

A Phenomenological Study of Selected International Student-Athletes at Saint  
Mary's University

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## A Phenomenological Study of Selected International Student-Athletes at Saint Mary's University

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of three international male student-athletes. The setting was Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. All the participants were undergraduate international students drawn from soccer and basketball varsity teams. The participants shared their lived experiences and the meaning of those experiences through in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and written narratives. Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological data analysis approach guided the data collection and analysis. All interviews were audio-taped by the researcher with permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim by a qualified transcriptionist.

The main objective of the study was to describe the lived experiences of the selected participants without making assumptions about the objective reality of those experiences. This process resulted in a characterization and understanding of the meanings of being an international male student-athlete as lived, and described by the participants themselves. Five themes were identified from the phenomenological data analysis in relation to the athletes' lived experiences as students and athletes and their meaning. These are: significant others; challenges; hard work; accomplishment; and determination. The findings reveal that the international male student-athletes had a positive, enriching, and fulfilling experience. These findings have implications for coaches, faculty, and university administrators and may contribute to a knowledge base in history and sociology of sport and socio-cultural research in Atlantic Canada.

April, 2011

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### **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis project to my son, Samuel Gachira Gatama, who was critically injured and hospitalised in a coma just as I was starting my graduate studies at Saint Mary's University. He came out of the coma eight weeks later and for the past year has been an inspiration to me. I also dedicate this work to my pre-teen daughter, Eunice Njoki Gatama, for holding on well despite tremendous emotional trauma. She stood by her brother and Daddy during those trying times and also supported her sisters and Mom. She made me proud and left me wondering what it was like for a younger sister to stand by an only brother hospitalized in a coma. What a lived experience she might tell us one day! Eunice graduates from Grade 6 to high school this year. Finally, this thesis is also a tribute to Ruth Wambui Gatama, my baby girl who was born while I was writing it, a bundle of joy and a true Santa Marian. What a fitting way to complete an academic journey at Saint Mary's University.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Place of the Researcher in the Study**

Studying abroad is supposed to be fun, or so I thought. I came to Canada in the late 1980s as an international student. I left my home country, my family, my children, and my friends to further my education with a hope of bettering myself. I brought with me teaching and coaching experience, but even more, I brought a desire to excel at whatever was ahead in the academic world.

I had played soccer, handball, table tennis, and lawn tennis during my undergraduate studies at Kenyatta University College, a constituent college of Nairobi University, in Kenya. My passion for sports began early and persists even today. Participation in sport for me was not mandatory but voluntary and for fun. I enjoyed doing what I did as an athlete, teacher, and coach. I became a high school physical education and geography teacher after graduating with a Bachelor of Education degree in 1984. I later got a job as an assistant games instructor at my former University College in 1985. In 1987, I was appointed the national trainer for the Kenya Women's Handball team, preparing for the All Africa Games in Nairobi. Apart from playing handball for my club, Village Rangers, I was at that time also a trainer and coach.

The following year, I enrolled in the Master of Education degree program at Kenyatta University. After completing my course work and passing my exams, I was awarded a scholarship through the Kenya Government and the Canadian International Development Agency (C.I.D.A.) to pursue further studies in Canada. In 1993, I graduated with a Master of Arts in Education with a specialty in sports psychology and motor learning from McGill University, in Montreal, Canada. A year later, I was hired as a

physical education and geography teacher at Greaves Adventist Academy in Montreal, where I taught until December 2007.

My experience as a young black man from a developing country, studying and, later, working in Canada, is worth noting as it has motivated me to excel at what I do and to be an example to others, especially to my children and family. It was this desire to be my best that led me to return to school and pursue further studies in political science at Saint Mary's University in 2008. I graduated in 2009 with a Bachelor of Arts degree and I am now completing an interdisciplinary Master of Arts degree in Atlantic Canada Studies. It has, thus far, been quite a journey through academia, sports participation, coaching, and teaching. The desire I have to explore the lived experiences of international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's has grown out of my personal experience. I can identify with the struggles and obstacles faced by international students, particularly by international male student-athletes.

This research study has, therefore, been motivated by my own experience as an international student, athlete, spectator, and teacher over many years in Canada. It also is a result of my desire to explore, describe, and understand the lived experiences of international male student-athletes in a natural setting using a descriptive phenomenological approach. What is it like to be an international male student-athlete? How does such an experience unfold and what does it bring to light? These are the two research questions that formed the basis of my data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

My major roles in this study were in participant selection, conducting phenomenological interviews, reviewing the data, and writing the thick description of the

text. I chose a phenomenological research approach because, as a form of qualitative inquiry, “It is naturalistic, takes a holistic perspective, and is focused on processes. It uses inductive analysis, personal insights, and reflections. Furthermore, it is case oriented, has empathetic neutrality, and a flexible design” (Patton, 1990, p.72). The qualitative phenomenological approach is capable of producing rich descriptive data in terms of the participant’s own written or spoken words and observable behaviour (Martin, 2005; Senecal, 1998). I thought this systematic method of uncovering and describing the internal meaning of lived experience through the analysis of the participants’ descriptions would be the most suitable approach for this study (Lee, 2010; Martin, 2005; Moustakas, 1994).

## **1.2 Study Context**

The sports program at Saint Mary’s University is organized into three levels: intramural sports (recreational), club sports (recreational and competitive), and varsity sports (competitive). I was interested in the sports participation experience of the international male student-athletes at the varsity level. The sports I chose were basketball and soccer because they are popular in North America and are also played in many parts of the world, including my home country, Kenya. I also participated in these two sports at the intramural level as an international male student at McGill University.

Saint Mary's University has embraced internationalization. As of September 2010, there were over 1,500 international students enrolled in various programs on campus, according to the International Students Advisor's Report and the Director of Student Services. This was an increase from last year when there were 1,400 international students in total. Only 9 of these international students are participating in varsity team sports during the academic year, 2010-2011. Many are, however, involved in intramural recreational and fitness programs as well as some club sports such as rugby. Most international students come to Saint Mary's mainly for academic purposes and many who have athletic skills may not have time for competitive sports.

### **1.3 Background Information on the Study**

My interest in studying the experiences of international students derives in part from my own experience. As an international student, I came to realize that there were many obstacles to overcome as a student studying abroad. I endured homesickness, social distance and loneliness, adverse weather conditions, culture shock, language barriers and financial woes as well as problems with immigration and integration. On the other hand, as an international student, I had opportunities to further my education and learn about Canada and its peoples, opportunities my countrymen back home did not have.

It is worth noting that international male student-athletes are a subset of the general international student population. They have a dual role in that they are students and athletes; while striving to maintain an appropriate academic standing, they must also compete at an elite level, which requires total commitment as an athlete. This duality of roles exposes international student-athletes to numerous challenges that they must

overcome if they are to be successful (Martin, 2005; Mwaura, 2008; Kissinger & Miller, 2009; Lee, 2010).

As both researcher and a former international student-athlete, I hope that this study will bring out the special nature of being an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary's University. I chose to study male student-athletes because I am male and hence able to relate my experience as an international student and athlete with this study group. This is one limitation of the study; future research should look at the experiences of international female student-athletes in a similar setting.

International male student-athletes are recruited by the head coaches before they come to Saint Mary's or during the first month of training and recruitment trials. Sports participation at the varsity level is highly competitive and only the most skilled international students make it onto the teams. Many international students with some athletic skills (though not enough to impress the coaches) do not make the varsity teams, which is a major source of frustration for them. The recruitment of international students onto varsity teams depends on their skill level and playing experience as well as educational qualifications and other factors such as financial support.

Inductive phenomenological research in sport studies has become increasingly popular over the past two decades, especially with regards to researchers examining athletes' lived experiences. According to Pitney and Parker (2009), meaning is socially constructed and is, thereby, created based on how people interact with each other and their environment; it also arises from the perceptions people give to their lived experiences. From the meanings derived from interactions and perceptions, a theory is developed (p.40).

The following is a brief analysis of related literature about my research topic as well as an overview demonstrating the need for this research study in Atlantic Canada, specifically, and Canada, in general. The review includes studies on international students, student-athletes, international student-athletes, masculinity and sports participation.

#### **1.4 Related Literature Review**

The focus of a phenomenological study is the exploration and description of lived experience with the goal of understanding a phenomenon from the participant's perspective or point of view (Senecal, 1998; Drury, 2001; Martin, 2005; Ojo, 2008). Qualitative inquiry in sports studies has become popular in the last two decades, especially as researchers examine athletes' experiences (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Phenomenological researchers are mainly concerned with how individuals develop meaning out of their lived experiences and therefore seek themes within phenomena using a subjective research paradigm (Patton, 2002).

Research on collegiate and university athletics has primarily focused on studying administrators, coaches, and domestic student-athletes. Consequently, international student athletes' experiences have been overlooked, and thus the research in this area is rather scarce. Moreover, there is no such literature specific to international students in Atlantic Canada.

This literature review provides a theoretical framework and a justification for this study. It is also related to the interpretation of the findings and recommendations for further research in this area. Understanding the experience of university student-athletes

and their level of satisfaction with both the academic and athletic experience is important, since higher levels of satisfaction could lead to better performances both athletically and academically (Kissinger & Miller, 2009). A subgroup within university student-athletes is international student-athletes. The number of international student-athletes participating in national and regional university competitions in Canada is on the increase, but the group members have received little scholarly attention in regards to their experiences.

Miller and Kerr (2002) observed that there is a great deal of literature on the experiences of college students, particularly college and university student-athletes in the United States. Researchers have investigated numerous questions related to the career planning, motivation, and later life satisfaction of intercollegiate student-athletes, with the relationship between participation in university athletics and academic achievement generating a tremendous amount of scholarly interest. These studies have told us a great deal about the athletic, academic, and social lives and experiences of college and university student-athletes in the US, and about how these experiences have evolved over the course of their university careers. By comparison, little is known about the athletic, academic, and social lived experiences of Canadian student-athletes, especially international student-athletes (Preacco, 2009).

#### **1.4.1 Research on International Students.**

Amoh (1984) conducted a longitudinal study on 64 newly arrived international students at an American university. The findings of the study showed that, academically, the most common problems they faced included lack of effective communication skills in English, frequency of university examinations, concerns about grades and the grading system, lack of knowledge about student-faculty relationships in the US, and comprehending registration procedures. Their social problems included concerns about understanding American “slang” words, concerns about being understood by American students and faculty, loneliness, and negative remarks and attitudes from some American students. Personal problems involved financial difficulties, tensions arising from adjusting to the different environment, locating suitable housing at reasonable prices, and time-budgeting. Most of the students’ coping strategies, which were tools they used either to solve such problems, help their adjustment to their new circumstances, remained the same throughout the academic year.

Mwaura (2008) conducted a phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences related to cultural adjustment of Black African international adult students in institutions of higher learning. Study results showed that transition to a foreign culture, social changes, and a new educational system can be overwhelming for international students. The researcher explains in his own words that like many other such students, he personally encountered countless problems, including culture shock, language barriers, social identity crisis, financial difficulties, homesickness, and loneliness, as well as racism and other generalized struggles, in adjusting to American culture and its higher education system.

Ejiofo (2010) also used a phenomenological approach to analyse the experiences of international students in a predominantly white American university. This qualitative study was conducted with eight international students from different countries. The participants were interviewed from a semi-structured interview guide. Results of this study showed that international students face many challenges which affect their adaptation to their new environments both academically and socially. This study, conducted over a quarter of a century after Amoh's (1984) study and only two years after Mwaura's (2008), shows that the problems facing international students have remained constant.

Anh (2010) conducted a study that aimed at producing an overview of international students' experiences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as articulated via their own words. The results of the study showed that international students face many challenges while studying in the US. The participants in this study expressed their fears and difficulties they face as well as their appreciation of the opportunity to study in the US. There were positive experiences such as knowledge of the world, making new friends, learning a new culture, becoming open-minded, confident, and mature. Negative experiences were reported too such as loneliness, loss of familiar support systems from family and friends, language and culture barriers as well as acculturation stress. In this study, participants wished they had more positive interactions with domestic students. The results of this research may have contributed to the pool of knowledge about international students at the university by portraying a holistic view of the overall experience.

Ellefson (2009), who studied spirituality and international student experience supports the findings of many others in stating that although international students comprise a significant and growing portion of the university student population in the US, they face unique adjustment challenges during their living experience involving adapting to academic expectations, social life, loneliness, building relationships, and language barriers.

Lee (2010) conducted a study to explore international students' experiences and how these experiences might influence them to recommend or not recommend others from their home country to attend the US host institution. Findings of this study show that perceptions of unequal treatment are a major factor influencing international students' attitudes. The students in this study reported greater difficulty in social adjustment and felt that they were not always treated as fairly as domestic students. The perception of receiving fair and equal treatment, according to Lee (2010), was the most important influence that would lead an international student to recommend the host university to others. The other factors were satisfaction with institutional services and the host university's reputation. In this study, the sample size was small, the students' subjective experiences were limited to a survey, and the data was not triangulated with those qualitative methods which, according to the researcher, would have provided a deeper understanding of the complex reality of international student experiences.

Cameron (2006) conducted a historical study that explored the social incorporation of international students at St. Xavier, an Atlantic Canadian university. The findings of this study suggest that there are historical challenges to integration of international students in Canada. These challenges are varied and depend on the students'

national-linguistic backgrounds, individual personalities, length of stay, programs of study, the local social contexts, and federal and provincial government policies. In addition, policies and practices of their host as well as international political developments also affect the students.

#### **1.4.2 Research Studies on Student-Athletes.**

Becker (2007) explored athletes' lived experiences of effective coaching using phenomenological interviews and existential phenomenological methods. The participants in this study included nine female and nine male athletes selected from a variety of sports such as football, volleyball, baseball, and softball. The goal of Becker's study was to expand on previous literature examining athletes' experiences of great (i.e., effective) coaching. Results revealed a comprehensive picture of the factors that underlie coaching effectiveness. The true essence of greatness was captured in the athletes' experiences of who their coaches were, what they did, how they did it, and how it influenced them.

Senecal (1998) conducted a study using a phenomenological design to gain an understanding of the lived physical activity experiences of university athletes at the University of Alberta, Canada. She also wanted to explore and describe how the meaning of those experiences related to their quality of life. Participants were drawn from elite sport teams in a university setting. The athletes were encouraged to formulate and describe their own experience of physical activity and relate it to their quality of life. Senecal found that there was a need to address the lack of literature through which the voice of the university athlete in Canada is heard.

Gearity (2009) conducted a research study aimed at exploring collegiate, semi-professional and professional athletes' perceptions of poor coaching. An existential phenomenological research design provided the framework for understanding athletes' experience of poor (i.e., ineffective) coaching. Data were collected through in-depth interviews involving 16 athletes. Data in this particular study were analyzed using phenomenological methods which led to the identification of five themes that constitute the essence of the athletes' experience of poor coaching. These were: Not teaching; Unfair; Uncaring; Inhibiting; and Coping not. The findings of the study provided a clear detailed description of poor coaching from the athletes' perspective.

Kramer II (2008) conducted a phenomenological study to understand the effect of intercollegiate athletic participation on the academic socialization of male revenue-generating student-athletes in the US. Qualitative research methods were used to explore the socialization experience of 24 male participants. The findings of this study provide insight into the effect of subcultures of higher education have on the academic socialization of the participants.

Preacco (2009) explored athletic identity (AI) by examining its essence and learning how student athletes perceive and experience themselves and the world through their athletic endeavours. The researcher conducted a phenomenological study to describe the common and emerging themes of the Student Athlete Worldview (SAWV). Using this model, student-athletes described the fundamental qualities they possess, such as being hard-working, determined, dedicated, driven, competitive, motivated, and passionate, willing to improve, and having a love of sport. The student-athletes described how the above qualities contributed to positive outcomes such as 'better', 'apart', 'elite',

'knowledgeable about self', 'able to adapt', and 'responsible'. Preacco (2009) reports that these personal qualities led the student-athletes toward positive experiences of feeling special and, and, thus confident in themselves. According to Preacco (2009, p. 50), participants also described how at times the fundamental qualities they possessed created hardships and contributed to negative outcomes such as lack of freedom, lack of social life, lack of time, and difficulty in balancing academic and athletic lifestyles. In contrast to the positive outcomes, these negative outcomes led the participants toward negative experiences of being busy and missing out on school social events, being tired, and feeling separated from others.

Adler and Adler (1987) conducted a study to observe the lives of 40 members of a Division I men's basketball team in the US over a four-year period. The qualitative nature of the study allowed these researchers to document the student-athletes' academic progress over the length of their university careers which yielded unprecedented insight into their daily lives. The researchers discovered that most of the basketball players had been optimistic about obtaining a degree when they first entered college, contrary to popular opinion that student-athletes in lucrative sports use US college athletics as a stepping stone to professional sport and have little intention of pursuing a degree.

Unfortunately, the basketball players' athletic, social, and classroom experiences created an anti-intellectual environment that, over time, inhibited academic success. The athletes adjusted their academic plans throughout their college years and repeatedly lowered their educational goals. Fatigue from training, traveling, and competition, insufficient time for studying, isolation from the general student population, differential treatment from faculty, and pressures from coaches and alumni prompted and reinforced

disengagement from academic matters that culminated, for many, in academic failure and non-completion of their degrees because they were never valued as students.

#### **1.4.3 Research on International Student-Athletes.**

In a recent study by Trendafilova, Kim, and Hardin (2010), the purpose was to examine the level of satisfaction among international student-athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). These researchers point out that it is important to understand the athletes' satisfaction level so they can have an optimal and positive experience in the United States. Increasing the satisfaction of international student-athletes may lead to better performances in the classroom and in competition.

Respondents in that study were international student-athletes from six NCAA Division I-Football Bowl Subdivision conferences. Data analysis revealed that international student-athletes were satisfied with the dimensions measuring satisfaction including team social contribution, team integration, and personal treatment as well as academic support services. In addition, although generally satisfied with their collegiate experience as athletes, male athletes were more satisfied with external agents (i.e., media, the local and university communities) than female athletes. The highest dimension of satisfaction was in the area of academic support services, which has the potential to contribute to better performance in the classroom and higher graduation rates.

This study's findings that "understanding the dimensions of satisfaction with coaching can help coaches adjust their coaching and training styles" and that "understanding the experience of student-athletes and their level of satisfaction with both academic and athletic experience, is important" (Trendafilova et al., 2010, p. 10).

Coaches and administrators can also promote the high level of satisfaction at their universities to recruit international students who commit to the success of their university's and athletic programs. In addition to the aforementioned practical implications, this research contributes to the existing body of literature on students in general and student-athletes in particular. More specifically, it evaluates the overall academic and athletic experience of international student-athletes and does not focus on specific aspects of satisfaction, which provides for a broader description of their experience.

In their book *College Student-Athletes: Challenges, Opportunities, and Policy Implication*, Kissinger & Miller (2009) look at the contemporary college student-athlete as a subpopulation. The goal of the text is "to provide the reader with a glimpse into the unique challenges, barriers, and opportunities" inherent in the student-athlete experience in the United States (p. 2). The challenges facing international student-athletes are outlined with recommendations such as "balancing athletic and academic responsibilities as well as balancing the demands of relationships with coaches, teammates, parents and friends" (p. 3). Kissinger points out that foreign student-athletes struggle with adjustment problems that expose them to many psycho-social stressors.

Moreover, one of the primary challenges student-athletes face is adapting to differing coaching styles (Kissinger & Miller, 2009, p. 167). American sports are characterized by a hyper-competitive, success-oriented culture and international student athletes may find such a competitive mentality difficult to adapt to, especially if it clashes with their cultural upbringing or worldview (Kissinger & Miller, 2009). This creates a challenge of acclimatization to the cultural milieu, especially the distinctive American

sports culture (p. 162). The authors suggest that “optimizing an international student-athlete’s academic, athletic, and personal potential requires sensitivity to the interplay of unique cultural norms and worldviews that could impact their academic and athletic potential.” (p. 176).

Martin (2005) conducted a phenomenological study to identify and understand the factors that lead to favourable academic outcomes for student-athletes at highly selective Division 1 institutions in the US. This study aimed at understanding the non-cognitive variables that affect the performance of academically successful African American male student-athletes. International students of African or Asian descent were excluded from this study.

Pierce et al. (2010) examined the most difficult barriers for international student athletes to overcome in their sojourn in the US and investigated how international student-athletes compared their experience at an NCAA university to other available options. The researchers also compared US student-athletes with athletes from other countries. In total, 193 international student-athletes from 57 countries attending 15 NCAA Division 1 universities wrote answers to survey questions, all of which were examined by the team of researchers to identify themes. The results of this study showed that the most difficult aspects of international student-athlete experience were homesickness, adjustment to American culture, and adjustment to the English language. They noted that athletes from Europe were more likely to note language and cultural adjustments while Canadian athletes were more likely to identify financial and logistical difficulties. Individual sport athletes such as tennis, were more likely to identify language and cultural adjustments while team-sport athletes such as basketball, were more likely to

cite homesickness. International student-athletes, according to Pierce et al. (2010, p. 3), identified the following factors as contributing to a successful transition to their NCAA school: strong support systems from teammates and coaches; strong support systems from friends and family back home; and possession of key personality traits such as desire and work ethic.

### **1.5 Masculine Identity and Sports Participation**

Sport participation at a competitive level has been for years associated with masculine identity and characteristics such as dominance and aggressiveness (Whitehead, 2002, Atkinson, 2011). The term hegemonic masculinity is defined as “the normative or culturally dominant ideal of masculinity which men in a society are supposed to strive for or emulate”, characteristics of which include “aggressiveness, physical strength, drive, ambition, lack of emotion, and self-reliance” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 20). Furthermore, “masculinities have always been closely linked with a crisis in physical, emotional, and social ways” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 12).

In *Deconstructing Men and Masculinities* (2011), Atkinson points out that masculinity crisis is told by men through tales of frustration, self-doubt, distress, promise, happiness or even stories of indifference. However, in *Men and Masculinities* (2002, p. 14), Whitehead notes that masculinity which encompasses physicality, virility, morality, and civility was something to be openly strived for and welcomed as an achievement of male maturity.

MacDonald (2010) conducted a qualitative study with six male varsity athletes in order to find out how violence and hazing are accelerated in men’s competitive ice

hockey. Her study uncovered ways in which young male hockey players apply strategies of compartmentalization to violence and hazing in order to dilute and/or minimize the problematic nature of ice hockey. The findings of this study suggest that compartmentalization intensifies violence and hazing in the lives of the young male participants implying that gender and socialization are not the only factors influencing the phenomenon under study. The activity of hazing is seen as a test of player's masculinity and an initiation exercise where young men are expected to take up their roles as dominators as well as to prove themselves as capable and tough (MacDonald, 2010). It is also reported in this study that "boys are taught on the ice that it is acceptable and encouraged to be aggressive because real boys and men act that way" (p.10). However, in basketball and soccer at Saint Mary's University, hazing and gender bias are not reported as a factor by the participants because the men and women's teams work together.

Wellard (2009) suggests that sport is a significant site for the making and remaking of hegemonic masculinities and that sport still remains a predominantly male "social space" (p. 16). Men seem to dominate in team and competitive sports and engage more often in risky sports such as racing, as the "ideal man is equated with being a winner and real men are prepared to compete" (Verdonk et al., 2010, p. 3). The researchers also suggest that the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity "incorporates a concern with success and dominance and that competitiveness and nonchalant attitudes shape ideals" (p. 3).

Sport provides a "useful setting for exploring masculine identity and understanding of the body" (Wellard, 2009, p. 22). Gender was not a major factor but it was necessary to mention the role of masculinity in competition, aggressiveness, and

dominance because many studies on masculine identities and hegemonic masculinity suggest that male athletes thrive on competition and dominance (Whitehead, 2002; Wellard, 2009; Atkinson, 2011). Success and accomplishment is important for any ambitious and highly motivated male athlete. These researchers and writers have identified masculine identity to be related to ambition, high motivation, and the winning spirit among male athletes (Whitehead, 2002; Wellard, 2009). The International Student-athletes study involved male participants only and the setting was Saint Mary's University Athletics Department, thus making MacDonald's research (2010) relevant to this study. In general, one would expect all male participants to display some form of aggressiveness and a dominant personality as suggested by various researchers and writers.

Despite a growing literature on sports, universities, men, and masculinities, little research has been done in Canada and no research at all using a phenomenological approach was found with regards to Atlantic Canadian university student-athletes, whether domestic or international. Thus there is a sizeable gap in the literature and a need for a larger study to examine the lived experiences of both male and female international athletes in all institutions of higher learning in the Atlantic region. The proposed research will therefore make a small contribution by exploring and describing the lived experience of international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University.

A student-athlete's inability to integrate into the social and academic life of the host institution may be due to "pressure to perform athletically, poor social skills, and having limited knowledge of the larger campus community" (Martin, 2005, p. 53). Sports participation may provide international students a social environment that can foster basic

values such as fair play, competitiveness, and achievement (Preacco, 2009; Kissinger & Miller, 2009).

This brief review of studies conducted in the area of international students, student-athletes and international student-athletes' lived experiences in the US and Canada indicates a need for further research. International students in Atlantic Canadian universities are a diverse and increasing population, yet very little is known about this group in terms of their lived experiences as student-athletes in the region. A phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University will contribute to our understanding of who they are and how they can be served more effectively as both students and athletes (Martin, 2005).

### **1.6 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the lived experiences of three international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The researcher is interested in understanding the nature of their experiences as well as the meaning of those experiences from the participants' perspective by formulating a description of their lived experience using a phenomenological inquiry approach.

For the purposes of this research study, an international student-athlete is an undergraduate student from a region outside of Canada who, from the first day of the team's practice, is listed as a team member, practices with the varsity team, receives coaching from one the varsity coaches, and receives athletically-related student financial aid such as athletic scholarships and bursaries. To maintain that identity, such an athlete must also be actively involved in inter-university sports competitions and be in good

academic standing at Saint Mary's University. International students who take part in intramural or club sports are not included in this sample.

### **1.7 Research Questions**

There are two major research questions in this study:

1. What is the lived experience of international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University?
2. What does this experience of being an international male student-athlete mean to each athlete?

As researcher, I hoped to find out from the athletes themselves what it is like to be an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary's University and what the experience of being an international male student-athlete means to them individually. A rich and thick description of context as well as a depth of understanding and meaning related to the phenomenon under study was collected and documented from the international male student-athletes' perspective. The data-collection strategies used in this phenomenological study focused on in-depth interviewing of the participants so that their lived experiences and the meaning they give to these experiences are shared as well as written narratives.

### **1.8 Theoretical Basis of the Study**

This is a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological study, with phenomenology as a philosophy and methodology of research forming its theoretical basis (Moustakas,

1994; Van Manen, 1997; Byrne, 2001). The aim of phenomenology is to explore, describe, and understand life experiences (Senecal, 1998; Mwaura, 2008; Ojo, 2008; Ejiofo, 2010). Phenomenologists believe that understanding of life can emerge from people's life experiences and that what is essential is the illumination of such experiences (Senecal, 1998; Byrne, 2001; Patton, 2002). Phenomenological research attempts to understand the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of participants who have experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Essences serve as the ultimate structure of consciousness, according to Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher and mathematician (1858-1938). He contended that setting aside preconceived notions enables a researcher to describe objectively the phenomenon under study (Van Manen, 1997; Byrne, 2001).

This technique allows the researcher to listen and record the participant's description of their lived experience in an open manner. The procedure involves "studying a small number of participants so as to develop patterns and relationships of meaning" (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). A key characteristic of phenomenological research is its rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon being investigated (Lawrence et al., 2010). In this study, my own experiences were set aside in order to understand those of the participants.

Understanding the lived experiences marks phenomenology as a philosophy and a method of research (Creswell, 2003). Phenomenology provides researchers in sports studies the opportunity to describe and clarify significant phenomena by identifying the essence of the athletes' experience (Pitney & Parker, 2009). A qualitative study addressing the challenges and needs of international student-athletes in Atlantic Canada may contribute new information and a direction for further research. One tenet of

phenomenology is to provide an understanding of how people make sense of their daily lives and to describe how they interpret what they experience (Byrne, 2001; Mwaura, 2008; Creswell, 2003).

The objective of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the subjective understandings, perceptions, and opinions of the participants. The firsthand information gathered was useful in illuminating and describing their lived experiences as both students and athletes at a well-respected University in Atlantic Canada that supports competitive sports.

### **1.9 Organization of the Study**

This study is presented in four chapters.

*Chapter 1* includes background and context for the study, the statement of the problem, the study's purpose, the study's rationale, and the overview of the study's organization.

*Chapter 2* details the step-by-step methods used in the study. It includes the research design, the philosophical and methodological framework that guides the study, the selection of participants, data collection and analysis, ethical procedures, ways of ensuring trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, and a summary.

*Chapter 3* presents the findings of the study in terms of the themes derived from the data, the inter-connectedness of the themes, and interpretation of the findings in light of relevant literature supported by verbatim quotations from the participants' perspective.

*Chapter 4* provides a review of the findings and suggests the significance of the study. As well, it offers a detailed summary of the findings, the researcher's personal reflection, and study limitations. Chapter 4 also includes recommendations for University Athletic Departments and makes suggestions for future research.

### **1.10 Summary**

This chapter looked at the background information of the study which included the place of the researcher, a brief literature review, the purpose and context, the theoretical framework, and the significance of the study. The research questions and the study's organization were presented. The next chapter will provide the methodological context for the study and will include the research design, the qualitative phenomenological research and sampling strategy, the research setting profile, data collection and analysis procedures, strategies for validating findings, ethical considerations, and a summary.

## **Chapter 2: Research Methodology**

Qualitative methodology is a means of studying the subjective experience of the individual, thereby offering a detailed description of how one perceives, creates, and interprets one's world (Munroe-Chandler, 2005). This method offers an in-depth understanding of a person's experiences, allows the reader to locate the meaning in people's lived experiences, and provides vivid descriptions nested in a real context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative research allows the researcher to gain insight and understanding into human experience; it has a humanistic orientation, focusing on discovery and exploration, and using inductive analysis (Pitney & Parker, 2009, p. 13).

The use of thick description aims to give readers a sense of the thoughts, emotions, feelings, and perceptions that the participants experience and provides a basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the meanings and essences of the experience from the participant's perspective (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002; Ojo, 2008; Anh, 2010). Phenomenology describes rather than explains the meanings, structures, and essences of the athletes' lived experience (Creswell, 1998; Senecal, 1998; Patton, 2002).

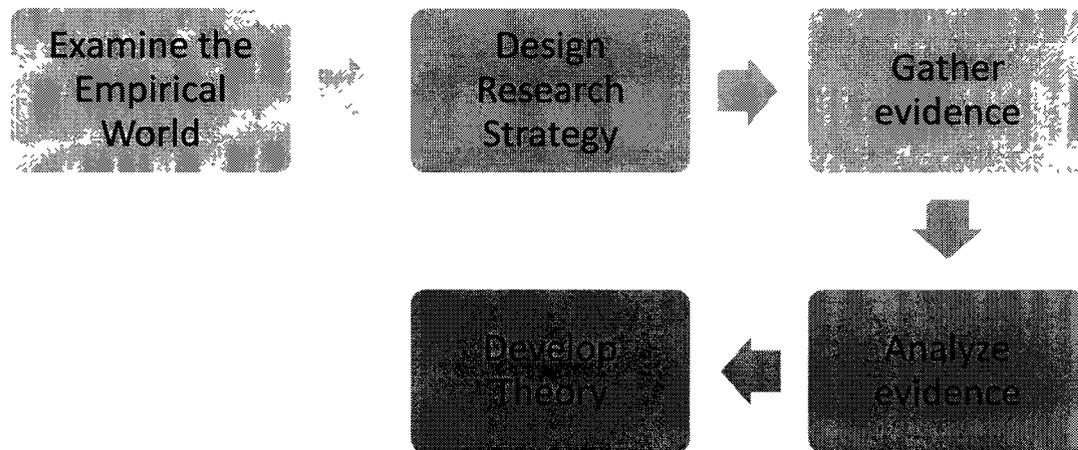
In this study, the researcher was interested in exploring and describing the details of lived experiences of three international male soccer and basketball student-athletes in a natural setting using a qualitative phenomenological research method. The qualitative phenomenological approach was used because very little previous information about the selected topic in an Atlantic Canada setting is known and the focus of the study was on the international male student-athletes' own experience (Field & Morse, 1985). Phenomenology is a useful way of describing the lived experiences of research

participants from their perspective (Drury, 2001; Ojo, 2008). The aim is to gain understanding and infer meaning from the data (Pitney & Parker, 2009, p. 57).

## **2.1 The Inductive Phenomenological Approach**

Qualitative research design emerged as a way for researchers to ask questions about, gather data on, and analyze people's experiences. Qualitative researchers are inductive and mainly concerned with how individuals develop meaning out of their lived experiences. Qualitative research, according to Pitney & Parker (2009, p. 5-7), "Focuses on people; uses textual data; aims at discovering and exploring the experiences of participants in a natural setting; interprets data with inductive reasoning; is systematic yet flexible; uses a small sample size to gain insight; provides rich, detailed descriptions so that readers can understand the participant's experiences and the meaning they assign to their situations and environments. It also identifies data patterns by helping discover information about the participant's perceptions of their experiences that reveals commonalities and builds theories as researchers interpret the data".

Phenomenology is one tradition that exists within the qualitative design. In the qualitative research tradition, researchers work with a small number of participants (as in this study) in an attempt to understand the meaning *each* participant attaches to certain unique behaviours and experiences (Creswell, 1998). A researcher begins by examining the social world; in the process, knowledge and meaning about the phenomena under study emerge from the analysed data (Esterberg, 2002). Figure 1 below illustrates the inductive approach used in this study.



*Figure 2.1: Inductive Approach*

*(Adapted from Esterberg, K. G. [2002] in Qualitative Methods in Social Research, p. 7)*

The purpose of using an inductive approach, according to Thomas (2006), is to condense extensive and varied data into a brief summary format, establish clear links between the research questions or objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data, and develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences which are evident in the raw data. Such an approach provides a convenient and efficient way of analyzing qualitative data for many research purposes (p.239).

## **2.2 Why a Phenomenological Research Approach?**

Phenomenology was chosen as an appropriate research methodology for this study because it provided not only processes but also a framework within which the lived experiences of international male student athletes at Saint Mary's University could be explored and understood. It is an appropriate research methodology for this study as it effectively brings to the forefront experiences and perceptions of the participants from their own perspective (Pitney & Parker, 2009; Silverman, 2001). The aim is to identify the basic structure of the phenomena under study based upon the convergence of participants' accounts of their individual experiences as lived by them during the academic year and their career at Saint Mary's University (Byrne, 2001).

## **2.3 Phenomenological Methods**

Phenomenological research is different from other qualitative inquiry approaches in that its aim is to understand the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of participants who have experienced it (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). It gives voice to the participants by making them active participants and experts and allows their voices to be heard. In this study, the researcher's intent was to conduct a phenomenological investigation into the experience and meaning of being an international male soccer and basketball player on the varsity teams at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. To do this type of research from a phenomenological point of view was to document the ways an international male student-athlete experiences the sports world in which he lives as an individual or member of a sports team. In conjunction with Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological approach of data analysis, the researcher used semi-structured in-

depth, face-to-face interviews, written narratives, and his research notes in collecting data from the participants.

## **2.4 Participant Selection**

The participants in this phenomenological study were selected through a purposive sampling technique. A purposive sample helped select participants who would produce detailed and rich data, thus increasing awareness of the depth of the lived experiences of each participant (Patton, 1990; Silverman, 2001; Pitney & Parker, 2009). The participants were selected from two varsity sports, soccer and basketball. The researcher chose these two sports because they are popular and played internationally. They are also sports familiar to the researcher. Participants were selected based on the simple fact that they played a varsity sport, could articulate their experiences and were willing to do so and participate in the study (Valle, 1998; Senecal, 1998; Kramer II, 2008; Pitney & Parker, 2009).

## **2.5 Sample Size**

Phenomenology is essentially the study of lived experience or the life-world of individuals (Van Manen, 1997). Qualitative inquiry focuses in depth on small samples selected purposefully. Purposive sampling involved selecting research participants according to the needs of the study (Patton, 2002, p. 230). The aim of purposive sampling was to select information-rich cases for in-depth study. The sample for this study was small but purposive. The researcher chose participants who had undergone the experience under investigation and were willing to share this experience.

The sample in this study was made up of three international male student-athletes, one from soccer and two from basketball varsity teams. Patton (2002) stipulates that within qualitative inquiry, rules of sample size do not exist. He argues that decisions on what sample size to use depends on what the researcher wants to know, the purpose of the study, what is at stake, what will produce credible results, and what can be done with the available time and resources (p.244). Sample size does not necessarily determine the importance of the study or the quality of the data (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). The general principle that guides sample size is “saturation of data and redundancy of data” (Pitney & Parker, 2009, p.44). Purposeful samples should be judged according to the purpose and rationale of the study (Patton, 2002, p. 245). In the present study, the sample size was enough to address the study’s purpose, answer the research questions, and produce credible results. It was also large enough to gain insight about the phenomena under investigation.

## **2.6 Bracketing/Phenomenological Reduction**

In phenomenological research where the focus is to reveal the pre-reflective structure of any meaningful experience, self-reflection is important. It involves a process called “bracketing” or phenomenological reduction, which identifies a researcher’s preconceived notions or biases regarding the experience being studied so as to minimize their effects on clearly depicting the meaning of the participants’ descriptions (Pitney & Parker, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the researcher had to acknowledge personal biases through personal reflection where his everyday understandings, judgements and knowledge were set aside. This process of reflecting on personal biases,

preconceptions and presuppositions created an environment for the researcher to conduct interviews and analyze the data with a clear and wide-open sense, devoid of personal and intrinsic biases (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997). Bracketing (to remove or withhold from context) a researcher's experiences and biases enabled the essence of the participants' experiences to be seen clearly and with less researcher bias (Willig, 2008; Kramer II, 2008; Gearity, 2009). The approach used sought to illuminate main aspects of the athlete's experience in such a way that each experience could be recognized and distinguished from any other phenomenon and still encourage readers to ask further questions. This study aimed at a characterization and understanding of the meanings of being an international male student-athlete as lived, experienced, and described by the participants themselves (Polkinghorne, 1989; Silverman, 2001; Pitney & Parker, 2009).

## **2.7 Ethical Considerations**

Permission to conduct this phenomenological study was granted by the Saint Mary's University Ethics and Research Board (see Appendix C). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. A signed consent form was obtained from each participant after an oral explanation concerning the purpose of the study, data collection procedures, approximate time required from the participant, and an assurance that their experiences would be described in a way that would maintain anonymity (see Appendix A for the informed consent form). The procedures used in this research study were non-invasive. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and interviews were conducted in a quiet, suitable private environment to maintain confidentiality while being accessible to the participant. Participants were

informed before commencing that the interviews would be audio-taped and that they were free to refuse to be interviewed or to stop the interview at anytime.

The researcher informed the participants that even though there were no direct personal benefits from the study, the anticipated information could help enhance sports research involving international student-athletes in Atlantic Canada and that the study may result in new knowledge concerning the experience of being an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary's University. The researcher thanked the participants (See Appendix B) and indicated to them that the findings could also help improve the recruitment process and services that cater to the particular needs of international student-athletes.

The researcher stressed that this was an opportunity for the participants to share their thoughts and feelings about their lives as situated international male student-athletes and to make their voices heard. Further, the researcher let them know that there were no anticipated risks from participating in the study. He also made every effort to be sensitive to the participants' verbal and nonverbal communications. None of the participants withdrew from the study in spite of a busy work, training, and school schedule. None of the participants showed any discomfort in discussing and sharing any aspect of their lived experience.

The researcher took all the necessary precautions to protect the participants' identity and to ensure confidentiality of all data. All interviews were conducted in a private place and at a time that was convenient for each participant. The consent forms, written narratives, audiotapes, transcripts, field notes and demographic sheets were all kept in a locked drawer at the researcher's desk located at the Gorsebrook Research

Institute, Saint Mary's University. Audiotapes containing original interview data will be erased and all written materials will be shredded once the study is completed and findings are published, in accordance with the policies of the Research Ethics Board at Saint Mary's University.

## **2.8 Data Collection**

The participants' lived experiences were captured using in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, written narratives, and researcher's notes. Each interview session lasted between 60 and 80 minutes. Each participant was asked to write a one-page summary of their lived experience as international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University after the in-depth interview session was completed. The data gathering procedures were flexible and depended on what made sense for the setting, the participants, and the researcher's growing knowledge about the project. Data are contained within the perspectives of the participants and the researcher had to engage with the participants to collect this data.

The researcher started the interviews with a welcoming note and a statement of the purpose of the research study. This was followed by posing the questions: "What is it like to be an international male soccer or basketball varsity-team player at Saint Mary's University"? And "What does such a subjective experience mean?" The participant was given time to respond. Additional open-ended questions were asked, as needed, to clarify responses given by the participants, such as, "Tell me more about how you have experienced that phenomenon" or "What has influenced your perception of and experience with the phenomenon?"

The phenomenological interview was the primary way to obtain the participants' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Willig, 2008; Ryba, 2007). The interviews were designed to probe the issues arising in the international male student-athletes' lives at Saint Mary's University that acted as barriers or enablers for participation in their sport. The semi-structured format allowed for the interviews to be shaped and developed by each participant, depending on individual responses, comments and thoughts, with latitude for each participant to respond to each question in his own manner and freedom to elaborate from personal experience (Pitney & Parker, 2009, p. 48).

Interviewing remains the most critical and noteworthy method of collecting data in phenomenology (Pitney & Parker, 2009, p. 45). As a social situation, the interview involves a relationship between the interviewer and the informant or interviewee. As such, it is important for the researcher to understand the nature of the situation and the relationship (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2001). Failure to recognize this may lead to false inferences about the participant's experiences outside the interview situation because other aspects of the student-athletes' perspectives that were not expressed in the interview could be missed. The researcher used data-source triangulation (e.g., interviews, self-reports, and field notes taken during and after each interview) to ensure that internal generalizability problems like the one stated above were covered, hence validating the accounts given during the interviews (Kramer II, 2008; Pitney & Parker, 2009).

## 2.9 Data Analysis

The data collected through semi-structured, face-face- interviews were transcribed by a qualified transcriptionist in preparation for data analysis. These interview transcriptions, written narratives, and field notes were read by the researcher several times so as to gain a broad perspective or familiarity with the phenomenon under study. The phenomenological approach of data analysis described by Colaizzi (1978) and as outlined below, was used to provide a rich description of the international male student-athletes' lived experiences. The goal of the analysis was to find common themes (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 1994), in the written descriptions, transcriptions of spoken conversations, and the researcher's field notes as well as to find a language that captures these oral structures (Barrit et al., 1983).

Significant statements and meanings were extracted and then formulated into categories or themes. The results of the data analysis were then integrated into the description of the phenomenon under study. The use of the original narratives of the participants, and how each significant statement related to the particular theme was then returned to the participants in the study via email to check if the data analysis or descriptions adequately captured their lived experiences (Silverman, 2001; Pitney & Parker, 2009). This member-checking exercise further enhanced credibility of the research findings. All participants responded positively to the member-check exercise with no changes to recommend. A faculty reader and the thesis supervisor also served as checks to ensure proper interpretations and conclusions of the data.

### **2.9.1 Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological data analysis approach.**

- (1) Read and re-read all the co-researchers' descriptions of the phenomenon under study.
- (2) From each description, extract significant statements that directly pertain to the phenomenon.
- (3) Formulate meanings from these significant statements.
- (4) Organise these formulated meanings into themes.
- (5) Integrate the results of the data analysis into a description of the phenomenon under study.
- (6) Return the results to the participants for validation, a process of member-checking.
- (7) Incorporate any new, relevant data or information into the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.

### **2.10 Summary**

This chapter presented the aims and objectives of the research methodology as well as the phenomenological procedures of data collection and analysis using the phenomenological data analysis approach stipulated by Colaizzi (1978) as described on page 35. The trustworthiness of the data was also discussed. The following chapter will present the data findings and their interpretation. Themes and participants' direct verbatim quotations are presented, followed by an interpretation of their meaning.

### **Chapter 3: Findings and Interpretations**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of three international male student athletes at Saint Mary's University. Phenomenology was chosen as a research method because it offers a descriptive, reflective, interpretive, and engaged mode of inquiry that seeks to understand and describe the essence of experiences and enables underlying structures or themes and commonalities in meanings to be understood (Pitney & Parker, 2009, p. 191). The process of data analysis according to Creswell (1998) involved the reduction of information, analysis of relevant statements, identification of relevant themes, and constant exploration of emerging themes expanding from the data. My personal bias was acknowledged through personal reflection, and my everyday understandings, judgements and knowledge were set aside to avoid subjective bias. This process of reflecting on my personal biases, preconceptions and presuppositions created an environment for me as a researcher to conduct interviews and analyze the data with a clear and wide-open sense, devoid of personal and intrinsic biases (Moustakas, 1994). Themes and patterns were recognized as connections between ideas (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002).

#### **3.1 Trustworthiness of the Data**

The aim of trustworthiness in this study was to support the fact that the research findings are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). The following four issues of trustworthiness demand attention; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings of this study represent a credible conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the

participants' original data. Transferability is the extent to which the research findings can be applied or transferred to similar situations or settings outside of this study.

Dependability is an assessment of the quality of the integrated process of data collection, data analysis, theory generation, and it ensures that the study was conducted logically, suitably and with the ability to be traced by future researchers (Pitney & Parker, 2009, p. 62). Confirmability is a measure of how well the research findings are supported by the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). To establish trustworthiness, not only were the above measures used but measures were used to ensure triangulation and member checks (Kramer II, 2008; Pitney & Parker, 2009). Because this study was conducted in an Atlantic Canadian University with international student-athletes as participants, it may be replicable in a similar college or university athletic setting. This study also used multiple sources of data collection (three student-athletes from two different team sports), member-checking, and institutional informants such as the International Student's Advisor, Athletics Director, Coaches, and Administrators.

The researcher asked the participants' to verify the findings based on their experiences and perceptions and to comment on the plausibility of the findings. They received an explanation of the study's emergent themes as well as the supporting quotations from their interviews. This strategy, known as interpretive verification as part of member-checking, allowed the researcher to verify his interpretation of the data as reasonable (Pitney & Parker, 2009, p. 66). Thomas (2006) suggests that trustworthiness of qualitative research can be evaluated by independent replication of the research, comparison with findings from previous research, triangulation within a project, feedback from research participants, and feedback from users of the research findings (p. 238).

The researcher did acknowledge that another researcher may uncover different meaning structures, but hoped that from this presentation those readers would be able to see how he moved from the participants' words to the final description of the experience. The researcher has trusted the participants' descriptive narrations to be rich enough to take the reader deeper into their lived experiences. Data are contained within the perspectives of the participants. Data analysis involved the use of Colaizzi's (1978) methodological seven-step approach, as outlined in Chapter 2, page 35. This approach was chosen because it provided clarity in the analysis steps.

### **3.2 Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a search for themes that emerge from the data as being important to the description of the phenomenon under study. A theme describes an aspect of the structure of lived experience. Themes have phenomenological power when they allow a researcher to proceed with phenomenological descriptions of the phenomenon under study (Van Manen, 1997; Patton, 2002; Pitney & Parker, 2009). Themes were supported by direct quotations from the participants to ensure that data interpretation remained directly linked to the words of the participants. The participants' reflections, conveyed in their own words, strengthen the validity and credibility of the research (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2001).

The five global themes arose from common experiences expressed by all three participants. These are as follows: challenges; hard work; determination; accomplishment; and significant others. Phenomenology offers a descriptive, reflective, interpretive, and engaged mode of inquiry that seeks to understand and describe the

essence of experiences and enables underlying structures or themes and commonalities in meanings to be understood (Pitney & Parker, 2009; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The transferability or fit of the findings beyond the lived experiences described by the student-athletes in this study was enhanced by the use of participant quotations to illustrate the themes (Willig, 2008; Ryba, 2007). In presenting the findings, the researcher has an opportunity to convey his position, explain the evidence collected to answer the research questions, help others gain useful insights about the study, and highlight the voices of the participants (Pitney & Parker, 2009; Ojo, 2008).

### 3.3 Participant Descriptions

In this section, the researcher presents detailed information about the participants to help readers determine the transferability of the research findings. The goal was to craft a careful description of the three international male student-athletes that would help readers understand their background and why they were selected as participants in this study. Labels of participants 1, 2 and 3 are used in the presentation of the participant's demographic information.

***Table 1: Demographic Information on Study Participants***

Participant	Gender	Age	Sport	Position	Origin	Experience in sport	Academic program
#1	Male	25	Soccer	Goalkeeper	Middle East	4 years	Business
#2	Male	27	Basketball	Guard	West Africa	5 years	Human Resource Management
#3	Male	22	Basketball	Forward	West Africa	2 years	Sociology

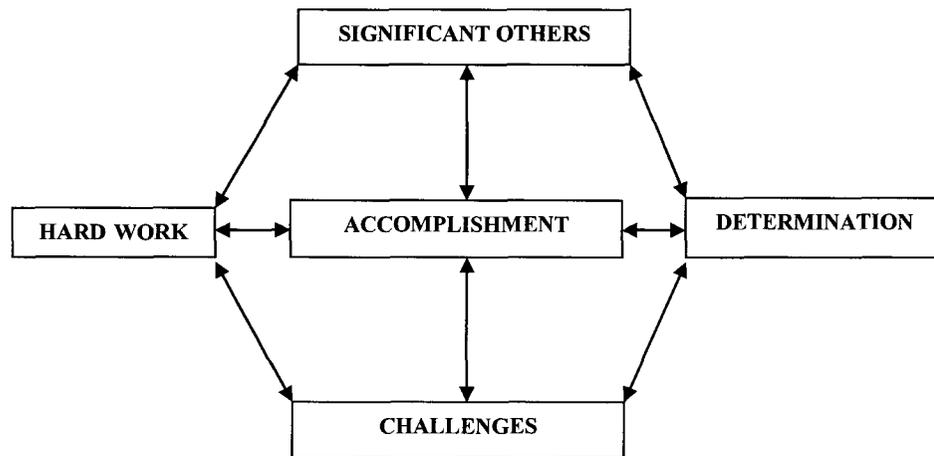
Participant 1 is a soccer player. He plays the goalkeeper position. Prior to coming to Halifax, he was playing competitive soccer in the Middle East and is from a soccer family. Religion plays a major role in his life. He is completing a degree in Business. He likes Canada and wishes to become a Canadian in the future.

Participant 2 is a basketball player. He plays defensive and offensive positions and is considered underrated but consistently hard-working. Prior to coming to Halifax, he was an experienced player in West Africa. He was recruited by the SMU Basketball Team head coach directly from his home country. His family supports him fully as he pursues his degree in Human Resource Management.

Participant 3 is a basketball player. Prior to coming to Halifax, he was an active and hard-working player in his home country. He was also recruited directly from West Africa by the basketball head coach with recommendations from participant # 2. He plays in the guard position and is pursuing a degree in Sociology. He has three more seasons with the team.

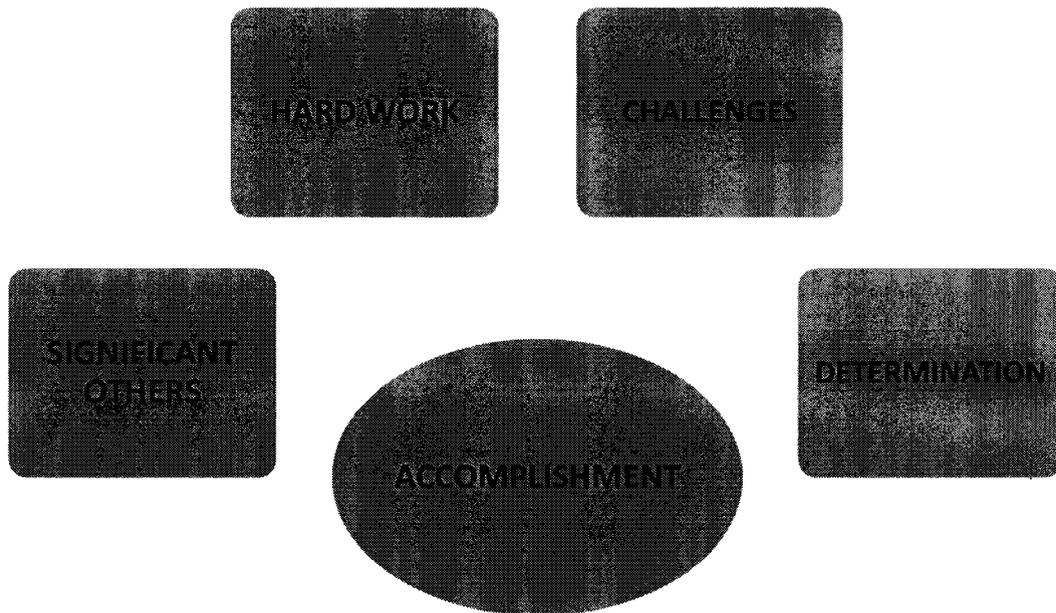
### **3.4 Introduction of Findings**

The qualitative and phenomenological nature of this study enabled the participants to express their voices and share their academic and athletic experience from their perspective. A total of five themes arose from the data analysis. The following diagram shows these themes and their interrelationships.



*Figure 3.1: Themes*

Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 show that each theme in this study is inter-related. The sense of accomplishment that marks the lived experience of each international male student-athlete is a combination of hard work, determination, support from those persons who matter in the athletes' life, and a challenging, competitive environment at Saint Mary's University that makes the athletes feel motivated and inspired to perform at their best.



*Figure 3.2: Convergence of themes*

#### **3.4.1 Connectedness of the themes.**

Accomplishment is the end-product of all the hard work the international male student-athletes put into their athletic and academic responsibilities (Figure 3.2). It is also a result of the tremendous support given to the participants by coaches, university administrators, professors, academic advisors, teammates, family, and friends. Their determination to overcome the numerous challenges facing them helped the international student-athletes reach their goals both as students and as athletes. The participant's lived experience is holistic and fulfilling with an interplay of the themes working to complete the meaning and essence. Figure 3.1 shows the inter-connectedness of the five themes,

while Figure 3.2 shows the convergence of challenges, hard work, determination and significant others around the theme of accomplishment.

As international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University, the athletes demonstrated the importance of hard work and sheer determination in overcoming a challenging cultural, social, financial, academic and athletic endeavour. Challenges can make athletes work hard. Social, emotional, and financial support is a key motivator for the three international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University. Such motivation and community encouragement builds a strong determined spirit in student-athletes and this may have contributed greatly to the study participants' sense of pride and accomplishment.

The themes in this study do not provide a complete picture or perception of participants' lived experiences as international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University. They are a complete picture of only one dimension of their student life and identity – that of student-athlete. This picture is not all of their lived experiences. This is because there are certain aspects of the student-athlete's day to day life experiences such as religious habits, social connections outside Saint Mary's, interactions with professors and advisors, as well as involvement in community projects on campus and off campus that are not well captured in the interviews and interpretations. However, when examined individually, the same themes provide an insight into the obstacles, frustrations, and struggles the three participants faced in trying to adjust to university life, balancing their academic, social, and athletic commitments. Challenges are an excellent catalyst for student-athlete success and accomplishment. The high expectations and competitive environment make an international student-athlete work extra hard as well as stay

focused and organized. Good time management skills as expressed by the participants, coupled with a strong work ethic that an international athlete is expected to possess, leads to success. The researcher observed, by interacting with the athletes through the interview sessions, that they were disciplined, energetic, proud of being a part of Saint Mary's University sports community and they loved the competitive nature of the sports program in Atlantic Canada. In their own eyes, all the hard work, perseverance, and commitment had paid off.

Table 2 below shows the themes, sub-themes, and verbal quotations that helped in comparative analysis. The rich descriptions therefore provide a basis for reflective structural and textural analysis that portrays the meanings and essences of the international male student-athletes' experiences from their perspective (Pitney & Parker, 2009).

### 3.5 Thematic Presentations and Descriptions

**Table 2: Themes, Sub-themes, and Quotes.**

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes: Participant 1	Quotes: Participant 2	Quotes: Participant 3
<b>Challenges</b>	hard, not easy, difficult, frustrating, barriers, adversity, hectic	"To be an international athlete is not easy." "Joining the soccer team in the beginning was very challenging. I did not know what the coach expected from the players and how seriously the coaching staff and the players take the team."	"I had a lot of difficulties adjusting." "Well, being a basketball player here is like a whole new experience to me 'because coming all the way from Africa to Canada without really knowing anybody to play ball and go to school, it's like a big deal."	"My experience as a first-year international student at Saint Mary's University was challenging." "The pressure of adjusting to the weather, academic timetables and also trying out with the basketball team was a huge responsibility."
<b><i>Cont'd on Next Page</i></b>				

<b>Hard Work</b>	No slacking, competitive, prove self, 100% effort, high expectation, adjustment	"Coaches want you to work hard to prove yourself." "I found there is no room for slacking."	"Being here and going to school and playing ball here have really changed so many things in my life... I have learned a lot by being here and being a student athlete...it's like hard work."	"I had to work hard because the educational system is quite different from our educational system back home, here; it is more of a technology-inclined educational system."
<b>Determination</b>	Focused, passionate, committed, role model, never give up, encouraging, priority.	"I had to learn how to manage my time carefully and give up on things like school activities or spending time with people whom I lived with on the same floor in residence."	"My experience here was somewhat hard at first because I had to learn to adjust faster by myself." "Working things together as a team helped me build up my adjustment level to where it is right now."	"The pressure of adjusting to the weather, academic time tables and also trying out with the basketball team was a huge responsibility, but I pulled through."
<b>Accomplishment</b>	Memorable experience, most valuable player (MVP), graduate, positive influence, winner, better player, ambassador, key player, leader, respected, popular, liked, opportunity to travel.	"I found that there is no room for slacking; it is all working hard and coaches want you to work hard to prove yourself. This is something that made me want to stay in the team because I have always liked challenges like that."	"My experience... I would say is like say it's like a stepping stone to a higher level of playing basketball and getting a good education." "I won a couple of player of the game and MVP (Most Valuable Player) of the tournament."	"I arrived in Canada during the winter time and the second half of the basketball season and the school year, which was not an easy task...but I pulled through." "The experience so far has been commendable and I'm adjusting to the cultures and traditions of the Canadian lifestyle."
<b>Significant Others</b>	Parents, teammates, coaches, tutors, friends, classmates, administrators, fans, physiotherapists, doctors, librarians, professors.	"My coach did actually help me and made me feel wanted and always made me want to keep working hard." "Friends watched my back and helped me out – you know, pushing me to do better."	"I talk to my family like a couple of times a month.... We stay in touch a lot and they have been a huge influence on my success here." "People around me made a great effort to assist me with adjusting, especially my teammates and coach."	"My family played a huge role in supporting me and encouraging me all the time about maintaining my focus." "Having my team mates and close friends has helped me adjust and move on with my own life."

Each theme will be described separately in the following section. Evidence in support of the thematic title explanation and its key aspects is given in the form of direct quotes from the participants. Labels (Participants 1, 2, and 3) are used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

### **3.5.1 Theme #1: Challenges**

An international male student-athlete at Saint Mary's University faces many challenges. These include a new social environment, new culture, language barriers, new rules and playing strategies, homesickness, adverse maritime weather, financial difficulties, academic pressure, and many more. The experience itself was challenging. The following quotes from the participants are evidence of these claims listed above.

#### Participant 1

“To be an international athlete is something not easy.”

“I was a complete stranger to people who I was surrounded by.”

“Joining the soccer team in the beginning was very challenging because I did not know what the coach expected from the players and how serious did the coaching staff and the players take the team.”

“I came here when I was young so I didn't have that experience, you know, about life and how to make friends, you know.”

“Language was a difficult part, since in soccer you have to learn how to communicate fast, clear and efficient with your teammates on the field and I got to learn that.”

Participant 1 clearly expresses the type of obstacles that he encountered. The first one is that he felt out of place (‘a stranger’) and that was made worse by communication problems and expectations from the coaches that were not yet clear to him. Making friends (socializing) was hard as he puts it because of lack of social skills, and lack of experience about life.

#### Participant 2

“Well, being a basketball player here is like a whole new experience to me, ‘cause coming all the way from Africa to Canada without really knowing anybody to play ball and go to school, it’s, like, a big deal”

“Weather is a big challenge to me... my first year, like, I really considered going back home because I have never been anywhere as cold as Canada.”

“I had a lot of difficulties adjusting with the new play system of the game.”

“Being an athlete you should face your studies and at the same time commit, like, 100% to your sport and it is not easy.”

“As I was new to the environment, most people find it hard to understand my English because of my strong African accent, so that was really frustrating to me.”

“Everything was new to me, like, the culture was totally different from mine.”

“My experience as a foreign student-athlete was somewhat hard.”

“Staying indoors here has changed me from being an outgoing person to more reserved person, so I’m still struggling with that aspect of adjustment.”

“The food is quite different, like, you can’t really get what we eat back home.”

Participant 2 had similar challenges to Participant 1 in that language hampered effective communication mainly because of a ‘strong African accent’. This was a source of frustration for this participant and it made adjustment and coping difficult. The different culture, a new playing system, and distance from family, contributed to a change in personality. He moved from an outgoing student-athlete to a reserved one. The adverse Atlantic Canada weather may also have contributed to this change in personality and social isolation.

### Participant 3

“My experience as a first year international student-athlete at Saint Mary’s University was challenging.”

“I arrived in Canada during the winter time and the second half of the basketball season and school year, which was not an easy task.”

“The pressure of adjusting to the weather, academic time tables and also trying out with the basketball team was a huge responsibility.”

“It has proven to be a lot of work for me to be responsible for my own self, being away internationally in a new environment which I have never been before.”

“Being here all alone without your family, it’s more of a disadvantage.”

“Not having your family and close friends around is a disadvantage for an international student because it has its psychological effect that may be sort of a distraction during the semester.”

“There are differences in the style of basketball from what we are used to back home; it is more technical and may be a disadvantage the first time prior to adjustments.”

Participant 3 mentioned the lack of family support and close friends as a major psychological challenge to him. He was a first year at the time he was interviewed unlike the other two participants who were in their fourth year at Saint Mary’s University. Being away from home, and in a new environment, seems to have been a stumbling block and a huge burden for this participant. It also put him at a disadvantage compared to his domestic teammates. The differences in playing systems as well as the adverse weather

conditions may have slowed down the adjustment process and made coping more difficult.

### **3.5.2 Theme #2: Hard Work.**

The second theme that emerged in this study was that of hard work. Participating in sports and studying at the same time is not an easy task. International male student-athletes face an uphill battle and without hard work and commitment, they may become a vulnerable and relatively powerless minority. The role of coaches, tutors, and academic advisors is important as they help the international student-athletes adjust and cope with their new identity of student and athlete.

#### Participant 1

“It was very hard when I first came here.”

“Joining the soccer team in the beginning was very challenging.”

“After a while I got used to the system and that you have to work hard to earn your spot on the team.”

“My life was becoming hectic; school work started adding up and being committed to the team was just too much for a young person who had nobody here.”

“I didn’t know anything about Halifax or Saint Mary’s.”

“It was definitely hard to kind of make friends.”

“My first semester here, it was very hard to organize myself, you know.”

“When you join a team here, there is no room for slacking, and coaches want you to work hard to prove yourself.”

“I learned to work hard because I found out here that you have to be physically strong to be able to play soccer.”

Participant 1 learned the importance of hard work from his academic studies as well as playing soccer. International student-athletes like him, have to prove themselves by working hard and calls for time management and excellent organizational skills. They have to listen to what their academic advisors and tutors say to them concerning their academic program. There is no room for being lazy or slack once one is a varsity team member as expressed by this participant. They are expected to prove themselves athletically and academically.

#### Participant 2

“Being here and going to school and playing ball here has really changed so many things in my life...I have learned a lot by being here and being a student athlete...it is like hard work.”

“The social aspect of everything – like, it’s really, like, it’s a big difference between that and where I’m from...things have really been changing a lot from this year.”

“As time goes by, I started to understand the ways and the culture of my new environment, which made things a little bit [more] comfortable.”

“At the same time an athlete should face studies and commit, like, 100% to whatever sport you are into and have to stick to what they are here for.”

Participant 2 found the task of balancing the social, academic and athletic lifestyles was hard. As a student and athlete, he had to work hard and commit 100% so as to make it. Life at Saint Mary’s University has been very different than back home and he needed a totally new attitude towards student-athlete life. He was able to cope and adjust overtime to the new ways of doing things.

### Participant 3

“Maintaining focus and believing in what I was working towards made me a great player and a great student in the school.”

“I had to be ready for the tests ahead since it was really, really not easy.”

“I had to work hard because the educational system is quite different from our educational system back home; here, it is more of a technology-inclined educational system.”

“The system of basketball is different and more technical than back home but with hard work and focus, I was able to adjust.”

“Being away in a new environment alone and where I have never been before made me a more focused student and athlete...also to work hard and to know how to face challenges ahead of me in life.”

Participant 3 realized the importance of hard work, focus and quick learning in order to do well in a new environment. The new educational system and the technical system of play in basketball was an additional reason enough to discourage him, however, he learned how to work hard, to stay focused and be determined. The tutors and academic advisors helped him plan his academic program and manage his time.

### **3.5.3 Theme #3: Determination.**

The third theme identified in this study was determination. The international male student-athletes are committed and focused on what brought them to Saint Mary's University. There is passion and drive to do well as an athlete and student. The challenging environment makes them have the strong assets of perseverance, tolerance, discipline and dedication.

#### Participant 1

“It was very hard when I first came here...however, after a while, I got used to the system and that you have to work hard to earn your spot on the team.”

“I had to learn how to manage my time carefully and give up on things like school activities or spending time with people whom I lived with on the same floor in residence.”

“I don't regret being on the soccer team. There were some personal issues, like the drop of my grades, but it wasn't that big of a deal because I had the time to do better and improve and I did it because I worked harder.”

“At some point in time, I wanted to quit soccer, especially in my first year since I wasn’t getting much playing time, but I think my strong will and my passion for this sport has made my soccer career last longer at the university.”

Participant 1 had no regrets but said he almost quit soccer if it was not for his passion and strong will to succeed. Personal issues and low grades in academics were enough to discourage, however, he learned how to work hard, stay focused and be determined. Working harder and persevering made him improve as a player and student at Saint Mary’s University.

#### Participant 2

“Working things together as a team helped me build up my adjustment level to where it is right now.”

“My experience here was somewhat hard because I had to learn to adjust faster by myself.”

“As time goes by, I started to understand the ways and the culture of my new environment, which made things a little bit [more] comfortable.”

“I have always been a starter and always been the centre of my team.”

“Here you are a student first of all, before being an athlete, so you should face your studies and at the same time commit like 100% to whatever sport you are into, so if you can handle these two together, then you are going to go places.”

Participant 2 embraced the university expectation of being both a student and a team player. His teammates helped him to adjust and to cope with the life of being a student and an athlete in a foreign land. His determination to prove himself and excel made him the centre of the team. He considered himself an asset rather than a liability to the team. He believes that being able to handle the pressure of having a double role as student and athlete can take the international student-athlete places, such as being successful.

### Participant 3

“The pressure of adjusting to the weather, academic time tables and also trying out with the basketball team was a huge responsibility, but I pulled through.”

“Coming here has given to me a chance to be a more mature student and to be a more focused student and also to work hard and to know how to face challenges ahead of me in life.”

“It has made me more diverse with the new cultures around me... new individuals and nationalities which I never been with enabled me adjust.”

“Adversities never ceased but I kept striving for my passion.”

Participant 3 was determined to make it in spite of the obstacles ahead of him. A commitment to strive for his passion as well as a fighting spirit has seen him through. Determination to him was the key to overcome and he liked the diversity at Saint Mary's University that helped him adjust. The pressure to quickly adjust was challenging, but being a part of a winning team and a teammate from the same region and culture in West Africa helped him as well. Being an international student-athlete at Saint Mary's University has given him a chance to mature and stay focused on playing well and succeeding academically.

#### **3.5.4 Theme #4: Accomplishment.**

The fourth theme that emerged from the data analysis is accomplishment. Hard work and a determined 'never give-up' attitude produces a sense of pride and accomplishment for each student-athlete in this study. Hard work and the determination to stay focused and motivated leads to a great sense of achievement and success for many student-athletes. Furthermore, the dedication to be disciplined in their academic studies and taking the advice given by academic advisors and professors seriously, has helped the international male student-athletes to do well in their student life and accomplish more than they had imagined as athletes.

Participant 1

“I learned the mentality here of how people think of soccer.”

“Canada in some ways has the same European style of living, so that kind of helped me to adapt easily.”

“I did learn several things that regards soccer, but in different views from my coaches point of view.”

“I play goalkeeper and it is one of the most important positions in the game you know... you have to kind of correct their errors or tell them the game or what to do or where to be placed.”

“I thank God for having given me a personality that makes me able to talk to people and which made me in some way outgoing, so that kind of helped me.”

“Playing on the soccer team definitely helped me... People give you attention sometimes and they can appreciate that you are playing for their university, you know what I mean, and that’s why I like here.”

“I found that there is no room for slacking. It is all working hard and coaches want you to work hard to prove yourself. This is something that made me want to stay on the team because I have always liked challenges like that.”

“Being in soccer has given me the opportunity to actually travel and go see Nova Scotia and I have been to places like New Brunswick, PEI, Cape Breton...places I wouldn't have the chance to go if I wasn't on the soccer team.”

“Saint Mary's is, you know, if you compare it to other universities, it's one of the biggest, right, and that's what I like about it, you know. Professors are really great and just the atmosphere here is lively, you know. It's a nice friendly university.”

“Honestly, Canadian people are one of the friendliest people I have seen in my life. I have lived in countries like Portugal, Jordan, Dubai, Iraq and I have never seen people who are very open. I hope to be Canadian one day.”

Participant 1 had much to share about accomplishment as an attribute of hard work, determination and a challenging environment. He sees the opportunities available to the international student-athlete at Saint Mary's University such as travelling to various places in Canada and especially Atlantic Canada, meeting new people, and learning about Canada. This participant is from a much more diverse social-cultural background than the other two participants and a soccer player who appreciates the opportunity he has had of playing for a varsity team on campus. God is mentioned as a provider of strength, and character (personality) that has helped him cope and adjust well. His accomplishments are attributed to factors within and outside of himself such as coaches, professors, and the soccer fraternity at the University. He expresses his plans of

becoming a Canadian one day and to be a proud family man who will share the lived experiences with his children. To him, this accomplishment is a mark of success as an international student-athlete.

Participant 2

“I came to Saint Mary’s University on an athletic scholarship.”

“My experience in both Canada and Saint Mary’s University has affected me in so many good ways.”

“When the basketball season began, I tended to become more popular and almost the whole school comes to watch our games.”

“My experience was great...I am graduating with a degree in Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations.”

“My experience, I would say, is like, say, it’s like a stepping stone to a higher level of playing basketball and getting a good education.”

“I can tell you that I like it here. I really learned a lot by being here and being a student athlete.”

"I won a couple of 'player of the game' and 'Most Valuable Player' of the tournament."

"I have always been a starter and always been the centre of my team."

Participant 2 is proud of his accomplishments as an international student-athlete at Saint Mary's University. Being granted an athletic scholarship was an achievement that has helped him cope and adjust to the pressure and financial hardships that many international students face. His popularity as a result of playing well and representing the university in major competitions successfully made him feel good and happy about being an international student-athlete. Playing basketball and doing well in academics was a big step in life, and he saw it as a stepping stone to a better and brighter future. He did not plan to continue playing basketball after graduating.

### Participant 3

"I am adjusting and getting used to the new system, new culture, though it is not easy."

"I am more focused and believe what I am working towards will make me a great player and a great student in the school."

“I arrived in Canada during the winter time and the second half of the basketball season and school year, which was not an easy task...but I pulled through.”

“I have been engaged in basketball camps and exchange programs within Europe and Africa and such programs have been a huge part of my life as a basketball player...seeing the game as ‘my other self’.”

“Adversities never ceased but I kept striving for my passion.”

“The experience so far has been commendable and I’m adjusting to the cultures and traditions of the Canadian lifestyle.”

“I am a student-athlete majoring in sociology and playing basketball at Saint Mary’s University.”

Participant 3 finds that being able to learn and adjust to a new culture in Halifax and Canada was a major accomplishment. He believes that staying focused on playing basketball and doing well in class is a big deal in that it will ensure him success in spite of all of the obstacles and adversities international student-athletes face. Basketball playing to him is a huge part of his life and he would like to do well like his teammate from West Africa. To him, winning is important for with hard work, determination and a

focused mind, one can achieve a lot. His ability to adjust to the culture and traditions of the Canadian lifestyle is commendable.

### **3.5.5 Theme #5: Significant Others.**

The last theme that emerged from the review of the narratives of the athlete's experience was that of significant others. The significant others identified were family, coaches, tutors, team mates, classmates, physiotherapists, doctors, nutritionists, professors, fans, and friends. The contribution of these significant others helped the athletes to adjust to a new environment, sports culture, playing system, and to educational goals and expectations. The international male student-athletes admitted that without support from significant others, it would have been impossible to tackle the obstacles and hardships they encountered at Saint Mary's University. The significant others in their lives played a major role in motivating and providing moral, emotional, and material support to the participants. The socialization agents such as peers, parents, coaches, and friends have been shown to influence not only the athletic but also the academic experience of student-athletes (Kramer II, 2008; Senecal, 1998).

#### Participant 1

"I was a complete stranger to the people I was surrounded by."

"The athletic department helped me through providing personal tutors."

"My family has always supported me since I was young."

“Friends watched my back and helped me out, you know, pushing me to do better and better.”

“My coach did actually help me and made me feel wanted and always made me want to keep working hard.”

“As an athlete, tutors and sports administrators help you to do better in school...In soccer, we get scholarships like \$1000, you know?”

“There was a drop in my grades but it wasn’t a big deal because I had time to do better and improve and I did it because I worked harder and because the athletic department helped me through providing personal tutors, which I’m greatly thankful for.”

Participant 1 attributes his success and achievement as an international student-athlete at Saint Mary’s University to his family at home and here in Canada, friends and coaches contributions in his life. The scholarship, and personal tutors as well as an encouraging coach, supportive family and friends helped him cope, and do well socially, academically and athletically. This participant is thankful for all of the help and encouragement without which he would not have been able to play soccer, get better grades, and graduate from Saint Mary’s as an international student-athlete.

Participant 2

“As school starts and classes were up and running, I got to meet other people and I started mixing up with classmates who some of them were international students like me.”

“I was picked up by my coach who took me in as part of his family.”

“I came to Saint Mary’s University on an athletic scholarship.”

“I was introduced to the rest of the team who were mostly Canadians and they were pretty nice and accommodating to me.”

“People around me made a great effort to assist me with adjusting, especially my team mates and coach.”

“Oh, without my family, I wouldn’t be here. They had a huge contribution in my success.”

“My family at home – if they don’t support me financially, they support me, like, emotionally.”

“The family at home has always been there for me whenever I need anything.”

“I talk to my family at home, like, a couple of times a month... like, we stay in touch a lot and they have been a huge influence on my success here.”

Participant 2 appreciated his family at home, his coach who accepted him and treated him like a part of his own family, and teammates for being there for him. His success as an international student-athlete is in part due to close family ties at home, and the excellent relationship he had with his coach, teammates and other SMU athletes and friends. Family support from home, both financial and emotional, was very important and an aspect of his experience that he will never forget. His coach was pivotal in ensuring that he adjusted well and did succeed in his basketball career while at Saint Mary's University.

### Participant 3

“My family at home played a huge role in supporting me and encouraging me all the time about maintaining my focus.”

“Friends and teammates also talked about their personal experiences, giving me hope.”

“Coaches were available to put me through in the best way they could.”

“Having my teammates and close friends has helped me adjust and move on with my own life.”

Participant 3 also cites family support from home as very important for his success as an international student-athlete. The coaches and academic advisors pushed him and are still pushing him to excel in both athletics and academics at Saint Mary’s University. Being a member of a varsity team gave him many opportunities that other international students (non-athletes) did not have such as physiotherapy and nutritionists as well teammates and friends who gave him hope and encouragement along the way. Adjustment to and coping with numerous challenges from personal to academic was possible due to the role of significant others in his life and that of the other two participants.

### **3.6 Interpretation**

In this section, the researcher will integrate the participant’s views with supporting views from related studies and literature. The two research questions below are answered from the participants’ perspective and the researcher’s reflective perception.

1. What is it like to be an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary’s University?
2. What does such an experience mean to each individual athlete?

The researcher asked the three international undergraduate students these questions; as the findings reveal, they had a lot to share.

### **3.6.1 What is it like to be an International male Student-Athlete?**

Previous studies show that an international student faces many challenges (Mwaura, 2008; Ellefson, 2009; Ejiofo, 2010), and being an international male student-athlete is likewise an uphill battle (Martin, 2005; Gearity, 2009; Adler & Adler, 1987; 1991; Grayson, 2008; Wang, 2009; Kissinger & Miller, 2009; Lee, 2010). The three participants admitted to encountering many obstacles that required substantial adjustments. These included problems of language, climate, homesickness and technology. For instance, while the English language was familiar to them, local expressions and jokes were hard to understand, which underscored the participants' sense of being outsiders (Mwaura, 2008; Ojo, 2008). The adverse Canadian weather conditions also proved too much to handle on occasion as the participants were from the tropics, where the weather is hot and dry and snow is a rare commodity.

In addition, loneliness and homesickness were enhanced by the absence of family and close friends and was further exacerbated by the difficulties they experienced in making new friends. The Canadian academic system was an additional challenge as everything here was highly technical and computerized, and the sports playing systems

and coaching techniques were different. In response to these and other challenges, the participants often felt like quitting and going home. They only stayed so as not to disappoint their coaches, family, and friends. These findings are similar to other studies which explored the experiences of international students and athletes (Adler & Adler, 1987; Preacco, 2009; Senecal, 1998; Mwaura, 2008; Pierce et al, 2010; Trendafilova et al., 2010).

Being an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary's University was difficult, but the participants in this study expressed their confidence, determination, commitment, and a desire to work hard to succeed. This was in agreement with Atkinson's (2011, p.20) delineation of masculine characteristics, which include: "aggressiveness, physical strength, drive, ambition, lack of emotion, and self-reliance". The participants in basketball and soccer did not find any form of hazing or discrimination due to gender. Gender was not an issue to them. The male and female teams work and support each other during practices and competitions. These are less gender specific teams. This is an aspect that I found very interesting and needs further research.

The researcher was impressed by the participants' determination, self-discipline, dedication and enthusiasm in spite of the day-to-day obstacles they faced. Academic life

was not easy for them, despite having tutors, academic advisors, and professors who empathized with their busy athletic schedule. This is in line with what Adler and Adler (1987) found in their study, namely that fatigue from training, traveling, and competition, as well as insufficient time for studying, affected academic performance amongst basketball players.

In contrast to these ongoing challenges, there were many opportunities involved in being an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary's University. These included opportunities to excel in athletics and academics in a supportive environment, to make new friends, and to travel to various parts of Atlantic Canada and the rest of Canada. They also included a chance to be known by the local media, university community including professors, academic advisors, coaches, administrators, and classmates as well as the Halifax community. The participants revealed that the experience was a satisfying and fulfilling one with a hopeful future. The prospects of graduating with a degree from a well-known and respected university like Saint Mary's was a privilege and an honour not enjoyed by many students back home. Participant 2 commented, "My experience was great. I am graduating with a degree in Human Resources and Industrial Relations." Participant 3 proudly added, "I am a student-athlete majoring in sociology and playing basketball at Saint Mary's University."

Moreover, representing the university in a competitive league and doing well with a winning team was uplifting and a major accomplishment. Some participants became popular and the pillar of their teams, which boosted their morale and self-confidence as international students and athletes. Participant 2 expressed his joy and satisfaction by saying, “I won a couple of ‘player of the game’ and ‘Most Valuable Player’ of the tournament” and “I have always been a starter and always been the centre of my team.”

Recognition of their contribution was uplifting and gave these undergraduate international male student-athletes a sense of pride. The participants displayed a sense of joy and happiness as a sign of accomplishment after all the challenges, difficulties, and uphill battles they had fought and won. Participant 2 proudly said:

“Here you are a student first of all before being an athlete, so you should face your studies and at the same time commit, like, 100% to whatever sport you are into... so if you can handle these two together, then you are going to go places.”

Being an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary’s University was a sacrifice worth making. The experience of tackling athletic and academic challenges all alone, far from family and close friends and in a new environment, was daunting but inspiring. The athletes learned quickly how to get organized and manage their time. It

was a learning experience and a growing period that equals none other. As the participants expressed, this experience would not have been possible without the support of family at home, coaches, tutors, teammates, administrators, academic advisors, professors, classmates, and friends.

Participant 3 phrased it this way: “My family at home played a huge role in supporting me and encouraging me all the time about maintaining my focus.” In addition, the “family atmosphere” at Saint Mary’s University was recognized and appreciated by the participants as a contributor to their feeling of accomplishment and success. The coaches took them in as their own children and made them a part of a greater family of the sporting community. As Participant 2 pointed out, “The family at home especially has always been there for me whenever I need anything.”

As well, the academic advisors, tutors, and faculty helped them with their academic struggles while the physiotherapists, doctors, and nutritionists made sure they stayed healthy and fit. Additionally, teammates, classmates, and friends socialized with them and showed them places in and around Halifax that made life manageable and interesting. Participant 3 commented, “I am adjusting and getting used to the new system, new culture though not easy.” Getting to know other students, both international and

Canadian, gave the athletes a chance to learn Canadian values and to develop coping skills that they would use even after graduation. Participant 2 explained, “I can tell you that I like it here... I really learned a lot by being here and being a student athlete.”

Interacting with other domestic and international students also provided an opportunity for the athletes to share their culture and contribute positively to the athletic and academic environment at Saint Mary’s University. Participant 3 said with a sense of pride, “Coaches were available to put me through in the best way they could. I am adjusting and getting used to the new system, new culture, though it is not easy.”

### **3.6.2 What does this experience mean?**

Being an international male student-athlete means having a lived experience worth remembering long after graduation. It is an experience that each participant can share with his children and family as memories of a time well spent with teammates and classmates. Further, it is an experience where talent and hard work were appreciated and the fruits of that labour were seen and felt, as well as an experience that called for time management skills and an organized life style to make it a successful one. Participant 1 states, “My family back home and here has always supported me since I was young.” Far away from home, and with high expectation of themselves and others, hard work is a

must for these international male student-athletes. They have to satisfy the expectations of coaches, tutors, professors, academic advisors, and family while at the same time getting as much support as possible from these same parties.

Participant 1 explained, “I thank God for having given me a personality that makes me able to talk to people and which makes me in some way outgoing so that kind of helped me.” There is a misconception that student-athletes (international and domestic) are socially incompetent and lacking in intellectual ability which puts pressure on the athletes to do exceptionally well in academics and athletics. There are rewards for their accomplishments on the field and in the classroom. Participant 1 spells it out, “If you are an international student at university and you get an opportunity, that’s great. You don’t want to miss it.”

Coakley (1990) states that, “industrialized societies like Canada emphasize achievement and organization. The majority of Canadians grow up learning the importance of setting goals, developing their potential, and becoming successful in the terms defined by their families and communities” (p. 88). However, practice and competition reduce these athletes’ free time and create an imbalance between academic and athletic responsibilities (Kissinger & Miller, 2009, p.43). The opportunity to compete and prove themselves was important for the participants in this study. To them, sport

competition was “a way of preparing for the successful handling of the rest of their lives” (Coakley, 1990, p. 86). As Participant 1 put it, “When you join a team here, there is no room for slacking and coaches want you to work hard to prove yourself.” Participant 2 added his voice by saying, “Here you are a student first of all before being an athlete, so you should face your studies and at the same time commit, like, 100% to whatever sport you are into, so if you can handle these two together, then you are going to go places.”

What does it mean to be an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary’s University? It means devoting more time and energy for practice rather than for socializing or doing assignments; it also means giving up personal and community activities in order to attend training sessions, team meetings, and competitions. Further, the athletes’ lived experience has created a desire to excel both academically and athletically through hard work and time management. Participant 2 explains, “Working things together as a team helped me build up my adjustment level to where it is right now.” The participants had a passion to win and a determined spirit that drove them to work harder and always strive for the best. As Participant 3 put it, “I am more focused and believe what I am working towards will make me a great player and a great student in the school.” Participant 1 added that, “When you join a team here, there is no room for slacking and coaches want you to work hard to prove yourself.”

Being an international male student-athlete means that all eyes are on you, expectations are high, and you are deemed a role model. Athletes represent the university

while setting the benchmark for others with their personal qualities that emphasize hard work, determination, and accomplishment. Participant 1 commented that,

“Playing on the soccer team definitely helped me... People give you attention sometimes and they can appreciate that you are playing for their university – you know what I mean? – And that’s why I like it here.”

The experience of being an international male student-athlete meant that the athletes took advantage of the many opportunities and benefits available to them as students and athletes at Saint Mary’s University. It meant that free tutoring, academic advising, career counselling, scholarships, bursaries, and grants as well as job opportunities were more readily available to them compared to the average international student. Participant 2 explained that;

“As school starts and classes were up and running, I got to meet other people, and I started mixing up with classmates, some of whom were international students too.”

The findings of this study demonstrate that lived experiences of international male student-athletes at Saint Mary’s University were special and unique. Their masculinity was demonstrated through “achievement, dominance, competence and competitiveness” (Martin, 2005, p. 179). Other writers such as Atkinson (2011), and Wellard (2009)

supported the notion of masculinity that success and accomplishment are important for any ambitious and highly motivated male student-athlete. As noted earlier on page 20, masculine identity has been identified as having a relationship between ambition, high motivation, and the winning attitude of male athletes. Participant 3 mentioned that;

“I arrived in Canada during the winter time and the second half of the basketball season and school year which was not an easy task...but I pulled through.”

No other qualitative, descriptive phenomenological study has been conducted in Atlantic Canada to explore and describe the lived experiences of international male student-athletes. The intention of this study was to provide a rich description of the athletes' lived experience and the meanings attached to these experiences from their point of view. This was in line with what other researchers have described (Senecal, 1998; Mwaura, 2008; Pierce et al., 2010). Despite the many challenges facing the three international male student-athletes, they displayed a resilient, confident, and focused presence.

Their commitment and dedication, self-discipline and hard work paid off as their narratives and expressions during the interviews and follow-up encounters showed. The sense of pride, accomplishment, and success was evident in their stories of perseverance

and consistency. Their determination to succeed was strong as was their resolve and motivation to be the best that they could be (Trendafilova et al., 2010; Pierce et al., 2010; Mwaura, 2008). They were happy to be involved in this research study and pleased to be given a chance to share their pain, fears, and struggles as well as their victories and triumphs. This is summed up by Participant 1, who said;

“I found that there is no room for slacking, it is all working hard and coaches want you to work hard to prove yourself. This is something that made me want to stay in the team because I have always liked challenges like that.”

The participants in this study felt appreciated, honoured, well nurtured, and supported. In their eyes, being an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary’s University was a precious time in their life – a time to prove they were worthy of the confidence their coaches, faculty, academic advisors, and family had in them. As well, it was a time to focus not on their vulnerability and powerlessness but on their strengths, abilities, and talents, and a time to manage and prioritize their daily activity schedules in a bid to balance the social, academic, and athletic demands on them. The participants needed to show that they can fully grasp the excessive demands, conflicts and hardships that are factored into their lives daily as international male students and athletes.

It was a time to display a “strong, upstanding, moral character that is expected of ‘men’ of integrity and wisdom” (Martin, 2005, p. 139). According to the participants, this was definitely, not a time to procrastinate, get low grades, perform below par, or slack off. Participant 1 commented, “There is no room for slackening...the coaches expect you to prove yourself.” Instead of slacking or performing below par, this was a time to help their teams win games, showcase their athletic abilities and satisfy their coaches’ and parents’ high expectations for them.

Being an international male student-athlete was not and has never been an easy task, but with determination, hard work, and the support of significant others, it was possible to accomplish their goals and aspirations as students and athletes. The challenges strengthened their resolve and sense of pride enabling them to succeed year after year. This is in agreement Martin’s research (2005, p. 129) which demonstrated that “hard work and practical goals can lead participants to success”. Participant 3 clearly stated that, “Adversities never ceased but I kept striving for my passion.” Participant 1 added that

“Joining the soccer team in the beginning was very challenging because I did not know what the coach expected from the players and how serious did the coaching staff and the players take the team.”

As well, life in a new place far from home has its challenges, as many other studies involving international students and athletes have shown (Preacco, 2009; Mwaura, 2008; Ejiofo, 2010; Pierce et al., 2010). International students including athletes, have to face the reality of having to cope with adjustment pressures and many other obstacles that they encounter in their new environment (Trendafilova et al., 2010; Kissinger & Miller, 2009). As Participant 3 pointed out, “The pressure of adjusting to the weather, academic time tables and also trying out with the basketball team was a huge responsibility, but I pulled through.”

Saint Mary’s University is an institution just like many others in Atlantic Canada where students both local and international excel in academics and athletics. More research is needed to compare the academic and athletic performances of international and domestic student-athletes across Atlantic Canada. There is a need to inquire about the lived experiences of academic advisors and coaches as they take care of the international students’ academic and athletic programs at Saint Mary’s University. The evidence is clear from the narratives by the three participants that athletic and academic life at Saint Mary’s University is noble, meaningful and satisfying. According to Trendafilova et al. (2010), “understanding the experience of student-athletes and their level of satisfaction with both the academic and athletic experience is important since higher levels of satisfaction could lead to better performance both athletically and academically” (p.5).

The support systems are in place to help international male student-athletes excel in their dual roles of student and athlete. The sports program is excellent and competitive enough to sustain their interest and nurture their growth and progress. The academic program is enriched by the provision of academic advisors and tutors as well as a team of

highly qualified faculty and staff. As noted earlier, the international male student-athletes have many advantages over other international students. The participants had this to say about their experience as international student-athletes in a new environment away from home;

“I was introduced to the rest of the team who were mostly Canadians, and they were pretty nice and accommodating to me” (Participant 1), and that

“Being away in a new environment alone and where I have never been before made me a more focused student and athlete... I also had to work hard and to know how to face challenges ahead of me in life” (Participant 3).

The financial, social, athletic and academic support the participants received from the university administration, faculty, academic advisors, tutors, and coaches was significant. Participant 3 supported this by saying, “Having my team mates and close friends has helped me adjust and move on with my own life.” Participant 1 added, “My coach did actually help me and made me feel wanted and always made me want to keep working hard.”

The pressure of adjustment was greatly reduced and coping made easy through the social support from coaches, academic advisors, tutors, friends, alumni, teammates, and family. “The coach took me in like his son” said one participant. “My family at home have always been there for me” proudly declared another participant. “Teammates and close friends have helped me adjust” said the third participant. Commitment and hard work are vital for success especially for international student-athletes who have a dual role to play as students and athletes. According to Coakley (1990), commitment and hard

work are vital for success and especially for international student-athletes who have a dual role to play as students and athletes (p. 245).

Saint Mary's University is a family with great values that international student-athletes have come to appreciate and accept. The participants agreed that internationalization of Saint Mary's University was a great idea and that the close-knit family atmosphere was unique in Atlantic Canada. A replication of this study in other similar settings in Atlantic Canada can help refute or support the above assertion.

Participant 1 put it this way:

“Honestly, Canadian people are one of the friendliest people I have seen in my life. I have lived in countries like Portugal, Jordan, Dubai, Iraq and I have never seen people who are very open...I hope to be Canadian one day.”

The diversity, rich-cultural perspective and orientation were felt campus-wide by all students, both athletes and non-athletes, local and international. This phenomenological study has helped the researcher's understanding of international student-athlete's life and the challenges they face and how they have learned to cope and adjust so as to accomplish their dreams and career objectives while studying and participating in the athletic and academic program at Saint Mary's University. It was a learning process that has enabled the researcher to ponder the possibility of further research in this area of study at a doctoral level. “It was very hard when I first came here,” said one participant. “Being an international student is not easy,” added another participant. “Coming here all alone without family and friends was a hard experience,”

stated yet another participant. “Adversity never ceased but my passion for the sport kept me going,” commented another participant.

It is worth noting that with determination and hard work, the three male varsity-athletes were able to accomplish something worthwhile. “This is an experience that I will share with my kids,” proudly declared a participant. “I am graduating with a degree in Human Resource Management,” exclaimed another participant with pride. “I want to be a Canadian one day after graduating,” affirmed a third participant. Reading their stories will hopefully encourage other international students and athletes to work hard and to face obstacles along their way with determination and courage.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Internationalization at Saint Mary’s University has helped diversify not just the student population but also the academic program and services provided. It has helped create tolerance and raise acceptability levels to some extent within the university community. Sports offer a “unique context for the study of social processes and relationships” (Coakley, 1990, p. 5). The needs of international students and athletes in particular have been well accommodated. Facilities at the residences, library, cafeteria, and sports complex have improved tremendously over the years. The English as a Second Language Centre and the Writing Centre are helping international students. The Health Services, the Library, the new Atrium complex, as well as the Students Centre have enriched the University environment making it conducive for international students and

athletes to thrive and succeed. Academic advisors and tutors also help student-athletes in planning their academic program of study.

It is my hope that this phenomenological study will usher in a desire and a thirst for more studies in this area of internationalization and sports participation especially involving student-athletes in Atlantic Canada specifically, and Canada in general. The three international male student-athletes expressed their support of internationalization as a good way to give students and athletes from other countries the opportunity to come to Canada to study and develop their athletic abilities. They also shared their dreams and aspirations including how they adjusted and coped with the numerous challenges and obstacles they faced. The student-athletes' determination, hard work, and a commitment to overcome all odds was inspiring. They had help from families, friends, alumni, teammates, and coaches. The support from the Athletics Department, academic advisors, tutors, administrators, and professors was appreciated for making their dreams come true.

### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of the study and interpretations. The trustworthiness of the data, thematic analysis, participant descriptions, as well as a thick description of the meaning, structure, and essence of the athlete's lived experiences as supported by their verbatim quotes are outlined. The next chapter involves a discussion of the limitations of the study, a personal reflection by the researcher, recommendations for future research and a detailed conclusion.

## **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of the international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University. This was a purposively selected sample of international student-athletes involved in varsity basketball and soccer competitions. The rich, thick descriptions of their experiences provided a basis for a reflective structural analysis and interpretation. The findings revealed five themes: challenges, significant others, determination, hard work, and accomplishment. Participant quotes that support these emergent themes and substantiate the findings were presented. The goal of this phenomenological study was to describe and explore rather than to explain. Two research questions formed the basis of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings. Participants were asked what it was like to be an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary's University and what such an experience meant to them.

### **4.1 Personal Reflection**

Coming to Canada as an international student in the 1990s was an exciting and rewarding experience. It was a dream comes true for me, a hard-working young adult who had grown up in Kenya, a country that values education and sports. I came to Canada in August of 1989 to pursue graduate studies at Dalhousie University in Halifax, having won a full scholarship through the Kenyan Government and the Canadian

International Development Agency (C.I.D.A.). My academic interest was in the discipline of Physical Education and Sport; at the time, I was a physical educator and sports instructor at Kenyatta University in Nairobi. As a sportsman (I played competitive soccer and handball), coach, teacher, and referee, my dream was to learn how to prepare athletes mentally for competition. This was also why I transferred to McGill University in January of 1990 to pursue a Master of Arts degree in Sport Psychology and Motor Learning under the supervision of the late Dr. Daniel Marisi.

My experience as an international student and a participant in intramural soccer as a player and referee at McGill University, in Montreal, Quebec, inspired me to want to explore the lived experiences of international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University. The pressure to cope with academics in a world of technology (I had never used a computer before coming to Canada), social life in a new culture, and adverse weather conditions (first winter ever in my life), and trying to adjust to a new country and environment far from home, family, friends, and social networks was too much for me. Without such a personal experience, I believe I would not have developed the deep level of compassion, understanding, and empathy that I have today for international students and student-athletes. The researcher's personal efforts, experiences, and insights were the central means for examining the phenomenon under study.

This study has helped me develop a deeper appreciation of the commitment, dedication, and hard work that goes into performing a dual role of being a university student and athlete. The obstacles are numerous that international students and athletes face as they strive to do their best with what they have but, as the three participants demonstrated through their narratives, it is an experience worth sharing through this

research project. In spite of cultural differences, the soccer and basketball players interacted well with each other. No gender specific issues were raised by the participants and teams (men and women), worked closely together and supported each other. My skill, perceptiveness, and dedication as a researcher was the engine of this phenomenological research study.

#### **4.2 Limitations of the Study**

A qualitative study like this one has limitations. One limitation of this study was the relatively small sample size. For this reason, the findings may not be generalized to the broader community of international student-athletes in Atlantic Canada based on this study alone.

Phenomenology is both metaphorical and interpretive in its approach and does not go beyond interpretation. The understanding of the social and psychological aspects of the phenomenon under study was from the participants' perspectives and the researcher's experience only. It is about meaning which comes from experience and application. In this study, the focus was on describing the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of international student-athletes. The participants focused on their athletic experience more than their academic experience at Saint Mary's University. Their academic experiences in class, interactions with academic advisors were not articulated enough and this I consider a limitation in this study.

The participants in this study were all males. This is a limitation because female international students' lived experiences are missing and would have made the study more representative of a university life in Atlantic Canada by broadening the range

and variety of student-athlete experiences. The pool from which participants were recruited was also limited due to the selective nature of this study and its purpose. The researcher chose to focus on international student-athletes who participate in varsity sports with which I am more familiar such as basketball and soccer. This choice limited the number of potential participants in this study.

The study context was a limitation in this study. The focus on male international student-athletes at Saint Mary's University limited the scope of the study. A broader representation of international student-athletes (male and female) across Atlantic Canadian universities would have produced different results and would have enhanced the credibility and transferability of the findings. It would have also introduced new perspectives of student-athletes from the Caribbean, Europe, South America, Asia, and the United States.

#### **4.3 Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings of this study may be useful in creating a university environment that better serves the international-student population at all levels of sports participation. The challenges student-athletes encounter are different to some extent from any other group within college and university education in Canada and Atlantic Canada specifically. The findings may help facilitate a socio-cultural change that mirrors the needs of the various student-athlete populations at Saint Mary's University and in Atlantic Canada in general.

The findings of this study may also contribute to a new knowledge and a spring board for more research involving sportsmen and women, coaches, administrators, and spectators in Atlantic Canada. International students' perspectives of their experiences

may have an impact on future enrolment trends in our local universities (Lee, 2010). International students do “contribute to campus diversity in enrolment numbers as well as in adding diverse perspectives and broadening cultural understanding in and out of the classroom” (Lee, 2010, p. 68).

The findings of the present study, according to Kissinger & Miller (2009, p. 177), help university and athletic department personnel become better at developing relationships to “ensure that international students are able to live, study, and compete in environments that care as much about their personal and vocational successes as their athletic accomplishments.” International students offer not only financial resources to host universities through tuition and other fees, but they also enrich the social-cultural environment at Saint Mary’s and other universities in Atlantic Canada. The international student-athletes are valuable resources who deserve to be treated fairly and equitably in terms of scholarships and social networking. Their contribution to the success of our teams especially in soccer and basketball has been invaluable.

The literature review and the conclusions of this study have shown that there is a gap to be filled and a need for further studies. Future research is needed as a follow-up to this study. The findings in this study may not be generalized but yet may be transferable to contexts similar to the current research site. Further research should include international female student-athletes while examining race and discrimination in recruitment, as well as coaching biases and burn-out effects on student-athlete performances. It should use a mixed method approach to studying lived experiences and life-style changes among international student-athletes. A phenomenological study could also be undertaken to look at coaches’ lived experiences of recruiting national, local, and

international student-athletes to Saint Mary's University. I recommend a comparative study that will look at differences and similarities of the lived experiences among the domestic and international student-athletes as well as the lived experiences of local (Atlantic Canada student-athletes) and those from other parts of Canada.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

Sports participation in a foreign country and a new cultural environment opens up not only educational and career opportunities but also a social learning process. International student-athletes take up the challenge with open hearts and with a hope that perseverance, tolerance and determination will pay off in the long run. My experience as an international student in Canada and later as a high school teacher in Montreal, Quebec, was an eye opener. I have come to appreciate the struggles and uphill battles that international students, including athletes, have to face. The participants in this phenomenological study have testified to that fact. As researcher, I hoped to find out from the athletes themselves what it is like to be an international male student-athlete at Saint Mary's University and what such a subjective experience of being an international male student-athlete means to them individually. The researcher takes note that the experience of academic advisors and faculty is an important aspect of the international student-athlete's lived experience at Saint Mary's University. I sought both a rich and thick description of context as well as an in-depth understanding of meaning related to the phenomenon under study, but from the international male student-athletes' perspective.

Previous studies on the topic have also demonstrated that being an international student and athlete is a daunting task. The participants, who happened all to be male, were determined to work hard not only to prove themselves through competition and excellence in academics but also to have a bright future. This dream come true before their eyes would not have been possible without the support of people in their lives like parents, coaches, academic advisors, professors, teammates, and friends.

Accomplishment, according to the participants, was a mission completed through sheer determination in addition to an organized and focused mind even in the midst of the many obstacles along the way. Language barriers, loneliness, a new educational system, and a foreign culture, coupled with the social distance and homesickness that comes with the territory, were all hard to deal with but unavoidable. The ability and desire to cope and adjust accordingly demanded discipline and organization on the part of the participants. Slacking had no place, but listening to the advice of coaches, faculty, academic advisors, and significant others created an environment that enabled the participants to do well academically and athletically.

Many international student-athletes in Atlantic Canada and Canada in general seem to have happier outcomes as evidenced in this study than might be expected. However, it is worth noting that there are many challenges, hardships, and pressures such as loneliness, language, and cultural barriers as well as acculturation stress, that student-athletes face when studying and competing in a new environment far from home (Anh, 2010; Kissinger & Miller, 2009; Mwaura, 2008; Madonna, 2005). There are also many wonderful memories and lifelong opportunities that make the sacrifice and struggle to excel worthwhile. Positive experiences, such as making new friends, getting to know

places in Atlantic Canada, and having better educational and athletic career opportunities (Anh, 2010), far outweigh the negative experiences. The participants expressed their appreciation by saying;

“I talk to my family at home, like, a couple of times a month... like, we stay in touch a lot and they have been a huge influence on my success here.”

“As an athlete, tutors and sports administrators help you to do better in school... In soccer, we get scholarships like \$1000, you know.”

The athletic department’s level of preparation in terms of welcoming the student-athletes and providing them with the necessary resources can go a long way in shaping the international student-athlete’s experience. The Athletics and Recreation Department at the university has both physical and human resources in place that help take care of these student-athletes’ needs. As Participant 1 explained:

“There was a drop in my grades, but it wasn’t a big deal because I had time to do better and improve and I did it because I worked harder and because the athletic department helped me through providing personal tutors, which I’m greatly thankful for.”

All three international male student-athletes who participated in this phenomenological study mentioned this support in the narrative descriptions of their lived experience. Athletic scholarships can help motivate student-athletes to excel in their academic and athletic pursuits and, possibly to achieve upward mobility. Participant 2 stated, “I came to Saint Mary’s University on an athletic scholarship.”

The following quote from Denis Coderre, a former Secretary of State (Amateur Sport), outlines the benefits of sport participation in Canada:

Sport is at the heart of Canadian life. It's an activity that has benefits for each and every Canadian, for our communities and for our country. Sport puts front and centre the qualities we value as Canadians – fairness, team spirit, hard work, dedication and commitment. And our hard-working, dedicated and committed high-performance athletes are unquestionably role models for our children. Sport promotes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health and well-being. Sport develops character and teaches the rewards of discipline and perseverance. It is also a way for Canadians to get to know each other. (*Sports Participation in Canada Report*, 1998, p. 49)

The international male student-athletes' experiences at Saint Mary's University seems to support this summary of sport participation benefits. Their narratives of lived experiences show how much participating in sports as an international student helps develop character, social skills and self-esteem. Participant 2 explained that, "People around me made a great effort to assist me with adjusting especially my teammates and coach."

Participating competitively in a sport of their choice and doing well contributed to personal satisfaction and a positive experience worth sharing and remembering, as Participant 1 pointed out, "This is an experience that I will be able to share with my kids and grand kids, and not only that, I also learned about how sports here are very important in Canada." The international male student-athletes had no regrets in being athletes and

team players at Saint Mary's University. They felt welcome and appreciated as they represented the university community wherever they went to play in Atlantic Canada and other Canadian provinces.

Participant 1 expressed this joy and pride by saying:

“I had the pleasure to travel with my team to places all over Nova Scotia and several other provinces like Alberta and British Columbia, and my experience with this team will always be a great memory.”

They seem to have embraced the motto – *One University. One World. Yours.* They have through their shared experiences demonstrated that international students (athletes and non-athletes) can succeed in whatever they do at Saint Mary's University where a new beginning in their lives as students in a foreign country commences. All they have to do is work hard, with a determination to overcome the challenges they face and with a hope that with the support from the significant others in their lives, they will be successful. Participant 3 added: “The experience so far has been commendable and I'm adjusting to the cultures and traditions of Canadian lifestyle.” Participant 2 suggested: “My experience, I would say, is like, say, it's like a stepping stone to a higher level of playing basketball and getting a good education.” The sense of pride and achievement displayed by the three international male student-athletes shows how important it is to stay focused, determined, organized, and motivated to excel in both academics and athletics.

When used well, sports provide a wonderful means to advance oneself and to keep the body fit and healthy for life. I experienced this wonderful feeling when I was in

high school and university in Kenya. For instance, I came to Canada on a sports-motivated scholarship. I was nominated for the award based on my academic performance as a physical education student and as a result of the fact that I had established myself as a coach-trainer and a sports instructor at Kenyatta University. Similarly, two of the study participants came to Canada on sports scholarships. Sports participation may therefore be a springboard for greater things in life, including lucrative careers and a bright future, as supported through narrations by the participants' lived experiences. The findings of this study may be useful in creating a university environment that better serves the international student-athletes in track and other individual sports.

Being a part of a team was advantageous for these young international male student-athletes because it placed them on a better playing field in terms of social networks. The difficulties of coping and adjusting were lessened by identifying themselves with other team members from Canada and the US. As a young student-athlete, I worked hard to prove myself. I was determined to make a difference in whatever project I engaged in as an international student and later as a teacher in Canada. This research project has been a learning process for me. The interaction with the participants as they let their voices be heard was not only a humbling experience but also a chance for me to share my experience. This phenomenological research study has been a learning experience that has led to a transformation of my consciousness, heightened my perceptiveness and in a special way, increased my thoughtfulness and diplomatic skills.

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**Appendix A**  
**Informed Consent Form**

**Title:** “A Phenomenological Study of Selected International Student-Athletes at Saint Mary’s University”

**Principal Investigator:** Peter Gatama Gachira [*B.Ed; BA; MA*]

REB Certificate # 10-052; Atlantic Canada Studies Department, Saint Mary’s University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3C3

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**Thesis Supervisor:** Dr. Peter Twohig, Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies, Saint Mary’s University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3C3. Tel: (902) 420-5668; **E-mail:** [peter.twohig@smu.ca](mailto:peter.twohig@smu.ca)

**Purpose:** To explore and describe the lived experiences of selected international male student-athletes at Saint Mary’s University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

**Study Design:** A descriptive, phenomenological approach to research that explores and describes the lived experiences of the participants and Colaizzi’s (1978) data analysis approach will be used.

**Participation Involves:** If you are an international student-athlete at Saint Mary's University, you are invited to participate in this study. As part of the data collection, you are invited to participate in a one-on-one interview with the principal investigator as part of his Master of Arts thesis research in Atlantic Canada Studies at Saint Mary's University to explore and describe your lived experience as an international student-athlete. The anticipated time for the interview is approximately 60-80 minutes. The individual interviews will be audio-taped. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your input in this study is important and valuable. Should you decide to discontinue your involvement in this study, you may do so at any time without any penalty. There is no remuneration for participating in this study.

**Potential Benefits:** You may benefit by having an opportunity to share your lived experiences as an international student-athlete and allowing your voice to be heard. The knowledge generated from the results of this study will inform our understanding of the obstacles and victories international student-athletes experience at Saint Mary's University and how they cope, adjust, and celebrate these experiences. It is anticipated that your voice will be heard and that the results will help administrators, coaches, and other student-athletes to appreciate more the role of being an international student-athletes and the challenges they face. Recommendations from this study will be useful for further research work and other policy formulation matters at the Atlantic Canada University sports level.

**Potential Risks:** The risks of participation in this study are minimal. The research topic concerns international student-athletes' life at Saint Mary's University and you may in the course of the interview express feelings or emotions about their experience here. It is unlikely, however, that these expressions would be different from daily conversations with other students or in class situations. The interviews will be confidential and scheduled as per your availability and at a venue convenient and comfortable to you.

**Confidentiality and communication of the results:** All information (including audio-tapes and transcribe data) will be kept confidential and participant privacy protected. All data collected will be securely stored in a locked cabinet at my desk in the Gorsebrook Research Institute with only the principal investigator, the thesis supervisor and reader and the transcriptionist having access to the data. Study results (including audio-tapes, transcriptions and analysis) will be kept for 5 years post publication at the institution. A copy of the individual transcribed interview of each participant will be sent to you for verification in an exercise known as member checking. Reporting of the data is collective and will be done through the writing of the thesis and a public thesis defence, where you are invited to attend. In the event that direct quotes from participants are used during analysis and discussion of this research, a pseudonym (labels) will be used to protect your identity. The results of the study will be made available to you upon its completion and at your request. Please keep a copy of this consent and information form for your information.

**Certification:** As with all Saint Mary's University research projects involving human participants, this project was reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through,

the Research Ethics Board at Saint Mary's University. My REB certificate # is 10-052. Should you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Jim Cameron, Acting Chair of the Research Ethics Board, at 902-420-5728 or [ethics@smu.ca](mailto:ethics@smu.ca).

I understand what this study is about and appreciate the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary, that the interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed, and that I can end my participation at any time.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**  
**Appreciation Letter**

July 30, 2010

Dear.....

We would like to thank you for your participation in this study. As a reminder, the purpose of this study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of international male student-athletes at Saint Mary's University using a phenomenological approach to data collection and Colaizzi's (1978) data analysis approach.

The results of this study will be shared with the university community through a thesis defence and a thesis which will be available in the library. If you are interested in receiving more information regarding the results of this study, or if you have any questions or concerns, please contact me or my supervisor at either the phone numbers or e-mail addresses below.

As with all Saint Mary's University research projects involving human participants, this project was reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Research Ethics Board at Saint Mary's University. Should you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Jim Cameron, Acting Chair of the Research Ethics Board, at 902-420-5728 or [ethics@smu.ca](mailto:ethics@smu.ca).

Thank you,

Peter Gatama Gachira, [Principal Investigator] (902) 492-2958 or  
[gachiragp@hotmail.com](mailto:gachiragp@hotmail.com) and

Dr. Peter Twohig [Thesis Supervisor], (902) 420-5447 or [peter.twohig@smu.ca](mailto:peter.twohig@smu.ca)

**Appendix C**  
**Research Certificate**

## **Research Ethics Board Certificate Notice**

The Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board has issued an REB certificate related to this thesis. The certificate number is: 10-052

A copy of the certificate is on file at:

Saint Mary's University, Archives  
Patrick Power Library  
Halifax, NS  
B3H 3C3

Email: [archives@smu.ca](mailto:archives@smu.ca)  
Phone: 902-420-5508  
Fax: 902-420-5561

For more information on the issuing of REB certificates, you can contact the Research Ethics Board at 902-420-5728/ [ethics@smu.ca](mailto:ethics@smu.ca) .