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Super equestrians – the construction of identity/ies and impression management among young equestrians in upper secondary school settings on social media

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze and increase the understanding of how young equestrians, in a sport school context, perceive, construct, negotiate and manage identities on social media. This article presents how a specific group of young athletes (equestrians) use social network sites (SNS), such as Facebook and Instagram, in relation to their everyday lives as students attending upper secondary schools with an equestrian sports profile. Social media is increasingly important for young people's perceptions, constructions, and managing of identities. Using a multifaceted theoretical framework, including Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, we will explore how young equestrians perceive the content on SNS and analyze how they act and create content in relation to existing norms and cultures. Equestrianism is one of the largest sports in Sweden and several upper secondary schools in Sweden offer programs with an equestrian profile. Studies on sport schools evince a focus on elite sport and competition, which affects norms and ideologies at these schools. Through focus group interviews with 25 students, we show that the situation is complex and contradictory. The results indicate that young riders have identified an online stable culture where high performance equestrianism is the norm. Our study shows that the educational environment is not the only factor affecting the students, but that social media is also a part of the young athletes' constructions of identity. The image of the employable 'super equestrian' who is attractive, wears the 'right clothes', is successful, and acts 'professionally' is the most desirable representation online. The young equestrians are critical of what is communicated on SNS in relation to horses and riding, and they are uncertain of how to position themselves in relation to this communication.

Introduction

School, sport, and social media all constitute important arenas for interaction and socialization among youth. Borders between offline and online everyday life are increasingly blurred (Statens Medieråd, 2019) and the fact that the Internet is increasingly embedded in everyday life has increased the need for research on how youth act and interact on online platforms. It is not only important to investigate how youth engage on the Internet, but also – and more importantly – how they engage and interact *through* the Internet (Livingstone et al., 2018).

Equestrianism is one of the largest sports in Sweden (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2018). Half a million people (out of a population of ten million), approximately 90 per cent of whom are women, practice equestrian sports. In contrast to many other countries, equestrian sport is a 'sports for all' in Sweden. Since WW2, and especially from the 1960s on, activities in riding schools have been offered to children and young people. Like other sports activities for this group, riding is subsidized (Thorell & Hedenborg, 2015). The equine sector is an important industry in Sweden, closely connected to the agricultural industry. There are around 360,000 horses in Sweden and the equine sector creates 16,900 yearly full-time jobs (Hästnäringens Nationella Stiftelse, 2018). Research has demonstrated that equestrian sports in Sweden have a long tradition of a specific kind of stable culture dominated by fostering in the stable and education related to the care of horses, compared to other sports where improving athletic performance has been central (Hedenborg, 2009). In recent years, social media have been a forum for debate about questions of horse keeping and welfare. On social media, the perspectives of researchers, elite, and leisure riders are voiced, and different ideas about horse keeping meet, clash, and are discussed. The traditional stable culture is now challenged by several different notions of what stable culture should entail. Internet forums are important arenas for narratives about the relationship between horses and humans and for creating standards for horse keeping (Dashper, 2017).

Social media is increasingly important for young people's identity constructions (Siapera, 2017). Social media culture is also characterized by great vulnerability, manifested in users' fear of being exposed or criticized, or simply not receiving the desired validation (Eek-Karlsson, 2015; Lunde, 2014). According to Goodyear et al. (2019) it is therefore imperative that involved adults (teachers, parents, guardians) know when young people are in control of social media and when social media is instead controlling them. In order to contribute to such awareness, teachers must support and train students to think critically about their use of Social Network Sites (SNS). However, it is equally important to respect students' use of SNS (Goodyear et al., 2019). By looking into how young riders interact through SNS this research will contribute to more informed discussions (in which students' experiences are respected) regarding online cultures. It will also assist involved adults to support student athletes to navigate the landscape of conflicting ideals and expectations on SNS.

The aim of this article is to analyze and increase the understanding of how young equestrians, in a sports school context, perceive, construct, negotiate and manage identities on social media. Goffman's theories about the dramaturgical perspective and impression management, Persson's development of Goffman's concepts f2f-p2p, frontstage-backstage, and the theoretical concepts 'super girl and boy', will be used. It is particularly important to understand these mechanisms in discussions regarding how social media impacts youth in a sports school context where competitive norms are often already significant.

The following research questions will guide the study:

- How do young equestrians perceive online representations of everyday life in the stable, are they affected by impression management, and what do they see as desirable, undesirable, valuable, and significant in this context?
- How do young equestrians' perceptions of online representations of other equestrians influence their own construction of identity/ies online, and are there any differences between equestrians' representation face-to-face (f2f) in the stable and persona-to-persona (p2p) on social media?
- How do young equestrians construct their equestrian identities at the intersection of school, sport, and social media?

Background

Though there are numerous studies of sports schools in Sweden, none of them have focused on equestrian sports schools, which have increased in number during the last decade. Today, there

are around 60 upper secondary schools in Sweden offering programs with an equestrian sports profile. According to a report by the Swedish Horse Industry Foundation, approximately 2200 students were enrolled at an equestrian educational program in 2015. Among these students, 98–99 per cent are female and approximately 1500 were students at the upper secondary level. Most of the equestrian programs fall under the Natural Resource Use Program for upper secondary schools, whose curriculum focuses on the management of natural resources and agriculture (Hästnäringens Nationella Stiftelse, 2015). There are also equestrian programs with elite-sport profiles. The main aim of the equestrian schools is generally to prepare the students for a future in the equine sector, but there are also opportunities for the students to take subjects preparing them for higher education (Hästnäringens Nationella Stiftelse, 2015).

Since the 1990s, there are several different varieties of upper secondary schools with a sports focus (Ferry, 2014; Ferry et al., 2013). However, the number of schools offering elite sports-focused education decreased after 2011 as a result of changed regulations regarding which schools are allowed to offer 'specialized sport' as a subject. Research shows that sports activities are prioritized in the programs, shaping their structure in several ways (Hedberg, 2014). In many cases, sports teachers at such schools have a background as coaches rather than PE teachers. The norms and traditions of organized sports often clash with the school context (Ferry, 2016; Hedberg, 2014). The focus on elite sports and competition affects norms and ideologies at the sports schools (Ferry, 2014). Even schools that offer sports education to lower age groups have a clear competitive focus (Eliasson, 2009; Fahlström et al., 2015; Larneby, 2020). In this study we use the concept equestrian schools, which includes schools focusing on equestrian sports. We are not aiming to analyze the content, profile, or pedagogical perspectives within these schools and programs. Instead the specific school setting is used to analyze how students at these equestrian schools' handle norms, cultures and expectations through their use of SNS.

Previous research has indicated that the educational context of equestrian sports differs from that of other sports. For example, whereas the Swedish Football Association's educational initiatives were and are focused on technical development related to competition and the playing of football (SOU, 2008, p. 59), the educational initiatives of the Equestrian Federation have focused on the care of horses in the stable (Hedenborg, 2009). In addition, previous studies have highlighted military norms as central to Swedish stable culture (Hedenborg, 2008, 2009; Thorell & Hedenborg, 2015). Later studies have demonstrated that the military norms are to some extent questioned by contemporary riding teachers and/or instructors, whose discourse on their work also emphasizes 'economy' and 'safety' as important norms (Thorell & Hedenborg, 2015). Furthermore, analysis of gender constructions has been crucial to understanding norms in stable cultures. Previous research has indicated that the stable culture has been feminized in some countries. However, the socially constructed femininity that is upheld as a norm in stables is complex and includes characteristics that in other contexts are connected to masculinity, such as strength, toughness, and the capacity to perform strenuous work (Dashper, 2012; Forsberg, 2007, 2012; Greiff & Hedenborg, 2007; Hedenborg, 2008, 2009; Plymoth et al., 2012).

Theoretical framework

In order to analyze young equestrians' relationship with social media, we use Erving Goffman's theories and concepts of the dramaturgical perspective, the relationship between the regions 'frontstage' and 'backstage', and impression management. The theory of impression management is rooted in Goffman's work on self-presentation in everyday life, explaining how individuals (deliberately or unwittingly) manage other people's impressions of themselves in order to impress and seek validation (Goffman, 2014). The Swedish sociologist Anders Persson (2012), who has developed some of Goffman's central ideas, notes that social media limits the scope for transmitted expressions as most of the information that is reproduced is controlled (Persson, 2012). In addition, Persson problematizes the distinction between social interaction 'in real life', which takes place face-to-face (f2f),

and in 'virtual life', where interaction occurs persona-to-persona (p2p). Boundaries between 'front-stage' and 'backstage' are more muddled today than previously. Whereas f2f interaction is characterized by shared physical space and physical proximity, p2p interaction offers another kind of space in a virtual network, where interaction does not necessitate physical closeness (Persson, 2012; Radmann & Hedenborg, 2019).

The quest for a temporary consensus in interactions with other people leads to a struggle to control which information about oneself is communicated to others, in order to avoid stigmatization and shame (Goffman, 2014; Persson, 2012; Radmann, 2013). Bullying can be described as an example of stigmatization. The theoretical concepts 'super boy' and 'super girl' highlight how young people are stigmatized if they do not live up to idealized images of how they should act or look (Persson, 2012; Zlotnik, 1999).

SNS such as Facebook and Instagram are modern tools for self-revelation, confession, self-management, and self-improvement. Writing about oneself on SNS can be more than a means of communication and self-expression – SNS can also be used as tools for exploring and working on oneself in relation to others. SNS enable users to navigate social expectations and norms seeking social acceptance and affirmation, but also to challenge and re-establish these social patterns (Sauter, 2014). Furthermore, SNS are platforms where users can strategically construct online personas that emphasize their most desirable traits (Vogel & Rose, 2017; Vogel et al., 2014). Frequent Facebook users compare themselves to these 'perfect' online personas, which may lead them to believe that other users are also more successful in their offline, everyday lives (Chou et al., 2013; Vogel et al., 2014). In other words, self-writing on social media sites can be used as a tool for impression management and creating online personas.

Vogel et al. (2014) discuss the human drive to compare oneself with others and suggest that social media is a common platform for such behavior. The expression *upward social comparison* explains how people compare themselves with others whom they see as superior. The expression *downward social comparison* explains, instead, how one compares *oneself* with people whom one perceives as inferior. Constant upward social comparison through social media can result in low self-esteem and may have a negative effect on personal well-being (Vogel et al., 2014).

Social media is an important social space for identity construction (Siapera, 2017). Eugenia Siapera (2017) addresses different aspects of the importance of social media for the construction of identity, or identities – since identity is not monolithical:

> [T]he involvement of the new media in processes of identity, both at the level of its constitution and at the level of its expression, has important ramifications for the types of identities a person constructs and expresses, as well as for the person's sense of well-being. (Siapera, 2017, p. 186)

The above point is congruent with Sherry Turkle's ideas about how people use the new media landscape to create multiple identities. Turkle shows how individuals are comfortable drawing on a wide range of identities, depending on the media context they operate in. Turkle also discusses if and how narcissism increases in our technologically based sociality as an expression of a weak self-esteem that constantly needs validation from others via interactive social media platforms (Turkle, 2011). For most young people, socializing via new media is important. The social value constructed in online interaction, through for example 'likes', is crucial. However, social media culture is also characterized by great vulnerability, manifested in the fear of exposure or criticism, or simply not receiving the desired validation (Eek-Karlsson, 2015; Lunde, 2014).

Methodology

Data collection

The studied population consists of young equestrians aged 15–18 years. 25 students from three upper-secondary level programs at two equestrian centers (Flyinge AB & Ridskolan Strömsholm) have participated in six focus group interviews. Of the 25 students, 23 are female and two male.

Although there are only two male respondents in the study, the gender distribution among the interviewees is representative of the broader gender (im)balance in Swedish equestrian sports.

Two of the programs are part of the Natural Resource Use Program. The third is a Natural Science program with an equestrian profile, meaning that the curriculum adheres to the national natural science program with additional courses focused on equine sciences. These courses include equine science-anatomy-physiology and equine science-ethology. The Natural Resource Use Program is a three-year vocational program. In addition to the core subject courses (including, for example, Swedish, math, and social sciences) and 'program-wide' subjects (including, for example, biology and natural resource studies), the students take classes related to their specialization and so-called elective subjects. For students enrolled at the program with the equestrian profile the 'program-specific' courses include subjects as horse knowledge I, II, and III as well as riding and 'animal keeping'.

Practical tests are required for enrolment in one of the programs, and none of the three programs require the students to bring their own horse. The schools provide student housing as well as horses as part of the education. The main focus, communicated by the schools, is to educate the students for a future in the equine industry. There are specific school stables and riding arenas at both schools and the courses related to the equestrian profiles are a part of the study plan and taught and assessed accordingly.

It is specifically interesting to examine the two national equestrian centers as they have a long history as educational centers in the Swedish equine sector. As noted in the background, today, there are numerous equestrian schools in Sweden but the national equestrian centers are still seen as hubs in the Swedish equine sector and role models for other equestrian schools. On the homepage for one of the upper secondary level programs it is stated that 'Together, the national equestrian centers form the Swedish Equestrian Centers of Excellence and our ambition is to offer excellence at all levels' (Ridskolan Strömsholm). The teachers at the schools are either educated schoolteachers, riding coaches, or both. A few of the teachers and staff at the schools are elite riders working part time teaching at the different educational programs and part time as competitive riders.

Focus group interviewing is a method in which the researcher assembles a group of people who discuss a given subject for a limited time. The word 'focus' indicates that the discussion centers around a pre-determined topic. This method is increasingly common in research aiming to examine perceptions, attitudes, and values in relation to a specific topic (Wibeck, 2010). Respondents are free to highlight the question(s) they consider relevant and important. A further reason for our choice of using focus groups is that the participants are relatively young (15–18 years), and this method allows respondents greater space and security to think and reason among themselves. The interviews were of a semi-structured nature. First, we devised questions to ensure a focus on the topic of study. Subsequently, we created an interview guide to be used in the interviews. The interviews commenced with open, introductory questions, after which respondents were queried about their perceptions and experiences of social media in relation to their interest in equestrian sport. The interview guide was tested and evaluated in a pilot interview.

Data analysis and ethical considerations

The empirical data has been subjected to thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2018). Firstly, focus group interviews were conducted as described above. All interviews were conducted by Author 1, as she has prior familiarity with the schools where the interviews were conducted and has considerable experience within equestrian sport. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Analysis of focus group data primarily entails coding the material, dividing it into units, and searching for trends and patterns (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Wibeck, 2010). The transcripts have been read and re-read several times, after which the material has been coded and structured thematically. The quotes used in this article have been translated by the authors, from Swedish to English. Wibeck (2010)

contends that when focus group interview discussions have a low degree of moderator involvement, it is notable if the same aspects are spontaneously raised in several different groups (Wibeck, 2010). This was indeed the case in the present study. In the final stage of the analysis, the thematic elements of the interviews were interpreted by the research team through the theoretical framework selected.

Reflexivity entails self-examination on the part of the researcher so as to avoid generalizing one's own prejudices. It may also mean critically using one's own experiences to ask pertinent questions to raise the research to a new level (Gratton & Jones, 2004). The research team for the present study consists of three researchers: two with extensive experience of the equestrian sector and one with no such experience. Our differing preconceptions and levels of experience have been discussed, challenged, and used to inform the analysis. Ethical considerations have influenced the approach of the study. All respondents signed a form for informed consent prior to the interviews. For the purpose of confidentiality, all sensitive and personal information is safely archived, the respondents' names have been replaced, and other indicators that could reveal their identity have been removed or altered. Although the interviews were not aimed to gather or process sensitive data, ethical precautions were taken as there was a risk that the interviews would generate sensitive discussions. Since all respondents are above the age of 15, consent from legal guardians was not required. Nevertheless, since all participants were under 18, several precautions were taken (Swedish Research Council, 2017). Above all, we have sought to clearly inform the respondents of their rights and the purpose of the study both verbally and in writing. All interviews were conducted in the respondents' schools.

There are a few limitations in this study, one of them being that we have chosen to focus on the students' own accounts of their SNS behavior. Conducting additional netnographic observations to collect information on what they actually express on SNS, and not just how they talk about it, would be helpful. Furthermore, it may be useful to conduct interviews among other groups connected to the equestrian schools (such as teachers, staff, and other stakeholders). It is also important to mention that we, with a specific focus, have studied a specific group of students who has chosen to become a part of these specific school settings. As there is a lack of studies on equestrian schools it would be productive to analyze curriculums and study plans as well. These are all interesting and important avenues for future research. Another possible limitation of our study is that we have used numerous different theories and concepts, drawing on both sociological and psychological terms. However, this broad perspective can also be a strength when creating an understanding around this complex and sometimes contradictory subject.

Results

Impression management through SNS

The interviews reveal that the young riders are constantly exposed to an online culture where riders portray a flawless everyday life around the horse. An equestrian life – as presented on social media – is full of success and 'glitz and glamor', rather than hard work, setbacks, and problem solving. The most commonly used platforms among the young equestrians are Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Snapchat and in some cases also blogs and video-blogs.

According to the respondents, the image of equestrian sport presented through social media does not correspond with what they experience f2f, at the equestrian schools. They repeatedly mention the terms perfect and perfectionism when speaking about what is communicated through SNS. Recent psychological research has shown that contemporary teenagers are affected by increasingly competitive environments and unrealistic expectations in society. Perfectionism has increased over the last decade and this affects adolescents in different ways (Curran & Hill, 2019). Our respondents' image of the perfect and idealized way of being an equestrian is congruent with this psychological research. However, we propose that the concept of impression management is more productive for understanding what is communicated through SNS, as there appears to be a

strong culture of using SNS to present oneself in an impressive manner. Social media is used as a tool for self-revelation and a platform for acquiring social acceptance (cf., Sauter, 2014; Vogel et al., 2014; Vogel & Rose, 2017). There seems to be a link between perfectionism and impressing others through SNS. Thus, it is relevant to explore the meaning of perfectionism in this specific context. Two of the respondents discuss the image of equestrian life on social media:

Sofia: Yes, from what you see online everything is perfect, the flawed things are not visible. People only post pictures that are good, you see a really nice picture of a horse. You don't see when it comes in from the field all muddy. You get that perfect picture of the horse and it looks really nice. So, nearly all of the pictures you show online are perfect.

Amanda: On social media, everything looks very exclusive and great and pretty. When you watch high-level equestrian horse shows you see the top and how great it can be. You don't see the sweat during training four years before the show, you don't see all the hard work. You see the top riders and the people who actually have the opportunity to compete at that level. You don't see people like us.

In other words, the notion of perfection in online stable culture includes clean horses, non-muddy fields, and equestrian sports performed at the elite level. Through SNS, impression management is used p2p to create a flawless image of equestrian life. These pictures are far removed from what the respondents describe as everyday life (f2f) at the equestrian school. This social media image also contrasts with findings from previous gender research on traditional (f2f) stable culture, where a complex/masculine femininity, encompassing strength, toughness, and the capacity to perform strenuous work, is celebrated (Thorell & Hedenborg, 2015).

The respondents problematize SNS use, underlining that equestrians often choose not to post images from competitions or riding lessons where they have not achieved the desired results. In the above quote, Amanda comments that 'people like them' do not appear in the glamourous settings at the horse shows showcased on SNS. What does she mean by this? It is clear that she feels that all the hard work needed to reach the top-level horse shows is hidden from the 'frontstage' on SNS. Does she also mean that she and her classmates are exclusively trained to become a part of the 'backstage' setting? Students at the equestrian schools are expected to learn horse care and equine biology. Everyday life at school includes mucking out the stables, feeding horses, and leading them to and from the fields. The students seem to understand, and accept, that these chores are part of a future in the equine industry, despite the fact that they are not shown as part of the 'perfect' life with horses communicated through SNS. The stable culture at the intersection of school, sport, and SNS thus seems contradictory for the young equestrians.

Competence and super equestrians in the cyber stable

Our respondents claim that the pressure that everything should look 'perfect' compels them to post only polished content, that is, to use impression management on SNS. Those who publish other kinds of images are often subjected to harsh comments and criticism. The respondents observe that bloggers who upload video clips from unsuccessful competitions or training sessions often receive many negative comments. The young riders thus see the consequences of uploading non-normative content and avoid publishing images or videos that may attract similarly unfriendly responses. This quote reveals how Anna decided not to post something that she felt clearly deviated from the norm:

Anna: I'm thinking about when I rode last week, and a friend came and took a few photos. It felt quite good before she came but we (Anna and her horse, authors' remark) are having some problems with the canter, he gets stressed and tense and takes the bit. So, all pictures showed that he had his mouth open, it looked horrible … even if it felt okay from time to time. I would never dare to post pictures like that! Partly because it doesn't look good but partly also because if I would've dared to post them people would've given me comments and they would talk to each other and say that they had seen these bad pictures of me. I would never dare to post pictures like that because the horse had his mouth open and it looked like the horse was suffering.

The concepts of the 'super girl and super boy' as idealized images striving to act and look 'good' in accordance with existing norms are useful for understanding these mechanisms (cf. Persson, 2012; Zlotnik, 1999). Anna's fear of what would happen if she published imperfect pictures compels her to act in accordance with existing norms. The young riders believe that a changed online culture would improve the psychosocial environment of equestrian sports. It is worth pointing out that horse well-being and rider competence are important aspects in this culture; if these parameters are not met, the person posting on SNS is criticized. In other words, a certain way of riding and caring for the horse is important within the stable culture – and norms for this may clash online. Here, we argue that caretaking and competence, in addition to the previously mentioned perfectionism, are part of the traits one should communicate through SNS. In order to act impressively (i.e. using a form of impression management) one should show competence and caretaking skills.

Opinions diverge among the respondents as to the potential effects of the cyber stable culture. One of the respondents does not feel the norms of online equestrian culture affect her particularly, while another respondent indicates that she has become more critical of what is published on SNS. Two of the interviewees feel the climate on social media can induce performance anxiety and may be harmful to young riders' self-confidence:

Alma: If you have a bad round and someone has filmed it, then maybe you choose not to post it, and so your followers still get the picture that every round you and your horse do is great, then the followers just see that it always looks good.

Author1: Are you affected by it?

Ellie: Not really.

Stella: Maybe to the extent that you become a bit, source-critical, you wonder if it really is true.

Emelie: I think you get affected by it, because that's what you get fed all the time. You can even, at some point, get performance anxiety because of it.

Alma: I have anxiety syndrome and I know very well that it is easy to see pictures and videos online and forget that they probably only post the good parts, it's easy to think that they're just better riders than you are … and that gets you down, pretty much. However, you also become much more critical, you become more skeptical of what is actually true online.

Clearly, the students compare themselves to others through SNS, which according to Vogel et al. (2014) is a common human drive. The results also show that the respondents' everyday lives online are affected by *upward social comparison*. In other words, they appear to compare themselves to those they view as superior. As seen in the above excerpts, however, the landscape of social media affects individuals differently. Some of the respondents attest to becoming critical and reflecting on what is true and false on social media, whereas others stress that they suffer from performance anxiety as a result of constant upward social comparison. They also discuss and problematize their social media habits.

One of the respondents mentions that young riders' self-confidence may suffer if they only see 'perfect' images of life with horses. She is clearly affected by other riders' impression management on SNS. She believes that especially young riders often compare their own riding to video clips and pictures on social media. It is, again, interesting to note that our respondents state that 'top riders' present images that they compare themselves to. This indicates that a specific kind of stable culture is seen as the norm on SNS.

Although the students seemingly agree that equestrians almost exclusively publish content that makes them appear successful on SNS, they also problematize this behavior. In addition, one of the respondents believes that the cyber culture has become more open and that it is increasingly common among social media users to publish content that challenges the perfect image. Some role models seem to defy the norms and the students welcome bloggers and Instagram users who dare to show something other than 'the perfect everyday stable life'. They appreciate when information normally kept 'backstage' is displayed 'frontstage' via SNS. The following discussion arose when the respondents were asked whether there are differences between f2f role models and those who appear on social media, that is, p2p:

Josefin:	I feel that people on social media are more fictional, they are like not real people, it is more like this perfect everyday life where you only publish when the horses goes well. After all, it is not the same as seeing role models, as for example our teachers, in real life.
Klara:	Yes, some younger riders, they post a lot on Instagram and they only post the best pictures or videos, to create a name for themselves. This means that you don't see the whole story.
Josefin:	Yes exactly, it should be ok that it is not always perfect, that it doesn't go well every time you ride.
Klara:	I think that is pretty good with 'blogger 1', I really like that she does not always post perfect clips. I think it is great to show that it's not always perfect. That you as a teenager learn that it does not always have to look perfect …
My:	Yes, it can hurt your self-confidence when you compare yourself to other people all the time, because you think that it doesn't look like that when I ride, when you see the experienced riders train their horses.

Goffman's concepts f2f-p2p and onstage-backstage are useful for explaining the respondents' desire for a more 'authentic' image of equestrian sport on social media. The above quotes suggest that the students are critically aware that social media profiles usually put on a filter or mask when interacting online. They ask for 'real people' and during many of the interviews the students compare these 'real people' to their teachers at school.

Professional identities and 'authentic' equestrians

It appears that the students wish for another stable culture to be more evident on SNS – one that more closely resembles their everyday lives at school. The findings of this study are, however, complex and contradictory. The young riders admire, and compare themselves to, elite riders who publicize their competition selves (frontstage), while simultaneously longing to see what they believe to be the 'genuine' or 'authentic' stable culture on SNS (backstage). Our respondents mainly follow two types of 'influencers' on SNS: firstly, already established elite riders, and secondly, young up-and-coming riders, who are striving to reach the elite. According to our respondents, the main difference in how the two types of 'influencers' express themselves on SNS is that the younger up-and-coming riders seem to dare to show a less polished picture of everyday life; they publish content from their life 'backstage'. Contrastingly, the established riders reiterate a more strictly 'professional-frontstage' expression. The respondents claim to understand why their online role models need to create online personas to promote themselves ('to make a name for themselves').

It is perhaps unsurprising that these 'influencers' present themselves 'professionally' as they use their accounts to promote themselves and their business. It is more notable that the young riders' question and problematize these images. Could this be generational; in other words, does the younger generation not view being 'too perfect' as a sign of professionalism? It appears that everyday life on SNS and at school do not always match; at school, the students learn that taking care of the horses and mucking out the stables are very much included in everyday equestrian life. However, some of their teachers are elite riders. Thus, the young riders studying at the equestrian schools have direct access to the f2f backstage of a few top riders, witnessing the amount of hard work that goes into a few minutes in the arena.

Although the students clearly wish to see a more 'authentic' version of everyday life with horses expressed through SNS, they also underline the importance of looking 'professional'. The notion of being 'professional' seems to stand in opposition to authenticity in the respondents' answers, and is used instead of the term 'employable'. In other words, the term is not used to imply specific knowledge, education, or licensing (in the sense of professions such as medical doctor, nurse, or lawyer). In the sports context, the term 'professional' has been used to reference someone who is paid to perform their sport, and opposed to that of 'amateur' – and it is likely that the young riders (and their teachers) are more familiar with this meaning (Hedenborg, 2006). 'Professionalism' is likely to be even more pronounced in these schools as the equine sector is notorious for its reliance on unde-clared labor (Hedenborg, 2008). During their education, the young riders are repeatedly told that

they should not accept anything but formal employment in the sector. Being professional/employable requires a certain kind of impression management on social media, where the backstage setting should not be exposed. In their education, professionalism is connected to certain norms and employability. One of the respondent's reasons regarding what she chooses to publish on her Instagram account:

Josefine: I use my Instagram as a sort of a diary, but it's open for everyone and I try to keep it at a professional level but at the same time as a diary.
Lovisa: That it's professional, what do you mean by that?
Josefine: Well, not a lot of party pictures or photos when I ride without saddle without helmet … not that I would do that though!
My: Yes, you should be able to add a link to your Instagram account to your CV
Josefine: Yes, actually, I wouldn't be ashamed if an employer would have a look at my Instagram account. I stand for everything I post there, it's like my own brand.

Online bullying, negative comments, and future employers are not the only factors preventing the young riders from publishing non-normative photos, videos, or written material on SNS. The above-cited respondents proceed to discuss how their teachers reacted when they posted a video in which some of the students could be seen falling off their horses, and which was not considered sufficiently 'professional'. Here, the norms and culture in the equestrian school context affects what is seen as professional and what is allowed to be shown frontstage:

Josefin: But it's like a few weeks ago when our class posted a video when a few of us fell of our horses, we had a week when like everyone fell off.
Haha
Josefin: It was hysterical, everybody was in on it and we did it together. But we got comments from the teachers and staff here that we had to take it down.
Elisabeth: Yes, because it was not suitable, because future employers might see it.
Josefin: Yes, and I think that shows that everything is supposed to look perfect on social media. But I don't think it's this school but rather society that has formed it like this. You are simply not supposed to post videos like that.
Klara: Yes, they (the school, authors remark) only want to be in line with this, so they don't look bad. And then you have to change the norms in society so that, hello, it's okay that people fall off their horse!

Falling off was obviously not seen as a desirable part of frontstage equestrianism, that is, 'professional' stable culture in cyberspace. It is interesting that Josefine, who also stated (see previous quote) that she wanted to showcase an 'employable' facade on Instagram, still chose (together with her classmates) to post a video that the teachers found 'unprofessional'. Here, the teachers and staff at the equestrian centers are seen as gatekeepers (by the students), controlling the content that the students publish on SNS.

It is likely that the teachers felt that the video of a group of students falling off their horses could be damaging for the school's reputation, or that it might negatively influence other students. However, the teachers' responses exceed the scope of this study, which instead focuses on the students' reactions to the teachers' expressions. The interviewees note that the ideal images on SNS present a certain type of performance as well as appearance. They argue that there is a strong culture with strict norms dictating how to look and what to wear in the school stables. The respondents claim that being skinny and wearing certain brands is a prerequisite for being fully accepted, and that these norms are enhanced by images on social media. This is consistent with Lunde's study (2014), which indicates that girls in the stable feel considerable pressure to look good and be slim. Lunde's study also indicates norms governing what clothes to wear; certain brands are valued more highly. The present study combined with Lunde's findings indicate that social media may increase young riders' sense of pressure to be slim, look good, and wear the right clothes.

The respondents feel pressured to achieve the ideals of the 'super girl' (cf. Persson, 2012). They stress that young riders' confidence can suffer as they constantly feel compelled to compare themselves to the ideal image of 'super equestrians'. According to the young riders, ideals connected to

SNS are not the only factors restricting them from publicizing what they view as everyday life in the equestrian school stable. Cultures at the school also provide boundaries and restrictions, where the teachers may act as gatekeepers.

Concluding discussion – the super equestrian

School, equestrian sports, and social media are central in the lives of the students taking part in this study. The respondents appear to struggle to orient themselves and construct identities in the borderland between the traditional stable culture and the impressive everyday life showcased frontstage through SNS.

The present study indicates that young riders have identified an online stable culture where high performance equestrian sport is the norm. Clean horses and perfect achievements (that is, riders who ride perfectly and do not fall off) are important ingredients in this high-performance culture. The young equestrians express that the image of the employable 'super equestrian' – who is attractive, wears the 'right clothes', is successful, and acts 'professionally' – is the most desirable representation online. This image is partly congruent with the aim of the equestrian programs. It is clearly communicated by the schools that they strive to offer excellent educational programs training employable individuals, ready to take on jobs within the equine industry. Old military norms meet new idealized images of what is expected of a 'super equestrian' communicating through SNS. Riders risk being stigmatized if they violate the standards of the 'super equestrian'. The ideal image is significant and impels young riders to display an idealized picture of everyday stable life on SNS, in order to avoid stigma and shame. In some cases, the norms of online stable cultures appear to induce performance anxiety due to upward social comparison. Setbacks in training and competition, bad horse-keeping, and 'unprofessional' behavior (presenting the backstage) are undesirable elements in the online equestrian culture. Nonetheless, the young equestrians value riders and influencers who dare to post images that are more harmonious with what they see as an 'authentic' representation of everyday life in the stable.

Theresa Sauter (2014) states that writing about oneself on SNS can be more than a mode of self-expression and communication. SNS enable people to navigate social expectations and norms seeking social acceptance and affirmation, but also to challenge and re-establish these social patterns (Sauter, 2014). Impression management clearly affects how young riders communicate through social media and influences their perception of other equestrians. We can see that the students choose not to publish what they see as the 'authentic' everyday life in the stable at school (backstage). While the idealized image of what life with horses should be like is limiting, and the young equestrians feel compelled to present themselves in accordance with the image of the 'super equestrian' through social media (frontstage), this study indicates the possibility for change.

Increasing awareness about what transpires on SNS, and understanding how different cultures have developed online, may be key to creating space for youth to act, interact, and develop through social media. As mentioned in the introduction Goodyear et al. (2019) state that it is imperative for relevant adults (teachers, parents, guardians) to know when young people are in control of social media and when it, instead, controls them. This study indicates that the equestrian schools are characterized by a norm that is seen as inauthentic by the students. They already seem to be aware and source critical regarding what is communicated on SNS in relation to their sport. However, the young equestrians may also experience a sense of inadequacy when comparing themselves to other equestrians' online representations, feeling that they do not live up to the image of 'the super equestrian'. This appears to affect their construction of identity/ies in different ways. Some students feel inspired, developing a strong equestrian identity while others experience performance anxiety and question their future within the sport. This result is congruent with Larneby's study, which shows that high performance educational environments shape young individuals in different directions. Some students evolve and see a future athletic career as a possibility, while many instead lose interest and self-confidence in the sport (cf. Larneby, 2020). Our study shows that the educational

environment is not the only factor in students' identity construction, but that social media is also a part of young athletes' constructions of identity.

The question of how young equestrians construct their equestrian identities in the intersection of equestrian school (in which teachers and study materials are gatekeepers of a specific kind of stable culture), high performance sport, and social media is complex, contradictory and does not have one simple answer. Through our research we show that young equestrians are critical of what is communicated online in relation to horses and riding, but they do not seem to know how to position themselves in relation to this communication. Although the teenagers are co-producers of the content on SNS, they do not fully relate to the ways in which the equestrian cultures are transmitted. If the social media content regarding stable cultures is limited to the frame 'super equestrians', they will struggle to relate and might continue feeling compelled to construct inauthentic identities.

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