An Exploratory Investigation of the Effectiveness of the True Sport Clean Anti-Doping Course Among U SPORTS Athletes

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On both international and domestic fronts, the World Anti Doping Agency (WADA) and National Anti-Doping Organizations (NADOs) have engaged in government-level initiatives that promote the development of safe and ethical sport policy regarding anti-doping (Kamber, 2011; Ljungqvist 2017). Nonetheless, relatively little is known about the athlete experiences of attempting to “live” the values of “top-down” policy. While national sport organizations typically promote anti-doping through detection-deterrence policies and approaches (Backhouse et al., 2012), sport managers may wish to consider a contrasting approach through values-based education, defined by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) as one “that places the development of an individual’s personal values and principles at the heart of their evolving sport experience” (CCES, 2019 p. 3).

The CCES is Canada’s national anti-doping organization and implements the Canadian Anti-Doping Program (CADP). The CADP’s primary source of education is the online learning program called True Sport Clean, which addresses ethical sport, athlete rights and responsibilities, supplementation and methods of illicit performance enhancement. Considering the CCES’s central philosophy of building values-based educational experiences (Lovat & Toomey 2009; CCES, 2019), this study will explore the depth to which athletes perceive that the True Sport Clean program achieves these outcomes. As such, the purpose of this qualitative research is to explore participants’ perspective of the effectiveness of the True Sport Clean program and its impact on their anti-doping motivations. Research findings theoretically contribute to the sport management field by addressing the existing gaps on both the impact of values-based education on athletes’ anti-doping behaviours and the effectiveness of online anti-doping programs.

U SPORTS is the governing body of Canadian University Sport, supporting 56 member institutions, more than 20,000 student athletes and 700 coaches. All U SPORTS athletes are responsible for completing the True Sport Clean program each year of competition. Athletic Departments within several U SPORTS member universities served as research sites, through which respective athletes from each site were first invited to participate in an online focus group interview. After providing consent to participate, individual athletes from the focus group interview were then selected according to pre-set criteria and invited to participate alone in a second, online semi-structured interview at respective research sites. This research utilized a constructivist paradigm to place U SPORTS athletes’ voice centrally through the research design, methodologies and findings (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). Inductive analysis was utilized to construct themes and preliminary knowledge from interview data, as guided by the purpose. This research was significantly timely, given focus on online learning has increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a practitioner perspective, the analysis of a values-based anti-doping program is contributory, as it may provide parameters to further enhance such programs. Moreover, athletes’ perceptions of the effectiveness—or lack thereof—of the online educational program may or may not contribute to their motivation to compete cleanly. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis of values-based vs. fear-based educational approaches may illuminate the effectiveness of operationalizing top-down anti-doping policy.