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Stable Cultures in Cyberspace

A study about equestrians' use of social media
as knowledge platforms

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Abstract

New media habits in the era of digitalization challenge previous understandings of who and what receives media coverage. Research shows that practitioners in self-organized lifestyle sports consistently use social media to attain and exchange information and knowledge about their sport. Is this also the case in organized sport? The Internet has become a great resource for horse-enthusiasts and the online horse world can be described as an extension of the physical horse world. Equestrian sport is particularly interesting to analyze due to the fact that there is an animal involved. Still, there is little knowledge of how horse enthusiasts use social media in relation to their interest in equestrian sports. The aim of this article is therefore to chart and analyze how equestrians use social media, how they communicate horse-related content on social media, and how social media can be seen as a source for knowledge exchange. Our investigation focuses on how equestrians use social media to acquire information about horses, and how this usage can be explained in connection to age and experience. A mixed methods design is used and data is collected from 28 focus group interviews with equestrians in Sweden and Norway and a survey with 1,628 respondents. Our study indicates that practitioners of self-organized sports are not unique in using social network sites (SNS) to exchange and attain knowledge about their sport; equestrians in general are shown to be frequent users of SNS such as Facebook and Instagram. Although our results show a few significant differences in SNS use in relation to age; the riders in the different age groups have surprisingly similar views of their SNS use in relation to attaining information about the horse. 'Stable cultures' and the organized structure of equestrian sports appear to create boundaries determining where a 'good equestrian' should seek information about horse-keeping. However, the organized structure and traditional nature of this sport do not stop equestrians from turning to SNS.

Key words: social media, equestrian sports, social information seeking, social network sites, sport, age, stable cultures, Facebook

Introduction

Absence of instructors and established pathways for education and knowledge development has led practitioners of self-organized sports to use the Internet as a source for knowledge. Online platforms are useful tools for knowledge exchange for practitioners in sports such as surfing, skateboarding, parkour, and sport-climbing (Säfvenbom et al., 2018). In many cases, practitioners even view YouTube as an alternative to a coach or supervisor. However, the use of the Internet as a knowledge resource is problematic. Source criticism is seen as an important trait and learning by hard work and putting a lot of time into practice is still seen as the ‘better pathway’ according to many practitioners. However, it is argued that traditional, physical educational contexts can learn from the peer-oriented digitalized modes of knowledge exchange used by self-organized lifestyle-sport practitioners (Säfvenbom and Stjernvang, 2020). Do practitioners in organized sports also use the Internet and social media as platforms for knowledge exchange? Or is this only seen in sports that are not governed by traditional learning processes and governing bodies educating coaches and trainers? This article will use equestrian sports as a case to investigate this question.

It is particularly interesting to explore equestrian sports as research shows that the Internet has become a significant resource for horse enthusiasts, and the online horse world can be described as an extension of the physical horse world (Broms et al., 2020; Dashper, 2017). Riders continuously discuss and debate horse-related matters on social media. The fact that there is an animal involved makes it especially interesting to analyze equestrian sports. The horse is dependent on human care, and occupies a potentially vulnerable position depending on the human’s level of knowledge and education of how to take good care of it. Social media plays a large role in many people’s lives, and there is increasing evidence of the effects of misleading information and rumors circulating online. For example, anti-vaccination movements use social media to share non-evidence-based information and false rumors about the negative effects of vaccines, and the WHO has identified the growing resistance towards vaccines as a major global health threat (Puri et al., 2020; Smith and Graham, 2019).

Similarly, there is growing concern for the effects of misleading and false information shared online for horse welfare and, ultimately, equestrian sports. However, there is scant research on this topic. The aim

of this article is therefore to chart and analyze how equestrians use social media, how they communicate horse-related content on social media, and how social media can be seen as a source for knowledge exchange.

Previous research and analytical frame

Social media is a context for social interaction, that is, it is a sphere of human action. It is an umbrella term and José van Dijck (2013) defines four different types of social media:

1. *Social network sites, SNS*, where interpersonal communication is of primary importance (e.g., Facebook and Twitter);
2. *User generated content*, where the users contribute (e.g., YouTube, Wikipedia);
3. *Brand and marketing pages*, where the main purpose is to sell or exchange goods;
4. *Game sites*, where the users play against each other (van Dijck, 2013)

In this article, we will explore equestrians' use of SNS and User generated content (i.e., types 1 and 2) for acquiring information, and whether there are any differences in usage of the different types within the group of equestrians.

Social media in Norway and Sweden

The daily use of social media has increased significantly in recent years and Facebook is currently the most popular platform globally. According to the report *The Global State of Digital in 2019*, 72% of people living in Sweden today are active on social media, spending an average of 1 hour and 49 minutes on SNS per day. The report further indicates that, in contrast to global patterns, YouTube is the most popular social media site in Sweden, used by 86% of Internet users. Facebook comes in second place at 82%, with Instagram in third place at 64%. Snapchat is the fourth most frequently used platform at 37%. Social media use in Norway is somewhat lower: 71% of those living in Norway stated that they were active social media users (Hootsuite, 2019).

A comparison with another report indicates the difficulty of measuring social media use. The report *Svenskarna och Internet* [The Swedes and the Internet] shows that only 51% of Swedish Internet users use Facebook on a daily basis, and that the portion of users who do so has decreased (54% used Facebook daily in 2018) (Internetstiftelsen, 2019). Use also varies between different age groups. For example, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitch have become increasingly important for the younger generation (Davidsson, 2016; Eek-Karlsson, 2015; Statens Medieråd, 2019; Internetstiftelsen, 2020). Young people aged 12–25 prefer Instagram over Facebook, and the youngest respondents (12–15 years old) hardly use Facebook at all. Furthermore, the report shows that older people trust what is written on the Internet to a greater extent than younger people, and less than 4 out of 10 Swedish Internet users are educated in source criticism. Another trend is that fewer people post pictures, write, or share others' posts on Facebook (Internetstiftelsen, 2019). A similar pattern can be seen in Norway. Studying Norwegian media habits and how different age groups choose to share or not share selfies on social media, Dhir et al. (2017) show that young adults (aged 20–30) are more restrictive than youth (13–19) and adults (31–50 years old).

Self-organised lifestyle sports and knowledge exchange online

Säfvenbom et al. (2018) note the existence of research showing that the notion of organized sports as a democratic, open space is sometimes exaggerated. A survey of 2000 youths in Norway show that many young people see organized sport as elitist and overly exclusive (Säfvenbom et al., 2014; 2018). Informal lifestyle sports are sometimes more appealing to youth, as such activities are more casual and contrast with organized sports activities, which are divided into groups according to gender, age, and experience. It is suggested that the term self-organized or self-structured sports explains these sport activities more sufficiently than, for example, unorganized sports (Säfvenbom et al., 2018).

The peer-oriented digitalized way of learning that is practiced in self-organized lifestyle sports can be used as an inspiration for physical educational contexts (Säfvenbom and Stjernvang, 2020). In a recent study about skateboard culture, identities, and social media, Tyler Dupont (2020) investigates how members of the skateboard community develop, maintain, and perform authentic identities through Instagram. In recent years, SNS have developed as platforms where members of

subcultures learn, perform, and discuss their ‘authentic’ identities, resulting in the maintenance of boundaries for authentic behavior (Buckingham, 2009; Dupont, 2020; Woermann, 2012). Dupont (2020) shows that skateboarders’ practices constantly drift between the physical and virtual world and that this has created new opportunities as well as obstacles in regard to developing and maintaining an authentic skate identity.

Practitioners of self-organized sports clearly see social media as an asset and tool for knowledge exchange. Is this only the case for ‘new’ sports with digital traditions and self-organized structures? By using equestrian sports as a case, we will analyze how participants of a traditional sport, which is governed by a federation and educational institutions aiming to control the educational processes, use social media as a knowledge resource.

- RQ1: Do practitioners in organized sports use internet and social media as platforms for knowledge exchange? Or is this only seen in sports that are not governed by traditional learning processes and governing bodies educating coaches and trainers?

Social information seeking

The concept *social information seeking*, SIS, is used to explain the process whereby equestrians use *social network sites* (SNS) to produce and access information and knowledge. Chirag Shah (2017) defines SIS as a process through which users locate and share information in participatory online forums, such as social media platforms and question-and-answer websites. Online communities are increasingly used to satisfy information needs, and there are numerous ways to seek information online. According to Shah (2017), the social dimension of SIS can be explained through two aspects: Online Question-Answering (Q&A) and Social search. Online Q&A is furthermore divided into four different types: Community Q&A, Collaborative Q&A, Expert-Based Q&A, and Social Q&A (Shah, 2017).

Information search on SNS has proven to be a very popular method by which people search for information. It appears that people are more comfortable sourcing information on SNS than on a designated tool for sharing and searching for information (Shah, 2017). Media use evidently

varies between different age groups. Warner-Söderholm et al. (2018) claim that trust of information on social media varies by age, gender, and time spent on social media. Previous research also suggests that we regard others as less careful social media users than ourselves and that group affiliation is often prioritized over knowledge and science on SNS (Klintman, 2019). This is not least evidenced by adults' perception of teenagers' social media use (Boyd, 2014; Marwick and Boyd, 2014). Numerous studies highlight problematic excessive social media use among youth in connection to mental and physical wellbeing (Boer et al., 2020). A recent study of elderly people's use of digital media highlights the importance of taking these citizens everyday life patterns into account when making political and strategic decisions regarding digitalization (Olsson and Viscovi, 2020).

Equestrian sports are unusual in that men and women compete against each other and riders of all ages are active within the sport. In Sweden and Norway, riding schools offer activities for riders in all age groups. The youngest groups are more often than not children in the age groups 0 to 6 years (Hedenborg et al., 2020), and in many of these riding schools there are also senior groups for riders over 65 years. For example, a senior group at a Swedish riding school has an average age of 72 (Thun, 2020). Does this differentiate equestrian sports from other sports where social media is a commonly used resource for knowledge exchange? Recent research on practitioners' use of SNS in relation to knowledge exchange and authentic performances in self-organized sports (Säfvenbom and Stjernvang, 2020) and skateboard (Dupont, 2020) include respondents aged 15–30 (Säfvenbom and Stjernvang, 2020) and 14–45 years (Dupont, 2020). These studies do not, however, indicate whether there are any age-related differences in the participants' use of or attitude towards SNS. To facilitate understanding of social media use within the equestrian community we argue that it is necessary to analyze how and why members of different age groups within this community use social media.

- RQ2: How do equestrians in different age groups use SNS to attain information about horses and riding?

Equestrian sports and social media

Equestrian sports have been Olympic Sports since 1900. The concept of “stable culture” is used to analyze norms of horse-keeping and the welfare of horses. Previous studies have highlighted military norms as central to the European stable culture (Moore-Colyer and Simpson, 2004; Hedenborg, 2009; Thorell and Hedenborg, 2015). However, later research has demonstrated that the military norms in Swedish stable culture are somewhat questioned (Thorell and Hedenborg, 2015). ‘The equestrian lifestyle’ is a well-known term among equestrians, and riders often express that equestrian sport is a lifestyle as well as a sport. Lack of coverage of equestrian sports in traditional media has led equestrians to express their views and exchange knowledge on social media (Dashper, 2017). Equestrian sports are included in the traditional sports movement but also differs from many other sports. The equestrian lifestyle far exceeds the sporting activity itself; stable culture includes fostering in the stable and taking care of the horse (Hedenborg, 2009).

- RQ3: In what way do ‘stable cultures’ affect equestrians in their use of SNS?

Though social media has been shown to be an important resource for equestrians, there is a dearth of social-scientific research on human-horse relationships in connection to social media use (Broms et al., 2020; Byström, 2015; Dashper, 2017; Schuurman, 2014). In one study, Dashper (2017) analyses the content of blogs by English hobby and elite riders. The study clearly shows that Internet forums are important venues for narratives about the relationship between horses and humans, and for establishing standards for horse-keeping. At the same time, Dashper indicates the problems posed by the spread of incorrect information. Inspired by the auto-ethnographic method, Dashper reflects on how she disregarded her veterinarian’s advice, using Google to search for – and find – several sources of information when her horse had fallen ill (Dashper, 2017). Another study shows how young riders are pressured by norms and cultures within the equestrian community both online and offline to present themselves as ‘super equestrians’ on SNS. At the same time, young riders long for more ‘authentic’ online representations of riders and admire those who dare to post relatable images of everyday life in the stable (Broms et al., 2020). Though a potential explanation for the importance of social media within the equestrian community is lack

of coverage in traditional media, we contend that the role of social media for riders warrants further charting and analysis.

To explain equestrians' SNS use we divide users into three categories: producers, consumers, and prosumers. The term prosumer explains how users both consume and produce content on SNS and describes how users control the production and distribution on SNS (Hayes et al., 2019; Ritzer et al., 2012). Hayes et al. (2019) argue that previous studies have focused on athletes as consumers and that there is a lack of studies relating to athletes as prosumers. This study will therefore fill an important gap.

- RQ4: How do equestrians use social media, are there any differences regarding who can be seen as producers, consumers, and prosumers?

Source material and methods

We used a mixed methods design for this study, choosing to collect data both from focus group interviews and a survey. The different data collections and data sets were used to inform and support one another, and neither of them was given priority. The triangulation of both data collection and analysis could be described as a “Qual + Quan” mixture design, which has the advantage of providing different perspectives on a phenomenon (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). This mixed methods design was deliberately chosen with the aim of developing a more complete understanding of how and why equestrians use social media to seek information about horses in general, training, and injuries/diseases. The procedure for both data collection and analytic strategy will be described in further detail below so as to provide insight into the sequential strategies in the triangulation of methods used, thereby increasing transparency (Pluye et al., 2018).

The qualitative data were collected through focus group interviews, which were conducted in two phases. A survey was constructed to expand the qualitative findings and explore whether the latter could be generalized to other groups in order to determine the distribution of social media habits among equestrians.

Qualitative study

The qualitative material consists of twelve focus group interviews in Norway and sixteen focus group interviews in Sweden (2–6 participants in each group). These were conducted in two phases. The first phase was March 2017 to June 2017, during which equestrians studying at the upper secondary level in Sweden were interviewed. Before commencing the focus group interviews, we constructed an interview guide based on previous media research and our preconceptions of the equestrian sector. The interview guide was tested in an interview (included in the total number of 28 focus group interviews), and was subsequently evaluated by the research group. No revisions were needed.

After the completion of the first round of data collection the material was analyzed. This analysis indicated the importance of posing questions to equestrians with different levels of experience. Therefore, more focus group interviews were conducted. The second set of interviews was conducted in August 2018 to December 2018. The interviewees were equestrians studying at the upper secondary level in Norway; students at riding schools in Sweden and Norway; and horse owners in Sweden and Norway.

The focus group interviews, which were semi-structured, lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and were conducted by three members of the research team. In focus group interviewing, the researcher assembles a group of people who discuss a given subject (Wibeck, 2010). The word “focus” indicates that the discussion centers around a pre-determined topic. In our study, interview questions were constructed to ensure a focus on the research topic. The interviews commenced with open introductory questions. Thereafter, questions were raised about the equestrians’ use of SNS in connection to their horse interest and how they seek information about equestrian sports and horse-keeping.

Focus group interviews are common in research that aims to examine people’s perceptions, attitudes, and values in relation to a specific topic (Wibeck, 2010). The choice of focus groups as a method was motivated by the fact that the qualitative data in this study emerge from the respondents’ views of their own social media use. As stressed by Bryman, respondents in focus group interviews are free to highlight the question(s) they consider relevant and important (Bryman, 2011). In our study, the respondents were given space to think and reason among themselves.

Analysis of qualitative data

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2018) using the qualitative data analysis program NVivo12. Analysis of focus group interviews primarily entails coding the material, dividing it into units, and searching for trends and patterns (Wibeck, 2010). In the analysis, the respondents were organized by age into two groups: 15–25 and 26 and above. The respondents have been pseudonymized and all respondents have signed an informed consent form. The transcripts were read and re-read several times by the authors with various experiences in the equestrian sector, after which the material was coded and structured thematically. Throughout our readings of the material, we discussed possible themes and interpretations. Our various levels of experience with equestrian sports and social media lent validity to the construction of themes not least due to our own questioning of each other's views. The themes were composed in relation to our questions on how and why equestrians engage in SIS. Themes were abductively identified based on trends and patterns in the interviews (cf. Peirce, 1955), and the material was coded accordingly. The following themes were used in the thematic analysis for this article: usage, knowledge, everyday life, “us and them”, and age. In the final stage of the analysis, the thematic elements of the interviews were interpreted through the analytical framework of this study.

Quantitative study

The survey consisted of 44 questions that addressed the respondents' background and social media habits. The background variables included variables in relation to the population (such as gender and age) as well as variables related to horses and riding. It was published on the research project Facebook page from 7 May to 30 September 2018.¹ It was also published by the Swedish and Norwegian Equestrian Federations. In addition, the survey was disseminated with the help of the Swedish equestrian centers Ridskolan Strömsholm and Flyinge AB. This manner of dissemination allowed us to reach a large group of people. It can, however, be problematized as these organizations are likely to reach a rather homogenous group of respondents in relation to age and experience. The way in which this affects the results is discussed

1 The survey tool Survey Monkey was used.

continuously in the text and balanced by the selection of respondents for the focus group interviews.

A total number of 1628 participants responded to the survey. An overview of the demographics of the participants can be found in table 1. The respondents were asked to report what gender they identified as. The vast majority identified as female ($n = 1525$, 93.4%), while the rest identified as male or other. As previous research has indicated the importance of age in relation to SIS, the respondents were asked to report their age in years. For the whole population, the average age was 40.7 years old ($SD = 15.00$), with a range between 15–77. To enable analysis based on age-groups, three age categories were constructed (see table 1): Low (15–18 years), Middle (19–30 years) and High (31+), where the distribution is presented in the table.

Survey: Background variables

The following variables were explored in relation to the respondents' experience of horses and riding: years of experience, education, horse ownership, riding school experience, and discipline of main interest. The respondents' years of riding experience were organized in seven categories (see table 1).

The respondents were asked whether they had received any kind of education in connection to horses and equestrian sports. Responses were divided into four different categories: "No education in relation to horses/riding"; "Some education in relation to horses/riding"; "Currently under education in relation to horses/riding"; and "Other", and the distribution is presented in table 1.

In addition to years of experience and education, we expected horse ownership and riding school experience to be important variables for SIS. The respondents were asked whether they owned one or several horses, with responses divided into three categories: "Yes, I own one horse"; "Yes, I own several horses"; "No, I'm not a horse owner". Most of the respondents had at least one horse (79%). Furthermore, 12.1% of the population stated that they regularly exercised another person's horse. The respondents were also asked whether they were currently pupils at a riding school, with answers divided into two categories: "Yes" and "No". Only 13% of the respondents responded "Yes".

TABLE I *Demographics for quantitative study population*

Demographics		n	%
Gender	Female	1525	93.4
	Male	68	4.2
	Other	12	0.7
Age	Low: 15-18 years	173	10.6
	Middle: 19-30 years	305	20
	High: 31 ≥	1101	67.4
Experience horse and riding	< 1 year	4	0.3
	1 – 2 years	5	0.3
	2 – 5 years	29	1.9
	6 – 10 years	131	8.4
	11 – 15 years	234	15.0
	16 – 20 years	189	12.1
	21 ≥	972	62.1
Education related to horse and riding	No education	815	52.6
	Some education	521	33.7
	Currently under education	73	4.7
	Other	139	9.0
Horseowner	Yes, own one horse	572	36.9
	Yes, own several horses	660	42.6
	I am not a horse owner	319	20.6
Currently pupil at riding school	Yes	215	13.8
	No	1338	86.2

Note: Valid percent of those responding is reported

Variables related to use of social media and SNS

To analyze SIS, we asked questions about “what for” and “how” equestrians use social media in relation their horse interest. First, the respondents answered the question whether they use social media to search for information about horses in general; training with horses; and information on injuries/diseases. In addition, the respondents were asked whether they use any of the following SNS (YES/NO): Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and/or Twitter. In relation to “how” they potentially used these SNS within each of these three categories, they were asked to indicate whether they were: “Consumers” (users of information); “Producers” (producers of information on SNS); or if they used SNS for both these categories, rendering them “Prosumers”.

Analysis of quantitative data

The analysis conducted in the current study was performed using SPSS (IBM, 2016). When describing the population, analyses of descriptives are used. Further, Chi-square tests were used when exploring the relationship between categorical variables.

Results

The use of social media and SNS in different groups

To study equestrians' SIS behavior, general questions about how respondents used social media were posed in the interviews and the survey. One hundred percent of the respondents in the qualitative study and 97.8% of the respondents in the quantitative study answered that social media use was part of their everyday lives. This is congruent with findings from other studies — as noted above, a majority of the population in Sweden and Norway use social media platforms (Davidsson, 2016; Eek-Karlsson, 2015; Statens medieråd, 2019). To learn more about the respondents' SIS behavior we asked them to specify which social media they used. Our analysis shows that the equestrians in the quantitative study use van Dijck's type 1 (SNS) and, to some extent, type 2 (user generated content, e.g., YouTube, Wikipedia). Further, most of the survey respondents answered that they use Facebook (88.9%) and/or Instagram (69%) (see Table 2). Other platforms were not used to the same extent. In other words, the use of SNS in this group is similar to the use of these platforms in other groups (cf., the report *Global State of Digital in 2019*), with the difference that van Dijck's type 2, YouTube, did not have the same status among our respondents. However, there were significant differences between age groups in relation to YouTube usage ($X^2(2, N = 1600) = 14.48, p = .001$), with the younger age group using YouTube to a higher extent.

TABLE 2 *Number and proportion (%) of survey respondents using different types of SNS.**

SNS	N	%
Facebook	1451	88.9
Instagram	1127	69.0
YouTube	913	5.9
Snapchat	619	37.8
Twitter	124	7.6*

* As many respondents reported using more than one SNS, the responses amount to a higher number than the total number of respondents. The proportion is calculated in relation to the total number of respondents.

As previous research has indicated that SIS is connected to age, we discussed this in the interviews. The respondents in the qualitative study described Facebook as a site for older users. In a group of young Swedish equestrians (below 25 years), the use of Facebook was commented on as follows:

Lovisa: Which Social Media platforms do you use?

Sofia: It's like Snapchat

Elsa: Yes! That's number one

Sofia: After that, it's Instagram for me

Elsa: Yes exactly, I would say Instagram and then it's Facebook... actually

Lovisa: Actually, why do you say it's actually Facebook?

Elsa: Well, it's not so many...

Sofia: No, not in our age...

Elsa: ...who use it.... but I do as my older friends and acquaintances use it, so that I can keep up with them

Lovisa: To keep up with the oldies?

Elsa: Yes, they post a lot on like Facebook so... (Swedish interview 1)

Another group of young Swedish equestrians similarly indicated that Facebook was an SNS for older people:

Klara: I think that it is only a few of us who post things on Facebook

Eva: Ah yes, it's only my mother who posts on Facebook and makes updates about us (Swedish Interview 4).

The younger equestrians' opinions on Facebook were confirmed in focus group interviews with older Swedish equestrians. However, they (older

equestrians) added that Instagram was an important site for them as they like pictures.

Age in connection to SNS use was also discussed in the Norwegian focus group interviews. A group of equestrians (qualitative study) of different ages again emphasized Facebook as an SNS for older equestrians. When the respondents were asked whether they use Facebook, they answered:

Alma: I think it is our generation, your generation (pointing to one of the younger equestrians) are more active on YouTube and on all these different channels where you get a lot of information, but we (the older generation, authors' remark) are not brought up with this

Lea: No, at least not YouTube, it is a channel I have to remind myself of. You do get a lot of information there, but I'm never out there (on YouTube, authors' remark)

Alma: Nor am I, I rather use Google

Lea: No, but, you Stine, you use it, don't you?

Stine: Yes (Norwegian interview II).

To explore whether the qualitative findings could be generalized to other groups to determine patterns of social media habits among equestrians, we performed a set of chi-square tests, on the quantitative data, showing whether there are any associations in how SNS are used in relation to age (Low/Middle/High). In the test related to age and Facebook use, no significant relationship ($X^2(2, N = 1600) = 5.69, p < .059$) was found. There were, however, significant relationships when age in relation to Instagram and Snapchat use was tested (Use of Instagram ($X^2(2, N = 1600) = 102.58, p < .001$) and use of Snapchat ($X^2(2, N = 1600) = 393.66, p < .001$)).

To summarize, social media use is common among equestrians, just like in the general population. There are some interesting age-related patterns in equestrians' SNS use. From the interviews, it is clear that equestrians (in all age groups) believe that the younger generation is less active on Facebook, while the older generation feels more at home on Facebook than on, for instance, Instagram or YouTube. This result is congruent with previous studies, which show that interest in and use of Facebook is decreasing among younger generations (Tourvala et al., 2019; Statens Medieråd, 2019; Davidsson, 2016; Eek-Karlsson, 2015). However, no significant relationship between the use of Facebook and

age was discovered in the quantitative results. Instead, these findings indicate that all equestrians use Facebook.

Using Social Network Sites to access information about horses and riding

In the following section, we present results connected to equestrians' SIS on horses in general, training, and injuries/diseases. Table 3, below, gives an indication of the number and proportion of "how" and "for what" the respondents use SNS in relation to SIS, and whether they share information about horses.

TABLE 3 *Number and proportion of "how" and "for what" the survey respondents use SNS in relation to information seeking and sharing information about horses*

	Horses in general	Training with horses	Injuries/diseases
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
Non user	256 (19.9%)	561 (43.9%)	737 (58.7%)
Prosumer	489 (38.1%)	199 (15.6%)	79 (6.3%)
Producer	311 (24.2%)	85 (6.7%)	24 (1.9%)
Consumer	299 (17.8%)	433 (33.9%)	416 (33.1%)

Note: Percentages are reported based on valid percentage.

Our respondents tend to use SNS to seek and share information about horses in general. When it comes to training and injuries/diseases, however, the respondents use SNS to a lesser degree. Moreover, the respondents report viewing themselves as prosumers and producers to a higher extent in terms of general information about horses than in terms of training and injuries/diseases.

Further, we wanted to explore whether there were relations between the respondents' age (Low/Middle/High) and being a "non-user", "prosumer", "producer", or "consumer" in one of the three domains of "horses in general", "training with horses", and "injuries/diseases". The analysis showed that there were significant relations between age and SNS use in relation to the variable searching for and sharing information about "horses in general" ($X^2(6, N = 1265) = 50.03, p < .001$). The results are displayed in table 4.

TABLE 4 *Usage of SNS in different age groups in relation to SIS on horses in general (quantitative study)*

	Non user	Prosumer	Producer	Consumer
Age low	8.5 %	55.8%	23.3%	12.4%
Age middle	11.6%	45.2%	31.1%	12.0%
Age high	23.9%	33.7%	22.1%	20.2%

These results show that the younger population uses SNS more and that they view themselves as prosumers to a higher extent than the older age groups in relation to the topic “horses in general”. The older equestrians see themselves as consumers to a higher extent than the other age groups whereas members of the middle age group regard themselves as prosumers or producers. Interestingly, respondents in the group “age middle” are more likely to see themselves only as producers than the younger and older age groups. This result contradicts the findings of Dhir et al. (2017), who suggest that young adults between the ages of 20 and 30 are less inclined to share content than younger and older groups. The analysis also indicated that there were significant relations between age and SNS use in relation to the variable searching for and sharing information about “training with horses” ($X^2(6, N = 1258) = 58.01, p < .001$). The results are displayed in table 5 below.

TABLE 5 *Usage of SNS in different age groups in relation to SIS on training with horses (quantitative study)*

	Non user	Prosumer	Producer	Consumer
Age low	26.2 %	24.9%	7.9%	43.1%
Age middle	35.8%	22.5%	9.6%	32.1%
Age high	49.0%	11.3%	5.3%	34.4%

Again, the younger age group tends to use SNS the most, this time in relation to finding and sharing information about training horses. In terms of producing information about training horses there is a clear difference between the two younger age groups and the group “age high”. The younger respondents are more likely to be prosumers than the older age group.

Finally, the quantitative results showed that there were significant relations between age and the respondents’ SNS use in relation to the variable of searching for and sharing information about “injuries/diseases” ($X^2(6, N = 1236) = 18.90, p = .004$). The results are displayed in table 6 below.

TABLE 6 *Usage of SNS in different age groups in relation to SIS about injuries/diseases (quantitative study)*

	Non user	Prosumer	Producer	Consumer
Age low	50.8 %	7.8%	2.3%	39.1%
Age middle	54.2%	10.6%	3.4%	31.8%
Age high	61.2%	4.9%	1.4%	32.5

The youngest age group tends to be the most active in terms of seeking and sharing medical information about horses on SNS. However, the age difference is less significant than when it comes to information about training horses. Clearly, it is not very common to use SNS as a platform for medical information about horses. The age group that tends to produce and share the most information of this kind is the group “age middle”.

In the focus group interviews, young equestrians problematized SNS use, indicating an awareness that the use of SNS for SIS about horses can be stigmatizing. The interviewees claimed to be more capable of distinguishing between correct and incorrect information than both younger and older equestrians. When a group of Swedish equestrians below the age of 26 were asked whether equestrians are aware and source critical online, they answered:

Felicia: Yes, I think that people who haven’t studied at university level aren’t as source critical.

Klara: Well, it is age too. There are so many below 15 years who use social media, maybe only eight to ten years old, and they are not aware at all (aware of how to sort information on social media, authors’ remark)

Felicia: Yes, but it could be the older persons too, those who are like 60 plus...

Marie: Yes, they grew up when it was possible to trust what was written in the newspapers.

Felicia: ...and they are maybe not so used to the big cloud where...

Klara: ...whoever can write whatever...

Felicia: No, right, they are not as critical, I think... I think about my grandfather who has Facebook and sometimes he shares things and you think “no” this is not so good. Then I think that they (older people, authors’ remark) are not really used to handling the information online (Swedish interview 5).

This discussion reveals that a group of equestrians below the age of 26 see themselves as more capable of assessing information online than younger as well as older SNS users. According to them, university-educated persons may be more capable of online source criticism. In another focus group interview, an older equestrian – when asked how one knows what constitutes “good or bad” information – indicated that younger equestrians struggle to do so:

Johan: It’s becoming more and more difficult, it is very interesting as, in general, I believe in information, but in relation to taking care of horses I think it may be difficult for the younger ones to sort out the information that exists online, it could influence them too much because of all the different opinions out there. The older ones have their own networks to rely on (Swedish interview 6).

When analyzing the focus group interviews, it is clear that the equestrians see themselves as capable of assessing information about horses and riding, regardless of their age. As presented above, however, it is common for the equestrians to claim that ‘others’ are incapable of distinguishing between ‘right and wrong’. This recalls previous research showing that group affiliation is seen as more important than evidence-based facts and science online (Klintman, 2019). It is common to believe oneself to be adept at judging what kind of information is good or bad for oneself or, in this case, one’s horse. The capacity to be in control of media rather than being controlled by media (cf. Goodyear et al., 2019) seems important to all respondents in this study. At the same time, the respondents stress that other groups are not source critical enough and that this could affect the horse. ‘The others’ are generally people in a different age group (younger or older) and/or who have less or different kinds of horse experience.

Practitioners in self-organized lifestyle sports attest to using the ‘worldwide gym on the Internet’ to glean advice on training as well as to find inspiration and knowledge. Although this behavior is very common, the practitioners do not appear to talk about what they learn from the Internet when they meet, preferring to keep this to themselves. Some practitioners, often the more experienced ones, also express shame when admitting to using the Internet for learning purposes (Säfvenbom and Stjernvang, 2020). The stigma of using online platforms for gathering knowledge about sporting activities is also apparent in this study.

Furthermore, this stigma seems to create tensions between different groups of riders. Säfvenbom and Stjernvang (2020) observe that youth involved in self-organized sports seize the opportunity to facilitate their personal knowledge production because the environment around them is not affected by actors and cultures governed by strong norms. They also suggest that there is an opportunity to learn from self-organized lifestyle sports when it comes to peer-oriented, Internet-facilitated knowledge exchange. Equestrianism is a part of the organized sports movement and governed by strong norms and cultures in relation to existing stable cultures (Hedenborg, 2009), yet our study shows that equestrians turn to online platforms to facilitate knowledge exchange. Although there is a strong culture governing how equestrians should learn to ride and take care of the horse, they also turn to the Internet to garner additional knowledge. Like the practitioners in Säfvenbom and Stjernvang's (2020) study, riders express a stigma around using SNS as a tool for knowledge exchange. They attest to using SNS, but respondents in all age groups emphasize the importance of being critical and claim that 'others' are less source critical and able to use SNS as a tool for seeking knowledge about horses.

Previous research on young equestrians' SNS use shows that there are norms in the online (horse) world stipulating that one should post "nice and pretty" content, presenting oneself as the 'super equestrian' (cf. Broms et al., 2020). Perfectionism has been problematized in previous research. "Generation perfectionism" and "generation performance" are debated terms, often used in the media to describe young people who consistently portray themselves as 'perfect individuals' who perform in every area of life (Holden, 2018). Just as the skateboarders in Dupont's study (cf. Dupont, 2020), the equestrians seem to struggle with the creation and meaning of authenticity.

Concluding discussion

Our study shows that practitioners of self-organized sports are not unique in using social network sites, SNS, to exchange and attain knowledge about their sport. We argue that there are similarities between equestrian sports and self-organized sports when it comes to utilizing online platforms for learning and exchanging knowledge. Similar to previous research on self-organized sports, our study also shows a stigma around attaining

information on SNS. A greater proportion of respondents indicate that they use the Internet more generally rather than SNS specifically to search for information. However, it is important to stress that a majority of respondents still report using SNS to attain information on horses and riding, and that the respondents are likely to underestimate their use (cf. Dashper, 2017). The proportion of social media users differs depending on the type of information sought. Generally, a greater proportion of respondents within all age groups use SNS for social information seeking, SIS, in relation to general information and training than when it comes to injuries and diseases.

The fact that some equestrians use SNS to learn how to take care of their horse is, evidently, so upsetting within the equestrian community that there is a widespread suspicion that ‘others’ (people in another age group or with other kinds of experiences) are doing so. We argue that the equestrians’ suspicions about “others” information-seeking is related to the strong norms and traditions in equestrian sports regulating what the ‘stable cultures’ should include and how the horse should be handled and treated in different situations. Furthermore, we believe such suspicions about “others” Internet use is related to the fact that equestrian sports are practiced by people in a very wide range of ages. Although, surprisingly, the quantitative results of this study do not show significant differences between the age groups in terms of which SNS they use, the qualitative results show that equestrians believe such differences to exist. Members of the older age group claim that the younger groups are less able to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources for information on horse care, and also that younger equestrians are mean to each other online. Conversely, the younger age groups make the same claims about the older age groups.

As equestrian sports are practiced by riders in a wide range of ages, we argue that it is important to investigate if the use of SNS differs between equestrians in different age groups. However, the quantitative results do not indicate significant differences when it comes to which platforms the equestrians use. The results indicate that the respondents in all age groups are regular users of van Dijck’s social media type 1 (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and (albeit to a lesser extent) type 2 (e.g., YouTube and Wikipedia) of social media. Most of the respondents use Facebook and/or Instagram. Other platforms were used less. In other words, the use of SNS in the survey group is similar to the use of these platforms in other populations (cf. the report *Global State of Digital in 2019; Medierådet, 2019*).

However, the qualitative data indicate that, although the equestrians use the same platforms, equestrians of different age groups do so in differing ways and are more or less active on the various platforms. For instance, the older equestrians seem to be considerably more active on Facebook than the younger age groups who are more active on Instagram and Snapchat.

We propose that ‘stable cultures’ and the organized structure of equestrian sports in Sweden and Norway create boundaries stipulating where a ‘good equestrian’ should seek information about horse-keeping. However, the organized structure and traditional nature of equestrian sports do not mean that the equestrians do not turn to SNS. Just like practitioners in self-organized lifestyle sports, equestrians are motivated to use online platforms to gather and exchange knowledge. The same motivation – taking good care of the horse – that drives riders to insecurity and feelings of suspicion towards ‘others’, is what makes them do the same: namely, to use SNS to attain information about horses and riding.

In terms of age differences, the two younger age groups use SNS for SIS to a higher extent while the middle age group seems to produce the most content on SNS regarding horses and riding. This result contradicts recent studies that suggest this group is the most restrictive when it comes to sharing information on SNS (Dhir et al., 2017). Other than this, the respondents in the three different age groups seem to have similar views on their use of SNS to attain and exchange information about horses and riding.

Group affiliation is often prioritized over knowledge (Hine, 2014; Klintman, 2019). The WHO has identified the growing hesitation towards vaccines as a major global health threat and research shows that SNS is used extensively by anti-vaccination movements to spread false information about vaccines (Puri et al., 2020; Smith and Graham, 2019). Misleading and non-evidence-based information about horses and equestrian sports, disseminated via SNS, can result in equestrians listening more to their peers than to professionals and researchers, ultimately endangering horse welfare. However, the present study shows contradictory patterns. Equestrians thirst for information about their sport and find it convenient to use SNS for this purpose, but their responses show that not all information is trusted, as in the case of information about injuries and diseases. This study also shows that it

is relevant to analyze divergences in social media use between different groups within a population of sports practitioners.

The present study has a few limitations, one of which is that – despite the large sample – the respondents in the quantitative survey are rather homogenous. A high proportion have extensive experience of equestrian sports and belong to the older age group. Therefore, it would be useful to follow up this study by including riders with less experience and a higher proportion of younger respondents. However, a benefit of the mixed method design of this study is that we have been able to include the younger equestrians' voices, despite their being to some extent missing from the quantitative data. Finally, it would be interesting to proceed beyond the case of equestrian sports and investigate how practitioners of other organized sports use SNS as a tool for knowledge exchange.

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