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Horseracing as gendered leisure events: doing and redoing masculinities in Mexico

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Abstract

Most research on equestrian sports, including horseracing, has been developed in contexts in the Global North. This has led to a narrow perspective of what horseracing is and means in different historical and sociocultural contexts. This paper extends this reach through considering informal horseracing events in Mexico. Based on understanding gender as a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’, and as an integral part of all social practices and identities, the races are examined as leisure events that function as sites through which masculinities are performed and (re)produced. Drawing on an ethnographic study, the horseracing events are identified as spaces in which male-male interactions provide opportunity for men to perform culturally hegemonic norms of masculinity, against a backdrop of shifting economic and social practices that are affecting wider gender relations in Mexico. Although women also have a presence in horseracing, they play a marginal role within the events which celebrate and foreground male homosociality. Masculinities are performed and validated predominantly through male-male interactions and expressions of male dominance over the horses. This paper thus illustrates the importance of gender to understanding different leisure practices and the significance of social and cultural context to examining leisure generally and equestrian sports specifically.

Keywords:

Events; gender; horseracing; leisure; masculinities; Mexico

Introduction

Horseracing has been a popular leisure activity for millennia, combining interspecies interaction with competition and usually some form of gambling. Horseracing is a global industry, worth several hundred billion dollars (McManus et al., 2012). Studies of horseracing have revealed its complicated class relations, wherein the privileged class status of horse owners and some spectators contrasts with the working class origins of many workers (jockeys and stable 'lads') and gamblers/spectators (Cassidy, 2002; Fox, 2005). Horseracing is also a gendered practice, highly masculinised at all levels despite increasing numbers of women as 'lads' and jockeys (Butler, 2013a; Boden, 2021). However, the majority of research on horseracing, and indeed other equestrian sports, has been conducted in contexts in the Global North and is thus shaped by specific historical, social and cultural understandings of horses, racing and social interactions, leading to a somewhat narrow view of what horseracing is and means to different participants. In this paper, we examine horseracing events in Mexico to consider how this popular leisure practice takes on varied meanings in different contexts. We argue that local horseracing events in rural Mexico become sites for the production and reproduction of different masculinities, set against a backdrop of changing gender relations in the country. In so doing we illustrate the importance of cultural context to understanding gendered leisure practices and demonstrate the ways in which leisure is an important site for the performance of gender identities.

Stereotypes of Latin masculinities in general, and Mexican masculinities specifically, are characterised by machismo, sexual risk-taking, dominance over women and violence (Perrotte & Zamboanga, 2019). There has been limited attention paid to leisure in the theorisation of Mexican masculinities, but Ridge (2017) notes that football is an important mechanism in upholding the patriarchal order through use of homophobic language and the exclusion of women. Alcohol is also an integral aspect of Mexican masculinities, and Bigalondo (2020) suggests that drinking is a social act and related to the public reinforcement of a particular hegemonic masculinity in Mexico. However, Ponting and Yarris (2019) argue that gender relations in Mexico are in flux; influenced by economic restructuring and urbanisation which have made it difficult for many men to achieve the expected model of masculinity which is characterised by being economically independent and able to support a wife and children. It is in this context of changing gender relations that this study examines the ways in which horseracing events become an important leisure context for Mexican men to both reinforce and challenge culturally reified forms of hegemonic masculinity.

The horseracing events in this study are small-scale local leisure practices wherein groups (mainly, but not exclusively, men) gather regularly to race, gamble, socialise and drink. Informal affairs, these horseracing events bear little resemblance to the codified practices of the global horseracing industry discussed in other studies. Rather, these events illustrate the ways in which global practices take on different nuances and meanings in different cultural contexts, becoming mechanisms through which gender identities are produced, reproduced and, occasionally, challenged. We begin by outlining our theoretical framework, which is informed by the concepts of doing, re-doing and undoing gender (West & Zimmerman, 2009), before presenting findings from an ethnographic study of leisure horseracing events in rural Mexico.

Doing, re-doing and undoing gender in leisure

Following West and Zimmerman (1987), we understand gender as a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’ and as an integral part of all social practices and identities. This entails a shift in understanding of masculinity and femininity from essential properties of individuals to interactional properties of a social system. Gender is achieved and maintained through social interactions, such as through leisure practices. Accountability is integral to doing gender, and gender is always ‘done’ with or for an other, whether that other is real or imagined (Butler, 2004), or, in the case of our study, human or nonhuman. West and Zimmerman (2009) stress that the ways in which gender is done are contextually and historically specific, thus a key task of research is to understand how interaction operates to sustain relations of inequality in different social and cultural contexts.

One can never not ‘do’ gender, as it is such an integral part of both individual identity and societal structures (Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). However, this does not mean that gender, and the inequalities that stem from it, is fixed and unchangeable. Certain ways of doing gender may well be socially desirable, and thus even become reified as hegemonic, such as the hyper-masculinity and machismo of Mexican stereotypes. Yet they remain subject to challenge. Deutsch (2007) argues that gender can be ‘undone’ in contexts where gender becomes irrelevant, or at least less relevant in social interactions and less important in sustaining social inequalities. Butler (2004) also suggests that gender can be undone, in theory if not in practice, and urges researchers to ‘trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories is put into

question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformative' (p. 216). West and Zimmerman (2009) are more cautious about the prospect of transformation and dispute the idea implicit in notions of 'undoing gender' that gender itself can be done away with. Rather, they prefer the concept of 're-doing' gender whereby 'the accountability structures that maintain gender may shift to accommodate less oppressive ways of doing gender, but they are never entirely eradicated' (Connell, 2010, p. 32).

In this study, we conceptualise gender as an integral part of everyday interactions, including those of leisure as manifest in local horseracing events. We recognise leisure as a key site for the production and reproduction of gender identities, as well as an arena through which those identities are challenged and sometimes shifted (Bäckström & Nairn, 2018). Sport and active leisure are mechanisms through which men and boys 'do' different forms of masculinity, whether that be hegemonic masculinity in body contact sports (MacDonald, 2014), heteronormative masculinity through dance and practices like salsa (Boulila, 2020), or collective forms of hegemonic masculinity through fandom (Ncube & Chawana, 2018). This 'doing' of masculinity is always in relation to an other, very often other men, as Lamont and Hing (2019) describe in relation to peer group norms among young bettors; or to differentiate from the assumed opposite, femininity, as Dashper (2012) found among gay men in equestrian sport; or in interaction with broader norms of neoliberal masculinity, as Voorhees and Orlando (2018) identified in professional gaming. In these and other examples, men 'do' masculinity in varied ways that are socially, culturally, historically and even sub-culturally specific.

Homosocial environments are important to the performance of different types of masculinity, and the reification of certain norms as hegemonic. We draw on Bird's (1996, p.121) definition of homosociality as "the nonsexual attractions held by men (and women) for members of their own sex". Homosociality promotes gendered segregation in leisure spaces, including the horseracing events in this study wherein men socialise primarily with other men, and appears to support clear distinctions between men and women, and hegemonic and alternative masculinities (Arxer, 2011). Homosocial leisure environments thus often play important roles in contemporary gender relations.

Opportunities for change and transformation within leisure are present, but restricted. Masculinities may be fluid and multiple, but they continue to marginalise certain groups, often reinforcing the dominance of the white, heteronormative, able-bodied ideal of

masculinity (Norman & Bryans, 2020). We remain open to identifying moments of transformation in terms of gender and the doing of masculinity within leisure contexts, and recognise that the gender attributes currently integral to maintaining men's hegemony are social attributes and thus open to change (West & Zimmerman, 2009). However, due to the pervasiveness of dominant gender norms on both interactional and institutional levels, such change is likely to be difficult to achieve and may thus be more of a subtle reworking, a re-doing of gender rather than a more obvious shift (Dashper, 2016). As the doing, re-doing and possible undoing of gender are historically, socially and culturally specific practices, it is important to investigate gender interactions and identities in different contexts. The majority of research on leisure and gender has been conducted in Global North contexts where gender norms and relations differ to many Global South contexts. In the next section we introduce the ethnographic study on which this paper is based that explores the doing and re-doing of masculinity within local horseracing events in rural Mexico, a social and cultural context that differs in terms of gender in comparison to the Global North contexts of previous investigations of horseracing and gender (e.g., Butler, 2013b; Boden, 2021). In this study we sought to identify the ways in which gender is done during these events, often reinforcing culturally hegemonic norms of masculinity, but also to identify examples where gender was re-done in ways that may begin to rework those norms to be less oppressive and exclusionary.

Research context and methods

Context

Equestrian events are an important tourist and leisure product and a component of culture and a symbol of national identity in Mexico (Monterrubio & Pérez, 2021). Many equestrian practices in Mexico are highly gendered and provide an arena for the performances of masculinities and gender relations. We recognise masculinities as non-static and varying across culture and historical periods (Connell, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 2009). Previous research on gender and equestrian sports has explored masculinities in cultures in the Global North (e.g., Dashper, 2012). Even research on the equestrian practice of rodeo – another strongly masculine practice wherein male homosociality contributes to the elevation of certain norms of masculinity as hegemonic and the marginalisation of women and some groups of men – has focused on the United States (Danby & Finkel, 2018). Our focus in this paper is on Mexico – a country that provides not only a very different equestrian/racing

culture than those previously studied in the Global North, but also with different gender relations and culturally reified norms of masculinity. It is therefore important to explore leisure practices and their role in the construction and reproduction of gender identities in diverse social and cultural contexts.

Existing research has suggested that conceptions and practices of masculinities in Mexico are changing (Gutmann, 2003; Inhorn & Wentzell, 2011). However, Mexico remains largely a site marked by powerful stereotypes of local manhood. For a long time, notions of hegemonic Mexican masculinity have been marked by gender polarisation, machismo, male superiority, aggressiveness, violence, dominance, bravery, promiscuity, virility, sexism, and the restriction of emotional expression (Uresti Maldonado et al., 2017). In the country, masculinity has also been defined by alcohol consumption, fun and promiscuity (Brandes, 2003; Inhorn & Wentzell, 2011) and closely associated with national identity (Irwin, 2003) and the equestrian world (Núñez Noriega, 2017).

One of the popular equestrian practices in rural Mexico is horseracing. Of particular interest for this study are so-called 'parejeras' horse races. These races are considered part of Mexican culture and tradition (Reydoebici, 2017) and are characterised, among other things, by their level of informality and lack of regulation, compared to those commonly found in racecourses in other contexts. In each of these races, two (sometimes three or even four) horses and/or mares compete against each other. The distance to run is usually between 100 and 250 *varas* (80 and 200 metres, approximately). Mainly quarter horses and mares participate, although many mixed breed descent horses are also part of the events. Some races, particularly those in which larger amounts of money are bet, are arranged weeks or months before. Prior to the race, these horses are trained, fed and medically prepared for the competition. Already on site, a few minutes before the race, the horse is warmed up and sometimes injected with chemical substances such as energisers, thus bringing him/her to the highest degree of excitement. In addition to the fixed races, other races are agreed at the site, in which there may or may not be money involved.

These types of races are held in many parts of Mexico and are intimately linked to rural life (Beezley, 1983; Deraga, 2007). This study focused on the races that take place in different 'carriles' (tracks) in rural locations in the State of Mexico (central Mexico). They are carried out in lanes on dirt roads, sometimes created in improvised places. There tends to be no institutional regulation; the races are governed by the implicit rules taken for granted or

agreed between the owners of the participating horses. The degree of informality depends on the 'carril', and not always is there programming of races. Races may take place once or twice a month, or every week in some 'carriles', and are communicated through social media and by word of mouth. These horse races are attended by people belonging predominantly to low and middle classes and are increasingly attracting people from across the state and even other parts of the country.

Methods

This study is part of a larger project that aims to examine gender performances and interactions in informal horseracing events in Mexico. Specifically, this article aims to examine horse races as leisure events that function as spaces in which masculinities are performed and reproduced. Drawing on ideas of gender as a doing rather than a being, as something that is continually achieved through social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009), the project adopted an ethnographic approach to explore this 'doing' in action, as it occurs at horseracing events.

Interspecies interactions -and their associations with gender- are embodied and visceral encounters that often occur beyond and outside of human verbal interactions (Dashper, 2017), so ethnographic methods of observation are important for trying to apprehend some of the nuances and complexities of these interactions that may be difficult to capture through traditional methods such as interviews and surveys. As a result, a participant observation approach was adopted. Participant observation is particularly useful when the phenomenon studied is visible and based on human interactions (Jorgensen, 1989). Empirically speaking, participant observation —either alone or in conjunction with other methods—has proved to be significantly useful in the study of interspecies relationships, particularly between humans and horses in tourism, sport, and leisure (Dashper, 2014, 2017; Helgadóttir & Sigurðardóttir, 2021; Monterrubio & Pérez, 2021; Notzke, 2019) and their association with gender (Adelman, 2015; Adelman & Knijnik, 2013; Butler, 2013; Dashper, 2012; de Haan et al., 2016; Fernando Rojo, 2009).

The first author adopted active membership for fieldwork, [as a regular spectator at the 'carriles'](#). According to Adler and Adler (1987), unlike in peripheral membership roles, in active membership observation the researcher assumes a more central position in the setting; the researcher is part of the core activities of the group and becomes a co-participant of a joint endeavour (p. 50). The following sections are the result of observations made during

horse races in the study area over a four-year period (2018-2021). On average, the first author attended one event per month and his presence at the event was practically from start to finish. The observations focused on the different actors -humans and horses-, their interactions and behaviours, and expressions of masculinity. As a Mexican man who lives in the State of Mexico, where fieldwork took place, he shared many attributes with participants at the races – horse owners, trainers, jockeys and spectators - the majority of whom are also men and this enabled him to move freely in this social world and be readily accepted by participants. The first author also has knowledge of equestrian practices, being a horse owner and rider himself, but is not a rider or trainer in the sport of horseracing. He therefore had some subcultural capital in this social world, as a fellow equestrian enthusiast, and this has proven to be important in previous ethnographic investigations of horseracing and other equestrian sports (Cassidy, 2002; Dashper, 2016). The existing specialised literature was especially useful because it enabled focused observations of human and non-human animal-related masculinity displays. The participation also included informal talks with other attendees, horse owners, trainers, jockeys, vendors and bettors. Informal conversations took place in Spanish, the first author's native language, which facilitated communication. He took photographic and video evidence of the different settings, actors, interactions, and events during several of the races and in different *carriles*. Bearing in mind the advantages of investigator triangulation in qualitative tourism and leisure research (Decrop, 1999), all three members of the research team attended at least two horseracing events to observe the practices and gain a sense of the atmosphere and behaviours that were recorded in the first author's fieldnotes and photographs and videos. Fieldnotes were originally completed in Spanish and later translated into English to enable all members of the team to contribute to analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted using the theoretical framework outlined in the previous sections of this paper.

Findings

The following sections are based on these ethnographic observations, analysed through the theoretical framework outlined in the previous section. Our intention is to provide thick description (see Ponterotto, 2006) of the horse racing events as sites for the production and reproduction of different masculinities. The following sections are thus based on the

fieldnotes and visual evidence (photographs and videos) collected by the first author over the course of four years' engagement in the field.

Horse racing events as a homosocial and hypermasculine leisure space

The horse races are almost completely all-men events. They are organised, performed and attended by and for men. Virtually all jockeys are young men, some with more experience than others. As a leisure event, the races attract a considerable number of local men and men from nearby areas. The vast majority of spectators are men, and they tend to attend these events with male friends. It is thus not surprising that horseracing functions as a space for the production and reproduction of masculinity based largely on homosociality. Masculinity is performed through interactions almost exclusively between men. Additionally, behaviours based on fearlessness, rudeness and risk taking, both on and off horses, and a frequent use of sexist, macho and homophobic language are common expressions of hegemonic masculinity at these events. Thus, horseracing is produced as a homosocial and hypermasculine leisure space.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Horseracing reflects and reinforces other traditional qualities of dominant masculinity. Of particular relevance are the consumption of alcohol and gambling. Alcohol is a permanent component of these events. Consumed by a considerable majority of the men who attend, the alcohol is sold in improvised stalls or, in some cases, is brought in by the attendees. In some Mexican contexts, 'alcohol consumption is an important part of male friendship' (Vázquez García & Castro, 2009, p. 713), therefore, among men it is common to invite a sip of the beverage that is being drunk or propose a drink to other men. Alcohol consumption begins practically from the start of the races (normally after noon) until they conclude (at the end of daylight); some men end up drunk and, as a result, there have been fights between men or groups of men, even requiring emergency medical services. There were also cases observed of drunken men riding horses to compete, and cases of accidents where men under the influence of alcohol are run over, pushed or kicked by horses in warm-up or competition. Alcohol consumption is not the same at all events, as some have greater organisation and control. However, alcohol consumption is a common denominator of this type of horseracing.

Gambling is a characteristic component of horseracing and is a men's affair. Betting is usually agreed prior to the event between the owners of the horses, and additional bets are made between the attendees already on the site; they are completely voluntary and there is no

minimum bet amount. Not all races are agreed in advance, as some are agreed and executed in the moment; there are men who simply take their horses to the event to see if anyone dares to compete against them. In some races there are no bets involved, it is simply about symbolic gains. What is at stake in horseracing is more than financial gain; honour, dignity, respect, prestige, in other words, social status is disputed, as happens in other hyper-masculinised events such as cockfights (Geertz, 2017; Morell Vega, 2016; Urbina Gaitán, 2000) and dog fighting (Kavesh, 2021). In some events, prior to the start of, or between, the races, games of chance are held (e.g., raffles and cards) where those who organise, bet and win or lose are exclusively men. The ostentation of money in these events is a masculine practice; being indifferent to winning or losing money during horseracing in Mexico has been seen as a symbol of honour and masculinity (Beezley, 1983).

Multispecies interactions in horseracing are a means of expression, performance, and validation of masculinity. In particular, horse handlers demonstrate control and domination of the horse through force and violence. Minutes before the race, the horses are ‘warmed up’ through physical work often accompanied by another horse and another rider. Sometimes, as happens in cockfights (Morell Vega, 2016), horses are injected with substances -including drugs- to bring them to their maximum degree of excitement and thus obtain the highest possible performance from the horse. In this state of excitement, horses are difficult to control, for they become too restless and excited, requiring courage and great physical strength from men to keep them under control. Controlling a ‘hot’ horse means taking a risk that not all men are willing or able to take. Also, the riders rely on the use of whips to hit the horse and on violent pulls on the reins and, in this way, put it on full alert and control its movements. Loud verbal communication and rude language towards the horse is an additional means of controlling the animal and an implicit outwards performance of hegemonic masculinity aimed at other men.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

In summary, the use of physical force, violence, rudeness, coarse language and the courage to control a 400 to 600 kilo horse are symbolic acts that build, express and validate masculinity before other men (and women). Horses serve as symbols for their owners, trainers and riders to perform dominant masculinities; therefore, men view the domination of horses as emblematic of their maleness. In this way, hegemonic masculinity is ‘done’ through

interactions and power relations, not only between members of the same species (i.e., men-men) but also through multispecies interactions (i.e., men-horses).

Marginalisation of women and children

Women also have a presence in horseracing but play a marginal role within the events. Compared to the number of men, there are very few women who, in different roles, attend and participate in these equestrian events. Their roles are mostly passive; their presence is mostly as spectators and they do not usually participate in gambling. They tend to socialise with other women or with members of their families. It is important to mention that, during the observation period, no female horse owners or trainers were recorded in action. Similarly, it is relevant to point out that during the years of ethnographic observation at different events in the area, only the participation of two women as jockeys was recorded. However, it was observed that during the warm-up the horses ridden by the women are accompanied – and to some extent controlled – by another horse with a male rider. The participation of women as jockeys is, therefore, assisted by men's physical strength, bravery, protection and male domination, thus upholding the patriarchal order.

The participation of women in a hypermasculinised environment requires the adoption of certain behaviours assigned to the masculine gender by women. In these equestrian events, it is increasingly common to see women wearing jeans, belts, boots and hats, which have been observed as symbols of hegemonic masculinity in rural Mexico (Núñez Noriega, 2017). Women who participate as jockeys, conditioned by the help of men, are associated with courage and risk taking; yelling, scolding and beating the horse are acts that, similarly to men, women jockeys also adopt. This may reflect, on the one hand, the need for women to adopt typically masculine behaviours in order to be included (accepted) as part of this culturally masculine practice and, on the other, that the relaxation of gender norms in these practices implies negotiations of important feminine identities.

The events are attended by some female (and more male) spectators on horseback; while very few women ride alone, others ride in the company of a man, when the latter happens, it is the man who takes the reins of the horse, thus assuming control. Although in smaller quantities, the consumption of alcohol by some women is also a recurring behaviour in horseracing. Fights between women have also been observed, fights that are usually stopped by men. In this sense, women are expected to mimic behaviours socially attributed to men in order to have a more active role in the hyper masculinised world of horseracing.

Children are also an active part of the expression and performance of gender in equestrian events. Although in smaller numbers and only in events that allow it, some boys participate as jockeys, bettors and spectators. As jockeys, boys often ride ponies and horses in arranged competitions. Although they are assisted by adult men, the boys take full responsibility for the horse during the competition, making use of whips, shouts and aggressive language towards the horses. Some boys also participate by ‘cooling down’ the horse; they walk the horses after having competed, thus showing their ability to control the equines. As spectators, it is common to see boys wearing jeans, boots, belts and hats. In some events, between horse races, boys compete in foot races with each other, thus establishing distinctions and hierarchies among them. For their part, girls usually attend only as spectators, always staying by their parents’ side. In this way, the dominant masculinities and traditional gender relations continue to be expressed, reproduced and validated by the new generations in horseracing.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Alternative masculinities

From the above, it is clear that many features of hegemonic masculinities are still in force and (re)produced in horse racing. However, these events are also spaces where, although to a much lesser extent, alternative masculinities interact with traditional gender relations and expressions. Informal conversations with some participants suggest that there are men who question violent treatment towards other men and towards horses and maintain alternative ideals of care and affection towards horses; the qualities of greater care and affection are usually perceived as innately feminine by practitioners of equestrian sports in contexts of other Latin American countries (Fernando Rojo, 2009). The presence and active role of men expressing alternative traits of masculinity challenge the traditional notions of what a man should be like.

There is also a presence of men who do not consume alcohol or who do so only moderately, who do not wear boots or hats and who socialise with women. Furthermore, the presence of gay men is also part of gender dynamics; although they usually participate only as spectators, their presence represents a challenge to heteronormative hegemonic male supremacy. In Mexico, an effeminate gay man tends to be a rejected man because he does not meet the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Vázquez García & Castro, 2009); therefore, the presence of gay men symbolically challenges the ideals of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity that predominate in horseracing and many broader aspects of Mexican society.

Discussion

The horseracing events in this study are spaces in which gender relations are produced, reproduced, reworked and, sometimes, challenged. As strongly masculine spaces, in terms of both the numerical and symbolic dominance of men and masculinity, these events provide an interesting context through which to examine the role of leisure in contemporary gender relations in Mexico. Against a backdrop of changing social structures and interpersonal relationships that characterise the country and appear to be contributing to a crisis of masculinity for many men, who feel increasingly disenfranchised and emasculated by economic restructuring and associated social changes (Ponting & Yaris, 2019), the events provide a space for men to (re)claim masculine identities. The traditional stereotype of Mexican masculinity, based on machismo, plays an important role in these leisure spaces which become sites through which hegemonic masculinity and machismo are performed and validated. Gender is always 'done' in relation to others, literally and symbolically (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009), and at these events it is male-male interactions that provide the primary sites through which masculinity is performed. As a predominantly homosocial activity, horseracing is an avenue through which mainly working-class men relate with other men, through riding, showing mastery over horses, drinking, gambling and socialising. Through homosocial activities, men choose to spend their leisure time with other men and the horseracing events are sites of male bonding and group cohesion and an opportunity for these men, who may be suffering economic marginalisation in the changing Mexican economy, to reassert their identities in relation to hegemonic norms of masculinity and machismo. It is other men from whom validation is sought and in relation to whom hegemonic masculinity is primarily performed. In ways similar to West's (2001) study of male homosociality and drinking cultures in the US twenty years ago, these horseracing events show how leisure behaviours are important in the performance of masculinities and the maintenance of male hegemony.

Centring homosociality in understanding the ways in which these horseracing events are important in the production and reproduction of masculinities does not mean that women, girls and femininities are not important to gender relations and performances. We draw on Bird's (1996) conceptualisation, wherein homosociality contributes to the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity and male hegemony through the celebration of emotional detachment and competitiveness between men, and the objectification and marginalisation of women. In a homosocial environment, women's status is derived through their relationships with men, as

fathers, brothers, sons, friends, lovers etc. (Lipman-Blumen, 1976). Crowhurst and Eldridge's (2020) examination of the *puttan tour* in Italy illustrates how homosocial leisure practices illustrate the paradox and complexities of masculinities, and the ways in which some leisure practices provide space for men to bond through the objectification and marginalisation of women. Within the horseracing events in our study, we did not see examples of women being explicitly objectified or male violence towards women, however women played important roles in the structure of male homosociality. Women are positioned either as supportive family members, in ways that reinforce traditional Mexican gender roles, or as almost pseudo-men, replicating masculine behaviours through clothing, attempting to show dominance over horses, alcohol and social interactions. Crowhurst and Eldridge (2020) note that masculinities and homosocial leisure practices need to be understood within their cultural and social context, and in our study the dominance of machismo and traditional gender power relations in Mexico limit the acceptable roles for women within the horseracing events, reinforcing the dominance of men and certain masculinities within the community.

Masculinities are multiple, complex and sometimes contradictory (Messerschmidt, 2018) and, even in the machismo-fuelled environment of the horseracing events, we found examples of alternative masculinities coexisting alongside hegemonic masculinities. Although in the minority, gay men and men who do not conform to the macho, alcohol fuelled dominant norms can be seen at the races. This would have been unimaginable even a few decades ago and does suggest a broadening out of acceptable masculinities. Some Mexican men do feel able to challenge the hegemonic macho norms and do not appear to be overtly persecuted for doing so, indicative of what Anderson (2010) calls more inclusive masculinities. Mexico remains a country in which those who do not conform to heteronormative binary gender norms are vulnerable to violence and exclusion (Monterrubio et al., 2021) so the seeming acceptance of gay men at the racing events is indicative of a shift in gender norms and a broadening out of acceptable masculinities. Equestrian sports more broadly are relatively accepting of openly gay men (Dashper, 2012), especially in comparison to other sports, and the horseracing events in this study suggest some level of acceptance as well. However, although a small number of men who do not conform to hegemonic masculine norms was observed over the time of the study, these men occupied marginal positions, indicative of the ongoing power imbalances between hegemonic and alternative masculinities (Connell, 1995). The visible presence of some men who do not conform to hegemonic masculine norms is thus an example of gender being redone; rather than a transformation of those norms and an

undoing of gender, masculinities are being reworked in small yet potentially significant ways (Dashper, 2016).

However, as Rojek (2010) suggests, leisure is not just about fun, freedom and relaxation and is instead bound up with power, as are gender relations. O'Neill's (2014) critique of theoretical developments in masculinities studies highlights the lack of attention given in inclusive masculinity theory to power within contemporary gender relations. Developing this, it is clear from our study that small shifts towards more inclusive masculinities, such as the acceptance of gay men and men who do not dress and act in ways that resonate with hegemonic norms, are still infused with unequal power relations. Acceptance is contingent – whether that be of gay men, women, even children – only in certain roles and positions. Machismo continues to dominate and shape the action at these events. Only men whose gender performances align with hegemonic norms are at the centre of the action, riding, handling horses, gambling, celebrating victories. Nowhere is this dominance more apparent than in human-horse interactions. Horses have long been seen as a symbol of power and prestige in multiple cultures and societies (Raber & Tucker, 2016) and this is replicated in these events as well. Hegemonic masculinity is performed *through* the horses, through physical dominance, risk-taking, power and control. More caring and attentive interspecies relationships are feminised and devalued, raising questions about the ethics of these events and, at times, the welfare of the horses. The size and strength of the horse remains a powerful way for men to do hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing the dominance of machismo even in a changing social and cultural context and offering many men opportunity to (re)align themselves with culturally valued masculine identities.

Conclusion

Considering the idea that gender is not a static construct but rather continuously done and redone, this paper aimed to examine horseracing as leisure spaces in which masculinities are produced and reproduced. It revealed that, in the case of rural Mexico, horse races are events that function as hyper-masculinised leisure spaces based largely on homosocialization and the performance of traditional masculine traits, such as alcohol consumption and gambling. The study also found that interspecies (i.e., human-horse) interactions are a means of expression, performance, and validation of dominant masculinities.

In this sense, the theoretical contribution of this study falls in at least two directions; on the one hand, this study contributes to debates on gender and leisure in general, incorporating empirical evidence and discussion of how gender is done and redone in leisure spaces in which the social actors -male and female; humans and non-humans- are culturally signified. On the other hand, this research advances debates on gender and equestrian leisure specifically; it reveals how in certain social contexts equestrian practices (i.e., horseracing) tend to be highly masculinised and function as spaces of production, reproduction and sometimes challenge of hegemonic masculinities and of marginalisation of women. Most of the existing research on equestrian leisure practices has been developed in contexts of the Global North; in this way, this study broadens global debates on equestrian practices incorporating a Global South perspective in which leisure, interspecies interactions and gender are signified and therefore constructed differently.

Since we conceptualise gender as an integral part of everyday interactions, this study offers practical implications in the arena of leisure and gender. Specifically, horse races are spaces that, on the one hand, reproduce and reinforce hegemonic masculinity traits but also, as this study revealed, facilitate interaction with alternative masculinities (and femininities).

Therefore, through an institutional intervention (e.g., local government), these events can function as spaces for the deconstruction of dominant masculinities, giving rise to diverse expressions and validation of what it means to be a man in contemporary Mexico.

Furthermore, horseracing, as this study revealed, segregates other minority social groups, mainly women. The participation of women in horse racing in Mexico is minimal and mostly passive, but their presence as jockeys has begun to become more visible. Thus, through a more inclusive organisation and planning of horseracing in Mexico, these events can serve as spaces that recognise and legitimise the sports participation of women in what has been historically considered an almost exclusively male activity in the Mexican context.

This study is based on four years of ethnographic immersion in the social world of these leisure horseracing events, but there are some limitations to the project to be addressed in future research. Our focus was predominantly on men and the homosocial world of horseracing events as an opportunity for men to socialise with, compete against and gamble alongside other men. Although women were sometimes present, and we did include some women in informal conversations, future research could focus more explicitly on the experiences of women in this domain and how women's presence in this hypermasculine environment impacts gender relations and the doing of masculinities and femininities.

Further, as we have argued throughout, it is important to foreground social and cultural context in investigations of both leisure practices of horseracing and their role in gender relations and the performance of gender identities. We therefore call for further research into these issues in other contexts, primarily beyond the Global North which has been the focus of most research to date, in order to explore further the complex interrelations between gender relations and identities and the multispecies leisure practice of horseracing.

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Declaration of interest statement

None.

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Figure 1: A typical scene at one of the events

Figure 2: A male rider uses his strength to try and control a horse

Figure 3: Hegemonic masculinity is performed through dress, human-horse interactions and male homosociality