognitive mental and emotional transition from not having a path, being rejected from previous universities or sporting teams, and the unknowing reality of "what next?", to a fervent and steadfast interest and commitment from an individual representing an institution was a huge motivational factor for many of these male international soccer student-athletes. Javi, who faced constant rejection and was consistently told he would not be successful at the sport he loved, declared how important this moment was in his recruitment process:

The biggest moment for sure. I mean, I had been told I was not good enough so many times I looked else(where) for places to go to, but not successful. I was upset, my family upset, it was (a) hard moment for me. The coach spoke to (my) papa and he told me to speak (to) him on the phone. He said we like you; we want you to be our new number nine. It was (an) amazing feeling. I think I almost cried! My papa was happy but had tears. I was just happy to be in that moment then.

The participants during my in-depth interviews became more vulnerable once the question of their most memorable moment was proposed to them. Memorable moments appear to be a critical stage in the decision-making process for these male international student-athletes. For the number who referred to the coach's communication about their acceptance into the team as their most memorable and defining moment of the recruitment process, this encapsulated and hastened the decision-making process for the prospective recruit to commit to the institution seeking their talents. Manuel told me that once the coach from the school he was most interested in joining contacted him directly, his mind was made up:

It was an easy decision after the coach called me. I had already said I wanted to join this school, and the team was good, and I knew of some players that played there. I remember he called me saying to come to play. I didn't need to say anything else; I think I got the next plane out! The only problem was my family and leaving them behind. But I know they want me to enjoy football and my

mother said staying in school was important. For me though, it was all about

playing on this team. I was just so happy he called me I remember.

Coaches' direct communication with the players appears to be a pivotal moment in the

recruitment process for these young student-athletes. For many, it appeared that the coach

was the lifeline for them to continue doing something they loved doing, and this suggests

that this immediacy of relationship between coach and recruit is a catalyzing element of

the recruitment process. My prior knowledge of the collegiate soccer recruitment

strategies suggests that there is no strict guideline that coaches follow. It is impulsive and

often done with many varied techniques and levels of commitment on a coach-to-coach

basis. Many head coaches are standoffish and allow the reputation of the program or their

assistant coaches to conduct recruiting strategies.

Facing a similar scenario to Javi, James faced a difficult period of time before his

recruitment to an American collegiate institution. James was one of the 12 participants

whose memorable moment was the head coach reaching out and committing to having

him on the team. He stated how having been in such a low point of his life, facing

rejection from the club he had played at from a young age, it was an immensely

refreshing and liberating experience to be told that you are wanted once again:

It was like a weigh off my shoulders. I honestly didn't know too much about the

whole American college soccer life and going to school I knew was going to be a

challenge for me. But I really didn't care. I had been told that the club I had

grown up with wasn't interested in keeping me anymore, which hit me hard now

looking back. I had made loads of good mates there and to watch them go on

without me was hard. I think that's why I was so happy to speak to the coach and

it was nice to hear him be so… (pause)… complimentary, I guess, of me. He kept

on saying how much he wanted me, and that I could help the program win

championships.

When asked if there was a significant moment that made him choose the university that

he did, James stated:

It was feeling wanted again. I had a couple of offers from different schools, but no

one was really keen on me all that much. Coach Stevens was really into me as a

player and said that I would be challenging for a starting spot even as a freshman.

For a considerable amount of male international soccer student-athletes, their domestic

upbringing is immersed in the world of soccer. A large majority of my participants stated

how they had aspirations and dreams of becoming a professional soccer player upon

graduation from college. This dream of a professional career in the beautiful game

became a motivational factor in itself, with the collegiate soccer system offering a route

to Major League Soccer (MLS), United Soccer League (USL), and other professional

leagues operating within the U.S. At the end of each collegiate season there is the MLS

Draft, during which professional soccer clubs select college players for their respective

organizations and offer them a professional contract. This is a pipe-dream for many, yet

the attractiveness of this option is that most college soccer players will end their four

years with either a professional contract, or a degree that will aid them in gaining a good

job. Thirteen of my participants told me how they played at an elite level of soccer in

their domestic countries and for many it was there dream to continue playing for those

domestic clubs. Unfortunately for them, their careers with those elite clubs were abruptly

shortened, with reasons varying from injury, change in management, or simply they did

not make the grade in talent.

<div align="center">The Incognizant Reality</div>

I had no idea what I was getting into if I'm honest. I'd played back home and wanted to

carry on playing football. There wasn't much opportunity for me, and I knew someone

who had been out here and said I should look into it… I sent my highlight video off, got

an email from the coach and that was that. I didn't know the school, the city, or anything

about the team, I just wanted to keep playing.

- Luke

The recruitment experience that many of the male international soccer student-

athletes I interviewed had was one of unknowing exploration. Their decisions to travel

the world to a new country that they would call home for the next four years needs no

exaggeration of significance towards an immensely life-changing situation. The decision-

making process is a long, arduous and complex maze of difficult twists and turns,

eventually leading those individuals towards their destination. There is an immense

amount of sacrifice – family, friends, relationships, romance, familiarity – that all comes

under pressure when considering a move overseas for university. For many, their choices

are thrust upon them from outside pressures and temporal deadlines that hasten the

decision-making process. My study has discovered that for many male international

soccer student-athletes, their journey and commitment to an American collegiate

institution is followed blindly, without a cognizance and knowledge of the situation to which they will be arriving.

For those participants who did not experience any visits to their prospective colleges and athletic programs, the information that they received from those institutions had to be transferred through other communicative channels. The 14 participants who did not go on visits were of the most interest in this section of my study. Understanding what informational communication and institutional messaging they received that influenced their decision-making during the recruitment process was of paramount importance. In my own experience, the level of communication from American collegiate institutions varied and there was little to no cohesion or comprehensive messaging that they distributed during my own recruitment. Cognitively, this made my decision-making process hazy and at times incomprehensible. The institutions that had a stratagem for savvy communicative persuasive techniques were the most effective at getting my attention. This sentiment and experience were echoed through the words of my participants. For many, the messages received from coaches, players, professors, staff, recruiters and others were simply not ample enough for a clear picture and representation of the reality. The experience of the participants was thus riddled with opaque communication, an ignorance to the social world that they were being recruited into, and an inconsistent amount of mixed messages coming from multiple institutions.

The strategies of recruitment communication coming from different institutions towards prospective male international soccer student-athletes was varied and diverse. What sparked my interest in this matter was whether the recruitment for these specific

players utilized a wide-range of information dissemination; whether or not institutions themselves tailor messages towards certain demographics of potential recruits; and most importantly, whether or not the extensive diversity of my participants' geographical, cultural, religious, social and educational backgrounds impact their experience in this crucial stage of the recruitment process. The main source of information from which the participants received their communication from the institution was the soccer coaching staff. When prompted what was the specific process of the university contacting them, 12 of the 17 stated that their first contact was a member of the coaching staff. Five of the participants went through a soccer agency. This was something that as a researcher I did not foresee during the initial stages of my study. Prior research on soccer agencies that act as an intermediary during the recruitment process for collegiate soccer is largely undocumented. With college soccer becoming popular and the participation levels of male international soccer student-athletes continuously on the rise (NCAA, 2018), the increase in numbers of international collegiate soccer recruiting agencies has also developed.

These soccer agencies act as the buffer, communicator and distributor of many messages from both the athletes themselves, and the coaches who are looking to recruit internationally. There are several dozen for-profit agencies operating in countries around the world to facilitate potential scholarships for collegiate players (Kirk & Weaver, 2018). Although not all soccer specific, Kirk and Weaver (2018) discovered that there are 68 separate companies advertising recruiting services for international student-athletes seeking U.S. college athletic scholarships. The majority of these agencies are located in

the United Kingdom, but many advertise from all around the world. The rise of soccer as a serious sport in the U.S. and the development of soccer at the collegiate level has vastly changed in the last two decades. Kirk and Weaver (2018) identified that 85% of these agencies were founded since 2000.

The five individuals who acquired the services of soccer recruitment agencies appeared to have a better perception and understanding of American collegiate institutions, life as a student-athlete, and an improved sense of the whole environment they were being recruited into. Fraser used a reputable and well-established agency based in the U.K. He said that the information received from the individuals that represented the agency had a comprehensive understanding of the collegiate soccer paradigm:

> The agency actually contacted me first and had helped one of my teammates in sending out his highlights and profile to coaches, so I knew I could use them too. I think most of them charge a fee for their services but told me that I was good for their marketing and branding or something, so I got their offer for free.

I asked Fraser whether he would have decided to come to America to play college soccer had it not been for the agency:

> Honestly, I had no idea about college soccer. I knew a couple of mates that had gone out and played, but they didn't like it and came back. The lads I knew weren't that good either and they said that it was in the middle of nowhere. I think listening to them, I had an idea of soccer in America and it didn't sound like I would enjoy it. So, for the agency to contact me with better information about the

different divisions, the best schools to play at, the lifestyle and examples of lads

who had turned professional out there, changed my mind for sure.

Fraser, like others benefitted from the information they received from the soccer

agencies. The intermediary style of communication dissemination works on a two-way

street: The student-athletes are able to receive insights from the agencies and network to

coaches, while the coaches are able to receive information about the student-athletes from

the agencies. James also utilized the same agency that Fraser used, and had a similar

experience in his recruitment process:

> I went through a soccer recruitment agency, they helped put together game
>
> footage of me and distribute my highlight tape to loads of schools throughout
>
> America… I don't think that I would be playing at this level if it wasn't for them,
>
> I had not considered moving to America to play college soccer until I spoke to a
>
> guy called Paul who works for the company. He had played college soccer and
>
> told me everything that he had experienced. I think listening to what he had said,
>
> and all of the information and videos they gave me convinced me that it was a
>
> worthwhile thing to look into.

I proposed a similar question to James, asking whether or not he would have contacted

the institutions, coaches or collegiate recruiters if the soccer agency had not helped in the

process:

> I'm not sure I would have ever reached that stage. It was never really on my radar
>
> to be honest; I didn't have a clue about college, America, or any of that. I didn't
>
> even know if I wanted to stay in school.

James and Fraser played for the same football club together, so there was a natural pipeline through which the soccer agency could help like-minded prospective recruits, convincing them to at least consider the option of a collegiate soccer career. My study has highlighted how the five individuals who went through international soccer recruitment agencies profited from the messaging and information that they received. However, the other 12 participants' recruitment experience was largely an unknowing and unaware step into another reality.

It appears that most of the participants' knowledge of college soccer prior and during the initial phases of the recruitment process was limited. The majority of the participants I spoke to referenced how their initial discovery of American collegiate soccer was via word-of-mouth. The source of the initial information varied from family members, domestic coaches they had worked with, and friends who had experienced a similar process. None of the participants in my study stated that a collegiate men's soccer coach was the first stage of understanding about American collegiate soccer. Manuel originates from Costa Rica and decided to look into college soccer upon recommendation from one of his high school soccer coaches. Manuel stated that his coach informed him that it was an option he should consider:

> He told me that it would give me the chance to play football and get a degree that would help me get a good job if I couldn't play professionally. You can't do that in Costa Rica. You play football or you go to school. You don't do both… I knew about America and college sports (pause) not all (that) much, but enough. I didn't

know that I would be able to play in America though. I didn't know about the

school side and thought I would not be good (pause) smart enough for it.

Manuel's experience was consistent with many of the other participants in my study. That

initial contact and description was often the small catalyst that sparked their interest in

pursuing a collegiate soccer career. The next stage of their recruitment experience was

their direct interaction and communication with the coaching staff who sought to recruit

them to their collegiate soccer program. My study highlights the lack of coherent

awareness, disclosure and clarity that coaches, institutions and athletic programs portray

in their pursuit of prospective international soccer student-athletes. I discovered an

incomprehensive array of mixed messages disseminated to the athletes about what they

would be experiencing for the next four years of their life.

Speaking in-depth with the participants, I gained insights into how they felt that

coaches and athletic programs marketed themselves in a way that did not always reflect

the needs and requirements of the individual. Instead of seeking questions from the

prospective recruit, coaches and recruiters often inundated them with a barrage of

information that they believed would sell their program and collegiate institution. My

findings show that the participants in my study would have benefited from a greater

process of individualistic attention, rather than a wholistic tactic of marketed recruitment.

The participants stated that they often felt no more knowledgeable about the collegiate

soccer world after their initial communication with coaches. Mats mentioned how some

coaches appeared disinterested and would not answer inquiries that he had about

collegiate soccer, academics, lifestyle and other personal interests he had:

I was let down by some schools. I had four or five schools I was speaking, but

only one really answered my questions. I didn't know enough about America and

college, so I needed someone to tell me before I went.

Mats stated that the school he ended up attending was the best at disseminating the

information that he requested. This led him to feel more comfortable during the

recruitment process and lending a clearer picture of what he could expect when arriving

at his destination.

<center>Increase of Self-Awareness</center>

It was the biggest decision of my life. Moving to a new country is a huge undertaking and

the decision to move changed me as a person. I became more independent from my

family and grew up in a very short space of time… Looking back just over a year ago I

can see now how much that influenced how I am at this moment, and I'm excited to see

what the future has in store for me.

- Michael

During my interview process, I felt a profound sense of inner pride bursting with

an effervescent buzz from the participants. They had made it. The long arduous process

of getting a visa, applying for college, committing to an athletic program, passing

entrance exams, all appear worth it as they portrayed a collective aura of supreme

dedication and self-sacrifice. Each have their own story to tell, yet all share a certain

history that seems to unite them all unbeknownst to them. The journey each individual

has taken is unique in its own right, but the destination seemingly the same: They are

American collegiate soccer players. Their experience in getting there has helped shape

<center>60</center>

their current situation, molded their identity, forged a vision for their future and created a new reality in which they are fully immersed. The beauty and sheer pleasure of conducting this phenomenological study has been to evaluate their experiences and the immense self-worth that they have gained from the process.

An overwhelming majority of the participants in this study alluded to the growth in their self-awareness of who they are, and their place in the world. This ultimately was the process of saying "yes" in the recruitment stages and making that leap of faith to structure a new life in America. Fraser had spent all of his life being looked after by his mother. Although he stated how the familial bond was strong and their relationship superb, he longed for a break into independence:

> I feel like something changed when I decided to go. I had been living at home for 18 years and finally I knew I was going to be living alone and away from my family… Yeah, it was almost like a switch where I knew I had to look after myself, and start being basically an adult, I guess.

The cognitive process of decision-making usually incorporates an element of risk and expectancy. The traditional mathematical notion for dealing with risky decisions is the that choices should be made to maximize expected value (Edwards, 1954). The process of making these decisions appears to impact the psychological self-awareness of the participants. They became more confident in their decision-making abilities and indicated that they matured because of it. However, their decision-making process during the recruitment phase was somewhat forced upon them; they had to make an assessment and decision on whether or not they were going to commit to the prospective American

collegiate institution. Individuals become part of the social group in a number of ways: choice, peer pressure and subliminal seduction; but always through a sequence of decisions, either conscious or not (Grigolini & West, 2011).

Self-awareness is a concept that encapsulates the process that each of the individuals in the study cognitively undergo during the recruitment phase. Fenigstein et al. (1975) determine:

> Self-awareness is a central concept in several divergent approaches to behavior and life. In psychoanalysis, increased awareness of the self is both a tool and a goal. Self-examination enables the person to recognize his unconscious thoughts, motives, and defenses; one result of the therapy is an increased insight, i.e., greater self-awareness.

Self-awareness can be increased when an individual is contemplating the self, focusing on one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors; or when one is making decisions and plans that involve oneself (Fenigstein et al., 1975). This is precisely the procedure that the participants in the study experience. Mario spoke of his decision-making process and how it impacted him:

> I had to grow up fast… I was always good at doing the right things – training, eating right, schoolwork – but this was different, I had to decide if I move (away) from home at a young age… It was exciting of course, but it took a lot of thinking (pause), a lot of thinking.

I furthered the line of questioning to understand if the process during his recruitment effected his self-awareness; he told me:

It was an eye-opening experience, I had a lot of big decisions to make and it made

me look at myself a lot more as a person, so yes, I think it did.

Mario was one of many individuals who I posed this question to. During my member

checks phase, I asked Luke if his decision-making process had an impact on his self-

awareness:

I became more independent definitely. It was a process where I was drifting away

from what I had known growing up and everything that was around me, but I

never felt too sad about it. I knew it was all a part of growing as a person and I

was proud of my decision and I am so happy I did it.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

<u>Introduction</u>

My results can be categorized into five themes: 1) Social Acceptance, 2) Sense of Belonging, 3) Acceptance vs Rejection, 4) The Incognizant Reality, and 5) Increase of Self-Awareness. The purpose of my study was to explore the realities that male international soccer student-athletes undergo during the recruitment phase to an American collegiate institution, how they perceive the communication being directed towards them, and how this impacts their decision-making process. Through these five thematic constructs that I extracted from the in-depth interviews with the participants, and applying the lens of social identity theory, I was able to ascertain the essence of the experience that male international soccer student-athletes undergo. The findings of my study highlight the communicative efforts of collegiate institutions, coaches, agencies and recruiters from the perspective of the prospective international student-athlete. The insight and stories of the participants delve into their expected social acculturation to a new environment and the socially-constructed reality it encompasses. The rich, textural descriptions that were gained through the in-depth interview process, offer a better understanding of the opinions and realities that the participants experienced. The responses from the participants answered my research question: How does communication received during the recruitment phase affect participants at the individual level, as well as their decision-making to commit to a NCAA Division I program?

With the findings satisfying the research question, my results reveal the importance of communicative efforts during the recruitment phase of international student-athletes, and how perceived social acceptation and integration is of paramount importance to these individuals. The subsequent discussion will examine the significance of my findings in relation to academic researchers and practitioners and provide support for my overarching research question: What is the essence of the experience of male international soccer student-athletes when being recruited to play NCAA DI soccer men's soccer?

My findings show that there is a psychological level of social acceptance and belonging that the participants aspire to ascertain when considering commitment to an American collegiate institution. This level of perceived social acceptance is primarily communicated through various communicative methods and channels conducted by the prospective collegiate institution who seeks to acquire the participant's talents. The participants' responses tell me that the more perceived social acceptance communicated, the more inclined they were to feel an emotional bond to the prospective collegiate institution. Although there are other motivational factors that appear – Popp et al. (2011) discovered that tangible influences, such as athletic scholarship awarded and degree leading to a good job – the initial socialization and identification to a prospective collegiate institution was a pivotal factor in their decision-making process during the recruitment phase. Being made to feel like they belonged to the institution, college, athletic program, and team was a recurring response from the participants.

Implications for American Collegiate Institutions

First, it is important to refer back to the literature review in order to discern what is incorporated in an American collegiate institution. It is a combination of athletic and academic communication directed toward prospective recruits. This includes the head coach, professors, assistant coaches, recruiters, and other students or student-athletes at the institution. My findings suggest that the communication disseminated by American collegiate institutions toward the participants were often incoherent, incomprehensible, or lacking the persuasive skills to successfully appeal to the participants.

The sparsity of research conducted on institutional communication towards prospective international student-athletes is evident in my literature review; however, it is worth analyzing how institutional branding as a communicative method does not hold significance for the participants in my study. Aligning with the Popp et al. (2011) study on motivational factors, my findings suggest that international student-athletes are not influenced in the recruitment stage by an institution's brand appeal or reputation. The participants did not reference feeling a stronger association with a particular institution because of the strength of that institution's brand. These findings indicate that institutions that typically rely on heavy branding in their recruitment of international student-athletes should re-evaluate their communicative stratagems in the recruitment phase.

The role of new communication technologies in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world has led to an upward trend in aggressive international recruitment from collegiate soccer coaches (Kirk & Weaver, 2018). My findings suggest that understanding the characteristics and elements of how to approach prospective

international student-athletes needs reevaluating. My study suggests that to achieve the goals of attaining the best recruits on an international stage, recruitment may need a more personal touch from the coaching staff. My results show that inundating prospective recruits with information about the athletic program and/or school does not always offer a comprehensive understanding of the new reality that they will be entering. The participants alluded to feeling incognizant about what it means to be a student-athlete in America, what their lifestyle would be like, the management of athletics and academics, and how they would acculturate into this unfamiliar socially constructed environment.

American collegiate institutions may instead turn to international soccer agencies as a successful intermediary in the process of acquiring prospective recruits. Recruiting agencies likely have an oversized and under-appreciated impact on the expanding and globalization of college soccer (Kirk & Weaver, 2018). My results show that those who used soccer agencies generally had a better understanding of the American collegiate system, they had more exposure to numerous prospective institutions, and their level of incognizance was lower than those who did not use these soccer recruiting agencies.

My findings also show that male international student-athletes require substantial reinforcement of perceived social acceptance. Being made to feel part of a team, family or social group was an essential element and an influencing motivational factor in their decision-making process. The prospective recruits undergo a cognitive process of social identity: Imagining themselves within the in-group of the socially constructed paradigm. This factor is of paramount importance and is often overlooked when discussing motivational factors for international student-athletes when joining an American

collegiate institution. My findings show that institutions that promote social acceptance through successful communicative strategies, such as, using other members of the team to invoke a sense of belonging in the prospective recruit, can have significant influence on their decision-making process.

<div align="center">Implications for Male International Soccer Student-Athletes</div>

My study allowed the participants to retell their individual experiences of being recruited to play NCAA Division I men's soccer. Several participants referenced how recalling their experience was an interesting and uplifting experience, allowing them to reflect on one of the most important decisions of their lives. The qualitative methodology implemented in my study allowed for the participants' perspectives, viewpoints, feelings and emotions to be articulated in a way in which I could extract rich, textual analysis of their experience. There are several implications for former, current and prospective male international soccer student-athletes that can be obtained from my study. Although not generalizable to the whole population, this phenomenon is a shared experience throughout the demographic, each with their own individualistic take on what is an up-surging trend in international collegiate men's soccer participation.

The participants explored their world view and orientation of the phenomenon with a temporal remembrance of their lived experience. Using underclassmen who underwent the recruitment process allowed for their memories of the experience not to be significantly impacted by loss of recollection. My study found that the participants had vivid recollections of their experiences because of the temporal immediacy to the event.

The participants' experience emphasized the need of an immediate social interaction with specific stakeholders and publics of the prospective American collegiate institution. Popp et al. (2011) found that the personality of the head coach was the second most influential factor in the decision-making process for international student-athletes; my findings agree with this conclusion. The more emotional, communicative association and relationship that develops with the coaching staff increase the self-gratification and perceived social acceptance of the prospective participant. This social interaction is essential in persuading the individual to commit to a collegiate institution. The importance placed on the development of strong social ties between a prospective recruit and the prospective collegiate institution serves as a template for future recruitment strategies. It can also inform future international student-athletes the significance of communicating and developing strong associations in the initial stages of their recruitment process.

The affinity to be accepted and belong to the in-group is a theme that resonated strongly with the participants in my study. Once the initial development of the relationship between the two involved parties (recruit and collegiate institution) is developed, the prospective recruit undergoes a process of self-categorization. In terms of social identity formation, self-categorization is an accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, and an accentuation of the perceived differences between the self and out-group members (Stets & Burke, 2000). The participants who developed communicative and social bonds with members of the in-group (current players on the team) alluded to their experience of the recruitment phase

69

being significantly satisfactory. Participants who did not communicate with current players, but experienced encouraging communication between coaches, professors and other in-group members of a prospective institution also had a positive recruitment experience. However, the participants who had little communication with any in-group members experienced high levels of incognizance and found it difficult to formulate a social identity with the in-group they would be entering. The participants who experienced lesser communication with prospective collegiate institutions found it harder to orientate towards their new reality. The increase of self-awareness seemed less for those who had less interaction and communication; instead they maintained a closer affinity to their domestic environment and current reality.

Limitations

During late spring of 2014, I ventured across the Atlantic Ocean on a mission to find my new home for the next four years. It would take me to five different schools, across four different states, travelling from East Coast to West Coast, all in an 11-day period. My experience was my own. This study offered a fresh new perspective on the experiences of others who all had different journeys, but ultimately ended up in the same destination: Becoming an NCAA DI soccer player. The experience was a cathartic process of grasping old experiences and learning from like-minded individuals who shared new ones with me.

I understand my embodied role within my research as one who has undergone a similar experience to my participants can have implications of bias. My own experiences have resonance to the participants and may coincide or deviate from their responses

during the interview process. I was diligent to employ reflexivity throughout my study; however, I realize that it requires an immense deal of self-efficacy and can be hard to measure successfully. I interviewed 17 participants and believe to have reached data saturation. However, conducting a phenomenological study focuses on the individual experiences of the participants and can be hard to generalize to the whole male international student-athlete population. Heeding Fusch and Ness's (2015) advice, I understood saturation as mitigating the use of my personal lens during the data collection and analysis of the study. I utilized purposeful sampling, which can be useful for limited resources, but can affect the minimization of bias in selection of participants (Palinkas et al., 2015). Although I conducted two in-person interviews and seven video conference interviews, eight interviews were conducted via telephone, lessening the non-verbal cues – such as hand gestures and facial features – that would have added to my data collection. Only five of the participants' native language was English; although most were able to conversate efficiently, several of the conversations were in fractured English. This verbal communication problem may have influenced the opportunity for some of the participants to articulate their responses in the most effective manner.

<u>Future Research</u>

My research served as a qualitative, phenomenological exploratory study into male international soccer student-athletes' experience during the recruitment phase. I hope that it contributes to and advances to knowledge on male international soccer student-athletes, and the international student-athlete demographic as a whole. My study can be applied to both sports communication researchers and sport organization

practitioners seeking a guide or template on communication strategies when recruiting international athletes. My exploratory study can be useful for further scholarly studies, with the possibility of applying the same methodological approach to other collegiate sports.

An area of interest that future research can explore further is the increased number of international soccer recruitment agencies. Two of my participants who both used the same soccer agency during their recruitment and transition to an American collegiate institution referenced how pivotal a role they played. Kirk and Weaver (2018) comprised the most comprehensive study relating to these intermediary organizations, nevertheless, further research is needed to better understand their role within international student-athlete recruitment.

Prior research has delved into international student-athlete motivational factors (Bentzinger, 2016; Popp et al., 2011) and motivational factors for international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). However, with the evident trend in male international soccer student-athlete participation (NCAA, 2018), more research can be applied towards this increasing phenomenon. My study serves as a phenomenological framework into the experiences male international soccer student-athletes undergo during the recruitment process, yet further research should seek to pursue acculturation, retainment, and post-graduation of this demographic, which would benefit understanding if this route is beneficial to the individuals.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

My exploratory phenomenological study into male international soccer student-athletes provides insight that can benefit both the academic and practical professional paradigms. The participants used their own perspectives and experiences to shed light on and aid in the understanding of the recruitment process experience for international student-athletes coming to an American collegiate institution. My participants' candid reflections illuminated the natural human tendency for social acceptance and belonging. They sought not just individualistic success in their sport or in academics, but a longing to be included and represented in their prospective environment. My findings suggested that anticipation of social acceptance and perceived progression towards belonging was an outstanding motivational factor in their decision-making process.

My participants explained how their previous experiences of rejection led to a newfound acceptance. Perceptions of NCAA Division I soccer student-athletes are often based on the viewpoint that these individuals have never experienced rejection because of their elite status as a collegiate athlete. This, I believe, is the major difference between international and domestic soccer student-athletes' experiences when being recruited. International soccer student-athletes are more likely to experience rejection *prior* to their recruitment process for an American collegiate institution. Therefore, targeted messaging and communication towards these athletes should be conceptualized differently from domestic prospective recruits. This emotional juxtaposition from negative to positive resulted in a substantial cognitive process of exceeding satisfaction towards their

newfound reality. I believe that it is the emotional juxtaposition that can result in a temporal increase in their decision-making process to join an American collegiate institution. The participants' sincere revelations of feeling at their lowest point upon the moment of rejection, to their recollections of excitement upon the moment of acceptance, serve as evidence of the cognitive emotional motivation when they internally process the recruitment phase.

My findings show that the participants experienced varied levels of understanding of the American collegiate system and the world into which they would be entering. My participants stated levels of understanding ranging from no understanding or prior knowledge at all, to a fairly comprehensive level of perceived understanding. This range was influenced by the communicative skills of the American collegiate institution, whether the participant had experienced the environment (recruiting trip to prospective institution), and external factors influencing awareness (international soccer recruitment agencies/acquaintances that have prior knowledge).

The participants experience the recruitment process at a young age, in which risk-taking in the decision-making stage is higher (Löckenhoff, 2018). During this phase, the participants referenced an increase of self-awareness. They stated a newfound independence and maturation of the self. Although it was a continuous process of improved self-awareness and self-discovery, the catalyst moment for the majority of the participants was their commitment to a sole institution. This commitment in turn sealed their orientation towards a new reality, initiating the transitional process from their previous socially-constructed reality, to their new one.

My study has enlightened the necessity of understanding international student-athletes' perceptions during the recruitment phase. However, it is imperative to note the substantial benefit that my study may offer in the conversation of quality of life for these individuals. Developing a longitudinal relationship between international student-athlete and the realities to which they are oriented, and in which they further operate in, is essential in furthering their quality of life. With the increase in awareness of mental health issues surrounding athletes of all levels, this study is particularly pertinent in addressing the understanding for this specific demographic. The participants in my study highlight the importance of the relationships and connections that they make in the initial stages of recruitment. The anxiety and apprehension that many of the participants alluded to can be combated with increased sense of belonging, social integration and acceptance, and continued positive communicative strategies. Support systems within collegiate institutions should be crucial in strategizing systems for these issues, and allow an easier integration, assimilation and acculturation to the international student-athletes' new reality. A continuous development of addressing those individuals' needs and concerns is imperative in ensuring that the international student-athletes' quality of life is not only satisfactory, but valuable to their development as a contributing member of society.

These realities are the socially-constructed worlds of an American collegiate institution and all of the stakeholders who embody its existence. Utilizing the phenomenological approach, in Kvale and Brinkman's (2009) words, allowed me to, "understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (p. 1). This

approach has allowed my research to delve into the deep realities that the participants experienced. My findings show that the initial phases of communication between two entities is crucial in developing a mutually-beneficial relationship that is favorable to all parties. Employing a humanistic scope towards this study emphasizes the value that the participants, and individuals like them, may inherit from a continued positive communicative relationship with their prospective American collegiate institution.

This exploratory phenomenological study into male international soccer student-athletes sought to better understand the essence of the experience when being recruited to play NCAA Division I men's soccer. My findings show that there is a preeminent requirement for perceived social acceptance, inclusion and belonging into the participants' new environment. Although more tangible motivational factors that influence their decision-making referenced in my literature review hold weight for the participants, it is the intangible sociological connections to their prospective collegiate institutions that this study found most outstanding.

APPENDIX

List of Participants

Table 1.1

List of Participants

Pseudonym	Country	Class	Region	Interview Type	Member Check Conducted	Length of Interview
James	England	RS-Freshman	Southeast	Video conference	No	58
Fraser	England	Sophomore	Southeast	In-person	Yes	51
Mats	Norway	Freshman	Southeast	Telephone	No	38
Kasper	Denmark	Sophomore	Southeast	Telephone	No	30
Shinji	Japan	Sophomore	Midwest	Telephone	No	40
Javi	Spain	Freshman	Midwest	Video conference	No	32
Daniel	Nigeria	Sophomore	Midwest	Telephone	No	39
Manuel	Costa Rica	Sophomore	Southeast	Video conference	No	51
Miguel	Brazil	Sophomore	Southeast	Video conference	No	39
Mario	Germany	Sophomore	Pacific	Video conference	No	48
Sergio	Spain	Freshman	Southeast	Telephone	No	34
Michael	England	Freshman	Northeast	Video conference	Yes	50
Andre	Jamaica	Sophomore	Southeast	Telephone	No	41
Ryan	Slovakia	Freshman	Northeast	Telephone	No	29
Ibrahim	Ghana	Sophomore	Midwest	Telephone	No	39
Gylfi	Iceland	Sophomore	Southeast	In-person	Yes	37
Luke	Scotland	Sophomore	Southeast	Video conference	No	34

References

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal

    attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *117*(3),

    497-529.

Bennett, R., & Ali-Choudhury, R. (2009). Prospective students' perceptions of university

    brands: An empirical study. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *19*(1),

    85–107. doi: 10.1080/08841240902905445

Bentzinger, E. R. (2016). *International student-athlete experiences at the NCAA Division*

    I level (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Iowa State University Digital

    Repository (15127)

Brandtstädter, J., & Greve, W. (1994). The aging self: Stabilizing and protective

    processes. *Developmental Review*, *14*(1), 52–80. doi: 10.1006/drev.1994.1003

Chen, Z. (2017). Social acceptance and word of mouth: How the motive to belong

    leads to divergent WOM with strangers and friends. *Journal of Consumer*

    *Research, 44(*3), 613–632. doi: 10.1093/jcr/ucx055

Clayton, M. J., Cavanagh, K. V., & Hettche, M. (2012). Institutional branding: a content

    analysis of public service announcements from American universities. *Journal of*

    Marketing for Higher Education, 22(2) 182-205.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and

    evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology, 13*(1), 3-21.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing*

    among five approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cummins, P. G., & Boyle, O. I. (2014). Leading through others: Social Identity Theory

    in the organizational setting. *Organization Development Journal, 32*(3), 27–39.

Davidson, C. (2009). Transcription: Imperatives for qualitative research. *International*

    Journal of Qualitative Methods, 35(8), 35–52. doi:

10.1177/160940690900800206

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*.

    Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

DeWall, C. N., & Bushman, B. J. (2011). Social acceptance and rejection: The sweet

    and the bitter. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 20*(4), 256–260.

    doi: 10.1177/0963721411417545

Edwards, W. (1954). The theory of decision making. *Psychological Bulletin, 51*(4), 380-

    417. doi: 10.1037/h0053870

Fenigstein, A., Scheier, M. F., & Buss, A. H. (1975). Public and private self-

    consciousness: Assessment and theory. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical*

    Psychology, 43(4), 522-527. doi: 10.1037/h0076760

FIFA Women's World Cup Archive. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.fifa.com/fifa-

    tournaments/archive/womensworldcup/index.html

Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative

    research. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(9), 1408-1416.

Gai, L., Xu, C. & Pelton, L. E. (2016). A netnographic analysis of prospective

    international students' decision-making process: implications for institutional

branding of American universities in the emerging markets. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 26*(2), 181-198. doi: 10.1080/08841241.2016.1245233

Gaining ground: Major League Soccer popularity in the U.S. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2018/gaining-ground-major-league-soccer-popularity-in-the-us/

Gibson, W. J., & Brown, A. (2009). *Working with qualitative data*. London: Sage. doi:10.4135/9780857029041

Greenwood, G. (2012). Examining the presence of social media on university web sites. *Journal of College Admission*, (216), 24–28.

Grigolini, P., & West, B. J. (2011). *Decision making: A psychophysics application of network science.* Singapore, Singapore: World Scientific.

Hogg, M., van Knippenberg, D., & Rast III, D. (2012). The social identity theory of leadership: Theoretical origins, research findings, and conceptual developments. *European Review of Social Psychology, 23*(1), 258–304. doi: 10.1080/10463283.2012.741134

Holton, J. (2007). The coding process and its challenges. *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory, 9,* 265-289. doi: 10.4135/9781848607941.n13

Hunter-Johnson, Y. (2016, November). *Against all dds: Socio-cultural influence on nontraditional international learners pursuing higher education in the United States*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Albuquerque, NM.

Husserl, E. (1967). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (H. D. Lewis, Trans.). Norwich, Great Britain: Jarrold & Sons. (Original work published 1913).

Husserl, E. (1964). *The idea of phenomenology* (W. P. Alston & G. Nakhnikian, Trans.). Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff. (Original work published 1907).

Idris, M. Z., & Whitfield, A. T. W. (2014). Swayed by the logo and the name: Does university branding work? *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 24*(1), 41-58. doi: 10.1080/08841241.2014.919979

Johnson, A. (2015). *Soccer by the numbers: A look at the game in the U.S.* Retrieved from https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/fifa-corruption-scandal/soccer-numbers-look-game-u-s-n365601

Kirk, R., & Weaver, A. (2018). Footballers, migrants and scholars: The globalization of U.S. men's college soccer. *Soccer & Society*. doi: 10.1080/14660970.2017.1419469

Kvale, S., & Brinkman, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Larsen, P. V. (2003). Academic reputation: How U.S. news & world report survey respondents form perceptions. *The CASE Journal of Educational Advancement*, 155-165. doi: 10.1057/palgrave.cijea.2140021

Lashari, S. A., Kaur, A., & Awang-Hashim, R. (2018). Home away from home: The role of social support for international students' adjustment. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction, 15*(2), 33–54.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods*.

    Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lochtie, D. J. (2016). A "special relationship" in higher education? What influence might

    the U.S. higher education sector have in terms of support for international

    students in the U.K.? P*erspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education,*

    20(2), 67–74. doi: 10.1080/13603108.2015.1074627

Löckenhoff, C. E. (2018). Aging and decision-making: A conceptual framework for

    future research - A mini-review. *Gerontology, 64,* 140-148. doi:

    10.1159/000485247

LoRé, M. (2019). Soccer's growth in U.S. has international legends buzzing. Retrieved

    from https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaellore/2019/04/26/soccers-growth-in-u-

    s-has-international-legends-buzzing/#698a9fb517f1

Lyotard, F. (1986). *Phenomenology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. (2002). The 'push-pull' factors influencing international

    student selection of education destination. *International Journal of Educational*

    Management, 16, 82-90. doi: 10.1108/09513540210418403

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Transcendental phenomenology: Conceptual framework in*

    phenomenological research methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. doi:

    10.4135/9781412995658

Nasti, C., Venuti, M., & Zollo, S. A. (2017). U.K. university websites: A multimodal,

    corpus-based analysis. *International Journal of Language Studies, 11*(4), 131-

    152.

National Collegiate Athletic Association (2018). Trends in the participation of

    international student-athletes in NCAA Divisions I and II. Retrieved from

    http://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/2018RES_International_SA_charts_Sept20

    18_fin al_20180919.pdf

Norman, J. (2018). Football still Americans' favorite sport to watch. Retrieved from

    https://news.gallup.com/poll/224864/football-americans-favorite-sport-

    watch.aspx

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, P. A., Duan, N., Hoagwood, K.

    (2015). *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services*

    Research, 42, 533. doi: 10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Pierce, D., Popp, N., & Meadows, B. (2010). Qualitative analysis of international

    student-athlete perspectives on recruitment and transitioning into American

    college sport. *Sport Journal, 15*(1).

Popp, N., Pierce, D., & Hums, M. A. (2011). A comparison of the college selection

    process for internationals and domestic student-athletes at NCAA Division I

    universities. *Sport Management Review, 14*, 176-187. doi:

    10.1016/j.smr.2010.08.003

Procidano, M. E. & Heller, K. (1983). Measures of perceived social support from friends

    and from family: Three validation studies. *American Journal of Community*

    Psychology, 11, 1-24. doi:10.1007/BF00898416

Purdy, J. (2018). List: Every draft pick in the 2018 NWSL College Draft. Retrieved from

http://www.nwslsoccer.com/news/article/watch-live-nwsl-college-draft-thurs-10-

a-m-et

Rodriguez, A. (2014). International student-athletes and stress: Implications for

American universities' administrators. *Journal of Academic Administration in*

Higher Education, 10(2), 39-47.

Romeo, C. (2017). Children at football academies are more likely to get hit by a

meteorite than succeed as professionals – here's the shocking statistic. *Business*

Insider. Retrieved from https://www.businessinsider.com

Saldana, J., & Omasta, M. (2018). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life*. Thousand Oaks,

CA: Sage.

Schutz, A. (1970). *On phenomenology and social relations*. Chicago: IL: The University

of Chicago Press.

Servaes, J. (2008). *Communication for development and social change*. Thousand Oaks,

CA: Sage

Stets, J., & Burke, P. (2000). Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. *Social*

Psychology Quarterly, 63(3), 224-237.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W.

Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations*, (pp.

33-47). Monterey, CA: Broks/Cole.

Thomas, D. R. (2017). Feedback from research participants: are member checks useful in qualitative research? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 14*(1), 23-41. doi: 10.1080/14780887.2016.1219435

Thomas, I. (2018). MLS scores in key metrics in 2018. Retrieved from https://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2018/10/29/Leagues-and-Governing-Bodies/MLS.aspx

Tomaney, J. (2015). Region and place II: Belonging. *Progress in Human Geography, 39*(4), 507–516. doi: 10.1177/0309132514539210

Turner, M. L. (2017). Like, love, delete: Social media's influence on college choice. *Journal of College Admission, 31*(33), 327.

Van Manen, M. (1997). From meaning to method. *Qualitative Health Research, 7*(3), 345-369. doi: 10.1177/104973239700700303

Ward, S. M. (2017). Lost in translation: Social Identity Theory and the study of status in world politics. *International Studies Quarterly, 61*(4), 821–834. doi: 10.1093/isq/sqx042

Watkins, B. A., & Gonzenbach, W. J. (2013). Assessing university brand personality through logos: an analysis of the use of academics and athletics in university branding. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 23*(1), 15–33. doi: 10.1080/08841241.2013.805709

Yanchar, S. C. (2015) Truth and disclosure in qualitative research: Implications of hermeneutic realism. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 12*(2), 107-124. doi: 10.1080/14780887.2014.933460