Factors influencing the attitude of equestrians towards sport horse welfare

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Abstract

Until now, only a limited amount of research has been carried out on addressing attitudes towards sport horse welfare (AHW). In order to contribute to filling this gap, the goals of this study were two-fold: the investigation of the influence of different demographic factors and factors related to equestrianism on the AHW and the demonstration of the applicability of Partial Least Squares Equation Modelling (PLS) in this field of research. An online survey was conducted among 2,947 equestrians. A research model was established based on eleven factors, which were investigated for their potential influence on the AHW and their relationships to each other. This model was analysed by means of PLS which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been used before to investigate human attitudes towards horses (Equus caballus). The results show that the factors with the highest impacts on the AHW were the affection for animals, the attitude towards classically organised equestrianism and the utility orientation. Gender, income, agricultural background, tradition, brand orientation and the importance of breed and pedigree were also found to exert a significant influence on the AHW. In contrast, age and involvement in horse-riding as a hobby were found to have no effect on the AHW. Furthermore, several significant relationships could be identified among the different factors. In conclusion, the present study provides an insight into the factors influencing the complex AHW and demonstrates the applicability of the PLS for research in this field.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes towards animals, equestrians, horse, Partial Least Squares Equation Modelling, sport horse welfare

Introduction

The horse (Equus caballus) and man share a long common history in which horses have had a significant influence on the development of mankind (Endenburg 1999). Today, the majority of horses in the world are still used for work purposes either in agriculture or as draught horses (Waran 2007). In recent decades, the role of the horse has changed especially in Western societies where horses are increasingly being used for sport, recreation and health (Atock & Williams 1994; Minero & Canali 2009; Visser & van Wijk-Jansen 2012).

In recent years, there has been increasing criticism that current management practices and horse husbandry systems are much more adapted to human requirements instead of being oriented towards the basic needs of the horse, which can result in serious consequences for the health and the welfare of the horse (van Dierendonck & Goodwin 2005). In line with this, the topic of the welfare of sport and competition horses has attracted increasing attention from both scientists and society in general (Atock & Williams 1994; Visser & van Wijk-Jansen 2012). As a consequence, there is a growing sense that inappropriate riding and schooling seems to be an underestimated welfare problem (Odberg 2005; Lesimple et al 2010).

One of the major problems in the welfare discussion is the difficulty humans have in detecting clearly when the welfare of a horse is actually endangered. This is partly due to the fact that a problem is often only noticed when the horse develops serious behavioural problems, such as bucking or rearing (Waran 2005). Another problem is that equestrians have different understandings of, and attitudes towards, horse welfare (Kiley-Worthington 1997). Their opinions can range from one extreme to the other: some people treat their horse almost like a human, exaggerating their care beyond the actual needs of the animal or may not meet the needs of the horse at all as they focus only on erroneously presumed human needs. Others, in contrast, only appreciate the instrumental and material value of a horse. As a result, the sensitivity of equestrians towards the topic of horse welfare is very likely to affect the actual level of the welfare of the horse.