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SOCIAL MEDIA, MENTAL HEALTH, AND EQUESTRIAN EVENTS

SARAH SNELL,* ALLAN JEPSON,† RAPHAELA STADLER,‡ TRUDIE WALTERS,§ KATHERINE DASHPER,¶ NEIL SPENCER,# AND PERSIA BHATIA**

*The Business School, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK
†Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK
‡Management Centre Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria
§Lincoln University, Lincoln, New Zealand
¶School of Events Tourism and Hospitality, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK
#Hertfordshire Business School, Hatfield, UK
**Musselburgh Racecourse, Edinburgh, UK

Many studies have investigated the benefits and drawbacks of social media, but the impact it has on amateur sports participants who use it as part of their practice has been largely overlooked. This study addresses this gap, investigating the impacts of social media on the mental health of women participating in amateur sport activities—specifically, equestrian events through a mixed methods survey of 221 female amateur equestrians in the UK. Themes included the pressure to present a "perfect" image to an external audience, the stress of comparison to others, and constant judgment around the performance of a participant. We also found issues of distorted reality and false representation. We conclude by highlighting a need for better assistance for athletes both while they are competing at events and at other times, particularly pre/postevent.

Key words: Social media; Mental health; Amateur sport participation; Equestrian events

Introduction

Mental health is increasingly acknowledged as a prevalent concern in today's society. There is a growing discussion within sports around the impact that physical competition can have on an athlete's mental health due to the pressure to perform, particularly at elite level (Souter et al., 2018). Often the psychological and physical requirements of sporting events can lead to anxiety and depression: encouraging a cycle of poor performance leading to further mental health issues (Souter et al., 2018). A systematic review by Fossati et al. (2021) revealed a complex relationship between physical exercise and mental health, noting that many amateur and professional athletes suffer from increased depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, sleep disorders, or combinations thereof when competing. They

Address correspondence to Sarah Snell, The Business School, Edinburgh Napier University, 219 Colinton Road, Edinburgh, EH14 1DJ, UK. E-mail: s.snell@napier.ac.uk

also found that mental health conditions increase the risk of injury during competitive events. Purcell et al. (2019) identified that elite athletes encountered a range of factors influencing their mental health such as: sports-related injuries/concussion (Gulliver et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2018), performance failure (Hammond et al., 2013), overtraining (Frank et al., 2013), low social support (Kotnik et al., 2012), impaired sleep (Gupta et al., 2017), major negative life events (Gouttebarge et al., 2017), sport type (and specific risks of competing) (Schaal et al., 2011). Junior competitors are particularly vulnerable with respect to decreasing mental health (Fossati et al., 2021) and therefore there is a key need for supportive relationships with parents, coaches, and fellow competitors to sustain positive well-being (Berntsen & Kristiansen, 2019). Saw et al. (2016) also drew attention to training demands placed on competitors (both by themselves and by coaches), while Donnelly et al. (2016) concluded that travel away from home to compete in unfamiliar environments can also be detrimental to mental health and well-being.

Social media is becoming central to athletes' identities (Sanderson, 2013), personal branding (Park et al., 2020), and financial viability. It provides opportunities to connect with fans and promote sponsors in the contemporary neoliberal landscape of professional sport (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). The ubiquity of social media means all athletes are likely to engage with it on a regular basis, despite its potential to cause distress and psychological harm for users (David et al., 2018). For young people, social media increases risk of exposure to online aggression, negative content, and cyber bullying (Craig et al., 2020). Brougham's (2021) research with student athletes found that social media use affected some students' mental health, self-esteem, and anxiety, with many feeling that it had a negative impact on them. Further research is therefore needed to examine the links between social media use and mental health in different sporting and social contexts.

Equestrians have been shown to engage with social media for knowledge sharing and community building (Schurer, 2019). However, this can lead to the spread of misinformation and reinforcing boundaries and hierarchies within equestrian subcultures (Broms et al., 2021; Dashper, 2017). The issue of bullying has recently come to the fore in the equestrian world, with the international sport governing body—the Federation Internationale Equestre (FEI)—considering implementing social media policies for athletes and officials to try and safeguard participants and reduce cyber abuse (Jones, 2023). Equestrianism is one of the few sports where men and women, boys and girls, compete together on equal terms at all levels of competition (Dashper, 2012). Godoy-Pressland (2014) found that female equestrians were less exposed to gendered insults in the media, perhaps in part due to the lack of formal sex-based divisions. Equestrianism also provides opportunity for physical activity across the life span: riding is popular with both children and older people, particularly women (Davis et al., 2016). The reported prevalence of online bullying is therefore worrying in that it detracts from other, more positive, aspects of equestrian sport and exposes participants to negative experiences that may affect their mental health.

Competitive events form an important part of many sporting practices and can be a catalyst for increased pressure and poor mental health (J. C. Smith, 2022). For many equestrians, the sport is more than just a pastime—it becomes a way of life, partly due to the significant time and resource demands required to care for the horses that are essential to the sport (Dashper, 2017). In this context, negative experiences on social media are likely to affect personal identity and enjoyment of this valued leisure activity. In the UK, 74% of horse riders are female (BETA, 2019) and girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to mental distress related to social media use (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020).

In this study, we sought to investigate how young female riders engaging in competitive events in the UK experience social media and its impacts on their sense of identity, enjoyment of equestrian sport, and mental health. The objectives of the study were: 1) to establish whether there is a link between social media and mental health of the participants of equestrian events; 2) to identify the factors within social media that may contribute to a decline in participants' mental health and whether there is a specific demographic that may be more susceptible to the effects of social media; and 3) to make recommendations on improvements to support participants throughout their sporting events.

Literature Review

Sport Participation and Mental Health

The multifaceted benefits of sports participation have long been acknowledged. A number of studies have highlighted the benefits of sport participation on the mental health of participants (Huang & Humphreys, 2012; Ruseski et al., 2014; Stanis et al., 2014). Huang and Humphreys (2012) identified increased happiness, self-confidence, and satisfaction associated with sport participation, demonstrating the potential positive benefits from taking part. Engaging in outdoor sporting events specifically was acknowledged by Thompson Coon et al. (2011) to provide benefits for participants, and Eigenschenk et al. (2019) identified a range of mental health benefits associated with sports participation outdoors. Equestrian sport, which takes place almost exclusively in the outdoors, thus has potential to contribute positively to participants' mental health.

However, the high levels of stress associated with competitive sport (Rice et al., 2016) can place significant pressure on participants and this has the potential to negatively impact their mental health (Myer et al., 2015). Relatedly, Gulliver et al. (2012) found that the age at which an athlete is likely to reach their peak athletic performance intersects with the age when an individual is most likely to develop mental health issues. While no link between the two factors is confirmed, the potential susceptibility to mental health crisis at specific ages is an important factor to consider when examining the impacts of engaging in sport on a participant's mental health, particularly as participants are often young when they begin to engage in competitive sport events.

Equestrian sport has been shown to have positive impacts on the psychological well-being of participants, particularly through relationships between horse and rider, and including competing in equestrian events (Hatcher et al., 2019). Many of the interactions involved with caring for horses provide continued engagement with the animals. This has been found to bring relief to those suffering from stress, along with other benefits such as improved confidence, better communication skills, increased self-esteem, and enhanced ability to make decisions (Evans et al., 2009; Trotter et al., 2008). Equestrian event participation, irrespective of type, has recognized mental health benefits for athletes (Biddle & Mutrie, 2007).

Although equestrian sport can bring many positive benefits to participants, the demands of horse care and the dangers associated with the sport can be both mentally and physically challenging (Landolt et al., 2017). The rider's mental state is of further importance and is integral to the rider–horse relationship (McBride & Mills, 2012; Wolframm et al., 2010), with issues in this relationship noted as being detrimental to the rider's mental health (Butler-Coyne et al., 2018). Equestrian sport thus has potential to have both positive and negative impacts on participants' mental health.

Social Media and Mental Health

Mayoh (2019) noted that "social media is an online space where digital leisure allows us to engage with the world and construct and maintain identities" (pp. 204–205). It becomes a space through which users project the self-image that they would like to present to others, whether that image be based on reality or more a sense of what the user would like to be reality (Shannon, 2022). It becomes a space through which individuals compare themselves with others. Users of social media generally highlight positive aspects that cast themselves in the best possible light (Vogel et al., 2014). Other social media users compare their own actual lives—the good, the bad, and everything between—with an idealized portrayal of others' lives. Thus, social media usage has been found to increase levels of envy (Taylor & Strutton, 2016) and lead to lower life satisfaction (Chou & Edge, 2012; Krasnova et al., 2013).

Abi-Jaoude et al. (2020) discussed the steady growth of social media in recent years, noting a corresponding rise in the number of people who report it having a negative impact on their mental health. They found that the proportion of teenagers using social media reporting moderate to severe mental distress had risen by 15% between 2013 and 2017, providing a link between the use of social media and a decline in mental health within young people. Naslund et al. (2019) and Goodyear and Armour (2019) also found a link between declining mental health and social media usage, especially for young people. Likewise, Karim et al. (2020) found

a direct correlation between increases in anxiety and depression and those who are persistent users of social media.

There is often pressure associated with social media to create a "perfect" persona and to be popular with others. The stress of maintaining an image on social media that shows only positive attributes and lacks coverage of "bad days" can result in the user comparing themselves with others and developing a need for positive feedback, issues that are further associated with depressive symptoms (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). There are also well-reported negative behaviors linked to the use of online platforms including bullying, fear of judgment from others, and worrying what people online think about you (O'Reilly, 2020). It is further acknowledged that as an account becomes more popular, there is an increased risk of behavior addiction and higher instances of users experiencing online victimization (Longobardi et al., 2020). Many athletes have suffered abuse and hate on social media, leading to concerns about athlete welfare and mental well-being (Kavanagh et al., 2023).

While discourse on negative aspects of social media is prominent in the literature, research shows that those with moderate to severe depression can find it a more favorable means of communication than in-person interactions (Rideout & Fox, 2018). Social media can be a supportive environment for some individuals with mental health issues. This is partially due to the manner in which social media allows individuals to communicate with people remotely, providing relief for those with certain mental health issues (Rickwood et al., 2007), alongside it being a source for seeking out advice and assistance with mental health concerns (Batterham & Calear, 2017). Pavlíček (2013) further identified benefits of social media to include building communication with others and being able to share news with friends and family.

Social Media Use Within Sporting Communities

Within sporting communities, social media is widely used by athletes to progress their sporting skills and develop relationships with fans (Thorpe, 2017) and has become a popular platform for sport event communication, particularly from competitors (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019). Social media is providing competition to traditional sports journalists, as athletes and sports teams can engage with the online platforms to present information directly to fans and without delay, bypassing mainstream journalism (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). It also gives users ownership over the narrative being presented and provides the opportunity to have a more active role in their public presentation (L. R. Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

Its use is widespread within equestrian sport, especially among young people who use it to construct their equestrian identities, gain information, and compare themselves to others (Broms, Hedenborg, & Radmann, 2022). Social media influencers are increasingly important in creating the online equestrian community (Radmann et al., 2021), and Broms (2019) argued that young equestrians use social media differently to older groups. Given the prevalence of bullying within the equestrian world, as noted in the introduction, it is important to consider the role of social media in constructing equestrian communities and its effect on the mental health of young equestrians, particularly in relation to the high-stress context of competitive events.

Equestrian sport provides an ideal context through which to consider the relationships between sporting events, social media use, and mental health and well-being, particularly among young female participants. Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework depicting the key theoretical contributions of these three areas of academic literature, and the relationship between them firmly positions our research questions at their intersection.

Methodology

Approach

We aimed to investigate the range of impacts of social media on female amateur athletes' mental health in the specific context of equestrianism. To achieve this, we adopted a mixed methods approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a semistructured survey. This enabled us to gain surface data such as key demographics and also deep data with respect to participants' perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and feelings (Hargreaves & Seale, 1981). Collecting qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously

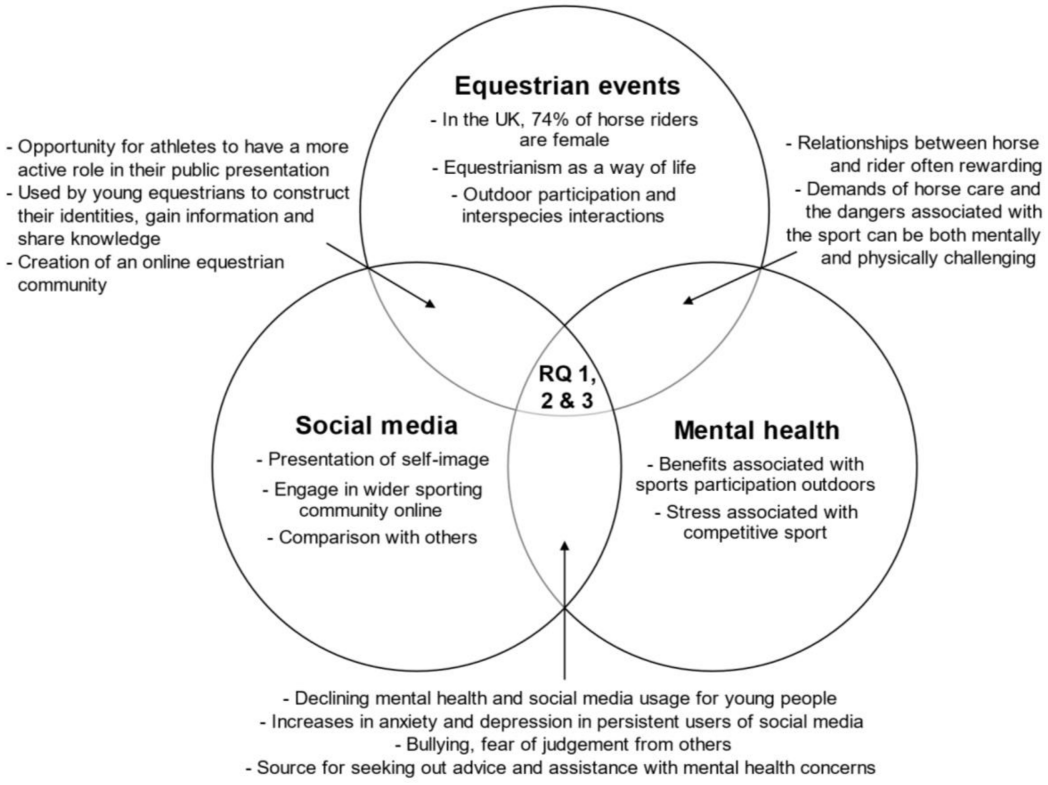

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

can enhance the understanding of a phenomenon (Gratton & Jones, 2004). The adoption of mixed methods for primary research within equestrian sports events has proved successful and can be considered widespread (Broms et al., 2022; Furtado & Christley, 2021; Parrish et al., 2023; Vial & Evans, 2015). Most notably, mixed methods have been effectively employed to better understand the impacts of social media and the equestrian industry (Vial & Evans, 2015) and social media and performance at sporting events (Prado-Gascó et al., 2017).

Survey Design

Following a comprehensive review of the literature, a semistructured survey was developed using Microsoft forms. This platform was used to ensure a high level of accessibility by respondents (Mercurio & Merrill, 2021) as the survey could be viewed and completed by respondents using any type of device.

The survey consisted of 18 open- and close-ended questions. Quantitative questions included demographic and multiple-choice questions, such as: What equestrian events do you compete in? What social media platforms do you use? Have you ever suffered from mental health problems/a disorder? and If you feel comfortable, please could you state what disorders you have suffered from? Qualitative questions were designed to be reflexive and exploratory to encourage deeper responses with respect to participants' feelings towards specific topic areas (Ward et al., 2018). This included questions about competing in equestrian events and whether the use of social media has affected participants' mental health in a positive way, negative way, or both? And more specifically whether the use of social media has affected participants' mental health while competing, and why they feel this was the case? A pilot study was carried out on a selected group of amateur equestrian competitors

to check the clarity of the quantitative survey questions and the depth of responses given to qualitative questions. Following discussion with respondents in the pilot study, improvements were made, such as making some questions optional to avoid pressuring or making respondents feel anxious when completing the survey. The final survey can be seen in the Appendix.

A key strength of the data collected is that many respondents provided in-depth insights to the four open-ended questions (108 responses for question 10; 119 for question 12; 104 for question 14; and 79 for question 15). Responses were detailed and provided in-depth and insightful discussions as to the nature of participants' experiences. The majority of respondents expressed their views at length, offering a comprehensive account of their experiences, allowing for a detailed and nuanced analysis.

Sample Size/Strategy

The population of interest was female amateur or "grassroots" equestrian competitors aged 18–65 who had at least one personal social media account (Facebook, TikTok, Twitter/X, Instagram, or YouTube) and regularly posted or interacted with others' posts about competing in equestrian events (dressage, eventing, show jumping).

In the absence of a sampling frame congruent with the population of interest, equestrian competitors in the Lothian Region of Scotland were targeted initially to provide a sample representative of competitors across the UK. This region was chosen because (i) its sociodemographic composition is not atypical when viewed in a UK-wide perspective (from comparisons of West Lothian, City of Edinburgh, Midlothian, and East Lothian council areas within UK based on gender/age profile and average earnings; Office for National Statistics, 2022, 2023), (ii) the area has a tradition of equestrian competition, and (iii) it is well known by authors of this article, thus providing an opportunity for successfully obtaining a sample of respondents.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling (Dörnyei, 2007) using social media groups (localized to Midlothian) on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, and LinkedIn, and the researchers' personal contacts within amateur equestrianism. Participants had the option of discussing the survey further on the social media network, taking part in the self-administered survey based on the information given, or opting out. This enabled researchers to build a pool of respondents who were engaged and motivated to complete the survey (Stratton, 2021) and more likely to promote the survey to others, making use of snowball sampling (Browne, 2005).

The survey was live between February 5 and 28, 2022, an appropriate timeframe for self-administered surveys (Mertler, 2017). Snowball sampling led to a sample size of 223 participants. Of these, two respondents were ineligible as they either did not meet the criteria of social media use or preferred not to provide a binary identification of gender. They were excluded due to the study's focus on female participants who, as stated above, comprise 74% of horse riders in the UK (BETA, 2019). The final sample size of 221 is sufficient to provide 95% confidence intervals for proportions which have a width of less than ±6.5%.

Quantitative Data Analysis

As demonstrated below, the characteristics of the survey respondents in terms of age, equestrian sport participation, and social media channel usage are broadly in line with the characteristics of a wider UK population. Thus, when findings are presented below, no weightings have been applied to the sample. Data on ethnicity and (dis)ability were not collected. Where appropriate, 95% confidence intervals are provided to give context to estimates of proportions.

Respondents are concentrated in the younger age groups (although participation exists in all age groups) and dressage, eventing, and show jumping are the predominant sports (Table 1). Data on female participation in equestrian sport by age in the UK are sparse but data from Sport England (2023) show similar patterns, although the respondent data shows a greater participation in eventing.

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents across age groups and social media channels. As the sample has been recruited via specific social media channels, it is not surprising that use of Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok is higher in the sample than in the UK population as a whole (Statista, 2023a), although the relative popularity of the

Table 1
Distribution of Respondents by Age and Sport

		Equestrian Sport				
Age	Count	Dressage	Eventing	Horse Racing	Showjumping	Other
18–24	96 (43.4%)	45 (46.9%)	72 (75.0%)	5 (5.2%)	57 (59.4%)	9 (9.4%)
25–30	24 (10.9%)	14 (58.3%)	14 (58.3%)	1 (4.2%)	16 (66.7%)	6 (25.0%)
31–40	25 (11.3%)	15 (60.0%)	18 (72.0%)	0 (0.0%)	16 (64.0%)	3 (12.0%)
41–50	25 (11.3%)	15 (60.0%)	17 (68.0%)	0 (0.0%)	14 (56.0%)	5 (20.0%)
51–60	38 (17.2%)	30 (78.9%)	15 (39.5%)	0 (0.0%)	16 (42.1%)	13 (34.2%)
61+	13 (5.9%)	8 (61.5%)	4 (30.8%)	1 (7.7%)	2 (15.4%)	5 (38.5%)
Overall	221 (100%)	127 (57.5%)	140 (63.3%)	7 (3.2%)	121 (54.8%)	41 (18.6%)

Note. Authors' calculations. Percentages across sports sum to more than 100% as respondents may participate in more than one sport.

different channels is similar. As Twitter/X and YouTube were not used to disseminate the survey, it is unsurprising to find their usage is lower than in the population. The use of social media channels by the sample decreases with age for Instagram and TikTok, mirroring the UK population (Statista, 2023b). Facebook usage is uniformly very high, which reflects its use as the primary recruitment channel, although the youngest ages are least likely to use it, as with the general UK population. It is inappropriate to discuss age group usage patterns for Twitter/X and YouTube in the sample due to small numbers.

Respondents were asked to report whether or not they had ever suffered from mental health problems. Table 3 shows the results by age. Of the 98 that gave details of their conditions, 81 (82.7%) reported anxiety and 44 (44.9%) reported depression. These contrast with figures from England in 2014 (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2016) shown in Table 4, which suggest lower levels of depressive symptoms and anxiety at all ages. Although these refer to a different geography, the differences between England and Scotland are unlikely to be large and conclusions about differences between the general population and the survey respondents will be unchanged.

Qualitative Data Analysis

With regards to qualitative data analysis, this study required a flexible and iterative process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, we adopted an inductive approach to identify themes in the survey data. Each member of the research team individually coded the data (open codes) and then developed themes through axial codes (Braun et al., 2020). We read through

Table 2
Distribution of Respondents By Age and Social Media Channel

		Social Media Channel					
Age	Count	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube	Other
18–24	96 (43.4%)	83 (86.5%)	95 (99.0%)	69 (71.9%)	18 (18.8%)	32 (33.3%)	4 (4.2%)
25–30	24 (10.9%)	23 (95.8%)	23 (95.8%)	12 (50.0%)	6 (25.0%)	6 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)
31–40	25 (11.3%)	25 (100.0%)	22 (88.0%)	2 (8.0%)	3 (12.0%)	7 (28.0%)	0 (0.0%)
41–50	25 (11.3%)	25 (100.0%)	19 (76.0%)	4 (16.0%)	8 (32.0%)	9 (36.0%)	0 (0.0%)
51–60	38 (17.2%)	38 (100.0%)	16 (42.1%)	3 (7.9%)	4 (10.5%)	12 (31.6%)	2 (5.3%)
61+	13 (5.9%)	13 (100.0%)	4 (30.8%)	1 (7.7%)	3 (23.1%)	6 (46.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Overall	221 (100%)	207 (93.7%)	179 (81.0%)	91 (41.2%)	42 (19.0%)	72 (32.6%)	6 (2.7%)

Note. Authors' calculations. Percentages across social media channels sum to more than 100% as respondents may engage with more than one channel.

Table 3
Reported Mental Health Problems by Age

	Ever Suffered From Mental Health Problems?	
Age	Yes	No
18–24	43 (44.8%)	53 (55.2%)
25–30	17 (70.8%)	7 (29.2%)
31–40	14 (56.0%)	11 (44.0%)
41–50	14 (56.0%)	11 (44.0%)
51–60	11 (28.9%)	27 (71.1%)
61+	3 (23.1%)	10 (76.9%)
Overall	102 (46.2%)	119 (53.8%)

Note. Authors' calculations.

the material multiple times, seeking to identify subthemes and condense these into overarching themes. We worked both independently and collaboratively across the phases of analysis, meeting to discuss our interpretations and reach a consensus. This form of investigator triangulation aids the study's credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Decrop, 2004).

Findings

Quantitative Findings

Respondents were asked if *competing in equestrian sport* had affected their mental health—positively, negatively, or both. Almost half of the 221 respondents (104) said that it had (47.1%, 95% confidence interval 40.8% to 53.9%). Table 5 summarizes their responses. Taking these as forming an ordered category from negative to positive with "both" or "no effect" between the extremes, we can measure the impact of competing on mental health. We calculate Kendall's tau-c to be close to zero (0.077, $p = 0.186$), suggesting that, in general, competing does not affect mental health in a positive or negative direction (although for a number of people it does affect mental health in one direction or another, negative responses are balanced by similar numbers of positive responses).

Table 5
Ways in Which Competing in Equestrian Sport Has Affected Mental Health

Response	Respondents	Percent (95% Confidence Interval)
Positive	32	30.8% (22.9%, 40.6%)
Negative	24	23.1% (16.2%, 32.4%)
Both	48	46.2% (37.2%, 56.2%)
Overall	104	100%

Note. Authors' calculations.

Respondents were also asked if *using social media* had affected their mental health—again positively, negatively, or both. Just over half of the 221 respondents said that it had (52.5%, 95% confidence interval 46.1% to 59.2%). Table 6 summarizes their responses. Taking these as forming an ordered category as above, we can measure the impact of social media use on mental health. We calculate Kendall's tau-c to be 0.404 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that, in general, social media does affect mental health in a negative manner to a moderate degree.

Additionally, respondents were asked if using social media had affected their mental health *while competing*. Almost half of the 221 respondents said that it had (46.2%, 95% confidence interval 39.0% to 53.0%) and were invited to provide details. These

Table 4
Women Reporting Experience of a Common Mental Disorder in the Past Week

Age	Percentage Reporting Disorder
16–24	28.2%
25–34	20.7%
35–44	22.3%
45–54	24.2%
55–64	20.2%
65–74	14.7%
75+	11.0%
Overall	20.7%

Note. Source: Health and Social Care Information Centre (2016).

Table 6
Ways in Which Using Social Media Has Affected Mental Health

Response	Respondents	Percent (95% Confidence Interval)
Positive	6	5.2% (2.5%, 11.0%)
Negative	53	46.1% (37.6%, 55.6%)
Both	56	48.7% (40.1%, 58.2%)
Overall	115	100%

Note. Authors' calculations.

Table 7
Ways in Which Using Social Media Has Affected Mental Health While Competing

Response	Respondents	Percent (95% Confidence Interval)
Positive	8	8.1% (4.2%, 15.3%)
Negative	83	83.8% (76.2%, 90.5%)
Both	8	8.1% (4.2%, 15.3%)
Overall	99	100%

Note. Authors' calculations.

responses are considered in the following section alongside other comments. As before, these can be characterized as being positive, negative, or both. Table 7 summarizes the responses from the 99 who explained how their mental health had been affected. Again taking these as forming an ordered category, we can measure the impact of social media use on mental health when competing. We calculate Kendall's tau-c to be 0.731 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that, in general, social media does affect mental health when competing in a negative manner to a strong degree.

Qualitative Findings

Our qualitative findings need to be interpreted in light of two factors: 1) the important role of both the horse and horse riding for many participants' mental health; and 2) the equestrian community. With regards to the former, participants highlighted:

> Just being with horses has been a huge positive for me.

> Horse riding is therapeutic and when I'm out and about I love chatting to everyone.

> Gives a break from exam stress and time to relax and focus on something I enjoy.

> Horses allow for an escape from work and university life however competing gives this a focus and helps to improve mental strength.

For the latter, participants commented that the equestrian community can be "encouraging" and "very supportive," but it can also be rather cliquey, which plays out not only in real life but also online:

> Can be cliquey in equestrian sports which continues online.

> Horsey people are bitchy.

> The equestrian world can be "bitchy" and social media has just given these people a bigger platform. I now report, hide and ignore these types and enjoy my ponies.

Within this context, we identified four dominant negative themes and one positive theme in the survey: pressure, comparison, judgment, and distorted reality; and encouragement and support.

Pressure

In this theme, we see women equestrians experiencing the pressure of high expectations as a result of social media use. They feel these high expectations are perpetuated not only by others, but by themselves. Comments included:

> Added pressure.

> Pressure by team members, team members' parents and BSJA team managers makes you feel like you're not achieving enough.

This is not only in relation to competing well, but encompasses how they look and the resources (horse, livery) they have:

> Pressure to keep up with people with more money that can afford more lessons, better horses and equipment.

> A lot of pressure to look as good as the others! I feel like there's less focus on the performance of the horse etc and more on how many brands you can tag in a post.

> Pressure to always achieve better than others, to be slimmer than others, to have what others have.

This creates a sense of pressure to be the best, exacerbated by the perception that everyone is watching both in person *and* online:

> Added pressure as I felt that people were constantly watching me and wanting me to fail.

> Due to my following I feel like I have high expectations from my followers to perform well.

It can be argued that a certain amount of pressure is natural in a sporting competition, and that healthy pressure can help an athlete to perform at their best (Perry, 2019). However, in these comments the impact of the pressure appears to be negative as it is associated with a sense of failure or not being good enough.

Comparison

Related to pressure, yet subtly distinct from it, is the theme of constant comparison. Social media use facilitates the ability to compare oneself with others, leading to feelings of inadequacy which (as the second comment below indicates) may not have been there during the event:

> Always comparing yourself as to why you aren't as good as others.

> For example everyone is at different stages/levels in competing. I totally understand that!! I went out one day on a young fresh horse, and had in my head if I make it into the area today, I've already achieved something! I got round and had just 1 down. Amazing! Got home went on social media, and seen that another rider went double clear with every young horse she had on her wagon that day. Then my morning with my 1 young fresh horse having one fence down didn't seem so amazing anymore.

> Seeing other people progressing further and feeling like a failure.

> I feel I must be up to everyone else's standards.

Again, as with the theme of pressure, these comparisons go beyond performance results and flow into the horse, equipment and money available to a rider:

> Competing against those with a lot of money behind them, when all you have is a rusty old h-box, kit off ebay, 2nd hand saddle, self taught largely . . . mostly out hacking as no arena or facilities & a 4 legged best friend with no breeding lines to mention (bought from a dealer, turned out to be a bit if a talented rough diamond, jump anything!) but willing to do anything you ask of him . . . it's v v intimidating.

> You see others with their fancy tack and expensive horses and feel belittled by them like you're not good enough.

Social media has increased the visibility of both one's own and others' performance at equestrian events, meaning that comparison is not limited temporally, as these respondents indicate:

> Because even if they aren't there they can see how you've done and compare how they've done competing at that level compared to you.

> Social media has made everybody more accessible. You can see who will be in your classes before competing and compare yourself to them.

Thus, the comparison can begin far in advance of the event, resulting in a heightened state of pressure over a longer period of time that was not necessarily the case in the past before the advent of social media. The relative permanence of social media posts means one can revisit them to rewatch videos of one's own and others' performance, and reread comments, creating something of a downward comparison spiral.

Judgment

Related to pressure and comparison, a number of respondents report feeling judged by others when they post videos and comments of their performance on social media. They go on to note that this sense of judgment in turn influences (a) whether they post and (b) what they post:

> Also find it frustrating at times when I know people haven't done that well and feel like they can't post the bad bits (me included) due to judgment or embarrassment and gossiping.

> Not as keen to mention the bad days as feels it gets frowned upon by those who "seem" to be doing amazing. Often don't bother posting the small wins on a daily basis let alone at completion as certain individuals quick to comment that that it's "only" a lower height fence or lower level dressage.

Some link this judgment to increased levels of anxiety, evidencing the role social media plays in poor mental health.

Distorted Reality

A reluctance to post the reality of competitive equestrian events online (e.g., a bad or even average performance, or using second-hand or no-name-brand equipment) results in the portrayal of a skewed, distorted reality. All the positive posts suggest that no one has a bad day, which subsequently sets unrealistic standards:

> Social media generally only shows the good side, so when you have a bad day you feel like you're the only one who has bad days.

> People bragging about their success and making everything appear wonderful even if it's not.

Some note that they deliberately resist this discourse, posting their bad days to keep things real, although this was not a common practice within this sample:

> I always post the bad days so it affects me when I know that others have but pretend that they haven't. Especially as there are now live results so it's easy to see how people did. I think social media can be super positive when people are being supportive but there are also a lot of negatives such as it distorting reality.

Encouragement and Support

While uncommon, some respondents did articulate positive experiences of using social media in the equestrian events context. These women cited the encouragement and support they gained when they found their "tribe" on social media:

> In the correct setting with a handful of supporting and understanding individuals there can be great enjoyment and camaraderie too.

> However, I have met some amazing new friends through social media that live across the UK and are very supportive of each other, which is great to see and makes me feel more at ease when posting content.

They actively curate their followers/friends on social media, seeking out those individuals and groups who are positive. However, comments such as these were in the minority.

Discussion

Our findings confirm previous research that the relationship between horse and rider and competing in equestrian events can have positive psychological impacts upon mental well-being (Hatcher et al., 2019). Social media can also enhance community building and knowledge exchange between riders (Schurer, 2019), and some of our participants acknowledged how supportive and encouraging the equestrian community can be—both online and in real life. However, most highlighted that they had both positive and negative or just negative experiences with using social media. In relation to participation in equestrian events, these negative experiences included pressure, comparison, and judgment—from themselves and others—as well as a distorted reality portrayed on social media.

The three factors of pressure to be the best, comparing oneself to others, and fear of judgment combined to negatively impact participants' mental health. Our findings show that female equestrians have high expectations of themselves as well as of others and hence feel constant pressure. This can be in the form of pressure to compete well, but also to look good and have the best resources. Participants felt they were being watched—and judged—both in person and online. Our findings align with previous research on the high levels of stress in competitive sports and the impact this has on athletes' mental health (Myer et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2016). Having to create a "perfect" image of oneself on social media, however, adds another layer of pressure for many of our participants who feel they are being judged by others based on the identity they create online. A fear of judgment and worrying what others might think are common issues experienced by social media users in general (O'Reilly, 2020), and many users therefore project an image of themselves based on the reality they want to create rather than the reality they experience (Shannon, 2022). This seems to be exacerbated in our context by the cliquey, judgmental, and "bitchy" equestrian community.

Study participants experience additional pressure when comparing themselves to others. Many feel they are not achieving enough, are not as good (in terms of their performance, equipment, horse or money), and often feel inadequate. While comparison to others is common in sports competitions (there can only be one winner) and can increase pressure and poor mental health (J. C. Smith, 2022), the use of social media before, during, and after the event means these comparisons now extend far beyond the competition itself. With 46.2% of our respondents saying that using social media had affected their mental health while competing, there is further pressure arising from comparing themselves to others not just during the event but also before/after. Taylor and Strutton (2016) found that using social media can increase levels of envy over time, and according to Krasnova et al. (2013) can even have an impact on life satisfaction. Rereading other people's comments, rewatching videos on social media, and comparing oneself to the "perfect" images others portray of themselves online certainly produces a distorted reality for our participants.

The sport itself is more than just a leisure activity for equestrians; it is a way of life (Dashper, 2017). But in an online world this way of life is largely based on unrealistic standards, only positive posts and, hence, false representations. Many of our participants commented that "no one has a bad day" on social media. For a demographic (young, female) that is already at a higher risk of negative content and cyber bullying (Craig et al., 2020), and is also more vulnerable to mental distress in relation to social media use (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020), the potential distress and psychological harm for users should not be underestimated. We have found ample evidence of the detrimental impact of social media use among female equestrian participants. While these are amateur competitions, these participants nevertheless feel pressure, comparison, and judgment from their peers, team bosses, and the wider audience reached through social media. They also acknowledge the impact that the distorted reality portrayed on social media has—for themselves and for others. Social media exacerbates the levels of pressure, comparison, and judgment naturally present in competitive sporting events, causing anxiety and other symptoms of poor mental health, particularly because social media facilitates constant visibility. While few respondents explicitly mentioned bullying through social media, it was nevertheless present—couched in the comparison and judgment narratives.

Limitations and Conclusion

We acknowledge that the survey was self-administered and there was no opportunity for the researchers to explain the questions to participants if they needed clarification. The survey was also limited to one region in the UK and to female participants. A future study could focus on male and nonbinary segments of the equestrian events sector. Last, we acknowledge that those who have been affected by poor mental health at some time have potentially been more likely to participate in the survey. Future research could investigate individuals' change over time while using social media to identify points when participants may need support, to ensure that mental health assistance is available when it is needed.

We conclude by highlighting the need for better assistance for athletes, not only while they are competing at events but also pre/postevent. Practical solutions include having more facilities available at events, such as a safe or quiet space, along with helplines and safe chat zones for anyone feeling overwhelmed or having mental health difficulties at any time. The provision of a range of avenues and support for equestrian event participants would avoid potentially putting strain on people closest to them. Equestrian event organizations should also develop and enforce social media policies to prevent negative comments about riders. These organizations have policies about making comments against the organization itself so these could be extended to ensure those that are part of the equestrian events are also held accountable if they are causing mental harm for other participants.

ORCID

Sarah Snell: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5867-1070
Allan Jepson: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1036-6404
Raphaela Stadler: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3517-8138
Trudie Walters: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0041-7255
Katherine Dashper: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2415-2290
Neil Spencer: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6068-5887

Appendix: Survey Questions

1. Consent question.
2. How old are you?
3. What is your gender?
4. What equestrian events do you compete in?
5. Do you use social media?
6. What platforms do you use?
7. Have you ever suffered from mental health problems/a disorder? Such as anxiety disorders, mood disorders or trauma related disorders.
8. If you feel comfortable, please could you state what disorders you have suffered from? (Follow up question to 7)
9. Has competing in equestrian events affected your mental health?
10. Do you feel this was in a positive or negative way? (Follow up question to 9)
11. Has the use of social media affected your mental health?
12. Do you feel this was in a positive or negative way? (Follow up question to 11)
13. Have you ever felt that your use of social media has affected your mental health whilst competing? Such as added pressure, comparison with others or bullying. Or in a positive way.
14. Could you explain why you feel that it has? (Follow up question to 13)
15. Is there anything else you'd like to add in reference to this topic?
16. Have you experienced any mental health issues relating to social media with any other sporting events?
17. Would you be able to take part in further research for this study?
18. If you're comfortable, could you please leave some contact details in case further research is needed. (Follow up question to 17)

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