



## Original Research

## Information-Seeking Behavior of the Horse Competition Industry: A Demographic Study



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 2 August 2015

Received in revised form 14 October 2015

Accepted 15 October 2015

Available online 5 November 2015

## Keywords:

Learning

Online

Equine education

## ABSTRACT

Studies have shown a high number of American adults use the Internet to seek health information. Research on information-seeking behaviors of the equine industry has suggested that the population is heterogeneous and can be categorized into groups. The purpose of this study was to (1) demographically identify how the American horse competition industry prefers to seek information about the care and health of horses, (2) determine if the subgroups of the American horse competition industry use informational technologies similarly or differently, and (3) determine learning preferences regarding use of online educational materials. A survey was disseminated using Facebook-convenience sampling. A total of 1,007 surveys were completed and descriptively analyzed. Results revealed that 86% of respondents used the Internet as a horse health information source. Regardless of discipline, between 80% and 90% used Internet for health information,  $N = 978$ , but not as a preferred source. Preferred sources of horse health information were veterinarians (91%), farriers (77%), and trainers (68%),  $N = 954$ . Forty-nine percent of respondents would be willing to spend up to 1 hour on an equine Internet learning session and 36% would spend up to 30 minutes,  $N = 973$ . When asked how about separate Internet learning sessions, 53% would be willing to participate in up to three sessions,  $N = 969$ . Although these results cannot be generalized, this analysis presents themes of the equine show industry as learners. This study provides information to be used in design of education programs that cater to the information-seeking preferences of equine industry learners.

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## 1. Introduction

This study was a learner analysis originally conceived as a subsection of a larger study by Voigt et al [1] which explored the awareness and perceptions of equine welfare in horse competition participants. The intended purpose for this particular section of the project was to demographically identify how the horse show industry seeks information about the care and health of horses, determine if the subgroups of the American horse competition

industry use informational technologies similarly or differently, and determine participant learning preferences regarding use of online educational materials. There exists literature that contributes to the body of knowledge regarding what subgroups exist within the equine industry in relation to their information-seeking and what particular groups (horse owners) do to access information [2–4]. However, there has been little work done to identify how the equine industry uses the Internet and informational technologies to communicate about, share, and seek information.

The information gathered from this study will be used to effectively design and implement appropriate, accessible educational outreach tools that benefit the stakeholders, which include both humans and horses. The output of this

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study was a descriptive analysis of the horse show industry's population and corresponding information-seeking behaviors and Internet usage of this populous.

## 2. Internet

### 2.1. Information and Communication Technologies

Since its conception, the Internet has continued to evolve and completely change the way people communicate and access information. The dynamic nature of the Internet has resulted in various mediums of the communicative and informational persuasion, of which social media has a large part in [5]. Social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, have the capability of connecting people from various backgrounds and locations all around the globe and provide a steady line of communication to the world at a lightning fast pace. Other sites, such as Google, Wikis, and YouTube, can provide quick access to vast amounts of information and can be used for a quick inquiry at the click of a mouse.

All these Internet entities can be compiled into a single category: information and communication technologies (ICTs) [5]. Information and communication technology includes any computer and/or telecommunication applications to the exchange of informational data but places extreme emphasis on the factor of communicative transference taking place [5]. Information and communication technologies are quickly revolutionizing the way people are able to access important information and exchange it with one another to synthesize meaning for their individual situations, which in turn give people the opportunity to make more informed decisions and effect their surroundings more positively [5].

In 2011, Pew Research Center conducted a survey and found that 92% of adult Internet users used search engines when searching for information and that young adults under age 30 years are more likely than adults age 65 years and older to use search engines to find information [6]. In 2013, the Pew Research Center conducted another survey which focused on health-seeking behavior and found that 72% of American adult Internet users had used the Internet for health information in the past year [7]. Of these "online health seekers," 77% began at a search engine such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo, whereas 70% of US adults got information from a doctor or other health care professional [7].

### 2.2. ICTs in Extension Education

The introduction of ICTs into the knowledge-seeking paradigm has had an impact on extension education. Traditionally, extension education has been an informal classroom experience that is organized for the general public [2,3,8]. The aim of these programs is to provide and disperse educational information to the general public involving certain topics that pertain to that group, such as crop farmers or animal owners [2,8]. However, the paradigm shift toward technological use has resulted in some online applications to extension. In New Jersey, a program was designed that instructed agricultural producers on

how to use the Internet to their advantage from a marketing perspective [8]. This website was also used as an extension education tool for farmers [8]. Using surveys, data about hay production were collected and compiled to create the informational website [8].

The online extension site, eXtension, provides faculty educators and extension specialists alike with a dynamic, collaborative space to educate the public about equine issues [2]. The first community of practice created through eXtension, the group HorseQuest evolved from a small group of extension horse specialists into an interactive forum filled with peer-reviewed material that could be used by the general public and professionals alike [2]. Another source of online extension education is Michigan State University's My Horse University, which offers free and paid online courses on various topics related to horse care and management [9]. These mediums provide a unique opportunity for veterinarians, professors, farriers, students, and various other members of the equine industry to interact with one another and transfer new information to a large number of people instantaneously [2].

## 3. The Equine Industry

### 3.1. Characteristics

The equine industry in the United States is a large and complex population that has been identified as diverse and heterogeneous. In 2005, the American Horse Council Foundation Survey found that there were 9.2 million horses and 4.6 million people involved in the horse industry in the United States [10]. This survey also found that the equine industry is highly diverse and made up of many roles, such as horse owners, service providers, and employees [10]. Although this survey data are helpful in providing a perspective of size and economic impact of the equine industry, it does not provide information about who participants are as learners nor what horse care information they are in the most need of.

### 3.2. Equine Industry Participants as Learners

At the University of Minnesota, a survey was distributed to 1,008 horse owners to gain insight into their educational preferences and demographics [3]. This information was used to create a tailored extension program for the Minnesota horse owner population [3]. Owners responded that their primary sources of information were from magazines and equine professionals, such as veterinarians or farriers [3]. Minnesota horse owners also showed preference to accessing educational information online, in evening seminars, and palatable publications [3]. This University of Minnesota study was the first known survey conducted around the educational needs of the equine owners [3]. In the Netherlands, a diversity study of "horse enthusiasts" was performed which explored their knowledge of equine welfare, their practices, and how they search for information [4]. Through this study, the researchers were able to categorize the horse enthusiasts into four subgroups based on how they searched for further information regarding

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