

What Is Welfare? A Qualitative Study into Perceptions of Equine Welfare of Horse Owners

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Abstract

While existing literature broadly addresses equine welfare, limited research has explored horse owners' perspectives on welfare within the contexts of ownership. This study aimed to identify aspects of care and practice that horse owners consider essential for safeguarding equine welfare. An online survey comprising eight open-ended questions was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. A total of 341 responses identified four higher-order themes: Equine Husbandry, Human–Horse Interaction, Equitation and Training, and Personal Development and Ethics. Equine Husbandry was the most frequently referenced theme, with respondents emphasizing the importance of appropriate housing and management practices, particularly the provision of year-round turnout, as central to equine welfare. Within the theme of Human–Horse Interaction, owners highlighted the need to understand equine behavior, recognize signs of stress, and treat horses as sentient beings deserving of respect, while avoiding anthropomorphism. The Equitation and Training theme underscored the importance of ethical, evidence-based training practices, including the correct use of tack and equipment. Many respondents expressed negative views toward the use of whips and spurs and stressed the value of qualified coaches who prioritize welfare-focused training. However, concerns were raised about entrenched or outdated coaching practices that may compromise welfare. Participants emphasized the importance of ongoing education, reflection, and a multidisciplinary approach to equine management, including collaboration with veterinarians, professional farriers, and saddle fitters. Despite widespread awareness of welfare considerations, findings suggest the persistence of a knowledge–practice gap. Focusing on education and evidence-based training is recommended to enhance the application of welfare principles in horse ownership.

Keywords

Equine welfare; equine husbandry; human–horse interaction; equitation

1. Introduction

Equine welfare has become a subject of heightened concern in recent years, particularly following several high-profile instances of mismanagement and abuse that have sparked public attention and debate [1]. Horses hold multifaceted importance in modern society, engaging in recreation, elite

competition, breeding, training, sport, coaching, and therapeutic contexts. Consequently, safeguarding equine welfare is not merely a matter of animal care but a prerequisite for maintaining equestrianism's "social license to operate," an informal yet essential societal contract that underpins public acceptance of equestrian practices [2].

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Central to equine welfare is the role of horse owners, whose husbandry, management, and training choices directly impact both the physical and psychological well-being of their horses. However, if not managed or monitored well, seemingly routine practices, such as stabling [3], high-concentrate feeding, or limited turnout, can inadvertently compromise welfare, evidenced by increased stereotypic behaviors [4] and elevated risks of conditions like colic [5].

While equine welfare has traditionally centered on physical health indicators such as body condition, lameness, and disease prevention, contemporary frameworks increasingly recognize the importance of psychological well-being. The Five Domains Model [6] has been instrumental in advancing this shift, highlighting that true welfare encompasses not only the absence of suffering but also the presence of positive affective states such as comfort, pleasure, and agency. In parallel, the field of Equitation Science has emerged as a multidisciplinary area of research that applies principles of learning theory, ethology, and animal welfare science to horse training and management [7]. By focusing on how horses perceive and respond to human interactions, equitation science bridges the gap between performance and welfare, advocating for evidence-based practices that minimize confusion, fear, and conflict behaviors. This growing field offers scientifically grounded alternatives that prioritize both ethical training and the horse's cognitive and emotional needs.

Despite a growing body of research into assessing equine welfare, research into stakeholder perceptions of equine welfare has been limited until recently [8]. Wolframm et al. [9] sought to address this gap with an online survey that garnered 875 responses from Dutch equine enthusiasts, which included horse owners, riders, and drivers. Their thematic analysis revealed three dominant dimensions of perceived welfare: Equine Husbandry, with a strong emphasis on the ability for horses to express natural behavior and appropriate feeding; Human–Horse Interaction, highlighting behavior understanding, respectful treatment, and effective communication; and Equitation, encapsulating rider/driver training, knowledge of tack and equipment, and the importance of qualified instructors.

Notably, Equine Husbandry emerged as the most frequently cited category, with 91% of respondents underscoring the importance of natural behavior components such as free movement, social contact, and forage access. This underscores that Dutch horse owners place profound weight on environmental and management practices as foundational to welfare, pointing to a widespread appreciation of horses' intrinsic needs yet a persistent gap between knowledge and implementation [10,11].

By examining how horse owners outside the Netherlands define and prioritize equine welfare across varying contexts and settings, this research intends to expand upon the findings of [9]. The aim of the current study is to deepen the understanding of the gaps between awareness and practice among English-speaking equine owners, to inform the development of tailored educational and policy initiatives that align equine management more closely with authentic welfare standards.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Survey Recruitment and Distribution

Following institutional ethical approval (Hartpury University Ethics Committee, ETHICS2023-184) and adhering to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, individual horse owners aged 18 years or older were targeted. Recruitment took place via Facebook, LinkedIn, and various online equine-related sites. The survey was distributed using MS Forms, an online survey platform. Following an introduction to the aim of the study at the start of the survey, respondents were asked to provide active informed consent to participate. All respondents were assigned unique numerical identifiers to ensure anonymity.

2.2. Survey Design

This survey was adapted from the questionnaire designed by Wolframm et al. [9], which was used to investigate "What is Welfare? A Qualitative Study into Perceptions of Equine Welfare of the Dutch Equestrian Community." The survey was administered in English, available in the United Kingdom and North America, and consisted of three parts with a total of 20 questions (**Supplementary Materials**).

The first part of the survey collected demographic information of respondents (gender, age, education, and type of involvement with horses). In addition to a number of predefined options, participants were also given the option to respond in an open-text format.

Sections 3–7 contained eight open questions concerning equine husbandry, riding, human–horse interaction, welfare, and training practices. To elucidate as much detail as possible regarding which aspects participants found important when it comes to equine welfare while staying as close to reality as possible, the questions were phrased as scenarios, e.g., "A friend wants to stable her horse at a livery/boarding facility with welfare as a top priority. What advice would you give her?" "A close acquaintance's daughter has just started riding. What should she know or be able to do to become a good rider and ensure horse welfare?" "Thinking back to the start of your horse career: what do you wish you had known or been able to do then that you can do or know now?" "What do you think everyone who interacts with horses should know or be able to do?", and "Can we improve the welfare of horses in all areas of their lives? Where should we focus?"

2.3. Data Analysis

Open-ended question responses were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, following the method of Graneheim and Lundman [12]. The analysis focused on condensing and interpreting meanings. First, all responses were collated and read in full. Two researchers (S.O. and V.L.) independently reviewed the content to identify key sentences and phrases that conveyed similar meanings, which were subsequently coded. The researchers then met to compare their coding, discuss discrepancies, and reach consensus on the final codes. These codes were organized into lower-order and higher-order themes to reflect their content and were further filtered and grouped into categories to summarize participants' discussions and conclusions.

A meaningful unit was defined as a word, phrase, or sentence that could be attributed to a recognizable theme recurring

across respondents' answers. A single sentence could contain multiple meaningful units, one meaningful unit, or none, depending on how meaning was expressed and how the data were segmented during coding.

3. Results

The survey yielded 341 submitted responses. The highest number of respondents were aged between 55–64 years ($n = 87$; 25.5%), closely followed by those aged 25–34 years ($n = 80$; 23.5%). Most respondents were female ($n = 314$; 92.1%). A total of 32.3% of respondents listed equine-industry professions ($n = 110$). Additionally, 23.5% of respondents were primary-sector equine-industry professionals ($n = 80$). Recreational riders ($n = 88$) and amateur competitors ($n = 86$) represented 51% of the survey population. Almost half of respondents were educated to the bachelor's degree level or above ($n = 169$; 49.5%), with 80.4% having a formal equine education ($n = 274$). Formal equine education was defined as equine-specific certification or instructor-led training from Pony Club to Ph.D. The top three disciplines in which respondents were involved

were Dressage ($n = 168$; 49.3%), Trail Riding/Recreational ($n = 155$; 45.5%), and Jumping ($n = 147$; 43.1%) (note that respondents could select multiple disciplines). The full demographic overview can be found in **Table 1**.

A total of 5,944 meaningful units were identified across all questions. **Table 2** provides an overview of the distribution of meaningful units across each question, illustrating the relative contribution of responses to the overall dataset.

Four higher-order themes were generated: Equine Husbandry, Equitation and Training, Human–Horse Interaction, and Personal Development and Ethics. **Table 3** outlines these higher-order themes alongside their associated lower-order themes and definitions, providing a conceptual framework for the analysis. **Tables 4–7** (thematic results tables) present the frequency and percentage of coded responses within each higher-order theme, offering a descriptive summary of the prominence of specific categories and allowing for comparison across themes.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Demographic variable and category	n	Percentage (%)
Age		
18–24	30	8.8
25–34	80	23.5
35–44	44	12.9
45–54	60	17.6
55–64	87	25.5
65–74	35	10.3
75 and older	5	1.5
Gender		
Female	314	92.1
Male	18	5.3
Non-binary	6	1.8
Prefer not to say	3	0.9
Primary involvement in the equine industry		
Owner/employee of a direct horse-related business	80	23.5
Owner/employee of horse-related products business	5	1.5
Owner/employee of horse-related services business	25	7.3
Competitive rider at the national or international level	13	3.8
Competitive rider at amateur level	86	25.2
Recreational rider with one or more horses	88	25.8
Owner of unriden horses	28	8.2
No own horse, ride at a riding school	7	2.1
Other	9	2.6
Location		

Demographic variable and category	n	Percentage (%)
Europe	11	3.1
UK and Ireland	316	92.7
USA	7	2.1
South Africa	7	2.1
Highest level of education		
Some secondary or high school	6	1.8
High school diploma, GCSE, CSE	34	10.0
AS or A level, GCE, Matric	34	10.0
Some university or college	34	10.0
College Diploma	27	7.8
Bachelor's degree	109	32.0
Master's degree	50	14.6
Ph.D.	10	2.9
Other	2	0.6
Professional certification	35	10.3
Formal equine education*		
University, higher education	61	17.9
Equine diploma or certificate	78	22.9
Equine veterinary medicine	7	2.1
Full coaching certificate (BHS, UKCC, EQASA)	59	17.3
Rider level program or equine management course	69	20.2
Pony Club	59	17.3
Currently studying	9	2.6
Life experience	10	2.9
None	77	22.6
Other	25	7.3
Years in the horse industry		
0–5	11	3.2
6–10	24	7.0
11–20	92	27.0
21–30	48	14.1
30 or more	166	48.7
Disciplines involved with*		
Dressage	168	49.3
Trail riding/recreational	155	45.5
Jumping	147	43.1
Riding club	67	19.6
Showing	63	18.5
Eventing	45	13.2

Demographic variable and category	n	Percentage (%)
Hunting	42	12.3
Endurance	25	7.3
Western	15	4.4
Driving	13	3.8
Liberty, groundwork, or horsemanship	10	2.9
Polo	10	2.9
Mounted Games	9	2.6
Racing	8	2.3
Vaulting	7	2.1
Rescue, rehoming, and rehabilitation	5	1.5
Equine agility	3	0.9
Coaching	2	0.6
Horseback archery	2	0.6
RDA	2	0.6
Side saddle	2	0.6
TREC	2	0.6
Working Equitation	2	0.6
Other	14	4.1
None	8	2.3

*Some respondents have multiple formal equine qualifications or are involved in multiple disciplines.

Table 2: Answer point analysis across all eight questions.

Question	Total meaningful units
Q1. A friend wants to stable her horse at a livery/boarding facility with welfare as a top priority. What advice would you give her?	1188
Q2. A close acquaintance's daughter has just started riding. What should she know or be able to do to become a good rider and ensure horse welfare?	903
Q3. Thinking back to the start of your horse career, what do you wish you had known or been able to do then that you can do or know now?	519
Q4. Would you do anything differently?	446
Q5. What do you think everyone who interacts with horses should know or be able to do?	692
Q6. Are there any current challenges you face in interacting with horses? Consider things you might be afraid to do or unsure how to approach. Perhaps you sometimes need some support, or you are unsure who to ask.	431
Q7. Do you think traditional horse training methods are appropriate, or are there other techniques that may improve horse welfare?	756
Q8. Can we improve the welfare of horses in all areas of their lives? Where should we focus?	1009
Total	5944

Table 3: Definitions of higher-order and lower-order themes.

Higher-order themes	Lower-order themes	Description
Equine husbandry	Importance of housing and management	Constant access to forage and water, freedom to move, knowledgeable caregivers with an understanding of needs and holistic horse care, and inspecting facilities to ensure needs are met.
	Year-round turnout	Access to turnout all year, with mixed-species forage, compatible friend groups, enough space, and protection from the weather.
Human–horse interaction	Multidisciplinary care (vets, farriers, saddle fitters)	Access to qualified specialists when needed, and appropriate treatment and care
	Understanding horse behavior	Observing horses and understanding what their behavior may mean, and being able to communicate clearly and consistently
	Identifying signs of stress and pain	Being able to identify lame horses and subtle signs of pain, stress, or distress, and modify care or training appropriately
	Treating horses as sentient beings	Having the values that recognize and respect sentience and emotional well-being when dealing with horses.
	Avoiding anthropomorphism	Understanding that horses do not think like people and avoiding ascribing human attributes to behavior or accessorizing that may be detrimental to welfare
Equitation and training	Ethical training principles	Understanding how to train horses ethically, closely linked with human–horse interactions, and protecting welfare and well-being
	Knowledge of tack and equipment	Understanding how tack should fit and the effects of equipment
	Negative views on whips and spurs	Regret overusing artificial aids such as whips and spurs, and the use of equipment to punish rather than reinforce
	Importance of qualified, evidence-based coaches	Finding qualified, evidence-based coaches, questioning practices, and advocating for the horse
	Training of the rider	The importance of posture, seat, balance, and fitness, the use of cues, and human well-being
	Training of the horse	The importance of groundwork, a positive state and/or environment for training, and an understanding of equine learning theory
Personal development and ethics	Impact of coaching philosophies on owner beliefs	Regulated, accredited, insured, and supportive evidence-based coaches, riding schools, and mentors
	Desire for continuous education	Access to resources to learn, and directing of research to improve education and understanding
	Ethical reflection and growth	Learning and improving understanding, regardless of where we started our journey with horses, a sense of responsibility

Table 4: Thematic analysis results for respondents across the higher-order theme of Equine Husbandry.

Lower-order theme	Category	N	%
Importance of housing and management	General horse knowledge, horsemanship skills, and understanding of welfare needs	318	93
	Forage, frequency of feeding, type, and quality of food and water	314	92
	Housing, stable size, bedding, and time stabled	154	45
	Staff and livery yard owner knowledge	88	26
	Consult others/recommendations	84	25
	Free movement	57	17
	Accreditation and licensing of livery yards, owners, and knowledge tests	31	9
	Cleanliness of facilities	29	8

Lower-order theme	Category	N	%
	Importance of human-focused facilities	28	8
	Indiscriminate breeding	16	5
	Enrichment opportunities	14	4
	Cost of livery/boarding	11	3
Year-round turnout	Access to appropriate turnout (grass type and suitability, space)	336	98
	Social contact with other horses	235	69
	Ability to perform natural behaviors	99	29
	Protection from the weather	36	10
Regular access to multidisciplinary care	Veterinary care	64	19
	Others, e.g., physiotherapists	32	9
	Saddle fitters	31	9
	Qualified farriers	23	7

Table 5: Thematic analysis results for respondents across the higher-order theme of Equitation and Training.

Lower-order theme	Category	N	%
Importance of qualified, evidence-based coaches	Access to supportive, experienced, and trustworthy holistic trainers, coaches, mentors, and riding school teachers	341	100
	Importance of regular lessons and formal instruction for novice owners, livery yards, and training establishments	82	24
	Question practices, advocate for the horse, collaborate, and find like-minded people	79	23
	Regulated, accredited, and insured	77	22
Ethical training principles	Ethical, consistent, and welfare-based training	341	100
	Conflicting views on "traditional" vs. "modern" training techniques, both within an individual and viewed in practice	273	80
	Rider knowledge, skill, position, and fitness	264	77
	Importance of correct ground-schooling	98	29
	Equine fit for purpose and understand the horse as an individual	94	28
	Human mental, emotional, and physical well-being and confidence	73	21
	Positive reinforcement training	44	13
	Negative reinforcement training	33	10
	Natural horsemanship	32	9
	Concern about welfare in competition	28	8
Knowledge of tack and equipment	Knowledge of tack and fitting	103	30
	Misuse of training aids and equipment	98	29

Table 6: Thematic analysis results for respondents across the higher-order theme of Human–Horse Interaction.

Lower-order theme	Category	N	%
Understanding horse behavior	Human–horse communication	263	77
	Knowledge of behavior	225	66
	Positive affective state	44	13
	Addressing fear, anxiety, and aggression in horses	12	3
Identifying signs of stress and pain	Recognizing abnormalities	206	60
Treating horses as sentient beings	Patience	79	23
	Autonomy	78	23
	Kindness	66	19
	Respect	59	17
	Partnership	58	17
	Empathy	28	8
	Gentleness	26	8
	Calmness	25	7
	Compassion	19	6
	Trust	19	6
Avoiding anthropomorphism	Recognizing sentience	10	3
	Emotional control, avoid anthropomorphism, manage expectations, and human perception of cruelty	67	20
Safety	Safety of the horse, first aid	67	20
	Safety of the rider, safety on the roads	53	15
	People not adhering to health and safety requirements	11	3

Table 7: Thematic analysis results for respondents across the higher-order theme of Personal Development and Ethics.

Lower-order theme	Descriptive category	N	%
Desire for continuous education and knowledge development	Knowledge, education, research, human behavior change, and decision-making	108	32
	Strengthen equine welfare legislation	25	7
Ethical reflection and growth	Commitment to and responsibility for bettering horse welfare	183	54
	Acceptance of past actions or decisions	110	32
	No current challenges	94	28
	Access to education	91	27
	Personal growth, learning, and reflection on past actions	45	13
	Trust in your instincts and decisions	17	5
	Concern over decision paralysis in welfare matters	10	3

4. Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the perspectives of equine owners on which aspects contribute to equine welfare. The following discussion focuses on the most salient aspects and what they might mean for the practical application and interpretation of equine welfare.

4.1. Higher-Order Theme Equine Husbandry

Equine Husbandry emerged as the most frequently mentioned theme in this survey, incorporating three lower-order themes: Importance of Housing and Management; Year-Round Turnout; and Multidisciplinary Care. Horse owners considered welfare a multifaceted issue that encompasses

physical health, psychological well-being, and the ability to express natural behaviors. Findings from this study highlight that horse owners acknowledge the critical role that housing and turnout practices play in supporting these welfare domains. Horses are social, grazing, and browsing animals that evolved to move and interact freely within a herd structure [13]. As such, restrictive housing, such as individual stabling for extended periods, can negatively impact their welfare by limiting movement, social contact, and opportunities for natural behavior [3,14]. However, the size and type of stable appear to be important considerations for participants in this study to ensure that the horse's innate needs are met.

Respondents overwhelmingly cited access to turnout as a high priority for equine welfare. Year-round turnout, particularly in social groups and environments that support foraging, has been shown to significantly reduce behavioral signs of stress and frustration, including stereotypies such as weaving and crib-biting [15]. Research also suggests that horses housed in enriched, pasture-based systems display lower cortisol levels and better behavioral indicators of well-being compared to their stabled counterparts [16,17]. Additionally, turnout opportunities promote physical health by supporting musculoskeletal integrity, reducing the risk of colic [18,19], and encouraging healthy gastrointestinal function through natural grazing patterns.

Importantly, year-round turnout supports positive affective states in horses, a key component of modern welfare assessments. According to the Five Domains Model [6], the mental state of the animal is influenced by factors such as nutrition, environment, and behavioral freedom. Environments that allow for consistent turnout, even in colder months, enable horses to engage in species-typical behaviors such as locomotion, social grooming, and exploration. These behaviors not only satisfy behavioral needs but also contribute to emotional well-being, which is now considered crucial to equine welfare.

Furthermore, there is increasing pressure from both within the industry and from animal welfare organizations to move toward housing systems that reflect horses' ethological needs. Research suggests that integrated management systems, those that combine access to shelter, forage, social interaction, and the need for variation in the field, increase opportunities for horses to engage with a more varied and stimulating environment, both at the group and individual levels, and are more sustainable in the long term and foster a healthier, more manageable equine population [3,20,21]. Considering this evidence, promoting year-round turnout within suitable environments should be viewed not as a luxury or seasonal privilege, but as a fundamental aspect of good equine care and welfare.

4.2. Equitation and Training

This study reinforces the critical role that equitation and training practices play in determining equine welfare outcomes. Four lower-order themes emerged: Ethical Training Principles, Importance of Qualified, Evidence-Based Coaches, Knowledge of Tack and Equipment, and Negative Views on Whips and Spurs. These themes reflect a growing recognition that equine welfare is not only shaped

by management practices but also by the methods and mindset employed during training and riding.

The theme of Ethical Training Principles underscores the necessity of training systems that respect the horse's cognitive and physical capabilities. Research findings advocate for training that is consistent, clear, and uses the least aversive methods possible [22]. Horses learn most effectively when cues are applied with appropriate timing and pressure, and when responses are reinforced in a predictable manner. Ethical training reduces conflict behaviors, fear responses, and stress, which are all markers of compromised welfare [7]. Furthermore, training based on learning theory promotes voluntary cooperation rather than submission, helping to preserve the horse's agency and emotional well-being [23].

Participants also highlighted the importance of qualified, evidence-based coaches. Coaching practices that integrate equitation science principles lead to more ethical, effective, and welfare-friendly outcomes. Yet, many coaches still rely on traditional or anecdotal approaches that can perpetuate misunderstandings of equine behavior and learning [8,24,25]. Equestrian coaches often lack consistency in their knowledge of learning theory, which can lead to confusing or even aversive experiences for horses [26–28], suggesting that coaches educated in equitation science or its guiding principles are better equipped to guide riders in using clear signals, avoiding punishment, and recognizing signs of mental or physical discomfort in their horses. This theme also links to improved rider safety and long-term horse soundness, reinforcing that welfare and performance are not mutually exclusive.

Knowledge of tack and equipment emerged as a pivotal concern, particularly in relation to how poorly fitted or misused tack can result in discomfort, injury, or behavioral conflict [29–31]. The FEI emphasizes that all equipment must be functionally appropriate, correctly fitted, and not interfere with the horse's natural biomechanics, but a lack of awareness among horse owners, riders, and coaches about the physiological and psychological impact of equipment represents a significant welfare risk that could be mitigated through formal education and updated industry standards.

Lastly, the negative effects of whips and spurs were a consistent concern among participants. While often considered traditional aids, their improper use contradicts the principles of negative reinforcement and can act as punishment if applied with excessive force or ambiguity [7]. Research has shown that spurs and whips can induce fear, sensitization, and even learned helplessness when used inappropriately [32] and can cause visible injury [33]. The over-reliance on whips, spurs, and other training aids often signals a breakdown in training clarity or rider skill, further highlighting the need for evidence-based coaching and ethical oversight.

This study demonstrates that equine welfare cannot be separated from the processes of training and riding. Evidence-based theory, such as the ISES First Principles, FEI Ethical Training Method, and the International Group for Equestrian Qualifications (IGE) Core Competencies, provides scientifically grounded frameworks for assessing the ethical integrity of training practices and promoting the welfare of horses in equestrian sport and leisure. Integrating

such principles into coaching, rider education, and equestrian culture at large is essential for fostering a more humane and sustainable future for horse–human partnerships.

4.3. Human–Horse Interaction

The findings of this thematic analysis indicate that horse owners' understanding of equine welfare is heavily influenced by the quality of human–horse interaction, reflected through themes such as Understanding Horse Behavior, Identifying Signs of Stress and Pain, Treating Horses as Sentient Beings, and Avoiding Anthropomorphism. Together, these lower-order themes support the higher-order concept that equine welfare is inextricably linked to how humans perceive and interpret horses' needs and behaviors.

Owners who recognized horses as sentient beings were more likely to prioritize welfare needs such as appropriate turnout, social contact, and mental stimulation. Recent cross-cultural research supports this, finding that owners who attributed emotional and cognitive capacities to their horses tended to provide higher welfare standards, including better physical health and more opportunities for natural behaviors [34]. Treating horses as sentient beings aligns with contemporary welfare science, which includes not only the absence of disease or discomfort but also the promotion of positive mental states [6].

The theme Understanding Horse Behavior emerged as foundational to effective welfare practice. Research suggests that equestrians often emphasize physical health and visible indicators over mental and emotional states [35–37]. This narrower, biologically focused view can overlook horses' affective experiences and reflects a fragmented understanding of welfare, which may limit welfare improvements, particularly when behavior is misunderstood or misjudged. Understanding horse behavior was also central to owner perspectives on welfare. Yet, horse owners often prioritize physical indicators of welfare (e.g., body condition) over behavioral ones, sometimes overlooking critical signs of distress [38]. This highlights the need for improved education around ethologically grounded behavioral cues and their links to emotional states. Increased awareness of these cues would allow for earlier intervention and more nuanced care decisions.

Integrating the theme of Avoiding Anthropomorphism provides critical nuance here. While the projection of human emotions onto horses can be misleading, rigid rejection of anthropomorphic thinking can equally fail to acknowledge an animal's inner life [39]. Findings from this study suggest that horse owners advocate for a balanced "critical anthropomorphism," a reflective, scientifically informed empathy that allows humans to interpret horse behavior without projecting unjustified human emotions. This sensitized understanding enables more accurate interpretation of equine behavior while mitigating the risks of misrepresentation [39].

Research emphasizes that welfare outcomes are shaped not just by management practices, but by the human attitudes, skills, and emotional responses behind them [38]. Equine welfare is therefore both a behavioral and relational construct. Owners' beliefs about sentience, emotional capacity, and behavioral interpretation profoundly shape the lived experience of horses. To raise welfare standards, future interventions should aim not only to improve practical

management but also to enhance owner education on equine behavior and emotional needs.

4.4. Personal Development and Ethics

The fourth theme of Personal Development and Ethics captured internalized coaching philosophies, the pursuit of ongoing education, and the capacity for ethical reflection. These findings highlight that equine welfare is not solely determined by technical knowledge or management practices but is deeply affected by the cognitive and moral frameworks through which humans understand their role in the horse–human relationship.

The Impact of Coaching Philosophies on Owner Beliefs emerged as a powerful driver of attitudes and behaviors. Participants frequently described their early equestrian experiences as formative, often adopting their coaches' approaches, whether positive or aversive, without critical evaluation. This aligns with previous research indicating that coach attitudes and methods are among the most influential factors shaping an owner's perception of acceptable training and management practices [16]. Coaching philosophies that prioritize submission, dominance, or "quick fixes" can normalize coercive or aversive techniques, thereby undermining equine welfare, a pattern also evident in non-equestrian sports [40–42]. In contrast, coaches who promote learning theory, combined reinforcement, and emotional awareness in horses are likely to foster more ethical and evidence-based practices among their students, thereby supporting welfare-aware coaching and enhancing motivation and learning, as reflected in non-equestrian coaching methodologies [43–45]. Therefore, the pedagogical stance of equestrian coaches plays a pivotal role in either reinforcing or reshaping welfare-relevant beliefs among horse owners.

A strong Desire for Continuous Education was another recurring theme among participants who demonstrated more welfare-conscious approaches. Owners who actively sought out new scientific knowledge through workshops, academic literature, or evidence-based training systems may be more equipped or willing to question traditional practices and implement humane alternatives. This motivation aligns with the concept of "lifelong learning" as critical to advancing welfare standards in equestrian contexts [3]. Moreover, the increasing availability of accessible equitation science resources is helping to democratize knowledge and support owners in aligning their practices with current welfare frameworks, such as the Five Domains Model [6]. Continuous education also fosters adaptability, allowing owners to respond to new research findings and improve both their horsemanship and ethical decision-making over time, and to utilize ethical frameworks designed to support horses in sport and recreational use [46]. However, these resources need to be accessible to the wider equestrian population, and other studies call for the development of further education materials to support this learning process [8].

The theme of Ethical Reflection and Growth reinforces the view that equine welfare is, in part, a moral endeavor. Participants who described their evolving understanding of the horse's sentience, emotional needs, and learning capacity also reported changes in their practices, often moving away from punitive or ambiguous training methods toward more

transparent and horse-centered approaches. This aligns with research on moral development in animal care, which shows that individuals who engage in reflective thinking about animal welfare are more likely to support autonomy and positive affect in animals under their care [47]. The ISES First Training Principles, the FEI Ethical Training Method, the IGEQ Core Competencies, and other evidence-based training methods provide a valuable framework for promoting interventions that are not only effective but also minimized in terms of aversiveness, aligning with broader animal welfare goals. Encouraging ethical growth in equestrians through qualifications that facilitate reflection, value clarification, and exposure to animal welfare science may therefore be a powerful tool in shifting industry norms.

Taken together, these findings highlight that personal development and ethics are integral components of improving equine welfare. Owner behavior is not static but evolves through exposure to coaching, education, and self-reflection. Programs aimed at welfare enhancement should therefore include not just practical skills but also opportunities for critical engagement with ethical and scientific principles. By embedding personal development into equestrian education, the industry can better support the transition from outdated views of horsemanship toward practices rooted in empathy, evidence, and ethical integrity.

4.5. Limitations

Several potential biases associated with the study's sampling and design should be acknowledged. The sample was predominantly female, which aligns with similar studies on equine welfare [48,49], but may have introduced gender-related bias, as women are generally more engaged in animal welfare issues [50]. As participation was voluntary, there is a risk of self-selection bias, with individuals already interested in equine welfare being more likely to respond. This may have skewed responses toward more welfare-conscious views, as noted in similar research [16]. Social desirability bias may also have influenced responses, leading participants to emphasize welfare-centered approaches or target perceived coercive practices, as ethical horsemanship and athlete welfare are increasingly socially valued in equestrian contexts [51]. Nonetheless, the findings offer valuable insights into prevailing attitudes within an engaged equestrian population.

Open-ended responses may have been influenced by participant characteristics. Scenario phrasing and question order may have introduced framing and primacy effects, with earlier items potentially receiving more attention. Finally, the range of respondent expertise may have affected the consistency of responses. However, given the study's aim to reflect the diversity of equine owners, such variation is seen as a strength rather than a limitation. Interpretation bias is inherent in qualitative research due to the researchers' role in theme development [52]. To minimize this, we adhered to recommended qualitative guidelines, including whole-dataset coding and peer-reviewed analysis.

5. Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into how members of the wider equestrian community perceive and prioritize equine

welfare. Thematic analysis revealed a strong awareness of welfare as a multifaceted concept, extending beyond basic husbandry to include the quality of human–horse interactions, training methods, and ethical decision-making. While the study did not directly assess participants' knowledge, the frequent reference to key welfare principles suggests a solid foundational understanding among horse owners and enthusiasts. However, the continued presence of welfare concerns within equestrian settings highlights a gap between awareness and consistent application in practice. This underscores the need for further efforts to translate knowledge into meaningful change at the grassroots level. Education and training initiatives tailored to the realities of daily horse care across various disciplines, cultures, and experience levels will be crucial in closing this gap.

Overall, the findings affirm a widespread and genuine concern for horse welfare. The next step lies in empowering individuals through evidence-based guidance and accessible education to embed welfare-focused practices into everyday routines. Strengthening this connection between intention and action is essential for ensuring a more ethical, informed, and sustainable future for horses and the people who care for them.

Supplementary Materials

The **Supplementary Materials** include the original survey questions in English.

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Authors' Contributions

V.L.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. S.O.: Formal analysis. C.B.: Conceptualization. G.T.: Writing – review & editing. I.W.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

Data storage was conducted according to the Research Data Management policy framework of Hartpury University. Data management adhered to the principles of Open Science, and data are available upon request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

The survey was conducted according to the requirements of the Hartpury University Ethics Committee (Approval No. ETHICS2023-184) and followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent to Participate

Following an introduction to the aim of the study at the start of the survey, respondents were asked to provide active informed consent to participate. All respondents were assigned unique numerical identifiers to ensure anonymity.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Microsoft Copilot to improve readability. Following the use of this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the final version of the publication.

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