

ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE IMPACTS OF U.S. NATIVES' ATTITUDES TOWARD NCAA INTERNATIONAL STUDENT-ATHLETES ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT- ATHLETES' COLLEGE EXPERIENCE AND TRANSITION

by Jiaying Wang

While the number of international student-athletes competing in the NCAA has gone up significantly in the past decade, no study to date has explored the connections between U.S. domestic stakeholders' perceptions of international student-athletes and international student-athletes' college experience and transition. The present study had two research purposes. First, it aimed to investigate how U.S. domestic coaches', teammates', fans', and general student body's attitudes and behaviors toward NCAA Division I international student-athletes were interpreted, negotiated, and experienced by the international student-athletes. Additionally, the study also examined how the experiences of interacting with U.S. natives may affect NCAA Division I international student-athletes' transition and adjustment to college. Eleven international student-athletes from six teams who were currently enrolled in four different institutions in the Mid-American Conference (MAC) voluntarily participated in the qualitative study. An in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. The findings revealed that the participants' overall college experiences had been positive, largely thanks to domestic stakeholders' equal treatment and positive attitudes. Language differences, certain beliefs, and the expectations that domestic stakeholders had of international student-athletes made international student-athletes' first-year transition challenging. However, such difficulties were sometimes offset by the help and resources offered by coaches, teammates, faculty, and staff.

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Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

by

Jiaying Wang

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

2020

Advisor: Dr. Callie Maddox

Reader: Dr. Adam Beissel

Reader: Dr. Bo Li

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This thesis titled

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Jiaying Wang

has been approved for publication by

The College of Education, Health and Society

and

Department of Kinesiology and Health

Dr. Callie Maddox

Dr. Adam Beissel

Dr. Bo Li

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Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank my advisor Dr. Callie Maddox and the rest of my thesis committee – Dr. Adam Beissel and Dr. Bo Li, for their guidance and support in the past year. My idea and motivation to study about international student-athletes in the NCAA would not turn to a complete thesis project without your guidance and directions.

I would also like to thank Dr. Thelma Horn and Dr. Valeria Freysinger, who opened the door of academic research and qualitative research for me in my first year of graduate school. It would be impossible for me to complete my thesis without your suggestions on my research proposal and DGAP paper.

Besides my professors, I would like to thank the athletic staff, coaches, and student-athletes who helped me with my research. I greatly appreciate your involvement in the study and your contribution to the better understanding of international student-athletes in the NCAA.

Lastly, thank you my family and friends for your continual support in the past seven years, even though I have been far away from you. Thank you all for believing in me throughout my journey.

Examining the Impacts of U.S. Natives' Attitudes toward NCAA International Student-Athletes on International Student-Athletes' College Experience and Transition

Introduction

In the past decade, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has gone through a rapid global expansion. An increasing number of NCAA basketball and football games are now played and broadcasted overseas. Meanwhile, many talented young athletes from countries other than the United States have also seen opportunities arise to play competitive sport while attending a U.S. college. In the 2009-10 season, there were 1,948 first-year international student-athletes competing in NCAA Division I sports and 797 competing in NCAA Division II sports. These numbers skyrocketed to 3,173 and 1,906 in the 2016-17 season, accounting for 11.9% and 6.6% of total first-year student-athletes in the NCAA at Division I and Division II levels respectively (NCAA, 2018). The numbers of new foreign-born student-athletes in some NCAA-sponsored sports are even more remarkable. Tennis, for example, has recently been dominated by international student-athletes. During the 2016-17 season, 62% of first-years competing in men's tennis at the Division I level were not U.S. natives; and for women's tennis in Division I, this number was 59% (NCAA, 2018).

While international student-athletes are common in the NCAA today, the recruitment of student-athletes from outside the U.S. used to be a slowly emerging phenomenon. A handful of track and field athletes from Canada started to participate in intercollegiate sport competitions in the U.S. in the early twentieth century (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a). However, the influx of international young talent into American college sport did not become a trend until much later. In the early 1950s, the recruitment of foreign-born student-athletes with the provision of athletic scholarship became popular for the first time among a few U.S. universities that highly valued sport (Stidwill, 1984). The University of Texas El Paso and Washington State University started to heavily recruit cross country athletes from Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, and each won multiple national championships under the lead of the African runners (Stidwill, 1984). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, recruiting foreign-born student-athletes has become more and more common. Even American football, the sport very few people watch or play outside the U.S. and Canada, has become an option for international student-athletes, especially for those

from American Samoa (Beissel, 2018). Today, it is almost impossible to find an NCAA Division I school that does not have an international student-athlete.

Researchers have proposed multiple explanations to understand the sharp increase in the number of international student-athletes competing in the NCAA. For coaches, especially those at the Division I level, the increasing pressure to win at all costs is considered a major factor that propels them to look for the best young talent available not just within the U.S., but all over the world, so their programs can remain competitive (Ridinger & Pastore, 2001). International student-athletes, on the other hand, are willing to play college sport in the U.S. to gain access to high-quality facilities and coaching (Bale, 1987), get a good education (Bale, 1991), and simply compete in NCAA sports (Garant-Jones, Koo, Kim, Andrew, & Hardin, 2008), given the lack of intercollegiate sport systems in many other countries.

Despite the fact that international student-athletes are no longer rare in the NCAA, this type of migration has always been controversial. People who support the influx of foreign-born student-athletes into the NCAA argue that international athletes often possess higher degrees of work ethic and persistence compared to their U.S. domestic counterparts (Asher, 1994), and the inclusion of these international student-athletes is actually beneficial to the development of U.S. domestic young talent. In contrast, others believe that by recruiting athletes from overseas to the NCAA, Americans are offering training and valuable resources to foreign athletes who may later compete against the U.S. in international sport events (Hoffer, 1994). Other issues include concerns about the potential age advantage international student-athletes might have, the athletic scholarship opportunities they take away from U.S. domestic student-athletes, and effects of the overly competitive sport environment at the college level (Ridinger & Pastore, 2001). In addition, questions of whether or not international student-athletes can successfully fit into American culture have also been raised. Previous research showed that some international student-athletes had inaccurate understandings or expectations of their academic and athletic journeys in the U.S. (Bale, 1987, 1991). Although times have changed and people are now able to obtain more information about American college sport via the internet, concerns surrounding the adjustment of international student-athletes to U.S. colleges still exist.

Given the rising trend of contemporary college sport migration to the U.S. and the relatively limited amount of studies available about these international student-athletes as a group, the present study had two research purposes. First, it aimed to explore how U.S. domestic

coaches', teammates', fans', and the general student body's attitudes and behaviors toward NCAA Division I international student-athletes were interpreted, negotiated, and experienced by the international student-athletes. In addition, the study also examined how the experiences interacting with U.S. domestic stakeholders may affect international student-athletes' transition and adjustment to college. Understanding of how international student-athletes interpret their experiences and why they think they have been perceived by Americans in certain ways can help college sport coaches and administrators support them, meet their needs, and facilitate a positive overall experience in college.

A review of relevant literature on this topic is first presented to provide a context for the study. The research articles are categorized into three subtopics. The first section presents studies that have explored international student-athletes' experiences and satisfaction levels while attending U.S. colleges. The next section focuses on studies about U.S. college coaches' and the domestic general student body's perceptions of international student-athletes. The third section outlines studies that have examined international student-athletes' college adjustment issues. The findings in these studies helped build the current understanding of the experiences of collegiate international student-athletes. The two research questions for the present study were also raised based on the existing findings.

The literature review is followed by an explanation of research methods for the study. This study was guided by the qualitative interpretive lens. The researcher used the criterion sampling method to draw participants. After the athletic department officials and coaches approved the researcher's study request, the researcher contacted some of the current NCAA Division I international student-athletes competing in the Mid-American Conference (MAC), inviting them to join in the study on a voluntary basis. In-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with those who volunteered to participate. Data were collected from eleven international student-athletes who met the selection criteria.

The results and discussion sections then introduce and analyze the five key themes that emerged from the interviews: (a) Equal Treatment, (b) Positive Attitudes, (c) Challenges and Difficulties, (d) Support and Resources, and (e) Network and Exploration. Additional sub-themes are discussed and linked to these broader issues. The findings revealed that American domestic stakeholders' equal treatment and positive attitudes toward international student-athletes could enhance international student-athletes' college experience. Differences in language, culture, and

certain expectations from domestic stakeholders were identified as the three main challenges in international student-athletes' college transition process. However, multiple types of help and resource offered by coaches, teammates, professors, staff, and the general student body allowed the international student-athletes to overcome such challenges associated with college transition. Compared to other participants, the two black student-athletes from Nigeria in this study faced more struggles in their first-year of college.

Finally, implications of this research for both international student-athletes and the universities that host them are addressed. To support international student-athletes and facilitate a positive overall experience, universities and their athletic departments need to create a culturally inclusive environment and help staff and students improve their degrees of cultural competency. International student-athletes, on the other hand, need to be open to new cultures. Limitations and future research directions are also discussed.

Literature Review

International Student-Athletes' Experiences

Due to the differences in culture, language, and sport systems between the U.S. and many other countries, it is not surprising that international student-athletes may have very different experiences attending college in the U.S. compared to their American domestic teammates. With the purpose to understand international student-athletes' academic, athletic, and social experiences while attending a historically black university, Sato, Hodge, and Eckert (2018) conducted semi-structured interviews with six international student-athletes at a historically black NCAA Division I-Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) institution that had a total enrollment of approximately 4,500 students. Of these participants, two were from Brazil, while the rest were from Philippines, South Korea, Serbia, and Canada, respectively. The researchers recruited the participants by contacting personnel in the university's athletic department, who then nominated the potential student-athletes that met the criteria. Each participant was interviewed twice, once in season and once offseason. An in-season interview guide with fifteen questions and an offseason interview guide with eight questions, both developed by the NCAA (2007) and modified by Sato, Hodge, and Burge-Hall (2011), were used for the interviews. In addition, information about each participant's program of study was gathered by the researchers.

The results of the study conducted by Sato et al. (2018) revealed that the six international student-athletes in general had an unpleasant experience academically, athletically, and socially at the historically black university. The three main themes that emerged from the interviews were “differences and difficulties”, “social disengagement”, and “under-resourced”. The study results showed that language barriers were hard for the international student-athletes to overcome, which negatively affected their academic performance. Additionally, all six participants claimed to have very negative experiences socially at the university, resulted from not only the lack of respect from the African American student population, but also the extreme lack of support from their African American teammates. Furthermore, the limited budget from the university and the athletic department also contributed to the international student-athletes’ negative experiences. To conclude, Sato and his colleagues claimed that language differences, discrimination due to cultural differences, and shortage in resources could all lead to international student-athletes’ unpleasant experiences at the institution. Nevertheless, the authors indicated that only six international student-athletes from one institution were included in the study, so the results were not generalizable. Future research should look at the experiences of more international student-athletes at different institutions.

Looking at another group of international student-athletes in the U.S., Lee and Opio (2011) aimed to explore the challenges and difficulties that international student-athletes from African countries had experienced in U.S. colleges through the lens of neo-racism theory, the discrimination of people of color based on their cultures and national origins. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. A total of sixteen African student-athletes attending five predominantly white public universities and two predominantly white community colleges in the Southwest and South of the U.S. voluntarily participated in the study. The participants came from seven different countries. One from Morocco was Arab, three from South Africa were white, while the rest were black. The study consisted of two phases. First, one researcher observed these African student-athletes’ interactions with other team members during practices, travels, and games. In the second phase, interviews were conducted with each of the participants. Specifically, the interview questions asked the African student-athletes about their expectations before coming to the U.S., as well as their true experiences as international student-athletes.

Lee and Opio (2011) revealed that most African student-athletes who participated in the study felt that their cultures were not accepted by people from the U.S. Even worse, some of

these student-athletes suffered negative stereotypes from their professors and fellow students, which demonstrated the unacceptance and unwelcome attitude toward these African student-athletes, and sometimes, discrimination against them as the result of their different cultures. It was notable that the three white African student-athletes from South Africa in this study, however, reported generally positive experiences at the predominantly white institutions in the U.S.

In discussing their findings, Lee and Opio (2011) concluded that the majority of the African student-athletes interviewed in the study constantly reported being excluded and treated as inferior in U.S. colleges, which suggested the existence of neo-racism. However, the positive experiences claimed by the white African student-athletes in the study implied that in comparison to country of origin, race might be the more important factor in terms of determining whether, and to what extent, international student-athletes would experience unexpected difficulties, such as stereotypes and discrimination. Similar studies with more participants from different regions in the U.S. should be conducted in the future, as suggested by Lee and Opio.

In a quantitative study, Trendafilova, Hardin, and Kim (2010) investigated how satisfied NCAA Division I-Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) international student-athletes felt about their experiences in American colleges, and whether their levels of satisfaction were associated with demographic variables, such as gender, origin, scholarship type, and sport played. Potential participants were identified by the researchers through the websites of the universities' athletic programs. Emails that contained an explanation of the study purpose and a link to the online questionnaire were then sent to all potential participants. A total of 206 international student-athletes from the SEC, Pac-10 (now Pac-12), Big 12, Big East (before its split into the American Athletic Conference and the new Big East Conference), ACC, and Big Ten conferences voluntarily participated in the study. The Athlete Satisfaction Questionnaire (ASQ) developed by Riemer and Chelladurai (1998) was administered to the study participants. Using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all satisfied" to "extremely satisfied", the instrument's 56 items were categorized into fifteen dimensions, including "individual performance", "team performance", "ability utilization", "strategy", "personal treatment", "training and instruction", "team task contribution", "team social contribution", "ethics", "team integration", "personal dedication", "budget", "medical personnel", "academic support service", and "external agents".

According to the demographic information gathered by Trendafilova et al. (2010), the age of the 206 international student-athletes who completed the questionnaire ranged from 18 to 25. Among all these participants, 146 were females, 149 received full athletic scholarship, and 133 participated in an individual sport. The results of the ASQ revealed that the international student-athletes were generally satisfied with all fifteen dimensions, with individual performance mean score being the lowest (4.95) and academic support service mean score being the highest (5.97). The mean scores for team task contribution (5.27) and team social contribution (5.84) were also high, which suggested that the study participants believed their teammates had positively contributed to the team environment in task and social aspects. For satisfaction with external agents – the international student-athletes' beliefs on how much support they had received from their universities and local communities, along with the fans and media, the average score for the 206 participants was 5.07, with male athletes rated significantly higher than did female athletes, and athletes received full athletic scholarship and partial athletic scholarship rated significantly higher than did athletes received no athletic scholarship.

In discussing their findings, Trendafilova et al. (2010) concluded that international student-athletes who competed at the NCAA Division I-FBS level were generally satisfied with their academic and athletic experiences in U.S. colleges; those with athletic scholarships were in general more satisfied with their experiences than those without an athletic scholarship. However, as the authors also pointed out, the sample of this study could only represent the satisfaction level of a certain group of international student-athletes. More research would be needed to better understand the experiences of those international student-athletes who attend NCAA Division I-FCS institutions.

The Perceptions of International Student-Athletes

As the number of international student-athletes competing in U.S. college sport went up significantly, debates about whether they would bring more positive or negative outcomes to American college sport have also been raised. In order to better understand U.S. college coaches' perceptions of the recruitment of student-athletes from foreign countries, Ridinger and Pastore (2001) contacted 368 college head coaches in basketball, field hockey, ice hockey, soccer, swimming, tennis, and track at NCAA Division I, II, III, and National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) member institutions, inviting them to complete a survey. Of the 368 coaches, 146 returned the survey. All participants were asked to first identify their backgrounds,

including age, gender, years of coaching experience, sport, conference, division level, school type, and number of international student-athletes coached, which were the independent variables. The questionnaire developed by the researchers asked coaches about their views on the recruitment of international student-athletes at the college level, and all 31 questions could be categorized into four dimensions, namely “recruitment issues”, “international student-athlete issues”, “attitude issues”, and “adjustment issues”, which were the dependent variables. A 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was used for all 31 items. Six independent multivariable analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to examine the correlations between the independent variables and the dependent variables.

The results of the Ridinger and Pastore (2001) study revealed that a variety of factors could lead U.S. college coaches to view the recruitment of international student-athletes differently. One important finding was that for “attitude issues” particularly (the issues associated with the animosity international student-athletes would face from their teammates, teammates’ parents, and opponents), coaches from Division I programs generally rated higher than did coaches from Division II and III levels. This implied that college coaches believed international student-athletes from Division I, the top division in U.S. college sport, had experienced more animosity from their teammates, teammates’ parents, opponents, and the athletic department, than did international student-athletes from lower divisions.

To interpret this finding, Ridinger and Pastore (2001) suggested that in the top division, where competitive levels for scholarship and winning were high, teammates and their parents were likely to perceive international student-athletes as the ones who would take the scholarships away from domestic student-athletes; opponents might perceive the teams with international student-athletes as having an unfair advantage; and athletic departments might worry about the negative voices from the general public if they overrecruit international student-athletes. Consequently, attitudes toward international student-athletes were typically more negative at the NCAA Division I level, as perceived by the coaches. However, as Ridinger and Pastore also claimed, it is necessary for future researchers to investigate what made the coaches to believe in the existence of such differences, and whether the possible explanations given by the authors could truly explain the findings of the study.

Given the lack of research on the general student body’s perceptions of international student-athletes, Foo, Wells, and Walker (2015) aimed to examine how U.S. domestic college

students would perceive the large number of international student-athletes appeared on American college campuses and the continual recruitment of student-athletes from foreign countries. For recruitment purposes, the researchers contacted sport management instructors at a large public university in the Southeast of the U.S. After receiving permissions, the researchers explained the study purpose to the students. A total of 146 full-time U.S.-born sport management students agreed to participate in the study voluntarily, who were then randomly divided into three groups, with groups 1 and 2 being asked to read an article that portrayed international student-athletes in U.S. universities in a positive way and a negative way respectively, while group 3 read neither of the two articles. A questionnaire modified from Ridinger and Pastore's (2001) work was then given to all participants after they finished reading the assigned article. With the exactly same dimensions – "recruitment issues", "international student-athlete issues", "attitude issues", and "adjustment issues", this 29-item questionnaire was used to evaluate U.S.-born college students' views of international student-athletes in U.S. universities. The students were asked to answer each question using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

The results of the Foo et al. (2015) study suggested that all three groups, regardless of the article they were assigned to read (or no article), showed a relatively neutral position toward the increasing number of international student-athletes on American college campuses. This was evidenced by the close mean scores in each of the four dimensions among the three groups. No significant difference on perceptions was found among the positive group, negative group, and controlled group. To conclude, Foo and his colleagues indicated that U.S.-born non-athlete college students generally had neutral attitudes toward NCAA Division I international student-athletes.

International Student-Athletes' Adjustment

Due to international student-athletes' unique experiences in U.S. colleges, it is reasonable to expect them to make more adjustments than their U.S. domestic counterparts do. Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) examined to what extent international student-athletes would have smooth and successful adjustments to college in comparison to U.S. domestic student-athletes and the general student body. After receiving the lists of student-athletes and international students from university officials, the researchers selected both U.S. domestic student-athletes and international non-athletes from the pool using systematic random sampling. All international student-athletes at the university were included in the sample due to the relatively small population. Domestic

non-athletes were selected from various physical activity and health classes, and these students ranged from freshmen to seniors. A total of 443 college students from a large Midwestern university in the U.S. participated in the study, of which 245 were in-state non-athletes, 40 were in-state athletes, 24 were out-of-state non-athletes, 40 were out-of-state athletes, 78 were international non-athletes, and 16 were international athletes. The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) developed by Baker and Siryk (1989) was administered to all study participants, who would self-evaluate their adjustments to college from academic, social, personal-emotional, and institutional attachment four aspects using the 67-item survey.

According to the demographic information collected by Ridinger and Pastore (2000a), the majority of the participants self-identified as white ($n = 296$). The participants had an age range from 18 to 47, with an average age of 22. The results generated from the SACQ questionnaire indicated that international non-athletes, in general, received significantly lower scores on academic adjustment compared to international student-athletes, and significantly lower scores on social adjustment than did all other subgroups. Asians, the majority of whom were not U.S. citizens, received lower overall adjustment scores than did whites.

To summarize the findings, Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) claimed that international student-athletes in general did better than international non-athlete students in terms of adjusting to U.S. colleges, and adjusted as well as U.S. domestic students did, illustrated by their highest mean scores on academic and overall adjustments to college among all subgroups. The results, however, should be interpreted carefully, as suggested by the authors, since only sixteen international student-athletes were included in the sample, which might not be large enough to generalize conclusive results. A larger sample size would be needed in future research. Interviews should also be conducted with domestic and international student-athletes and their coaches to gain a better understanding of student-athletes' adjustment to college.

To further strengthen understandings of international student-athletes' adjustment to U.S. colleges, Popp, Love, Kim, and Hums (2010) examined the effectiveness of using antecedent factors (personal, interpersonal, perceptual, and cultural distance), as identified by Ridinger and Pastore (2000b), to help explain international student-athletes' college adjustment in realities, and whether any additional antecedent factors not listed by Ridinger and Pastore could also impact international student-athletes' adjustment to college. The participants for the study included four male and nine female international student-athletes at the NCAA Division I level.

The thirteen participants were current international student-athletes competing in a variety of sports. They came from nine different countries and represented four different mid- to large-sized public universities. The researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. The interview questions focused on the participants' general background and personal experiences in adjusting to college life in the U.S. Follow-up interviews were conducted with some of the participants for clarification purposes. All responses provided by the participants were audio recorded and then transcribed.

The findings of the Popp et al. (2010) study showed that most of the antecedents identified by Ridinger and Pastore (2000b) were important to the international student-athletes interviewed in terms of adjusting to new cultures. Specifically, antecedents such as self-efficacy, technical competencies, interactions with teammates and coaches, realistic expectation, and social support, as listed by Ridinger and Pastore, were mentioned by most of the study participants. In addition, travel experience, adventure, and family influence were added by Popp et al. to the original model created by Ridinger and Pastore based on the responses given by the participants. Interactions with faculty and staff, on the other hand, were not a major factor that could help the international student-athletes get used to their new lives. For the interpersonal dimension particularly, some participants mentioned the importance of interacting with other international student-athletes from their home countries who attended different universities in the U.S., and some others highlighted the critical role played by international student-athletes from other countries attending the same institution. U.S. domestic student-athletes, in comparison, played a limited role in helping the international student-athletes adjust to the new environment. The majority of the interviewees agreed that their coaches were helpful in their cross-cultural adjustments.

To conclude, Popp et al. (2010) suggested that the model created by Ridinger and Pastore (2000b) was a useful tool to help predict international student-athletes' cross-cultural adjustments in college, but the antecedents listed in the model were not complete. New components were added in the Popp et al. study. For future research, the authors stated that numerical scales should be developed, so more quantitative studies could be conducted. This would allow more student-athletes to participate in the research, and the results gathered from international student-athletes could also be compared with those from U.S. domestic student-athletes.

In another qualitative study, Pierce, Popp, and Meadows (2011) explored how international student-athletes would perceive the recruitment process and their experiences transitioning to U.S. college sport. The researchers obtained the international student-athletes' information from the athletic department websites of fifteen universities. Potential participants were then recruited by the researchers by contacting the CHAMPS/Life Skills coordinators from the fifteen universities, who then distributed the surveys to the potential participants. Using an open-ended questionnaire format, the study included 192 international student-athletes playing a variety of sports in the NCAA Division I. The 192 participants came from fifty-seven different countries. They represented fifteen NCAA Division I member institutions (seven of them were FBS members) in eleven different conferences. Five open-ended qualitative questions developed by the researchers were included in the questionnaire. Specifically, some asked the participants about their most difficult experiences as international student-athletes, and some asked about the most crucial factors that could help them as international student-athletes successfully transit to U.S. universities. Data were examined by two raters separately, and codes were then developed by the researchers.

The results of the Pierce et al. (2011) study showed that homesickness, cultural differences, and language barriers were the top three hardest experiences for international student-athletes in American universities. Support received from teammates, coaches, as well as that from family members and friends back home, were identified by the participants as the two most important factors that helped them adjust to the life in the U.S. Participants identified personal focus, dedication, hard work, and persistence as the elements that helped them overcome the challenges of adjustment. Notably, in response to the question as to what they would do if they were not competing in the NCAA, 105 out of the 192 participants claimed they would attend another university in their home countries, 33 declared they would continue their sport career in their home countries, while only 7 stated that they would still attend a university in the U.S.

In discussing their findings, Pierce et al. (2011) claimed that it was not surprising to see international student-athletes having a hard time solving problems related to homesickness, cultural differences, and language barriers. To mitigate these issues, it would be necessary for international student-athletes to learn more about the athletic program, the coaches, the NCAA in general, as well as the dedication and commitment needed to compete in NCAA sports before

committing to the school. In addition, it would be extremely important for international student-athletes to build strong support systems with their teammates and coaches on the team, and family and friends from the home country.

Overview of This Study

To date, a number of studies on international student-athletes in American college sport have focused on their experiences in U.S. universities and colleges (Trendafilova et al., 2010; Lee & Opio, 2011; Sato et al., 2018). These studies, however, showed inconsistent findings. When looking at the experiences of those competing in NCAA Division I-FBS major conferences, which is the top level of American college sport, positive feedback was given by the international student-athletes in all fifteen dimensions, including support received from teammates, academic support staff, and communities on and off campus (Trendafilova et al., 2010). In contrast, neither international student-athletes at a historically black NCAA Division I-FCS institution (Sato et al., 2018) nor black African international student-athletes attending predominantly white universities and community colleges (Lee & Opio, 2011) had a good experience studying and playing sports in the U.S.

Less attention has been paid to U.S. natives' perceptions of these foreign-born student-athletes, despite those debates on the positive outcomes and negative consequences of recruiting international student-athletes. The limited amount of previous research suggested that U.S. domestic people's perceptions toward the increasing number of international student-athletes in U.S. college sport varied (Ridinger & Pastore, 2001; Foo et al., 2015). While college coaches were likely to see the recruitment of foreign-born student-athletes as common, and sometimes even necessary, in NCAA Division I with the ultimate goal to win and build better programs, these coaches in general did not think that international student-athletes' teammates, teammates' parents, or the athletic department would support the idea of overrecruiting student-athletes from overseas (Ridinger & Pastore, 2001). U.S.-born college students who were not athletes, on the other hand, generally showed neutral attitudes toward the increasing number of international student-athletes in NCAA Division I competitions (Foo et al., 2015).

In addition to studies on international student-athletes' experiences and U.S. natives' perceptions of international student-athletes, researchers have also examined international student-athletes' adjustment to the new environment in the U.S. (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a;

Popp et al., 2010; Pierce et al., 2011). Once again, the findings were very inconsistent. Although early research suggested that international student-athletes adjusted as well as their U.S.-born counterparts (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a), more recent studies indicated that various adjustment issues did exist for international student-athletes upon their arrivals to U.S. institutions (Popp et al., 2010; Pierce et al., 2011).

Despite the findings on international student-athletes' experience and different groups' perceptions of international student-athletes in American intercollegiate sport, few studies to date have attempted to examine how these international student-athletes themselves think they have been perceived or treated by the U.S. natives. Ridinger and Pastore (2001) suggested that college coaches believed teammates and teammates' parents would sometimes show animosity toward international student-athletes in the NCAA Division I. However, such beliefs were coaches' inferences. No study to date has investigated U.S. domestic student-athletes' perceptions of their foreign-born teammates. Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding on American people's attitudes toward international student-athletes, the beliefs from international student-athletes themselves should not be overlooked.

Furthermore, although previous research studied international student-athletes as a group from multiple aspects, most of these studies focused solely on one major issue. There were, for example, studies on international student-athletes' motivations to play college sport in the U.S. (Bale, 1987; Garant-Jones et al., 2008; Stokowski, Huffman, & Aicher, 2013), international student-athletes' experiences in the U.S. (Trendafilova et al., 2010; Lee & Opio, 2011; Sato et al., 2018), and adjustment issues faced by international student-athletes in American colleges (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000a; Popp et al., 2010; Pierce et al., 2011). These issues were often considered on their own. In reality, however, situations may be much more complicated, and such issues can often be interrelated with one another. As a result, it will be important to look at the interrelationships among some of the issues associated with international student-athletes in American college sport.

Given these gaps on what have already been studied and what still needs to be discovered regarding international student-athletes in the NCAA, the present study had two research purposes. First, it aimed to investigate how U.S. domestic stakeholders' attitudes and behaviors toward NCAA Division I international student-athletes were interpreted, negotiated, and experienced by international student-athletes. Additionally, the study also examined how the

experience interacting with U.S. natives may affect international student-athletes' transition and adjustment to U.S. colleges. In accordance with these purposes, the present study had two central research questions: (1) How might U.S. stakeholders' attitudes toward international student-athletes at the NCAA Division I level affect these international student-athletes' overall college experience? (2) To what extent do these international student-athletes believe that their transition and adjustment to college were related with their experiences interacting with domestic coaches, teammates, fans, and the general student body? By learning from the international student-athletes, it is hoped that this study would help college sport administrators and policy makers better accommodate and support international student-athletes' physical, psychological, social, and educational needs.

Methods

Research Approach

This study was guided by the qualitative interpretive lens. Typically, researcher who claim to use the interpretive lens in qualitative studies aim to understand the complexity and constructed reality "from the point of view of those who live in it" (Schram, 2006, p. 44). Since this study sought to understand the beliefs or the constructed realities specifically from NCAA Division I international student-athletes' own perspectives, an interpretive lens was utilized to best fit the purpose of the study. One major feature among interpretivists is the common belief that "all constructs are equally important and valid" (Schram, 2006, p. 45). Accordingly, the researcher sought to understand international student-athletes' experiences and beliefs by conducting semi-structured interviews with the individuals, and make sense of the meanings based on what the interviewees said.

What really differentiates the interpretive lens from the critical lens is the fact that the interpretive lens "does not imply a change-oriented posture" (Schram, 2006, p. 45). Given the discrepancies in previous studies on international student-athletes' experiences, adjustments, and the ways international student-athletes had been perceived, the primary goals of this study were to understand what international student-athletes' experiences are truly like, how these student-athletes think they are perceived by Americans, and why they think these are the ways things are,

as opposed to advocate for any changes or reform before the truths and realities could be fully understood. Thus, the interpretive lens was used to guide this qualitative study.

Sampling

Criterion sampling was used in this qualitative study. All current international student-athletes in men's and women's basketball, men's soccer, women's field hockey, men's and women's tennis, and men's and women's track and field competing in the MAC were first selected as the potential research participants. These sports were chosen due to their relatively large international population in NCAA Division I. Additionally, the researcher purposefully chose the eight sports to include both individual sport athletes and team sport athletes, looking to further compare the potential differences in their experiences and beliefs. To be considered as qualified participants for the study, the selected student-athletes had to meet all the following criteria: (a) has nationality other than the United States; (b) was born outside the U.S.; and (c) currently plays one of the eight sports and holds an athletic scholarship. A complete list of 235 international student-athletes competing in the selected sports in the MAC was identified by the researcher through the official websites of the institutions' athletic programs. However, it was unclear which of them received athletic scholarships.

The MAC is a mid-major conference in NCAA Division I-FBS. Its full members include twelve mid- to large-sized public universities in the states of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and New York. This mid-major conference was chosen for two reasons. First, as college sport powerhouses from the Power Five conferences are typically highly attractive to the best young talent within the U.S., searching for talented freshmen from overseas has become a common strategy for many coaches from mid-major conferences, like the MAC, to keep their programs competitive. As a result, the MAC hosts a large number of international student-athletes. Additionally, the MAC sponsors many NCAA sports that have the largest percentages of first-year international student-athletes. As of the 2016-17 season in NCAA Division I, 62% of men's tennis, 59% of women's tennis, 34% of men's soccer, 25% of women's field hockey, 15% of men's basketball, 11% of women's basketball, 10% of men's track and field, and 10% of women's track and field first-year student-athletes came from countries other than the U.S. (NCAA, 2018). Due to its large number of international student-athletes and wide range of sports that host these student-athletes, the MAC was selected as the ideal athletic conference to draw participants from for the purposes of this study.

Data Collection Procedure

To receive the permission required to get in touch with the international student-athletes and the information needed to contact them, the researcher first emailed the associate athletic directors at each MAC institution with a description of the study purpose and a copy of the letter of approval to conduct the study from the Miami University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The administrative staff from five of the twelve MAC institutions replied, of which four agreed to pass the study request to their respective coaches. A total of seven coaches from three of the four MAC schools agreed to have their international student-athletes available for the study. The potential research participants' emails were also provided by the coaches.

Then for recruitment purposes, emails that identified the broad research topic, the study purpose and procedure, as well as an estimation of total time needed for the study were sent to the identified international student-athletes upon the associate athletic directors' and coaches' approvals. Specifically, the participants were informed in this initial contact that the study would be about their experiences as international student-athletes born outside the U.S., and a one-on-one interview would be conducted either face-to-face or on the phone, which would last for 40-60 minutes. The international student-athletes who were selected chose to participate in the study on a voluntary basis, and they were allowed to determine the time and location for the interview that were most convenient for them.

Eight international student-athletes from the three universities volunteered to participate in the study. Looking to have a larger sample size, the researcher then emailed an additional twenty-four MAC coaches in the eight sports with an explanation of the study purpose and an IRB approval letter attached. Three of them approved the researcher's study request and provided the contact information of their current international student-athletes. The researcher then emailed the international student-athletes, inviting them to participate in the study on a voluntary basis, with the research topic, purpose, procedure, and time needed being identified. Four more international student-athletes were recruited to the study.

Before each individual interview, the study participant was informed that the study had been approved by the IRB, pseudonym would be used in the study to maintain anonymity, and the name of the participant's institution would not be disclosed either. To collect data, the researcher conducted an in-depth semi-structured interview with each of the study participants, as Ridinger and Pastore (2000a) indicated that interviewing international student-athletes could

offer additional insights that are not available in quantitative studies. All interviews conducted for this study were audio recorded. Participants' responses were then transcribed verbatim. Once the transcription process was completed, a copy of the interview transcript was emailed to the participant to check if the information was correct and accurate. No change to the original transcripts was suggested by any of the participants.

Interview Protocol

Qualitative research interviews are defined as the “attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 3). A semi-structured interview, as described by Shank (2006), allows the interviewer “some latitude in how questions are asked, and in what order, but it is still the case that all interviewees are asked the same basic questions” (p. 50). In using semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method for this study, the researcher first developed an interview guide that contained five major interview questions along with multiple sub-questions under each of the major interview question (see Appendix A). This interview guide was then used to help facilitate all interviews with the study participants. Shank (2006) pointed out that it would be better to ask too few questions than too many, since too many questions in an interview can oftentimes lead the interviewee to rush and give “quick, superficial answers” (p. 51), as opposed to thick and meaningful data. For this reason, only five interview questions were designed for the interviews in this study. Nevertheless, except the first question about the participant's general background, all other interview questions aimed to answer the two central research questions.

The interview guide started with a series of questions that asked about the participant's background playing the sport before he/she started to compete in the NCAA. Fontana and Frey (1994) claim that giving out introductory questions regarding the participant's general background will help the researcher build rapport with the interviewee. Thus, questions regarding the participant's past experiences were included at the beginning of the interview guide. The background questions were then followed by a grand tour question that asked about the interviewee's overall athletic and social experiences at the U.S. institution he/she attends. As suggested by Shank (2006), this would allow the interviewee to “lead you on a grand tour of the topic or setting” (p. 46). Following this grand tour question, two more specific questions that focus on the interviewee's perception of U.S.-born stakeholders' (e.g. coaches, teammates, fans,

students) attitudes toward him/her as an international student-athlete in NCAA Division I sport were included. The final question asked about the potential connections between U.S. domestic stakeholders' attitudes and the interviewee's experiences and adjustments made in college.

In order to accommodate the participants and offer them the flexibility they might need to participate in the study, the researcher first attempted to meet each interviewee at the location of his or her choice, which was typically the participant's house or apartment, or a quiet place on or nearby the campus. In situations where a date and time that worked for both parties could not be found, video phone interviews were conducted instead. Among the eleven interviews, eight were conducted face to face at locations of the participants' choice, whereas three were conducted via FaceTime or Skype. As suggested by Sturges and Hanrahan (2004), while face-to-face interviews are required in some specific settings, in most occasions, conducting phone interviews and face-to-face interviews can help generate equal amount of useful information, especially when the research topic has a narrow focus that does not require the researcher to be immersed in the field. For this study, all eleven interviews lasted between thirty and fifty-six minutes. No significant difference in length were found between face-to-face interviews and video phone interviews.

Trustworthiness and Data Analysis

To ensure the quality of this qualitative study, multiple strategies were adopted to establish trustworthiness. First, data triangulation was used. With data triangulation, "the researcher uses multiple data sources in a single research study" (Johnson, 1999, p. 164). In this study, by interviewing the participants who compete in various sports at different universities in the same athletic conference, data from multiple sources that met the criteria were collected. This allowed the researcher to obtain a more accurate and holistic picture that could help answer the study's central research questions, as opposed to seek for universal truth (Merriam, 1998). In the context of sport, different coaches are likely to have different coaching styles and philosophies; likewise, the culture and dynamic of one team will also be different from another. Such factors may impact a student-athlete's overall experience. Consequently, there is no one single answer that can depict the full picture. For this reason, data triangulation was used in the study.

In addition, the researcher also confirmed the accuracy of interview transcripts with the research participants. While all eleven interviews had been audio recorded, some words a few interviewees said were not easy to identify by the researcher later in the transcription process. To

ensure the accuracy of the data, the researcher contacted some of the interviewees following the interviews; any words that were unidentifiable previously had been clarified by the participants. After the completion of the transcription process, the researcher emailed the interview transcript back to the participant. No change to the interview transcripts was suggested by any of the participants.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of international student-athletes' experiences and beliefs, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants until data saturation (or theoretical saturation) was reached, which is the point when no additional information that answers the study's central research questions can be gathered from the new interviewees. Sandelowski (1995) argued that "adequacy of sample size in qualitative research is relative, a matter of judging a sample neither small nor large per se, but rather too small or too large for the intended purposes of sampling and for the intended qualitative product" (p. 179). For this reason, the researcher did not set a specific number of participants to interview. Rather, in order to obtain a full picture for data analysis and theme generation, the interview process continued until the stage of theoretical saturation was reached when "seeing nothing new in newly sampled units or feeling comfortable that a theoretical category has been saturated" (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 180). In this case, the researcher believed that data saturation was reached after eleven interviews.

Data analysis started with reading each full interview transcript. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, it is important to read the entire transcript, as this will help the researcher get "a sense of the whole database" (p. 187). While reading the transcript, the researcher marked and bracketed everything that was meaningful or could answer the study's central research questions. This process was done in order, meaning that the researcher marked and bracketed the important information related to the first central research question first, and then went back to the top of the interview transcript to mark the important information for the second central research question and so forth. After marking, these raw pieces of significant information became slices of data. The researcher then gave names that conveyed the "meaning" of the slices of data as part of the process of in vivo coding, referring to the strategy of using "names that are the exact words used by participants" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 193). Data units that are somehow related were then grouped together into "higher order" categories in meaningful ways, which became the themes of this study.

When reporting the themes, data, and other important information in the results section of the study, low inference descriptors were used. Low inference descriptors refer to the words or phrases the researcher uses in study reports that convey the same exact meaning as do the words or phrases the interviewee uses; and the lowest inference descriptors are, as suggested by Johnson (1999), direct quotes or verbatim transcripts. According to Johnson (1999), the use of low inference descriptors can be helpful in establishing the study's interpretive validity, which refers to "accurately portraying the meaning attached by participants to what is being studied by the researcher" (p. 162), since direct quotes can help readers get the sense of the real language and dialect used and personal meanings expressed by the interviewee. Multiple direct quotes were used in the results section of this study to help readers experience the feelings of the interviewees. This could contribute to the accurate portrayal of the same meanings attached by the interviewees.

After multiple themes were identified, the researcher then developed and assessed interpretations of the data. As explained by Creswell and Poth (2018), this step involves "abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data" (p. 195). In other words, it is the process for the researcher to make sense of the data by turning themes "into larger units of abstraction" (p. 195). In this stage, the researcher connected his interpretations to the larger meaning of data, namely others' research and literature in the field.

Results

Demographics of the Participants

A total of eleven international student-athletes from six teams who were currently enrolled in four different MAC institutions voluntarily participated in the study (see Appendix B). The sample consisted of three males and eight females. Among the eleven participants, there were three men's basketball players, one women's basketball player, four women's field hockey players, and three women's tennis players. Although the author also aimed to include men's soccer, men's tennis, and men's and women's track and field student-athletes in the study, no athletes playing such sports who met the selection criteria had been successfully recruited. The eleven participants represented nine different countries – two were from Germany, two were from Nigeria, and the rest were from Australia, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, Serbia, Ukraine,

and the United Kingdom, respectively. Five of them claimed English to be their mother tongue, while the other six spoke English as a second language. In terms of race, seven of the eleven participants identified themselves as white, three identified themselves as black, while one identified as Asian. The sample included five seniors, two redshirt juniors, two juniors, and two sophomores. All participants' ages were between 19 and 22.

Another interview was originally conducted with a men's track and field student-athlete; however, the athlete revealed during the interview process that he received no athletic scholarship. As a result, the data gathered from this interviewee was not included in the data analysis process, neither was the interview counted as one of the eleven interviews for the study, as the student-athlete's walk-on status did not meet the selection criteria.

Findings

After analyzing the eleven interview transcripts, the researcher developed twenty-five codes that answered the first central research question and twenty-six codes that answered the second central research question. These codes were then combined into five different themes, namely: (a) Equal Treatment; (b) Positive Attitudes; (c) Challenges and Difficulties; (d) Support and Resources, and (e) Network and Exploration. The first four themes were further broken down into multiple sub-themes. All themes and sub-themes (see Appendix C) are presented in the section below.

Theme (a): Equal Treatment

This theme refers to the belief held by the majority of the participants that they had been treated in the same way as U.S. domestic student-athletes by American fans and the general student body. That is, most international student-athletes did not think fans or students would differentiate between international student-athletes and domestic student-athletes. Some claimed that fans and students would simply consider them as another player on the team, while there were other more important factors that might impact how fans perceive or judge student-athletes. Other participants said that they could not think of an example, but they had never encountered any issues being international.

Sub-Theme (1): Just an Athlete

When asked whether they had been perceived or treated differently by U.S. domestic students or fans, most participants said "no". Several claimed that there was little or no difference in terms of how international student-athletes and domestic student-athletes had been

treated, since everyone was considered a member of the team, no matter where they were from. Scott, a redshirt junior basketball athlete from Serbia, believed that in fans' eyes, he was just another player on his team. Likewise, Molly, a white senior field hockey player from Germany, pointed out that fans at home games would cheer for everyone on her team, including herself. Sherry, junior, a white field-hockey player from New Zealand, also had the same point, as she said:

I would say no, I don't really know. I don't feel I had been judged in a different way to other student-athletes. I think it's maybe harder to have preconceived ideas, 'cause I just sort of showed up, whereas a lot of the girls already played with each other in high school and stuff like that. But I would say no, given my experience... They feel that everyone is part of the team.

In another interview, Sarah, a Ukrainian tennis player, stated the same point that U.S. domestic students and fans would not distinguish international student-athletes from domestic student-athletes, as the student-athletes were typically considered altogether. Moreover, she pointed out that many U.S. domestic students at her institution lacked the knowledge of European countries and European people, which might also explain why they would perceive all student-athletes in the same way. Sarah expressed her opinions as follows:

No, I don't think so... Because first of all, they don't know about internationals, and then they don't know how they behave. I mean maybe they have some stereotypes about German and Spanish people, but they don't know about the rest of Europe. So it's hard for me. I don't think they even distinguish anything. They just see you as an athlete and a student, that's it. If they hear the accent, they will understand this is international, but I don't think they will see the difference between (the two).

While most participants in the study did not think their international status would impact the ways they were perceived by American domestic fans and students, some other factors might. When asked what the most important factors were that would determine how American students and fans perceive and judge the international student-athletes, some factors were mentioned by multiple interviewees, which included work ethic, respect, and skillset. For example, Sherry talked about how work ethic could be a universal standard:

I think it's definitely how hard you work, sort of in any kind of sport. If they know that you're working hard and putting in the time, and really just doing your best, compared to having someone, you know, wasn't really trying, then that's what I would say the sort of the negative or positive perceptions come up, like plays and stuff.

As for Scott, how well he played in games was the most critical factor that would impact U.S. domestic fans' attitude toward him. He said, "I think the most important factor is just the game. If you prove them that you are actually capable of playing, and they are just going to judge you based on your game." Just like Scott, Lynn, a white Australian field hockey player, also touched on her skillset. In addition, she emphasized the respect she showed to fans and her teammates' parents at home games, which she considered as a major factor in how U.S. domestic fans would perceive her. She indicated that respect was reciprocal, as she shared her thoughts in the interview as follows:

I think attitude on and off the field, and just general respect. I know I always try to say hi to all the moms and dads (at home games). And it's very well reciprocated, because I tried to be polite to them. As long as you're nice to them, then they're going to be very welcoming to you. But if you're a bit shy, then it might take a bit more to warm up to that sort of things. I know my first game here, after I played, all the parents came up to me and said "you did well" and things like that. So I think it does have a bit of skill in it. But yeah, I think definitely attitude and how you present yourself to other people.

The factors above identified by the international student-athletes could all be considered as some of the universal standards or expectations in the sports world. That is, almost all sport fans from worldwide are likely to evaluate athletes based on their work ethic, skillset, and respect. This further supported the participants' point that U.S. domestic students and fans would not distinguish international student-athletes from other U.S. domestic student-athletes; rather, the interviewees were simply considered as athletes on their respective teams.

A few participants mentioned that sometimes they felt they were perceived differently by the U.S. domestic people, because students and fans would oftentimes have higher expectations on these international student-athletes, which could lead to more pressure. This will be discussed

later in the paper in the sub-theme called “Expectations and Pressure”, which is part of Theme (c) “Challenges and Difficulties”.

Sub-Theme (2): No Problem with Being International

Some other participants remarked that they could not think of an example of how they had been perceived or treated in the same way as domestic student-athletes; however, they had never experienced any issues being international student-athletes. For example, Sarah claimed that she had never been targeted because of her international student-athlete status. Similarly, Nicole, Asian Canadian, a senior student-athlete playing tennis, stated that most U.S. domestic students she had interacted with were friendly to her, and she had not yet experienced any negative perceptions from American students or fans.

The participants were further asked whether they had heard of the unfriendly arguments against them as international student-athletes, like they had taken away scholarship opportunities from domestic student-athletes, or they had an unfair advantage playing in the NCAA because of their past experiences playing highly competitive sports back in their home countries, or they were taking advantage of Americans’ money and resources in order to become better athletes and compete for their national teams. Some interviewees said they had never heard any of such arguments. Several stated that they had heard of the scholarship argument before, but none of them had been targeted personally while attending college. Emily, sophomore, a white field hockey player from Germany, recalled:

So I’ve heard of that a lot, actually, like in class. Because I’m studying sports, this is also a big topic in classes. I’ve heard people complaining about that in class, but I’ve never got offended personally, like somebody told me, “Oh, you are taking away the scholarship”. Never heard of that. It’s just in general I’ve heard people talking about it, but never against me or my team or anything. It was just in general.

Neither had Christine, a white Brazilian tennis player in her second year at the university, been told in person that she took away an athletic scholarship opportunity, although she was familiar with the argument:

I mean I’ve heard of it a couple of times, but not in a negative way... I think just like making comments. That’s how some people think, but... People have never told me, “Oh you’re taking place of someone from this country”, so...

In general, the participants agreed that they had not been targeted by other students or fans at their universities due to their international student-athlete status. While some interviewees were familiar with the scholarship argument, nobody had ever confronted with it while in college. None of the eleven participants thought they had been perceived negatively in college because they were international student-athletes.

Theme (b): Positive Attitudes

All eleven participants in this study claimed that U.S. domestic people's attitudes toward them had been mostly positive, although not everything came easy. In addition, many said domestic teammates' and fans' positive attitudes toward them made their college experience better and more memorable. Since there were many different types of positive attitudes identified by the participants, they were classified into three categories – “Impressed and Curious”, “Respect”, and “Welcoming and Fan Love”. Each category is discussed individually in a sub-theme below.

Sub-Theme (1): Impressed and Curious

This is the basic level of positive reactions the international student-athletes received from U.S. domestic people on their campuses. Many participants reported that American students, fans, and teammates would show positive reactions toward them, because these American stakeholders were very interested in the participants' stories and different cultures. The participants were asked how U.S. domestic students would react when they realized that they were interacting with a student-athlete from another country. Most of the interviewees described the reactions as ranging from impressed to curious. Jason, a black Nigerian basketball athlete, for example, reflected on domestic students' reactions after hearing his story:

They are amazed, because they feel like, you know, we traveled all the way from our countries to come over here to play. I think if there is anything, it is a positive reaction. And they admire our courage to be able to leave our parents and leave our families to come over to play. You know, some of us have not seen our parents for years. I hadn't see my parents for seven years. I just saw them two months ago. So when people hear about that, they're always moved by that, touched by that. You know, I still think it's always positive reaction.

Similar to Jason, Alan, another black basketball player from Nigeria enrolled at a different MAC institution, touched on many U.S. domestic students' and fans' curiosity when they learned about

his international student-athlete status. He attributed domestic students' and fans' reactions to their limited experience traveling abroad. But at the same time, he also suggested that American people showed their positive reactions toward him as an international student-athlete through their curiosity. Alan said as follows:

I think it's very welcoming. A lot of them are impressed that I traveled so far to come to school and play basketball, so they're intrigued. And a lot of them want to hear the story that I have to tell, because some of them have not even left the border of the U.S. yet. And they were like, "How come you travel 6,000 miles? And I haven't even left the border of the U.S.!" It's kind of funny when they told me stuff like that. And I'm like, "Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do to achieve your dreams."

Emily interpreted the reactions of domestic students at her university from another perspective. She stated that domestic students understood how much work student-athletes had to put in, which explained why the general student body were more amazed when they learned that she was not just a student-athlete, but also an international student-athlete. Emily talked about the general student body's reactions as follows:

It's definitely positive. They're amazed how I could reach to that kind of level, like being international and then being an athlete. Even American student-athletes, I feel they are kind of seen as at a higher level than the normal students, because there are a lot of work... Like in season, we don't have free time at all. I don't have social life in season, except for my teammates. And then telling them that I'm also international makes it even more difficult. I don't think it makes it more difficult, 'cause it doesn't really matter. But they think it's more difficult being international and a student-athlete. So yeah, they're even more amazed, like "Can't really imagine how you could do that!"

American students and fans were not the only ones who were impressed and curious about international student-athletes' stories. A few participants said their teammates would also ask them about their past experiences playing sports in their home countries, or some general questions in regards to their cultures or language. In general, the participants believed that U.S. domestic people's impressed reactions and willingness to learn more demonstrated their positive attitudes toward the international student-athletes.

Sub-Theme (2): Respect

This sub-theme details some international student-athletes' feeling of being respected. It is the second level of positive attitudes U.S. domestic stakeholders may have toward international student-athletes. It moves beyond the feelings of impressed and curious to a stage where a respect of differences is emphasized. When asked about her relationship with her U.S. domestic teammates, Olivia, a black basketball player from the United Kingdom, responded, "I can tell that they're respectful with it, because they always ask me questions about how I might feel about situation or just wanting to get to know more stuff." As Olivia indicated, her teammates were aware of the cultural differences she brought to their program. As a result, they would ask her about her feelings, as opposed to simply doing what they thought was right, which really showed that her teammates not only cared about the potential cultural differences, but also respected them.

Respect for international student-athletes and their cultures may not be represented in the form of thoughts or opinions only, but also in the acceptance of diverse forms of popular culture. Jason explained how he felt the respect from his American teammates by giving an example of playing Nigerian music in the team locker room. He said:

I think they all understand and appreciate that (the cultural differences) ... Sometimes in the locker room I would play my music out loud, and they actually, you know, they're not very discriminating or being like "No, don't play that African stuff". They had never been like that. They listen to it, sometimes they dance to it, and they enjoy it. So yeah, they appreciate the fact that I'm different and I have my own music to listen to, and they don't abash me for not listening to American songs.

This kind of respect the participant felt from his teammates also helped make his college experience a good one. In his response to the question about how Americans' perceptions of him impacted his experience at the institution he was attending, Jason remarked:

I think it shaped my experience to be better than what it was supposed to be, based on the fact that I've not played a whole lot. Since I've been here, people's perception towards me has been fun, positive, you know. Everybody loves me here. They always say good stuff about me. So that has basically shaped the person I am. I'm happy to be around people here... I always have great energy.

I've been positive since then. I think their perception of me being a friendly person, a person that is easy to talk to made my experience here a good one.

Sub-Theme (3): Welcoming and Fan Love

In the next level of positive attitude, some international student-athletes felt not only the impressed reaction and respect from U.S. domestic stakeholders, but also love from the American fans, which to a large extent contributed to their positive college experience. Many participants shared their stories about feeling the love from the domestic fans and local community, and four of them specifically mentioned the support they received from their teammates' parents. Olivia was one of them. When asked whether she had been perceived differently given her international student-athlete status, Olivia said no and addressed on how domestic teammates' parents showed unconditional support and love to her:

From the games that I've played and what I've experienced so far, I don't feel like they've been perceiving me any different from the next person on the team. I feel we're perceived the same. I feel the fan base here is great. If anything, I would say I feel very much welcomed, especially by my teammates' families that come to watch the games, because they know I'm from so far, so they know it's hard for me to get home during the breaks, which makes them welcome me even more, more into their families, for me to come home with their daughters during breaks, and I really like that.

Besides the love from teammates' parents, another interviewee claimed that she and her teammates had also received a lot of support from the local residents. Christine described how she and her international-oriented team was welcomed by the local community:

We have a lot of people that support our team, and they always come and watch, like people from the city, from this society. And I think they do a pretty good job helping us and trying to show us that we're part of the family. So sometimes, they would invite us to dinner at their house and everything. They come and watch us at games, ask us how everything's going. They're willing to help us if we're facing some situations that we don't know how to deal with.

Just like Christine, Scott had the same experience feeling the love from the local community. He recalled how non-student fans in the area would greet him outside games:

Every time when we're doing community service, or even go to the grocery store... People see me, and they'll be like, "Oh, he's on the basketball team! How you're doing?" And then blah, blah, blah. Those people, I think they see me and perceive me as positive.

Scott believed that most Americans were very welcoming. A student-athlete from Serbia, he further shared the story how he was supported by a U.S. domestic student fan that he did not even know:

One of the fans made a sign. (He) put my picture there and wrote something is Serbian, but I think he's American... He actually wrote "you are my favorite player", but in Serbian, and he put a Serbian flag right next to my photo. I mean... I haven't... It's right here! I saw him before the game, during our warm-ups, 'cause he was waving it in front of our warmup lines. And I saw it after the game, he just left it there on the bleachers, so I picked it up. I just use it as a reminder, or just something I want to keep... I felt great, you know? He did all that just to show me respect and love, you know? So yeah, I feel great.

Many participants agreed that the support and love they received from U.S. domestic fans made their college athletic experience a good and memorable one. In his response to the question about how U.S. domestic stakeholders' perceptions of him shaped his overall college experience at the institution, Scott said:

It can only shape my experience in a positive way, 'cause I think I have three beautiful years behind me with a lot of memories. And once I leave this place, I would be happy with the connections that I have made, and happy with the memories that I have made, you know?

Theme (c): Challenges & Difficulties

This theme encapsulates the struggles and hard times the international student-athletes had experienced while attending college. Many different types of challenges and difficulties were identified by the participants in the interviews – some were related to U.S. domestic people's expectations and perceptions of them, while others were associated with their interactions with Americans. After combining these challenges and difficulties into groups, four sub-themes were developed – "Language Barrier", "Expectations and Pressure", "The American

Way”, and “Unwelcoming and Offensive Comments”. Each of the sub-themes is discussed below.

Sub-Theme (1): Language Barrier

Four participants whose mother tongues were not English mentioned in their interviews that they experienced some kind of language barrier when they first came to the U.S., which was a major challenge for them. Some observed that while they had learned English before coming to the U.S., what they learned back home was so much different from what U.S. domestic people would say every day. Emily touched on this difference, as she said, “At the beginning, I couldn't even really speak English. I had English in school (back in Germany), but learning English in school is so different from really talking and listening to it all day.” The same point was also mentioned by Scott. In addressing the biggest obstacle he experienced in his freshman year, Scott said, “Language barrier... I think that was the most important one. It was not the language barrier, because I knew the language. It was just... They talk too fast and they talk in a different way, like using slangs, that kind of stuff. So I had to pick that up.”

The four participants agreed that the intensive use of English every day was somehow a hard transition for them at the beginning. However, despite facing the early challenge in language, all four interviewees asserted that interacting with other people in English was no longer a hard thing for them by the end of their freshman year. Some even said they were able to communicate with their U.S. domestic friends easily within six months. The four international student-athletes all claimed that they had people helping them with their English in their freshman year, which made their transition easier than otherwise it would be. This type of support and assistance is discussed in Theme (d) “Support and Resources” – Sub-Theme (2) “Language Assistance”.

Sub-Theme (2): Expectations and Pressure

Many participants mentioned U.S. domestic people's expectations of them and how such expectations could result in pressure. As suggested by the participants, the expectations might come from different groups of people, such as fans, teammates, coaches, and the general student body.

Although Molly denied the point that American fans would judge or perceive international student-athletes differently, she argued that U.S. domestic people would typically hold higher expectations on international student-athletes:

I think at the beginning, there's always more pressure on internationals from the team, the coaches, probably fans too, just because they know that Europeans have been playing field hockey for longer. In nations like Germany, Netherland, and Great Britain, they are always pretty good at field hockey. So there's always (the belief) like "okay, that girl must be good".

Molly was not the only international field hockey athlete who felt this way. In another interview, Lynn, the Australian field hockey player from a different university, expressed the exact same feeling:

Sometimes I feel like they (fans and her teammates' parents) would probably have a bit more expectation (on me), because Australian field hockey is ranked number 1 and 2 in men's and women's. So sometimes I feel like I'm expected to be at a certain level, while I'm really just a college player, not like an Australian player or anything like that... They expect me to be better? I don't know. But I'm just very average.

Multiple international student-athletes suggested that they had felt the higher expectations being placed on them by U.S. domestic people. However, this not only happened in those sports with a large number of student-athletes from overseas, like field hockey. As a basketball player from the United Kingdom, a country that was not considered a powerhouse in the sport, Olivia also experienced people's higher expectation. When asked whether she thought U.S. domestic people would judge her based on her international student-athlete status, Olivia said no. But then she added:

I feel sometimes when I tell people that I am an international athlete, that's the time when there's this pressure that I have to uphold that I have to be good to a different standard. Because it's like the fact that the coaches are looking in a different country for an athlete to join their team, that means the athlete has to be really good. And I get those comments sometimes, like "Oh, you must be really good if you came from a different country!" So sometimes I feel there's that pressure on me that people think in these certain ways, like I have to be something great, so...

Some other participants contended that U.S. domestic people's higher expectations of them came not only on the field or on the court, but also in their everyday lives, which put additional

pressure on them. For example, Alan elaborated on how being an international student-athlete from Africa itself at a predominantly white institution could lead to more pressure:

I would say once they (the general student body) discovered that I'm an athlete, they would hold athletes to this high standard. And then when they discover that I am an international student, they will hold me to an even higher standard, because not only I'm representing the school, but also I'm representing the country where I come from. So they would expect a lot more from me than they would expect from an average student. So I mean that kind of puts pressure on you, because everywhere you go, you know, people are watching you; and everything you do is more like an interview, it's more like an audition. Everybody sees how you perform, so they know how to relate with you. They're like, "Is he a good kid?", "Is he a bad kid?", "Is this mad?", "Is this stupid?" You know? All that kind of stuff... So I think that kind of puts some pressure on you. You can't really live your life the way you want to live it, because you're not sure how the society would perceive it, since it's a different culture.

Sarah expressed similar points. Despite being a white international student-athlete at another predominantly white institution, Sarah also emphasized that she had to be careful of her own behaviors outside sport, as she believed American people would relate what she did to her country. When asked how other U.S. domestic people's perceptions of her had shaped her overall college experience, Sarah said:

On tennis court, I don't really care what people say. I'm here to win, to win the points, or whatever I act or whatever I do. I mean, I should be in my limit, of course... But I'm really not that aware of it, because I play tennis, she plays tennis, so who cares? But then when I'm outside the court, I'm trying to be more aware of what I'm doing, because people see me and associate me with different stuff. So I don't really want to get negative perspective on my country because of the way I'm acting.

While many participants claimed that the expectations from U.S. domestic students, fans, teammates, and coaches had resulted in more pressure, not everyone had the same reaction when facing such intense scrutiny. Despite the pressure, some said they enjoyed playing with teammates who had diverse backgrounds and learning about the sport from different

perspectives. Another participant claimed to be willing to help the U.S. domestic freshman players who did not have a lot of experience playing highly competitive sport in high school. On the opposite side, one participant revealed a sense of disappointment at not being able to express the “true self” because of the pressure to conform to these expectations. In addition, one participant admitted that in the MAC, the field hockey teams with more international players tended to win more games, although not all international players played at the same level. This implied that sometimes people’s higher expectation on international student-athletes might not be unreasonable.

Sub-Theme (3): The American Way

This sub-theme refers to the fact that many U.S. domestic people would expect and require the international student-athletes to behave in such ways that Americans are used to, or judge foreigners using American standards. For many participants in the study, it was not easy to abandon their own customs that they had been practicing for years. However, sometimes they had to conform to the expectations from American domestic people. This type of challenge could be found in many different circumstances, including interactions with authoritative figures like coaches and professors, as well as casual talks with students and fans in everyday life. Although most participants in the study declared that American people’s attitudes toward them had been friendly and welcoming, there were still some occasions that required the international student-athletes to react to, and behave in, ways that they did not grow up with, namely the “American way”, largely as the result of cultural differences between the U.S. and their home countries.

Jason and Alan, the two Nigerian basketball players currently enrolled at two different universities, provided the exact same example demonstrating the significant cultural difference they found between Nigeria and the U.S. in terms of how people react to elders’ critiques. Jason recalled his experience interacting with his head coach in his freshman year, where the coach was angry because of the way Jason reacted to criticism:

So my coaches used to yell at us during practice, you know. When we do something wrong, they'll always say that we should look them in the face when they talk to you. I don't know about you, but from where I come from, if your elder, your parent is yelling at you or screaming at you, you cannot look them in the face. You bow down and keep your head down. It took me a while to look at the coaches in the face when they are talking to me... At first, he (the head coach)

got mad, because he thought I was being disrespectful, and I did not care about what he was saying. But after I explained it to him... So I'm aware of that, you know, you have to communicate about these differences. I told him that from where we come from, we don't look at people in the face, especially when the elders are talking to us and all that. But he told me that this is America, and in America, this is how you do it; if you are not looking in the face, it's a sign of disrespect. So I had to understand that, you know, in America, act like an American, and behave in such a way...

Alan told a very similar story, explaining how he had to adapt to the cultural differences and look his coach in the face. In addition, he gave another example of his professor, who told him to write in an American way. Alan did his final two years of high school in the U.S. As he was discussing the differences he found in English spelling, Alan said:

In high school, I noticed that the spellings were kind of different, like “color”, from where I come from, there's a “u” in “colour”. But here, there's no “u”. “Favorite”, there's a “u” in “favourite”, but there's no “u” here. I'm like... Why? Why are they taking out the “u”s? (laugh) You know, there are slight differences in spellings. When I came in my freshman year, I took a test, and I spelled it the way I usually spelled it at home, with a “u”, and the professor marked me wrong, and I lost like three points from the whole test because of that. And I was like, “This is how you spell it”. And he was like, “No, no! This is America.” I was like, “Okay... Yeah, I get it now.” (laugh)

Alan also believed that Americans would judge and even criticize foreigners in a different way than they would judge American domestic people. When asked whether he thought U.S. domestic people would perceive or judge him differently given his international student-athlete status, Alan asserted they would, as he responded:

Definitely, because for the most part, you're not part of them; you're not part of their culture. They're always around you, they're always under your toes, you know? “What is he going to do in situations like this?” “He might react differently than a typical American will react...” And then if you do something bad, they will judge you more than they would judge a typical American, because they'd be like, “Maybe in where he's from, this is how people behave. We don't behave like

this.” So they will criticize you more, because you know, you're from a different country.

Alan then further added:

Americans always think they're right, every time. But once they travel and leave the border of the U.S. and they see how other people live, then they will realize “Maybe we're not right all the time. Maybe what other people are doing is the best way for them.” Yeah, like I went to Europe with the basketball team in my freshman year, we went to a talk that told us when you go to Europe, don't try to Americanize Europeans. They hate that, because Americans can't go to Europe and try to tell Europeans how to behave in Europe. You're supposed to go there and behave like them, but not go there and make them be like you, you know? So stuff like that... But yeah, Americans always think they are right, all the time. But most of the time, they're not. (laugh)

Emily expressed a very similar point. While she did not say Americans always think they are right, Emily pointed out that some American people love themselves and everything about their country, so they would expect foreigners to act in these American ways as well. From the standpoint of a student-athlete from another country, Emily suggested that all international student-athletes need to be open-minded, and not to complain about the different cultures, or they would get a lot of hate, as she said:

If you're not open to new things or you complain about differences, then yeah, people will not like you, if you complain about the culture in a serious way... So I complained about the custom more like in a funny way, like I told you about the food. I complain about the (American) food, but that's more like a funny thing that I don't like too much sugar. But if you really complain, and be in your culture and don't accept the differences, then you'll have a hard time. You need to be open for sure, because Americans, they love themselves. They love their culture and they love everything about America. And if you say anything against that, yeah, you'll get a lot of hate. (laugh) You shouldn't do that. But as soon as you accept it and you are open to everything, you're fine. People will like you, it doesn't matter that you're different.

Also touching on the point that many Americans love themselves and their cultures, Nicole stated that the U.S. domestic people at her university would be more willing to support those teams with the majority of student-athletes from the U.S., as opposed to those programs with most student-athletes being international, like tennis. Nevertheless, Nicole said that she completely understood it, since as an international student-athlete, she would also show more support toward other international student-athletes at her university. Nicole indicated the following in the interview:

I think they would be likely to support more Americans... Yeah, even for me, when I go to events, I would cheer for the ones who are international. (laugh) Yeah, so I think it's the same thing for them, for the Americans to cheer on their American friends... A lot of our friends who come to watch us are international.

Just like Nicole, Alan suggested that Americans would show more support toward U.S. domestic student-athletes, as he said:

I feel like everybody has this thing in them that makes them support people from where they're from, people of the same culture, and they try to criticize people from other cultures, mix them, you know? It makes them feel unified. So yeah, I wouldn't judge them for doing that. Most of it is based on security reasons, because I feel after 9/11, everybody has been walking on their tippy toes, you know, be careful with who they interact with, especially with people from foreign countries. You know? So stuff like that... I think that kind of influenced the way they interact with people from other countries.

Another point some participants raised was that sometimes they did not think the U.S. domestic people would be able to understand the challenges and difficulties international student-athletes were facing, since Americans could not really think from international student-athletes' perspectives. Rather, most U.S. domestic people would consider things in traditional American ways, as argued by some of the interviewees. For example, Lynn talked about being homesick:

International students definitely have a better understanding, because I know sometimes my American friends would definitely say things that they don't really think about. So I know some of them will be like, "Oh, I just want to go home", and they live like a drive away... So I know the international students will have a greater understanding. I remember one year I went to New York with two

American friends and a New Zealand girl. And that was good, 'cause I know she understands those sort of thing. But yeah, definitely the understanding part is a lot better on the international part, because the Americans usually can't realize that I'm literally on the side of the world.

Alan claimed that he did not hang out with his U.S. domestic teammates often. When asked why, he attributed it to the large gap between American cultures and his own cultures. He explained it in the interview as follows:

We don't really hang out a lot outside the locker room. Sometimes we go to, you know, parties together, and hang out. Yeah, sometimes that happens. But I was really, really focusing on, you know, having good grades and stuff. So I was always taking care of my schoolwork, while some of the guys, you know, hanging out... (laugh) I think there's a huge cultural difference. The kind of music they like, I might not necessarily like it. So the kind of things they do for fun, I might not necessarily do it, because of the cultural difference, because they were brought up in a different way that I was brought up. So if I hang out with them once or twice, I can see that the things they're doing, they're really having fun with it; I'm not really having fun with it, because it's not the thing I would do to have fun. (laugh)

For those international student-athletes who encountered challenges that were specifically related to conforming to the expectations of American cultures, many used the word “adaptation”, like Jason and Alan, who both adapted to the American ways of communication eventually, although it took them a while before feeling comfortable looking at their coaches in the face and deleting the letter “u” in words like “colour” and “favourite”. Scott also highlighted the importance of being adaptive as an international student-athlete playing in the NCAA. He believed his ability to be adaptive to any circumstance was one of his biggest strengths, remarking, “It’s all about being adaptive. If you can be adaptive, you’ll just become one of them.”

Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to expect everyone to adapt to everything. Other participants identified different coping strategies in their transition process when their ways of doing things were significantly different from the American standards, or when the difficulties they were facing were not recognized by the domestic people. For example, Sherry, Lynn, and Nicole all mentioned that sometimes they would talk to their friends who were also international

students. Some other participants stated that they would communicate about their challenges and struggles with coaches who had foreign backgrounds. According to the participants, these students and coaches were typically better at showing understanding on certain issues. Also facing the challenge of being culturally different, Alan claimed that he would focus more on academics as opposed to hanging out. His American teammates did realize the existence of cultural differences, and they showed him a lot of respect, according to Alan, as they would give him his own space, if needed.

Sub-Theme (4): Unwelcoming and Offensive Comments

This sub-theme focuses on the unwelcoming and offensive comments targeted at international student-athletes. These comments are different from those discussed in Sub-Theme (3), as “The American way” comments were not offensive or degrading to international student-athletes in any way. Very few participants in this study reported being offended by U.S. domestic people, and the frequency of offensive remarks was overall very low.

Scott had an unpleasant experience playing in his freshman year, as a student fan he did not know talked trash to him at home games. Scott remembered:

In my freshman year, one of our fans... I think he's a student. I mean... I know he's just a student. He used to yell at me every time he would see me. He would say, “I'll beat you in one on one!” He told me that twice or three times maybe! And you know, you're going to remember that. I was like, “Come on bro! You're going to beat me one-on-one? What are you talking about? I played this game for 17 years. You're like... Come on!”

Jason asserted that he had never had issues being an international student-athlete since college; almost everyone had been friendly and welcoming to him. However, he also indicated that while he was attending high school in the U.S., some American fans and players on opposing teams did offend him and his African teammates. When answering the question if anybody had ever told him that he had taken away scholarship opportunities from U.S. domestic student-athletes, he looked back at his experience and said:

So in high school, most of my teammates were also Africans, and we played a game against this school... This game was the regional final, and this team made a big deal about it, like we are in the United States, and they called us saying this game was basically the U.S. against Nigeria, since most of my teammates were

also Nigerians. But meanwhile, we also had some people from USA playing on our team too. So you know, our fans got really upset that their fans dressed up in blue, red, and white, coming out with flags and everything, just chanting “USA! USA! USA! Go back to your country! Stop staying on the court!” I think it was a racist remark to some extent, and a fight almost broke out, actually... And the same situation happened in the state final. We ran out of the floor, and some of the players on the team we were playing against were also saying “USA! USA!” You know? This is a country type of situation, and we just had to take whatever... Yeah, that did happen in high school.

Emily, who is from Germany, also claimed to have a very positive experience at her university. The only thing she did not like was that some U.S. domestic people would ask her questions about Germans in the Second World War. According to Emily, she was not offended by it personally, but she was not very happy about it either, as she stated:

I don't feel anything like judgment. But of course, Germans have kind of the bad image, because of history and everything. And when I say I'm German, I hear a lot like, “Oh yeah, there was the Second World War! Didn't the Germans start it?” I was like, “Yes, we did, but that was a different generation. There was not me!” I hear that a lot, but I don't think they really meant to be mean or something... They just asked like, “You guys started the Second World War?” But they had never offended me personally; it's just about the Germans. They also understand that it's not my generation; I didn't even live at that time... That's like the most offending thing. I don't like hearing that, of course. But I also know it's not against me, because I don't have anything to do with it.

While people's comments could be unwelcoming and even offensive to international student-athletes to some extent, they were not common. Most participants in the study had never had such experiences. Even when facing situations like these, the participants said they would not care too much, neither would they take the issues personally. For example, Lynn said she would not associate herself with people's negative opinions of her, and Sarah claimed that she would not take other people's thoughts personally, otherwise she would not have such a positive overall college experience. For Jason, while he had to endure extreme comments in high school, he also insisted that such experiences motivated him to work harder and be the best player he could be.

According to the interviewees themselves, their transition to college was not negatively affected by other U.S. domestic people's negative voices, if there were any.

Theme (d): Support and Resources

Support and resources refer to the help international student-athletes received from their coaches, teammates, the athletic department in general, professors, and other people around them. This kind of help is something specific other people actually did or offered to the participants which impacted their lives in a positive way by resolving an issue or problem the participants had, as opposed to simply having a positive attitude or being welcoming. Many participants in the study pointed out that people around them had offered support and resources to them, especially in their first year at their current institutions, which was crucial in terms of helping them have a smooth transition to their new environment.

The different forms of support and resources the participants mentioned in the interviews were grouped into three categories, namely (1) Academic Support, (2) Language Assistance, and (3) Helpful and Understanding Team Environment. Each of these three categories is discussed in the sub-themes below.

Sub-Theme (1): Academic Support

Multiple participants mentioned the importance of academic support they received from either professors or the academic support staff within the athletic department. The international student-athletes considered such help crucial in the process of transitioning to a new educational system. Most interviewees who emphasized academic support had very different educational backgrounds before coming to the universities they were currently attending. Emily, for example, who speaks English as a second language, spoke about how much help the professors offered her outside class:

As soon as people hear that I am from a different country, and especially speak a different language, they help me a lot. Like professors, they gave me the opportunities to make life a little bit easier, especially at the beginning, like you had a lot of readings in class. It still took me a while to fully understand all these articles and everything. I might have to read them twice or three times to get to know everything, and professors totally understood that and showed me stuff that I could do. So I went to a lot of sessions where they would prove read your essays

and check your homework. And I met a lot with professors individually to talk about everything, so they fully understood and helped me a lot.

Sarah compared the different teaching approaches between professors in the U.S. and those in her home country. She stated that the professors at her current institution in the U.S. did a better job facilitating students learning, as they would always encourage questions, which really helped her with the academic work. She said:

The (American) professors' approach, they were more willing to help and answer questions. Back home, it was not allowed, like if you had a question, you're stupid, you know? But here, there is no stupid question, you know? If you have a question, maybe someone else has the same question, and you are answering a lot of them. So for me, it was open, and I could go to office hours and ask questions and get some help. Back home, it was not like that; you had to figure out yourself.

Besides support received from professors directly, some participants also mentioned how academic support staff within the athletic department helped them and made their transition a bit easier. When asked about the interactions with the athletic staff, Scott elaborated on how much the academic support he received in his freshman year meant to him:

The faculty and staff there, they're aware of it, 'cause I remember my freshman year I came here and I didn't know... So I had to do my first homework, like the first essay since I got here. And I didn't know how to start. I just didn't know what to do. And then I got help from a support staff, and I worked with her. She showed me like, "yeah, this is how you do it". You know? They knew that I was foreign to them; I needed help. So they helped me.

Olivia also mentioned the help from academic support staff within the athletic department. Unlike Emily, Sarah, and Scott, English is Olivia's native language. However, she still found the help from academic advisors useful, as she transferred to the MAC institution from a community college. When addressing her interactions with the athletic staff at her university, she talked about the academic advisors as follows:

We have this program that we have to have weekly meetings with our academic advisors, just so they know that we're on track with all studies. So that is a big help, a lot, especially for freshmen and people like me that's transferring from

schools that don't really have that many stuff, you know? Just to make sure that you're on track.

Sub-Theme (2): Language Assistance

For a lot of international students, language can be a major barrier; and it is the same for many of these international student-athletes. Fortunately, some participants in this study said their coaches, teammates, and other U.S. domestic people around them had shown a lot of understanding and patience, as well as helped with their English, which made a positive impact on the international student-athletes' transition.

Alan speaks English as his first language. However, as a Nigerian, he has an accent, and sometimes American people may not be able to understand him easily. When asked whether he believed his coaches and other athletic staff were aware of the cultural differences he might have brought, Alan said yes, with a highlight on other people being patient with his accent:

I wouldn't say there was a language barrier, but since I'm African, I have this accent. Sometimes when I talk, people don't understand what I'm saying, and they'll be like, "Can you say that again? 'Cause we didn't really get you that time." That makes me know that they are aware that there is a language difference there, and they are willing to accommodate that, and work with me through that... I know they won't understand what I'm saying every time, but they tried to listen closely and hear what I have to say.

Scott also claimed that the coaches seemed to be patient with his English. He gave an example of his head coach showing understanding at the end of a team practice, as he recalled:

I remember my freshman year with this coach... So we used to have quotes of the day, and something like defensive emphasis and offensive emphasis, those three things. So we had to memorize those before every practice and every time we would stack it up, like every time we would be done with practice. He would ask us what the defensive quote, offensive quote were, and what the quote of the day was. And then one time, he put up some quote that I knew actually. And I think I was the one who raised my hand, and I said it. And he asked me "Okay, what does it mean?" And then it took me a second, because I was thinking, I was trying, I was trying to explain it. And then somebody tried to interrupt me, and the coach was like "Hold on, hold on, hold on! Wait, wait, wait! Let him finish!"

That's when I know how patient they were with my English and with my different cultures or the language differences.

Just like Scott, Emily also spoke about how her head coach showed understanding toward her language barrier. Additionally, her coach put in a lot of effort helping her improve her English-speaking skills on the field, as she played field hockey, a team sport, where communication is essential. Emily detailed the story as follows:

So as a goalkeeper, you're kind of a leader of the game, because you have the overall view from behind. So you need to talk. But at the beginning, I couldn't talk at all. I had no idea what to say, especially like everything goes so fast. At the beginning, I had to think about what I'm going to say in my language, and then I had to translate it. But as soon as I translate this, the situation was over for a couple of minutes already. (laugh) So that was kind of hard. But she (the head coach) made me a whole list of vocabularies I can use that I learned and everything. So she helped me with that, and she totally respected that.

For Sarah, talking in English with other people used to be something she was afraid of. Nevertheless, after a while, she realized that most people around her were friendly and understanding, which eventually made her become more comfortable talking to people. She said in the interview:

When I first came here, I was really scared that I would offend anybody, like I was scared to talk, because I know America is so diverse, and they take each other for words, for anything you say. So I was like, "Oh my God, if I say something wrong which I didn't mean it..." So like, you know, I would just shut up and don't talk, 'cause I don't want to offend anybody. Like I'm here, and I want to be friendly with everybody. So yeah. But everybody is understanding. So as soon as I started talking, they understand that I'm international, and they're pretty cool about it. Some of them are even friendlier, and would ask more questions about me.

Although the four international student-athletes above had different feelings about their transition to American colleges, they all agreed that the understanding and help on language they had from coaches, teammates, and other people around them made their transition easier. Once

people showed their patience with accents or language barriers, these international student-athletes became more comfortable talking and interacting with other U.S. domestics.

Sub-Theme (3): Helpful and Understanding Team Environment

While the different educational system and the different language being used in school were two major considerations for international student-athletes, the support and resources they received were not limited to academic study and language proficiency only. Many interviewees indicated that their team or athletic program was like a family that helped with their lives in various ways. For example, Molly said her team was “a family away from home”; Christine claimed that being with her teammates and coaches “felt like home”; and Sarah suggested the team had “a family environment”. Olivia was another participant who used the word “family” when describing her relationship with the U.S. domestic teammates on her current team. She believed that her teammates’ help made her transition a lot smoother:

The teammates are really nice. They actually helped my transition into DI, because obviously, it was a bit overwhelming when I first came. The junior college was small, so it's like... You kind of know everyone at the school, and everyone knows you, especially if you are an athlete. But here, especially with all the athletics being so big, and then this university has a lot of different people... I feel like my teammates really helped me, because it's like I'm coming to a family straight away, where I'm able to feel comfortable, sharing my new experiences with these people... They have already had certain stuff in common with me, so that made it easy.

Emily addressed the family environment on her team by highlighting the important role her head coach had played in her daily life outside games and practices. She referred to the coach as her “mother” away from home, as the coach would be willing to help with almost any problem the international student-athletes might encounter. Emily recalled how the head coach helped her during her freshman year:

At the beginning, I had no idea about miles or pounds, because we have different scale systems, like kilograms and kilometers and everything. She tried to explain it to me, like she went with me to the grocery store, and showed me what a pound of cheese is like and everything, so I know what I need to buy. Stuff like that... Small things. Super nice. And she's not only our coach; she's honestly like a

mother here, because our mothers are not here, she knows and she just takes care of everyone. As soon as we have a problem, we go to our coach.

Sherry emphasized how critical it was that her older teammates helped her in the first few weeks. According to Sherry, the help she received from her upper-class teammates allowed her to settle in to her new life quickly and easily. In her response to the question about factors influencing her transition, she explained:

Just being very supportive of getting you set up in those first couple of weeks, especially we came early for preseason, so we had time to get shown around. And the older girls would walk us around to where our classes were going to be, so we wouldn't get lost on the first day and stuff like that. So I think just the support for any questions that you have, stuff like that.

Sometimes, the helpful and understanding team environment went beyond the team. Jason thanked the administrative staff within the athletic department at his university for their love and support, who purchased a round-trip flight ticket for him, knowing that he had not had a chance to go back home and see his family for seven years. He said:

The staff or the people that are around here, those people who are in their offices now, they build relationships with us, which really, really helped me and made my life a whole lot easier. The athletic department paid for my flight to go home to see my parents. So you know, stuff like that and what they do really helped me. So I really appreciate them for doing that.

Theme (e): Network and Exploration

This theme refers to some international student-athletes' willingness and desire to explore something new and make connections outside athletics. Not all participants in the study enjoyed making friends with students who were not athletes – many said their friends at their institutions were mostly teammates or student-athletes on other athletic teams, due to the limited time they had outside practices, games, and classwork. Nevertheless, a few participants claimed to be actively engaged in student organizations or other university activities outside sports. Different experiences in relation to network and exploration were reported by the participants.

The Nigerian basketball player Jason was willing to connect with American domestic students and people outside the athletic bubble, but the fact that culturally he was very different

from most other students at his university somehow slowed down this process of networking. When asked in the interview whether he would hang out with U.S. domestic people, Jason said:

I'm mostly friends with my other international guys. But I also interact a whole lot with my U.S. domestic teammates. I think in this type of situation, you have to find people that you share some similarities with, because you cannot find, you know, a whole lot of similarities. So you have to derive pleasure and share, like the fact that you share little similarities with someone else. So yeah, I think I interact a lot better with my teammates now than I did when I first got here.

As the other Nigerian in the study, Alan expressed his wish to have more resources available around campus for international students with diverse cultures, so he could not only get African food and clothes, but also connect with people with different backgrounds. He encouraged all universities to open an international student center that would serve international students' social needs. He suggested the following:

I think every university as a whole should have an international student center that not only focuses on your immigration part, like signing your I-20s and doing all the documents; they should have an international student office that kind of runs orientation for incoming international students, and show them the places around the community, where they can get stuff, you know, like food stuff... So I think they should have an office like that on every campus that caters to the needs, even the social needs of international students.

On the opposite side, some participants found the process of making friends at college easy. Lynn, for example, said she was good at making friends, and being an Australian made it easier, because people at her university thought it was cool talking to an Australian, and they would ask her questions. Likewise, Sherry indicated that being international was a good conversation starter for her, as Americans would be curious about her. She claimed to be very active participating in various kinds of programs and activities on campus outside athletics, which was very different from most of her teammates. She noted:

I'm in a couple of different organizations, where I'm the only student-athlete. I know that a lot of athletes sort of just stay in their own bubble and don't really do that. I would say I definitely interact with student-athletes more than non-athletes,

but I do try to get myself out there and make, you know, different friends and stuff like that.

When asked how her experience interacting with U.S. domestic students had impacted her transition to college, Sherry offered the following thoughts:

I think when they know that you are from somewhere else, they are... But first of all, it's like a cool conversation starter, and you can talk about a lot of things, and they like to know a lot, like where you're from and stuff like that. And then they can also be more helpful, and trying to emphasize like no one wants to be so far away from home, and helping you out with things that are a little bit different.

For Sherry and Sarah, interacting with U.S. domestic non-athlete students was actually fun and helpful to their transition. Sarah explained why she enjoyed campus activities outside athletics so much:

I'm just grabbing all those opportunities in different programs, different organizations. I know I'm making hard for myself, joining all these stuffs (laugh), because my schedule gets bigger. But just because there are opportunities and different possibilities to enter and network... It was just an amazing experience, because I got to visit different states, I got to meet different people, got all these connections. So for me, it's huge. I really love it.

Later in the interview, Sarah touched on how being active on campus, joining different organizations, and having connections with a lot of people made her transition to this university smooth, as she said:

Actually, I was never homesick, because I was so overwhelmed – every day was so different for me; everything was like, “Oh my God, this is so cool”, or “Oh my God, look at that, that is different!” So for me, I was just exploring, and I was never homesick. So when it was winter break, I was like... I don't want to go home! But then I realized the campus was actually pretty empty, and I was the only one still here...

Based on the information gathered from the eleven interviews, a handful of international student-athletes who participated in the study were willing to explore and make connections with U.S. domestic students outside the athletic bubble. Among these participants, some claimed the process of making friends outside sports to be a bit hard at the beginning, whereas others

suggested it was easy. The two participants who found the process easy also stated that making connections and exploring new opportunities helped with their transition to college.

Discussion

The study had two research purposes. First, it aimed to investigate how U.S. domestic stakeholders' attitudes and behaviors toward NCAA Division I international student-athletes were interpreted, negotiated, and experienced by international student-athletes. Also, the study examined how the experiences interacting with U.S. domestic stakeholders may affect international student-athletes' transition and adjustment to college. To find the answers to these questions, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven international student-athletes from nine different countries who were currently enrolled in four different universities in the MAC. The findings suggested that the eleven participants had positive overall college experiences, largely thanks to American fans' equal treatment to U.S. domestic student-athletes and international student-athletes, along with domestic teammates', fans', and general student body's positive attitudes toward the participants as international student-athletes. Additionally, the results revealed that the different language spoken, certain expectations fans, teammates, and coaches had on international student-athletes, as well as some American people's firm belief in "American ways" to some extent made the international student-athletes' first-year transition challenging. However, such difficulties were sometimes offset by the help and resources offered by faculty, international student-athletes' teammates, coaches, and other athletic staff.

Unlike the six international student-athletes enrolled at an NCAA Division I-FCS HBCU who were unhappy with the university's shortage of athletic resources (Sato et al, 2018), the eleven MAC international student-athletes in the present study felt impressed about what their athletic departments had offered. Many indicated that through their frequent interactions with the highly professional athletic training staff within their athletic departments, they received not only care, support, and advice, but also great treatment and love. This kind of support from athletic training professionals went far above international student-athletes' expectations, according to the participants. Some others highlighted how they had been taken seriously by their athletic departments, as these participants as student-athletes would have exclusive access to high quality practice gyms and weight rooms on campus. All eleven participants in this study claimed to be satisfied with the resources their current varsity teams had provided. This is in sharp contrast

with the international student-athletes' lack of satisfaction at the HBCU found in the Sato et al. study, which implied that university budget matters, and international student-athletes in those bigger athletic programs in NCAA Division I-FBS conferences are more likely to have positive experiences than those in lower divisions where budget could be a constraint.

The participants in this study also reported to have positive overall experiences in both athletics and social engagement at the institutions they were attending. This finding is consistent with the results in the Trendafilova et al. (2010) study, which suggested that international student-athletes in NCAA Division I-FBS major conferences (Power Five conferences and the original Big East Conference) generally had high levels of satisfaction with their academic and athletic experiences. Just like those international student-athletes in the Trendafilova et al. study, many participants in the present study attributed their positive overall athletic experiences partially to having dedicated and understanding coaches and athletic staff, as well as having all the resources they needed within their athletic departments.

According to the international student-athletes in the study, they had not been targeted by U.S. domestic students, fans, teammates, or teammates' parents for being international. Instead, many participants said the American stakeholders showed positive attitudes toward them. Besides being impressed and curious, the U.S. stakeholders also showed respect, a welcoming attitude, and love to the participants, since they understood how hard it would be for the international student-athletes to play home games with no family cheering for them. As a result, many teammates and teammates' parents would offer additional support to international student-athletes. This finding is in contrast with many college coaches' assumptions in the Ridinger and Pastore (2001) study, which stated that international student-athletes in NCAA Division I were likely to face animosity from teammates, teammates' parents, and opponents. As suggested by Ridinger and Postore (2001), some would consider those teams with a large number of international student-athletes as having an unfair advantage. However, this point was rarely mentioned by the interviewees in the present study. With today's rapid change in recruiting patterns and the sharp increase in total number of international student-athletes in the NCAA, it seems most people may have already accepted the intercollegiate student-athletes from overseas.

Nevertheless, it is notable that one participant from Nigeria in the study reported to be discriminated against by his opponents and opposing fans for being foreign while playing high school basketball in the U.S. This phenomenon was somehow in accordance with Lee and Opio's

(2011) finding, which suggested the existence of neo-racism in multiple predominantly white universities and community colleges. However, there were two major differences between the two. First, the discrimination black African student-athletes faced in the Lee and Opio (2011) study took place on their own campuses, whereas the participant in the present study was targeted by opposing players and fans. In addition, in Lee and Opio (2011) study, the black student-athletes from Africa had the unpleasant experiences in college, which was different from the Nigerian participant in this study, who experienced it only when he was attending high school in the U.S. One possible explanation for the Nigerian student-athlete's experience in this study is that in high school, student-athletes would fight for college athletic scholarships, which might eventually lead some domestic players and fans to show animosity toward international student-athletes; however, after the participant had reached to Division I level, such unfriendly and offensive comments were likely to dissipate, given the pervasiveness of international student-athletes today in the conference and in the NCAA.

The international student-athletes in this study claimed that U.S. domestic stakeholders' attitudes toward them shaped their college experience in a very positive way, and gave them good memories. Many said they were able to make connections not only within the athletic programs, but also with American teammates' parents, non-student fans in the local community, and the general student body who were not athletes. According to the participants, these connections helped make their college experiences more memorable and more positive than otherwise they might have been. For these international student-athletes, there was no intercollegiate sport system back in their home countries. Other than two interviewees who played high school sports in the U.S., the rest had never had the experience playing sport for an institution. Therefore, playing in the NCAA was a completely new experience and challenge for them. But in this journey, the international student-athletes had been treated fairly and equally by multiple groups of American stakeholders, or in some cases, even treated better than domestic student-athletes were, which resulted in their generally positive experiences. While some participants admitted that unpleasant experiences did occur occasionally, no one thought they had ever been targeted intentionally while attending college.

It was also found in this study that the transition for international student-athletes would be greatly affected by their interactions with U.S. domestic stakeholders. In the short term, some international student-athletes might find their transition to be difficult and challenging due to the

language barrier, pressure from outside, and the expectation to behave in certain American ways. However, most international student-athletes in the study found the transition to be easier and smoother than they thought once they started to get used to communicating with people around them and having more healthy interactions with these people. All eleven participants claimed to be able to successfully overcome the challenges within one year. While some attributed it to their own ability to adapt to differences, most interviewees also stated that the assistance they received from coaches, teammates, the athletic department, professors, and even student organizations outside athletics helped them shorten the time they would otherwise need to adjust to the new environment. This help came in different forms, such as language guidance, assistance with classwork, and support in everyday life. In previous studies, interaction with coaches and teammates was identified as one of the important antecedent factors that could impact international student-athletes' transition and adjustment to college (Ridinger & Pastore, 2000b; Popp, Love, Kim, and Hums, 2010). The finding has been further confirmed in this study.

Although the college transition experience for international student-athletes would likely be enhanced by their effective communication and healthy interactions with U.S. domestic teammates, coaches, fans, and students, the degree of understanding American stakeholders had shown toward these international student-athletes might also vary. It is noteworthy that the two participants from Nigeria in this study both experienced a challenging time before being able to adapt to American ways and get used to the new environment. As black international student-athletes enrolled in predominantly white universities, the two Nigerians found a lot of gaps between their own culture and the American culture. While they both attended high school in the U.S., neither found interacting with U.S. domestic people easy at the beginning of college, since American people would sometimes have a hard time understanding the Nigerian student-athletes' ways of doing things. In comparison, the cultural difference between the U.S. and most Western countries would usually be smaller. Consequently, it took the two student-athletes from Nigeria longer to adjust to college, even though they tried to interact and communicate with U.S. domestic people. The two Nigerians had not been discriminated against or offended while attending college. However, just like the six international student-athletes attending a HBCU (Sato et al, 2018) and the black student-athletes from Africa attending predominantly white institutions (Lee & Opio, 2011), the minorities in this study had also experienced more challenges in their early transition to college.

A few participants in the study pointed out that interacting with U.S. domestic teammates could be hard sometimes as the result of large cultural differences and American people's lack of understanding toward international student-athletes. In situations like these, the transition process might take a bit longer. But meanwhile, some international student-athletes had also found other strategies to cope with the challenges. Popp, Love, Kim, and Hums (2010) found that support from other international student-athletes could be a major source to help some with their adjustment. In the current study, the same point was also mentioned by several participants. Additionally, a few said that they would interact more with their coaches who had foreign backgrounds, since these coaches would be better at understanding. Nevertheless, as suggested by most participants in the study, healthy interactions with both U.S. domestic team members and international team members could be beneficial to their transition, although in different ways. While international teammates and coaches were typically better at understanding, interacting with U.S. domestic team members would help international student-athletes become integrated into the new environment faster.

Occasionally, some international student-athletes in the MAC might face unfriendly or even offensive comments from U.S. domestic fans. However, circumstances like this were rare based on the findings. Unlike the black international student-athletes from Africa in Lee and Opio's (2011) study who were frustrated by the feeling of being excluded at their institutions, the international student-athletes in the present study claimed that they would most likely ignore such unfriendly comments or behaviors, and not take them personally, if there were any. One possible reason for these different reactions is that the international students-athletes' overall experience had been negative in the Lee and Opio (2011) study, whereas most participants in the current study were happy about their college experiences. It might be easier to ignore an unfriendly comment or behavior when the general atmosphere has been positive than in a situation where the majority have showed negative attitudes.

The core implication of this study is that in order to protect international student-athletes and offer them positive athletic and social experiences in college that are free of prejudice, athletic departments and universities need to create a welcoming and inclusive environment. Many different groups' perceptions and attitudes will shape international student-athletes' overall experiences, and the ways U.S. domestic coaches, teammates, staff, fans, and the general student body interact with international student-athletes will also greatly impact their transition

to college. To build such an environment, athletic departments may offer trainings to coaches and staff at the beginning of each season, helping improve their cultural competency. While treating all student-athletes equally on the field based on their attitudes and performance may be the first step to build a welcoming and inclusive environment, cultural differences off the field should not be overlooked, because the best way for Americans sometimes may not be the best way for people from other cultural backgrounds. Understanding this will help the entire program better accommodate international student-athletes' athletic and social needs. Universities might consider hosting training sessions about cultural diversity and inclusiveness for incoming students at the orientation, since the general student body's voices also matter.

For intercollegiate international student-athletes, the main implication of this study is that they need to be open to new cultures, and be willing to communicate about the differences when U.S. stakeholders do not understand their beliefs or customs. According to the interviewees in this study, no American fans, students, or team members aimed to target international student-athletes intentionally. Although sometimes Americans might lack the understanding of different cultures, most interviewees were able to successfully adjust to the new environments after having more healthy interactions with U.S. domestic stakeholders, since communication like this would also allow U.S. domestic people to learn more about them as international student-athletes.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study filled the gap that no previous research attempted to examine U.S. domestic stakeholders' attitudes toward NCAA Division I international student-athletes from international student-athletes' own perspective. In addition, it also connected American people's perceptions with international student-athletes' college experiences and transition. However, there are some limitations of the study that researchers and practitioners need to pay attention to when interpreting the results.

First, the eleven participants in this study came from nine different countries and five different continents. Because of their very diverse backgrounds, findings were not generalizable. Moreover, despite the different backgrounds among participants, there were only three males and three individual sport athletes included in the study. As a result, no conclusion on differences between male and female international student-athletes' experiences or between individual sport and team sport international student-athletes' experiences could be drawn. Also, the present

study only focused on the college experience and adjustment of international student-athletes from the MAC, a mid-major conference with most schools concentrated in the Midwest. While the majority of the domestic fans, students, and teammates had been friendly and welcoming to the participants in this study as international student-athletes, it is still unknown whether American stakeholders of other athletic conferences and geographic areas would perceive or treat international student-athletes in similar ways.

In addition, it is notable that all but two participants in this study were upperclassmen, and eight of the eleven participants had been attending at their current institutions for more than two years. Typically, student-athletes would be more likely to stay at the same institutions if they are satisfied with their overall experiences. If they have had an unpleasant journey, however, student-athletes may consider transferring or dropping out. Therefore, year of class might impact the study results to some extent. When interpreting international student-athletes' positive overall experiences found in the present study, this factor needs to be taken into consideration.

Another limitation of the study is that the researcher did not perform member checking after finishing writing the results section. While the researcher checked the interview transcripts with the participants, interpretations of the data were not sent back for review due to time constraints. In order to further improve the study's interpretive validity, the researcher may practice member checking by confirming with the study participants after data are analyzed to make sure if what the researcher understands is accurate. As pointed out by Creswell and Poth (2018), this process involves "taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account" (p. 261). By double checking with the interviewee, "useful information is frequently obtained and inaccuracies are often identified" (Johnson, 1999, p. 162).

By conducting semi-structured interviews with eleven student-athletes from countries other than the U.S., insights into their experiences and adjustments to American colleges were obtained. The findings, however, were somehow in contrast to other international student-athletes' unpleasant experiences found in similar qualitative studies (Lee & Opio, 2011; Sato et al, 2018). In order to explore more about these differences, future research should aim to understand domestic stakeholders' attitudes toward international student-athletes from multiple perspectives. While previous research had examined whether American college students majored in sport management would endorse the recruitment of student-athletes from overseas (Foo et al.,

2015), it is still unclear how other domestic stakeholders, such as college sport administrators, opponents, and faculty members, would react to the increasing number of international student-athletes. In order to obtain a more holistic picture, it will be necessary to learn from these groups as well.

Moreover, future research should also isolate populations based on participants' nationality, sport played, or gender in order to take a deeper look at international student-athletes' college experiences in more specific segments. In the present study, the researcher interviewed eleven international student-athletes in various sports who came from five different continents. While some useful findings were generated, it was hard to compare the international student-athletes' stories when the participants came from very different backgrounds. Since the findings were not generalizable, it would also be less feasible for college sport administrators and policy makers to implement rules or policies that can tailor to international student-athletes' needs. To allow coaches, administrators, and policy makers to better facilitate a positive experience for international student-athletes and craft policy changes thereafter, more qualitative studies that look at a specific niche should be conducted in the future.

Conclusion

As opposed to the twentieth-century and early twenty-first century when technology was a constraint for many people, young athletes today from almost everywhere are able to obtain up-to-date sport news and information worldwide, thanks to the rapid development of the internet. As a result, there are far more international student-athletes in the NCAA today than ever before. Moreover, many international student-athletes in the present study mentioned in the interviews that they first heard of the opportunity to play college sport in the U.S. from their former teammates or family members back home who had the experience of playing in the NCAA before, who shared their stories to the participants and recommended the participants to try the same. With this snowball effect, it is reasonable to expect even more foreign-born student-athletes interested in competing in the NCAA in the near future. For many international student-athletes, they came to the U.S. for the dream to play competitive sport while also receive a good education, which might sound truly unique to them. As one of the very few countries in the world where young athletes can continue their academic and athletic careers at the same time, the U.S. has already become an ideal destination for many young athletes around the world.

While the supply of international student-athletes in the NCAA went up, a rise in the demand side has also been evident. Looking to build stronger and more competitive programs in their athletic conferences and in the division, many coaches have adopted the strategy to heavily recruit from overseas. However, as the persons who bring foreign-born young talent to the U.S., these college coaches and administrators must also understand that they have the responsibility to guide and support their international student-athletes both on and off the field. For most international student-athletes, the coaches who recruit them are the only people they know at their new institutions before arriving to the U.S. Should they encounter any problems, the coaches will always be their first point of contact. Because of this closely proximity and trust from international student-athletes, college coaches play a critical role in terms of shaping international student-athletes' college experiences. As intercollegiate sport in the U.S. continues to grow globally, the student-athlete population will become increasingly diverse. Thus, it is essential for college sport coaches and administrators to not only possess a high degree of cultural competency themselves, but also know how to influence other people around them, and thus, create a welcoming and inclusive environment that is surrounded by respect and appreciation of different cultures.

In this increasingly globalized sport setting today, boundaries that prevent athletes to play in another country are falling gradually, and sport migration is becoming more common. Just like some young athletes who wish to pursue athletic careers at professional sport clubs' youth teams in another country, some others may prefer to play competitive sport and go to college at the same time. No matter what the athletes' choices are, they are simply different forms of sport migration under today's globalized environment, and there should be no judgement or discrimination based on the athlete's background or country of origin, because the opportunities are open to everyone in this globalized sport setting. While Hoffer (1994) once argued that Americans are training athletes for other countries by allowing foreign-born student-athletes to play in the NCAA, this does not seem to be a valid argument in the context of sport globalization today, especially given the large amount of international athletes who compete in American professional sports today and the popularity of American professional sports in many other countries. Therefore, under this general trend of sport migration, there should be no surprise if the number of international student-athletes at American colleges and universities continues to

go up. Instead, people are supposed to accept and welcome student-athletes from overseas just like they do to those professional athletes from foreign countries.

Furthermore, the majority of the participants in the present study indicated in the interviews that they were not looking to become professional athletes in the future, neither was playing for their national teams a motive for them to compete in the NCAA. Rather, they just wanted to receive a good education while playing sport, which explained why they chose to play college sport in the U.S. College is the place where people continue to learn and grow, and this type of learning should not be limited to academic work only. Nowadays, many American colleges and universities have attracted students with different backgrounds, and this can be extremely important in this culturally diverse society today, as it will allow college students to interact with people who grew up differently, which will in turn help create culturally competent global citizens. As part of this global community on college campuses, international student-athletes who compete in the NCAA will bring different perspectives to not just the playing field, but also the classroom and everyday life. Thus, it is also essential to support these international student-athletes from an educational standpoint, as such support will benefit both the athletes themselves and those people around them in the long term.

Appendix A:

Interview Guide

1. Could you please tell me some of your early experiences playing the sport?
 - When did you start playing the sport?
 - Why did you choose this sport rather than some other sports?
 - When did you first have the idea to play intercollegiate sport in the U.S.?
 - How did the coaches at your current institution find you and recruit you?

2. Now you have been playing for this university for some years. As a collegiate student-athlete born outside the U.S., could you please share your experiences so far at the institution you are attending?
 - How is your experience with the athletic program? (e.g., satisfied/not with coaches, teammates, facilities, playing time) Examples?
 - How would you describe the interactions you have with your coaches and other athletic staff? (e.g., do they seem to be aware of cultural differences, do they seem to respect cultural differences, are they patient with language differences) Examples?
 - What about your social experience, like the interactions you have with your U.S. domestic teammates? (e.g., do you hang out together, do you do activities together outside practice/games – if so, what/if not, why?) Examples? Do you feel comfortable with the reciprocal relationship?

3. What are your perceptions of the degree of cultural diversity on this campus?
 - To what extent do you think your team members accept and respect the different cultures you have brought?
 - Could you tell me more about that?
 - Examples?
 - On this campus, do you think the general attitude toward you and other non-U.S.-born student-athletes is welcoming, based on the interactions you have had with the general student body? With non-student fans?

- IF YES: How so? Could you give me an example?
 - IF NO: So you don't think the general attitude toward you and other non-U.S.-born student-athletes is welcoming, based on your interactions with the general student body? With non-student fans?
 - Could you tell me more about that?
 - Examples?
4. Do you think the U.S. domestic fans will judge you or perceive you differently given your international status?
- IF YES: Can you give an example? Do you think these different judgements and perceptions of you as an international student-athlete are the results of scholarships, different definitions of amateurism, age advantage, reluctance to accept foreign players, etc.?
 - From what you have seen/heard/experienced, what do you think native-born U.S. citizens' attitudes toward international collegiate athletes are?
 - IF NO: Can you give an example how you are judged and perceived in the same way as U.S. domestic student-athletes are?
 - From what you have seen/heard/experienced, what do you think the most important factors are that will impact native-born U.S. citizens' attitudes toward international collegiate athletes?
5. To what extent, if at all, do you think other U.S. citizens' attitudes toward you as an international intercollegiate student-athlete have impacted your transition to college? To what extent do you think these perceptions of you as an international intercollegiate student-athlete have shaped your overall experience at college?
- How would you describe your transition to this U.S. institution as an international NCAA Division I collegiate student-athlete coming from a different country?
 - Can you talk about some major factors that have impacted your transition to attending this U.S. college? How have they impacted? What made the transition smoother/more difficult for you? What about American people's perceptions?

- How would you rate your overall athletic experience and social experience at this university? How did American people's perceptions shape your experience?

OK, I feel as if our conversation is coming to an end. But before we end, is there anything else you want to talk about that you did not have a chance to say so earlier in the interview process?

OK. This interview may have evoked an emotional response or brought memories to the forefront of your mind. It may be wise to contact counseling services at your institution, talk to a family member or friend, or in some cases, report an incident of discrimination or prejudice to your institution. Most institutions should have a system for reporting concerns confidentially or anonymously.

Appendix B:
Interview Participants

Interviewee Name	Gender	Country of Origin	Race	Sport Played	Year of Class
Molly	Female	Germany	White	Field Hockey	Senior
Jason	Male	Nigeria	Black	Basketball	Redshirt Junior
Scott	Male	Serbia	White	Basketball	Redshirt Junior
Olivia	Female	United Kingdom	Black	Basketball	Junior
Alan	Male	Nigeria	Black	Basketball	Senior
Sherry	Female	New Zealand	White	Field Hockey	Junior
Emily	Female	Germany	White	Field Hockey	Sophomore
Lynn	Female	Australia	White	Field Hockey	Senior
Sarah	Female	Ukraine	White	Tennis	Senior
Christine	Female	Brazil	White	Tennis	Sophomore
Nicole	Female	Canada	Asian	Tennis	Senior

Appendix C:
Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes	Examples
Equal Treatment	Just an Athlete	Fans cheer for everyone
		Coaches treat all players equally
		International student-athletes being judged by attitudes, respect, and skillset
	No Problem with Being International	Never experienced negative perceptions from fans
		Never been targeted as an international student-athlete
Positive Attitudes	Impressed and Curious	Amazed reactions from fans and non-athlete students
		Teammates ask questions about cultures and previous playing experience
		Fans being impressed of international student-athletes' courage to play from far away from home
	Respect	Teammates care about the international student-athlete's feeling
		Teammates enjoy and appreciate the cultural differences
	Welcoming and Fan Love	Additional Support from teammates' parents
		Dinner invitation from the local community
		Sign made by a fan
Challenges and Difficulties	Language Barrier	Domestic people talk too fast
		Use of slangs
	Expectations and Pressure	Higher expectation on international student-athletes
		International student-athletes under intense scrutiny outside sport
	The American Way	Expected to behave in "American Ways"
		Lack of understanding from some American domestic people
	Unwelcoming and Offensive Comments	Trash talk from a student fan
Support and Resources	Academic Support	Professors and academic support staff offer support outside class
	Language Assistance	Coaches and teammates being patient with language barriers and provide additional help
	Helpful and Understanding Team Environment	Family environment within the team; Support in everyday life from teammates and coaches
Network and Exploration	N.A.	Explore and make connections outside athletics

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