

Participation Experiences in Equestrian Sport for Female Horse-Riders with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

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Abstract

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) affects 2–6% of the global population. Although equine interactions are known to provide psychosocial benefits for neurodivergent groups, there is limited research exploring experiences of individuals with ADHD participating in recreational horse-riding outside therapeutic contexts. This study investigated benefits and challenges of equestrian participation among female horse-riders with ADHD. Online semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 female horse-riders (18–52 years, mean: 25.5 ± 9.4 years). Eight participants were formally diagnosed and three self-identified (Combined $n = 5$; Inattentive $n = 3$; Hyperactive $n = 1$; Unsure $n = 2$). Interviews explored participants' involvement in riding, their ADHD experiences, and how these influenced equestrian participation. Thematic analysis identified four themes: (1) Structure and Organization; (2) Feel-Good Factors; (3) Social Aspects; and (4) Barriers to Participation. Riders reported difficulties with time management and routines; however, riding helped develop these skills, offering structure through horse-care responsibilities. Participants described benefits linked to emotional regulation, physical activity, a sense of achievement, and a quiet mind. The horse-human relationship was identified as a central influence on participation, supporting routine, accountability, purpose, identity, and social connection, although judgment affected self-perception and engagement. Participation barriers included memory and processing verbal instructions, impacting training, competition, and employment. These findings suggest that benefits of equestrian participation may extend beyond physical activity alone, with the horse-human relationship acting as a facilitator of engagement despite challenges associated with ADHD. These findings provide novel perspectives on the experiences of horse-riders with ADHD and have implications for inclusive practice within equestrian coaching, workplaces, and competition.

Keywords

Neurodiversity; horse-human relationship; emotional regulation; social connection; routine

1. Introduction

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a neurodevelopmental disorder and one form of neurodivergences, affects approximately 2–6% of the global population and is characterized by persistent patterns of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity [1]. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5), identifies three ADHD subtypes: predominantly inattentive (ADHD-I), predominantly hyperactive-impulsive (ADHD-H), and combined type (ADHD-C) [2]. ADHD

can affect executive functioning, including an individual's ability to organize and execute tasks, maintain attention, regulate emotions, and manage interpersonal relationships [3]. Inattentive symptoms may include difficulty sustaining attention, task completion difficulties, distractibility, and forgetfulness, while hyperactive-impulsive symptoms can include restlessness, fidgeting, excessive talking, and difficulty remaining seated [2]. Difficulties initiating and sustaining effort toward routine or effortful tasks are also frequently reported by individuals with ADHD [4]. In adults,

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hyperactivity is more commonly internalized, often presenting as anxiety symptoms [1].

ADHD frequently co-occurs with conditions such as anxiety, depression, and mood disorders, and overlapping symptomatology can increase diagnostic complexity, particularly in adulthood [5]. Women with ADHD demonstrate higher rates of internalizing symptoms (such as low mood, emotional distress, or feeling anxious), contributing to increased comorbidity with anxiety and depression compared to men [5]. Consequently, ADHD remains under-diagnosed in women and girls due to differences in symptom presentation and comorbidity profiles, with males diagnosed at higher rates and earlier than girls [6]. Female representation within ADHD research remains limited, with most studies focusing on adolescent boys and adult men [7]. While boys with ADHD typically present with higher levels of hyperactivity and impulsivity, girls more commonly exhibit inattentive symptoms [5–7]. As such, lived experiences of ADHD are likely to differ by gender, and research recommends specifically exploring ADHD experiences in women [6].

Some literature suggests the prevalence of ADHD may be higher within sporting populations than the general population [8]. Individuals with ADHD are often drawn to sport as an environment in which they may excel, with impulsivity and high energy levels providing both motivation and a physical outlet for symptom management [8,9]. Participation in sport has been associated with improvements in socio-emotional and cognitive skills, self-esteem, confidence, and attentional control [10,11]. As these domains often present challenges for individuals with ADHD, engagement in sport may support functioning across other areas of life, including education and employment [12,13]. Sport participation can also facilitate social connection through shared interests and community engagement [11]. However, much of this research has been conducted within male-dominated, team-based sports, with comparatively limited focus on female participants.

Equestrian sport represents a unique context, as one of the few global sports categorized as sex-integrated, with all genders competing on equal terms across competitive levels [14]. Despite this structure, gender distribution differs markedly by participation level. While elite competition remains male-dominated, with more male riders ranked in the Top 100 of Olympic disciplines [14], recreational participation in Britain is predominantly female, with approximately 75% of participants identifying as women [15]. Recreational equestrian sport therefore provides a distinctive opportunity to examine participation within a female-dominated physical activity. The social value of equestrianism has been highlighted [16], identifying five key areas of contribution: physical and mental health, subjective wellbeing, individual development, and social and community value, concluding that equestrianism offers benefits not commonly found in other physical activities. Interaction with horses through Equine-Assisted Activities (EAA) has been shown to improve physical [17], cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes [18] across a range of populations. Targeted equine-based interventions have also demonstrated benefits for the mental and physical wellbeing of neurodivergent individuals [19,20]. Research has identified improvements in socialization and

communication for individuals with autism [21], although language outcomes remain unclear. For young people with ADHD, equine therapeutic interventions have shown limited behavioral change but improvements in interpersonal relationships [22]. Despite growing evidence for therapeutic equine interventions, little is known about how non-therapeutic equestrian participation shapes the lived experiences of ADHD, including symptom management, identity, and wellbeing. This study therefore aimed to explore the perceived benefits and challenges of participation among female recreational horse-riders with ADHD.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Eleven female horse-riders (18–52 years; mean 25.5 ± 9.4 years) participated in the study. Participants were over 18, identified as female, were currently engaged in recreational horse-riding, and had either a formal diagnosis of ADHD or self-identified as having ADHD. Recreational horse-riding was defined as non-competitive or low-level competitive riding undertaken primarily for pleasure rather than income or performance outcomes [23]. Formal diagnosis included medical diagnosis or educational diagnosis issued by a suitably qualified professional. Participants who self-identified as having ADHD completed the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS) symptom checklist [24,25]. All self-reported participants met threshold criteria for inclusion.

Purposive sampling was employed using researcher networks, social media recruitment, and snowball sampling. Sampling aimed to capture a diverse range of recreational riding experiences. Given the exploratory nature of the study and its aim to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, sample size was guided by thematic saturation rather than a predetermined numerical target. Data saturation was defined as the point at which no new information emerged during analysis [26]. The +3 model was applied, whereby three consecutive interviews yielded no new insights [27], providing additional confidence that thematic saturation had been achieved. This approach is consistent with recommendations that sample size in qualitative research should be determined according to the methodological approach and study context, rather than a predetermined numerical threshold [28].

2.2. Study Design and Interview Guide

A qualitative approach, underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, was adopted to explore participants' subjective experiences of equestrian participation and ADHD, recognizing that reality is socially constructed and meaning is shaped through lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were used to allow flexibility, facilitate open dialogue, and enable exploration of emerging topics [29]. Three topic areas were explored: involvement in equestrian sport, experiences of ADHD, and the perceived relationship between ADHD and horse-riding (**Supplementary File 1**). Initial questions focused on riding experiences to support rapport building and participant comfort. Questions were phrased neutrally to reduce interviewer influence [30]. Questions could be repeated or reworded as required, with alternative phrasings included in the pre-interview guide to support participants who may experience attentional,

memory, or information-processing difficulties. A single pilot interview was conducted with a participant who met all study inclusion criteria. The purpose of the pilot was to assess the interview protocol, refine question wording, identify potential bias, and allow the interviewer to practice the interview procedure. Two question areas relating to barriers to participation and social interactions and relationships were identified as requiring minor clarification and were subsequently reworded to more clearly distinguish between general experiences and those perceived as specifically related to ADHD (**Supplementary File 1**). No new topic areas were introduced, and the intended areas of exploration remained unchanged. As the participant met the study eligibility criteria and only minor amendments were made to the interview guide, the pilot interview was retained and included as Participant 1 (P1) within the final analysis.

2.3. Protocol

Ethical approval was granted by the University Ethics Committee (ETHICS2023-24). Participants received information sheets, consent forms, and a pre-interview question guide outlining interview topics (**Supplementary File 2**). Providing this guide was considered beneficial given common ADHD-related challenges associated with attention, working memory, and information processing [31], and allowed participants time to reflect prior to the interview. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, offering a cost-effective and time-efficient approach with reliable recording and transcription capabilities. Online interviews are considered comparable to face-to-face formats, with some participants reporting increased comfort when discussing sensitive topics from their own environment. Interviews were conducted by the second author and lasted an average of 46.5 minutes (range: 37–58 minutes). Interviews were audio- and/or video-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for member checking to enhance credibility and trustworthiness before being anonymized. Participants were allocated numerical identifiers (e.g., P1, P2), and identifying details were removed prior to analysis.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as it is a flexible method of analysis that allows for a rich and detailed account of data [32]. It facilitated the analysis of multiple participants, highlighting similarities and generating potentially unanticipated insights. A six-step analytical procedure [33] was implemented to prepare and analyze the data: (1) digital audio recordings of the interview were transcribed verbatim; (2) transcripts were read and re-read for familiarization; (3) direct quotations were initially

organized according to the interview framework to facilitate data management; (4) an inductive thematic analysis was undertaken independently by both researchers, who separately coded all transcripts and developed preliminary codes and themes from the data; (5) both researchers met to compare their coding and preliminary theme development, discussing areas of agreement and divergence. Where differences in interpretation occurred, the original transcripts were revisited and discussed until consensus was reached, resulting in the refinement, organization and naming of the final themes; and (6) ongoing reflexive discussions were undertaken between the two researchers throughout data collection and analysis to critically reflect on emerging interpretations, consider alternative explanations, and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts [34]. A 15-point checklist was used to evaluate the analysis process and enhance the rigour and trustworthiness of the findings [35].

Both researchers identify as female horse-riders and are diagnosed with ADHD (ADHD-H; ADHD-I). Both have extensive equestrian experience, including horse ownership, recreational, and competitive riding, alongside professional involvement in the equestrian sector. Their interest in the research was informed by their lived experiences of ADHD and equestrian participation. Shared lived experience supported empathy and rapport during interviews, facilitating disclosure [36]. These experiences also informed inclusive study design, including question phrasing and the use of a pre-interview guide. Recognizing that shared lived experience also had the potential to influence data interpretation, both researchers engaged in ongoing reflexive practice throughout data collection and analysis, critically reflecting on their assumptions and returning to the original transcripts during consensus discussions to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than the researchers' own lived experiences [37].

3. Results

Eleven female horse-riders aged 18–52 years (25.5 ± 9.4 years), who were either diagnosed or self-reported as having ADHD, were interviewed (**Table 1**). The majority owned or had access to a regular horse ($n = 9$). Five riders were medically diagnosed, three were diagnosed through educational processes, and three riders self-reported experiencing ADHD. Five participants were diagnosed with ADHD-C, three were ADHD-I, one was ADHD-H, and two participants were unsure of their diagnosis type. Four higher-order themes were identified: Structure and Organization; Feel-good Factors; Social Aspects; and Barriers to Participation (**Figure 1**).

Table 1: Participant Information.

Participant	Age (years)	Diagnostic process	Year of diagnosis	ADHD type	Years of riding experience	Equine industry experience
1	52	Self-report*	2003	Combined	40	Recreational rider & horse owner
2	23	Educational	2022	Inattentive	19	Recreational rider & horse owner
3	23	Medical	2023	Inattentive	23	Recreational rider & horse owner
4	18	Medical	2023	Unsure	10	Recreational rider & horse sharer**

Participant	Age (years)	Diagnostic process	Year of diagnosis	ADHD type	Years of riding experience	Equine industry experience
5	23	Medical	2023	Inattentive	12	Recreational rider & horse sharer**
6	20	Medical	2021	Combined	6	Recreational rider
7	24	Educational	2018	Combined	20	Recreational rider & horse owner
8	21	Self-report*	2016	Hyperactive	10	Recreational rider & horse owner
9	32	Medical	2014	Combined	25+	Recreational rider & horse sharer**
10	23	Self-report*	2023	Unsure	12	Recreational rider & equestrian coach
11	22	Educational	2023	Combined	15	Recreational rider & horse owner

*Self-Report participants completed the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS) symptom checklist [24,25] prior to the interview. All participants met the threshold of symptom criteria to be included in the interviews.

**Horse Sharer is defined as an individual who has regular access to a horse without legal ownership, with shared riding and/or horse-care responsibilities, who may or may not contribute financially to its care.

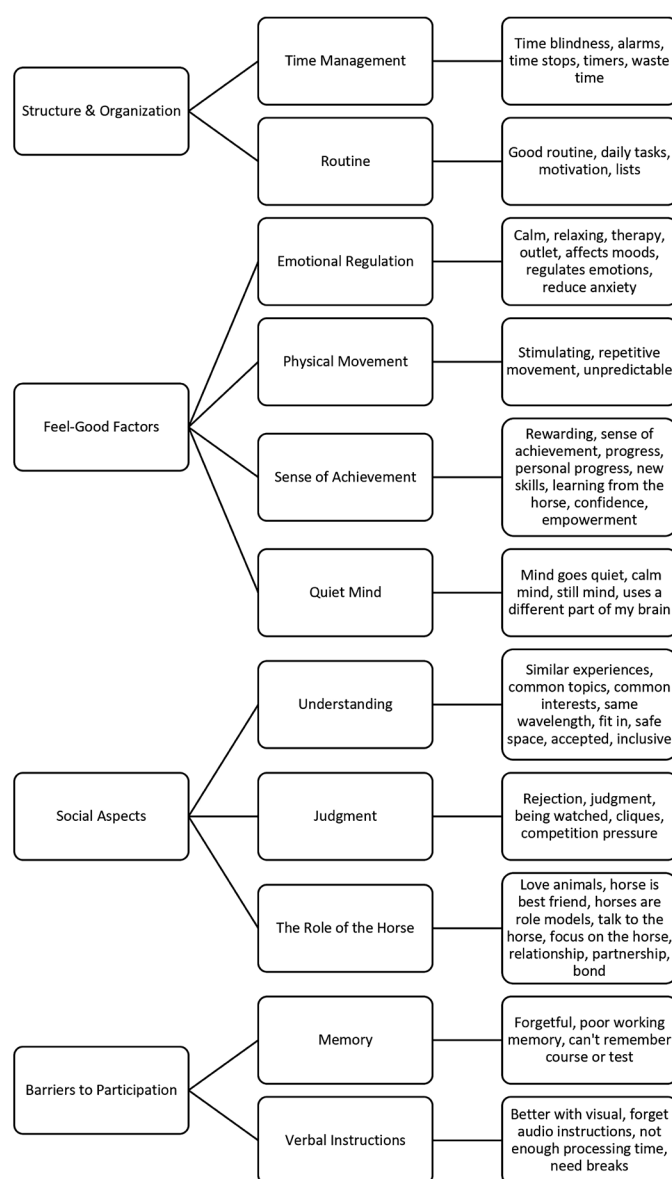


Figure 1: Thematic tree illustrating the higher-order themes (left), lower-order themes (middle), and associated recurring concepts (right) identified through inductive thematic analysis. Lower-order themes represent recurring patterns identified from participants' accounts and are organized within broader higher-order themes. Associated concepts illustrate the experiences contributing to each lower-order theme.

4. Discussion

This study explored the perceived benefits and challenges associated with equestrian participation among female horse-riders with ADHD. Findings identified a range of organizational, psychological, social, and cognitive experiences that shaped participation. The findings broadly align with the domains of wellbeing, individual development and social value previously identified within British Equestrian's social value framework [16]. Across themes, however, one consistent feature emerged: the central role of interactions with, and perceived connection to, horses. This relationship is developed further in the conceptual model presented in **Figure 2**. Participants frequently described horses as sources of structure, motivation, emotional support, purpose, and social connection, suggesting that the horse itself may play an important role in facilitating sustained participation among women with ADHD.

4.1. Structure and Organization

All participants reported difficulties structuring their time and maintaining routines associated with ADHD; however, involvement with horses supported improved organization across both areas.

4.1.1. Time Management

Participants described experiencing time blindness, difficulty perceiving the passage of time, and challenges completing

tasks as efficiently as others. However, engagement within the equine sector also promoted positive time-management strategies, including the use of alarms or timers, and several participants described feeling they had more time in the day after completing equine responsibilities:

"If I'm with the horses, then literally the day would evaporate; I wouldn't be able to tell you because I'm all consumed... When I've been with the horses, I find I've got much more time in the day because I can organize my time better because I haven't got all that interference in my head." Participant 1

Poor time management is a common feature of ADHD, particularly among females [38]. Participants frequently described becoming fully absorbed in horse-related activities, reflecting characteristics of hyperfocus commonly reported in adults with ADHD, including distorted time perception and difficulty disengaging from highly motivating tasks [39]. However, participants also reported that horse ownership encouraged the use of practical organizational strategies and provided an external structure through routine care responsibilities. Similar demands have been described within equestrian populations, where horse care requires consistent completion of daily tasks regardless of competing commitments [33]. Collectively, these findings suggest that equestrian participation may provide an environment in which individuals with ADHD develop and maintain compensatory strategies for managing time and organization.

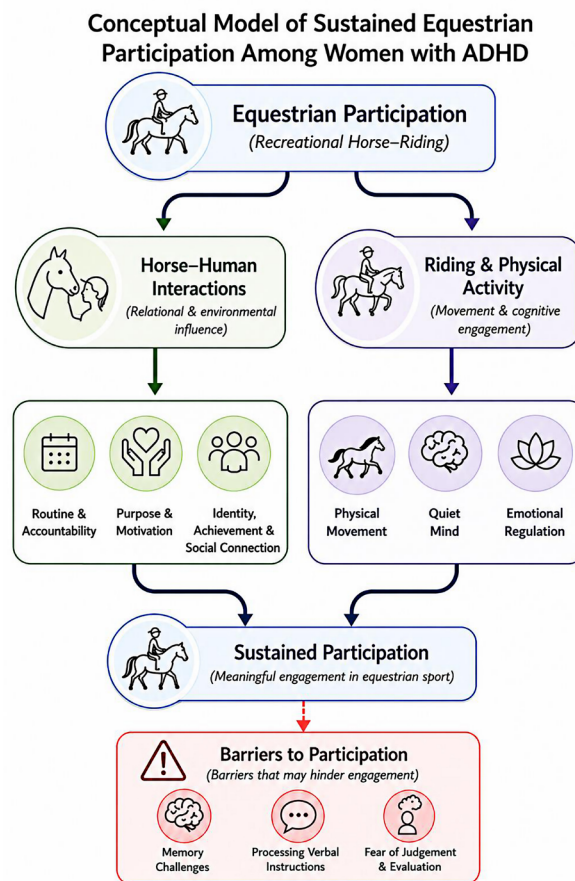


Figure 2: Conceptual model of sustained equestrian participation among women with ADHD. The model illustrates the proposed psychological, social, behavioral, and relational pathways identified within the findings that may contribute to sustained participation, alongside barriers that may hinder engagement.

4.1.2. Routine

Establishing daily and weekly routines was commonly reported by participants as essential for ensuring horses were cared for alongside work or educational commitments. Participants described horses as providing an external structure that supported routine adherence:

"I've always struggled with a 9–5 job, getting up, getting out of bed, going to work straight away, getting my brain going, and it's completely effortless to do that for horses. I get up at 6 in the morning to go to the horses and do it for hours and wake myself up." Participant 9

Maintaining routine is often challenging for individuals with ADHD, particularly in relation to work, education, and daily self-management [38,39]. Participants in the present study similarly described difficulties establishing and maintaining routines independently. However, horse ownership appeared to provide an external structure that encouraged routine adherence. Unlike self-directed organizational strategies, horse-care responsibilities were perceived as non-negotiable, creating a strong sense of accountability and motivation to complete daily tasks. This finding aligns with wider ADHD literature suggesting that executive functioning difficulties are often context-dependent, with task engagement influenced by external structure, intrinsic interest, perceived importance, and immediate consequences rather than reflecting a global inability to establish routines [12,13,22]. This finding may be particularly important within equestrian contexts, where consistent management practices are fundamental to maintaining equine health and welfare [40]. Consequently, horses may act as an external source of structure that supports routine development and maintenance for individuals with ADHD. While daily care may become embedded within consistent routines, less frequent responsibilities, such as arranging veterinary, farrier, or saddler appointments, may present different executive functioning demands that remain unexplored. Identifying strategies to support these aspects of horse ownership may further enhance both rider experiences and equine welfare.

4.2. Feel-Good Factors

Positive feelings were identified by all participants, prompting four lower-order themes: emotional regulation, physical movement, sense of achievement, and a quiet mind.

4.2.1. Emotional Regulation

Participants described feelings of enjoyment, happiness, calmness, relaxation, and therapeutic benefit when interacting with horses. Several riders suggested horses "take" or "melt away" stress, and some identified the need to regulate their own emotions in order to achieve positive outcomes while riding:

"I find it emotionally regulating because if you're running around being all stressed, they're running around being all stressed and then everyone is upset." Participant 7

Horses are increasingly used within therapeutic interventions to support emotional regulation, wellbeing, and self-efficacy across neurodivergent populations [22]. Participants in the present study similarly described feelings of calmness, relaxation, enjoyment, and stress reduction when interacting with horses. Positive emotional outcomes have also been reported among recreational horse-riders, who frequently identify psychological and emotional benefits as among the most valuable aspects of participation [41]. These findings may reflect the combined influence of physical activity and interaction with horses. Participation in sport is associated with improvements in mental health, wellbeing, attentional control, and socio-emotional functioning [10,11]. Collectively, these findings suggest that equestrian participation may provide a context that supports emotional regulation and psychological wellbeing in women with ADHD.

Although the present study explored riders' experiences rather than equine welfare, participants recognized that their own emotional state could influence their interactions with their horses. This highlights the importance of considering horse welfare alongside rider wellbeing when interpreting these findings. As these aspects were beyond the scope of the present study, further research is needed to better understand the implications of these interactions across different equestrian contexts, particularly where emotional dysregulation may be more pronounced.

4.2.2. Physical Movement

All participants described the physical demands of riding and horse care as beneficial, highlighting enjoyment of movement and the opportunity to expend energy. Participants reported feeling more able to sit still and concentrate following riding sessions:

"A lot of people with ADHD struggle to stimulate themselves, and I think horse-riding helps with that a lot. Not only does it get a lot of energy out, but it's also a movement, and you're constantly moving." Participant 4

Physical activity is associated with a range of benefits for individuals with ADHD, including improvements in attention, emotional wellbeing, and symptom management [11]. Participants in the present study similarly described horse-riding and horse care as valuable opportunities for movement, energy expenditure, and concentration. Riding is a physically demanding activity requiring coordination, balance, postural control, and continuous interaction with the horse [23]. Several participants also described benefiting from the combination of rhythmic movement and sustained attentional engagement. Horses move in predictable locomotor patterns, yet their behavior remains responsive to environmental and rider-related influences [42,43], requiring riders to remain attentive throughout participation. Together, these characteristics may provide a unique combination of physical movement and cognitive engagement that participants perceived as beneficial for managing ADHD-related challenges.

4.2.3. Sense of Achievement

Participants described feelings of reward and satisfaction through personal and equine progress. Riders valued learning new skills, developing confidence, and gaining empowerment through improvement over time:

"It was just the achievement of getting somewhere, especially when you've been working on with one horse for a long period of time, and you finally hit that kind of point when you're like, Oh I've got it! I love seeing the progress throughout things like that and progress within myself as well." Participant 6

"Like, I feel like horses is the only thing that I know that I'm good at and that I generally love doing." Participant 10

Individuals with ADHD commonly report difficulties across education, employment, and interpersonal relationships, which may negatively affect confidence and self-perception over time [3,44]. In contrast, participants in the present study frequently described horses as a domain in which they experienced competence, progress, and achievement. Riders valued the development of new skills, improvement over time, and the satisfaction associated with working toward long-term goals. These findings align with previous research, suggesting that individuals with ADHD often demonstrate high levels of motivation and engagement when participating in activities that align with their interests and strengths [11,45]. Equestrian participation requires sustained commitment, skill development, and ongoing problem-solving, creating repeated opportunities for achievement and positive reinforcement. For some participants, horse-riding represented a unique context in which they felt capable, successful, and confident, potentially counterbalancing challenges experienced in other areas of life.

4.2.4. Quiet Mind

Participants reported that involvement in the equine industry had a positive effect on cognitive "noise," describing an ability to "switch off," "float," or "calm" their minds when around horses. These experiences occurred during both riding and routine horse care, suggesting benefits extended beyond performance contexts:

"And I quite like mucking out because you can just switch your brain off and do it...I find that really, really good for occupying my brain enough that I can think about other things...it feels to me like it uses a different part of my brain..." Participant 7

"I think I do just leave everything behind...just float out of my mind whilst I'm just like on the horse." Participant 10

Participants frequently described experiencing a quieter mind when engaging in horse-related activities, including both riding and routine horse care. Feelings of reduced cognitive interference, improved concentration, and mental calmness were commonly reported. Similar benefits have been observed following physical activity among individuals with ADHD, including improvements in attention, reduced distractibility, and enhanced cognitive functioning [11,46]. Equine-assisted interventions have also demonstrated improvements in executive functioning among individuals with ADHD [22]. However, participants in the present study described these experiences not only during riding, but also during activities such as mucking out and horse care. This

suggests that the perceived reduction in cognitive "noise" may reflect broader aspects of equestrian participation, including sustained attentional engagement, immersion in meaningful activity, and interaction with horses, rather than physical activity alone. The experience of a quieter mind may therefore represent an important mechanism supporting ongoing participation among women with ADHD.

4.3. Social Aspects

Participants described both inclusive and judgmental experiences within the equestrian community, depending on context and individual social factors. While social interactions varied, all participants emphasized a strong bond with their horse as the primary motivator for continued involvement within the industry.

4.3.1. Understanding

Most participants perceived the equestrian environment as inclusive and welcoming, with shared involvement in horses fostering feelings of belonging and acceptance:

"I feel like I fit in there, you know. I don't feel like the odd one out." Participant 3

"It's a passion, and it's something you can just bond over with other people...it's where I've met probably most of my friends ...we've all just had the same common interests." Participant 10

Sporting environments can provide individuals with ADHD opportunities for identity development, social connection, and participation within communities centered around shared interests [9,47]. Within equestrian contexts, strong social networks and a sense of community frequently develop through shared involvement with horses [48]. Neurodivergent individuals may also place particular value on relationships characterized by common interests, mutual understanding, and acceptance [49]. Consistent with these findings, participants described equestrianism as facilitating friendship formation while also providing a sense of belonging. Rather than feeling different or isolated, riders reported feeling understood and accepted within equestrian environments, suggesting that shared passion for horses may create opportunities for meaningful social connection and community participation.

4.3.2. Judgment

Despite generally positive experiences of inclusion, several participants described concerns regarding observation, evaluation, and perceived judgment within equestrian environments. For some individuals, competitive contexts were actively avoided due to fears of criticism or rejection, while others reported anxiety when simply being watched by others.

"Self-esteem around judgment because I'm very emotionally sensitive and so if I feel like I'm being judged, I sort of go into my shell and don't want to be watched...I don't want anyone to watch me... If someone comes over to the gate whilst I'm having a lesson...I suddenly just freak out because I just feel like there's this massive pressure." Participant 9

Such experiences may be particularly salient for individuals with ADHD, who often report heightened rejection sensitivity, emotional dysregulation, and strong emotional

responses to perceived criticism [50]. Fear of evaluation has also been identified as a barrier to participation in physical activity [46], which may influence decisions regarding competition, training, or continued engagement. Participants in the present study similarly described withdrawing from competitive or highly visible riding situations to minimize feelings of judgment.

Beyond competition environments, social experiences within equestrian yards were also perceived as influential. While many participants described supportive communities, others reported concerns regarding cliques, exclusion, and negative social dynamics. Similar experiences have been documented within equestrian settings, where bullying, judgment, and social exclusion can negatively influence participation and wellbeing [51]. For some riders with ADHD, these experiences may represent an additional barrier to engagement, shaping both where and how they choose to participate.

4.3.3. The Role of the Horse

Participants consistently described horses as far more than a context for physical activity. Horses were viewed as companions, partners, sources of support, and central components of personal identity. Many participants reported strong emotional bonds, feelings of obsession, and deep partnerships with their horses, describing this relationship as central to both their choice of physical activity and their wider lives:

"It just makes me feel a bit like like a team. Like it's kind of like a friendship that you've [inaudible] and never get with anyone else." Participant 4

"...horses are my go-to always. So, everyone has their thing, and that's mine...so I would say that horses are my therapy. I will happily talk to horses. Hug them..." Participant 9

Previous research has similarly characterized horse-human relationships as reciprocal, emotionally meaningful, and influential in shaping wellbeing and participation [52,53]. Participants frequently described strong emotional attachments to their horses, suggesting that the relationship itself may represent an important mechanism underpinning sustained engagement. This finding may be particularly relevant for individuals with ADHD, who often experience difficulties initiating and maintaining effort toward routine or effortful activities [4]. While motivation is frequently enhanced when activities align with personal interests, the present findings suggest that continued participation may be sustained not only by enjoyment of riding, but by the emotional connection formed with the horse. Similar motivations have been reported within equestrian populations, where riders frequently identify the horse-human partnership as central to their participation experience [33,48].

Beyond enjoyment, participants described feelings of responsibility, commitment, and care toward their horses. Riders often prioritized horse-related tasks regardless of their own mood, motivation, or competing demands, suggesting that the horse may function as a powerful source of external accountability. In this way, the horse appears to operate not merely as the setting in which participation occurs, but as a central relational agent that supports

routine, purpose, identity, and sustained engagement. For participants in this study, continued involvement in equestrian sport was therefore driven not solely by the benefits of riding itself, but by an ongoing relationship that provided meaning, responsibility, and motivation to participate.

4.4. Barriers to Participation

Participants identified two primary barriers associated with ADHD within the equine industry: memory-related difficulties affecting competition participation, and challenges processing verbal instructions during training or employment.

4.4.1. Memory

Participants who engaged in competitive equestrian sport frequently described working memory difficulties as a barrier to progression and participation. Challenges remembering dressage tests, competition routines, and course information were commonly reported, often resulting in frustration, stress, and reduced confidence.

"I could ride the movements of a novice test, but am I going to remember it? No, never in a million years. So, it's kind of frustrating knowing that I have the ability to potentially move up the ladder, but there's one thing holding me back." Participant 2

Working memory impairment is a well-established characteristic of ADHD and can negatively affect the ability to learn, retain, and recall information efficiently [31]. Within equestrian sport, these difficulties may be particularly relevant given the requirement to memorize and accurately execute predetermined tests, routines, or courses under competitive conditions. For some participants, memory-related challenges limited their willingness to compete despite feeling capable of performing the required skills. These findings suggest that barriers to participation may arise not from riding ability itself, but from the cognitive demands associated with competition formats. While para-equestrian dressage incorporates classification-based adaptations to support riders with physical impairments [54], comparable accommodations are not routinely available for neurodivergent riders. Future consideration of strategies that reduce unnecessary working memory demands may therefore represent one avenue through which governing bodies could further enhance accessibility and inclusivity within competitive equestrian sport.

4.4.2. Verbal Instructions

Several participants described difficulties processing, retaining, and recalling verbal instructions during both coaching and employment-related activities.

"When it comes to working, when my boss tells me a list of things to do, I have to say, 'can you write that on the board for me?' Or else I won't remember." Participant 10

"Just when I was learning, my coach would tell me to do something, and I would do it, but it would take me quite a few tries to do it because, for whatever reason, like my brain, it would like, I could hear what she was saying, but it wasn't going in" Participant 5

Similar challenges are commonly reported by adults with ADHD, particularly in relation to attention, organization, and working memory [3,4]. Working memory difficulties can make retaining multi-step instructions especially

challenging [31], which may affect performance in coaching, educational, and workplace settings. Participants in the present study frequently identified written information, visual reminders, and task lists as helpful strategies for reducing these difficulties. These findings highlight the importance of coaches, employers, and educators recognizing individual communication needs and providing accessible methods of instruction where appropriate [31,55]. Written instructions or checklists may be beneficial within education, training, and workplace environments, where individuals are expected to remember multiple tasks or procedures. In riding contexts, however, alternative approaches such as breaking instructions into shorter sequential steps, visual or practical demonstrations, and allowing opportunities for repetition may be more appropriate. Adapting communication to the specific demands of the setting may help reduce working memory demands while supporting safe and effective participation.

While individual themes are discussed separately, the findings suggest these experiences are closely interconnected. The horse appeared to function not only as the context in which participation occurred, but also as a source of routine, accountability, emotional regulation, achievement, and social connection. Collectively, these factors may help explain why participants described equestrian involvement as particularly meaningful and sustainable despite experiencing challenges associated with ADHD. Rather than acting through a single mechanism, horse-human interactions appear to influence participation through multiple psychological, social, and behavioral pathways simultaneously. A conceptual model illustrating the proposed pathways through which equestrian participation may facilitate sustained participation among women with ADHD is presented in **Figure 2**.

The conceptual model extends existing research by suggesting that participation benefits may arise through two interconnected pathways. The first reflects the physical and cognitive demands of riding itself, while the second reflects the relational and motivational influence of horse-human interactions. Together, these pathways may help explain why equestrian participation was perceived as particularly meaningful and sustainable by participants, despite challenges associated with ADHD.

4.5. Limitations

A potential limitation relates to participant diagnosis status. While eight participants reported a formal ADHD diagnosis, three participants self-identified as having ADHD and were included following completion of the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS), with all meeting the threshold criteria for symptom endorsement. Although the ASRS is a validated screening instrument, it does not constitute a clinical diagnosis [24,25]. Consequently, it is possible that some experiences reported within this study may not fully reflect those of clinically diagnosed populations. However, difficulties accessing formal assessment and diagnosis are well documented, particularly among women with ADHD [7], and excluding self-identified individuals may have overlooked relevant lived experiences. No differences in experiences were identified between diagnosed and self-identified participants during analysis; however, the small sample

size precluded meaningful comparison between groups. Furthermore, as the study focused exclusively on equestrians with ADHD, it cannot be established whether the experiences identified by these participants are specific or unique to those with ADHD or are also shared by the wider equestrian population.

4.6. Future Research

Future qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of male horse-riders with ADHD is warranted, as symptom presentation and lived experience may differ between men and women [5-7]. Longitudinal studies examining the effectiveness of strategies designed to support organization, routine, and participation within equestrian settings may also be beneficial, particularly given the importance of these themes within the present findings [35]. Further investigation into neurodivergent athletes' support needs, alongside coaches' knowledge and understanding of neurodivergence, would help inform the development of evidence-based educational resources and inclusive coaching practices [47,56].

The recommendations arising from this study are:

1. The development of educational resources to improve awareness and understanding of neurodivergence within the equine industry.
2. Increased promotion of the potential benefits of equestrian participation for neurodivergent individuals.
3. Consideration of appropriate competition accommodations for neurodivergent riders by National Governing Bodies.
4. Further research exploring the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals participating in equestrian activities.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the benefits and challenges of equestrian participation for female horse-riders with ADHD. Time management and routine were identified as difficulties for all participants, yet riding helped them manage these skills more effectively through the structure of horse care and equestrian responsibilities. Riders reported biopsychological benefits including emotional regulation, physical movement, a sense of achievement, and a quiet mind. Social acceptance within the equine community and the role of the horse in supporting relationships and communication were also described. However, judgment within the industry, concerns over rejection and critique, and challenges with memory and processing verbal instructions affected participation in training, competition, and employment.

As female horse-riders with ADHD have not previously been researched, this study provides an initial understanding of a group that may be overlooked or misunderstood within both equestrian and neurodiversity research. The proposed conceptual model suggests that participation may be supported through both the physical and cognitive demands of riding and the relational influence of the horse-human relationship, offering a novel perspective on how equestrian involvement is experienced by women with ADHD. These findings have implications for equestrian coaches, employers, and industry professionals by highlighting the importance of recognizing neurodiversity, reducing participation

barriers, and developing more inclusive environments within equestrian sport. Future research should investigate the experiences of male riders, the effectiveness of tailored interventions for organization and time management, and equestrian coaches' knowledge of neurodivergence to inform educational provision, inclusive practice, and wider participation opportunities.

Supplementary Materials

Supplementary File 1 contains the Participant Pre-Interview Guidance Document and Interview Guide, including the interview structure, interview questions, pilot interview amendments, and information provided to participants before and during the interview. **Supplementary File 2** contains the Participant Information and Consent Form, including study information, consent documentation, and the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale Questionnaire used for participants who self-reported ADHD.

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Authors' Contributions

E.D.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration. G.P.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization.

Data Availability

The data used in this study are confidential and therefore are not publicly available.

Funding

This research has not received any funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study received ethical approval from the Hartpury University Ethics Committee (ETHICS2023-24) and complied with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained through a written consent form prior to the interview, in addition to verbal consent, which was provided at the commencement of the interview.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used OpenAI ChatGPT to support the visual development of the

conceptual pathway model. The figure is based entirely on findings derived from the authors' analysis and interpretation of the data. Artificial intelligence tools were used solely to assist with graphical design and visual presentation. Following the use of this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final version of the publication.

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