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Horse racing and the growth of hashtag activism

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ABSTRACT

The Melbourne Cup is Australia's pinnacle horse racing event, attracting more than 80,000 physical attendees each year (pre-COVID-19), as well as numerous others watching via live broadcasts around the country and overseas. In recent times, however, there have been growing calls to boycott the event, following concerns over the treatment of horses. New hashtag movements lobbying against horse racing have also emerged, aided by the affordances of social media. However, very little attention has been paid to these digital movements in the animal-based leisure and recreation literature. In this study, we investigate one such growing movement, namely, #Nuptothecup. We explore how horse racing is framed by digital activists, revealing their moral, socio-cultural, and political objections. Our findings suggest a societal shift towards a strong animal ethics sentiment combined with a more generalised disdain towards the racing industry and its wider societal ramifications. We argue that if #Nuptothecup and related activisms continue to gain momentum, the Cup may eventually lose its social licence to operate. Further, we consider potential opportunities for managers to reinvent horse racing's image and practices, if it is to secure its survival as an Australian recreational institution.

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Animal rights; Twitter; clicktivism; cancel culture; consumer boycotts

Introduction

Held on the first Tuesday of November each year, the Melbourne Cup is Australia's leading horse racing event. The event attracts more than 80,000 attendees, with a winning prize of close to A $8 million for the champion jockey and owner (Regan, 2019). In 2019, more than A$160 million in gaming bets were received (Zhuang & Hatch, 2019). However, attitudes towards the event affectionately known as the '*Race that stops the nation*' are increasingly polarised (Wahlquist, 2019). Proponents of the event are attracted to the festivities often associated with food, drink, and fashion trends (Paine, 2019). Opponents cite high-profile media reports about the alleged mistreatment of animals as evidence that racehorses have been objects of consumerism (Burke, 2019). Since 2013, seven horses have died participating in Melbourne Cup race day events, succumbing to injuries that were deemed too hard to treat (Vincent, 2022).

Media revelations have given momentum to new hashtag movements that oppose horse racing on ethical grounds. This paper analyses the drivers of one such movement, namely, #Nuptothecup, which has been the subject of growing interest, along with #horseracingkills and #animalcruelty (Russell, 2021). We argue that such movements are best understood within the broader sphere of global movements that are reshaping attitudes and debates around human-animal relationships in leisure and recreation. Further, we propose that as digital activism becomes more widespread,

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understanding the transformational role of technology in progressing and supporting social movements is paramount.

For the animal recreation industry, the growing opposition to using animals as objects of entertainment highlight the importance of a *social licence to operate*: 'Business enterprises invoke the "social licence to operate" . . . to indicate that their activities are considered as legitimate in the eyes of society' (Demuijnck & Fasterling, 2016, p. 675). When they fail to respond to societal concerns regarding the ethicality of their operations, their social licence can eventually be lost (McManus, 2022).

The study is particularly interesting considering 'cancel culture' and related 'call-out culture' phenomena, both viewed as defining aspects of the digital era. The paper distinguishes 'cancel culture' from a tool to ostracise individuals due to certain actions or non-actions (see for instance Mueller, 2021; Wong, 2022), to focus on an event that foregrounds animal rights and ethics. Using data from Twitter, we seek to unpack the human-animal recreational context of the #Nuptothecup movement and consider the implications for Australia's horseracing industry. Can the industry salvage its image and survive the growing negative attention? What more can be done about animal welfare for horses?

The changing landscape of human-animal ethics

Humans have a long history of using animals for entertainment and recreation (Coley, 2010). The first zoological gardens established in London in 1826 launched a global phenomenon of exhibiting animals in zoos and aquariums for visitors' pleasure (Turley, 1999). While the focus has since transformed into one of education and conservation, these sites retain their popularity as places of leisure and recreation (Ballantyne et al., 2007). Opportunities to view and interact with non-captive animals have also proliferated. Such offerings range from cruises to observe whales and dolphins to wildlife safaris, and bird-watching tours (Ballantyne et al., 2007). Researchers estimate that wildlife encounters account for 20–40% of all tourism and leisure activity (Carr, 2009; Moorhouse et al., 2017).

While viewing and interacting with wildlife is an attractive proposition to most, concerns about animal welfare, animal protection, and animal rights are on the rise (Keulartz, 2015). Against this backdrop of various terms, criticism of the treatment of these animals is not new. Even with the early zoo exhibits of the 1900s, visitors expressed concerns about the starkness of the exhibits and the visibility of the bars (Mason, 2000). Eventually, public objections resulted in changes to exhibit practices: barriers were replaced with dry, or water-filled moats, and shrubbery and artificial rocks were used to provide a more realistic appearance (Grazian, 2012). Nowadays, zoos are more 'naturalized' - open spaces, soundscapes, and water features that mimic the animals' natural environment, as well as an interpretation that informs visitors about animal and habitat conservation, are *de rigueur* (Ballantyne et al., 2007; Keulartz, 2015). These improvements in display practices are important because they influence visitors' perceptions of how well animals are being cared for. Packer et al. (2018) surveyed visitors at a zoo exhibit where they used different indicators such as body condition, activity levels, and provision of food and water in a clean and attractive environment to judge animal health and happiness. Against this backdrop, animal welfare in zoos has been further advanced with a range of technological tools revealing indicators of health and well-being for different species (Ward et al., 2018). Yet, critics argue that what can be measured doesn't always capture the complexities of animal welfare from sociological and biological perspectives (Cole & Fraser, 2018; Veasey, 2022; Whitham & Wielebnowski, 2013). After all, many of these theoretical and epistemological debates have mostly been undertaken from anthropocentric perspectives, as there remains scant literature surrounding longitudinal, or a universally accepted animal-centric health and wellbeing index (Williams, 2021; Yin et al., 2021). Such factors are relevant in the discussion of the Melbourne Cup because there are increasing expectations within the high-profile event that whilst the horses are the showpiece on race day, they would nevertheless be well looked after before, during, and after their respective competitions (McManus, 2022). In

addition, there are increasing calls to ban or change the dynamics around the race and its association with gambling, where the horses are domesticated to run to satiate punter demand (Marko et al., 2022; Rawat et al., 2020; Shaheer et al., 2022). Training is largely conducted 'behind the scenes', which fuels further speculation as to the methods being used (Winter & Frew, 2018). Accordingly, many organisations go to great lengths to explain their training, husbandry, and animal enrichment programmes.

Public opposition has been particularly vocal about animal shows (for example Bansiddhi et al., 2020; Malikhao & Servaes, 2017). This has in part prompted a sharp global decline in animal-based circuses and cancellations of animal shows at some zoos and aquariums (Winter, 2020). A well-publicised example is the 2019 closure of Sea World's theatrical Orca shows and breeding programme due to declining ticket sales and public outcry about keeping large mammals in captivity. Pressure from activists in Canada has also prompted bans on confining, breeding, and showcasing cetaceans in captivity (PETA, 2019). Researchers speculate that such censure has been partially fuelled by popular movies and documentaries such as Free Willy and Blackfish (Waller & Iluzada, 2020; Winter, 2020). Other large mammals could be next, with many urban zoos debating whether they have the necessary space and resources to keep animals such as elephants (Keulartz, 2015).

Since its inception, the animal rights movement has focused on the moral and exploitative issues associated with humans' use of animals (Munro, 2012; Keulartz, 2015). Protests typically use confronting images and examples to recruit supporters, likening animal abuse to abuse against women and children (Munro, 2012). To illustrate, the legislative advocacy of the League Against Cruel Sports and grassroots work by anti-hunting groups has seen the banning of fox hunting in Britain (Munro, 2012).

The relevance of wildlife ethics and animal rights is foregrounded in terms of thoroughbreds as in the context of the Melbourne Cup. This is because such horses are not wild but are instead domesticated and groomed to be part of a global circuit of horseracing events. While animal rights activists argue for all animals to have equal treatment, different contextual underpinnings make the Melbourne Cup (and other horse races) a problematic and complex environment to situate moral and ethical lenses. On the one hand, proponents of the Melbourne Cup attest to how such thoroughbreds are cared for and given the appropriate training to perform at their optimal level (Bell et al., 2020). Yet, opponents argue that such horses should not be domesticated in the first instance, and certainly not subject to mistreatment, gambling bets, and potential death (Cassidy, 2010).

Horse racing was once the prerogative of racing enthusiasts and supporters and required attendance trackside; now, activities are recorded and distributed globally via television and social media. This media coverage has sparked interest and debate about welfare issues, none more controversial than the use of whips (Graham & McManus, 2016). The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) as a welfare group has decreed that racing is permissible if the industry adheres to animal welfare standards, but animal rights groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have condemned horseracing as cruel and called for a ban on whip use. While thoroughbred horse races are conducted in over 50 countries, it is interesting to note that there are no universal rules and regulations about whips. However, under sustained public pressure, the racing industry in Australia has recently introduced padded whips and new whip rules that include penalties for exceeding the permissible number of whip strikes in a race (Bell et al., 2020).

Other investigations and allegations into the horse racing industry have been conducted in recent years for a range of issues such as suspicious deaths, misuse of drugs, fixing bets, and animal abuse (Jeffery, 2023; Langenberg, 2023; Paley, 2023; Pengilley, 2022). These issues come because of horse trainer Darren Weir admitting to animal cruelty charges, and avoiding criminal conviction as a result (Beatty, 2022). This shift from objectifying horses as a vehicle for consumption to developing a persona for horses is triggered by the racing industry itself. Horses are named and treated as individuals, and those who earn large amounts of prize money are promoted as celebrities (Notzke, 2016; Yerbury et al., 2017). As a supply-side consideration, most studies have ignored the role of animals, such as horses, and how their voices generally remain silent in research (Dashper &

Brymer, 2019; McManus, 2022). Nevertheless, there is growing awareness of the ethics of using animals in events such as the Melbourne Cup (Markwell et al., 2017).

Proponents of horse-related activities and events highlight sustainable outcomes, arguing that horse riding has socio-economic benefits for local communities (Brown, 2003; Helgadottir & Siguroardottir, 2008. Literature on horse racing to date has focused mostly on attendee motivations. Researchers such as Akhoodnejad (2018) argue that loyalty to horse racing events has grown out of cultural values and norms to become almost ritualistic behaviour. Other scholars allude to the intensification of gambling as a social practice, leading to a vested interest in participation in the sport (Kim & Petrick, 2004). The changing landscape of animal-human ethics is becoming more complicated as different stakeholders and monetary or non-monetary modes of engagement become enmeshed over time and space.

Hashtag movements cancel culture and the digital era

Ubiquitous technology adoption in contemporary societies has given rise to rapid communication and activism (Baer, 2016; Mkono, 2018). Social media networking has enabled a new kind of activism, namely 'clicktivism', centred on hashtags, thus 'hashtag movements' (Halupka, 2014, 2018; Karpf, 2010). Hashtag movements are credited with playing a key role in positive cultural and political shifts on a global scale (Ceron, 2018). A few notable recent examples include:

- Ice Bucket Challenge to bring awareness to health issues (Koohy & Koohy, 2014)
- #metoo campaign to shed light on sexual harassment (Rodino-Colocino, 2018)
- Extinction rebellion protests to stimulate actions that mitigate climate change (Slaven & Heydon, 2020)

Numerous hashtag movements relating to animal ethics have also emerged. One of the most impactful was the #cecilthelion movement, which brought trophy hunting back into public consciousness (Carpenter & Konisky, 2019). When Cecil, a famous lion living at Hwange National Park, was shot by Walter Palmer, an American trophy hunter, there was global outrage which led to calls for a hunting ban on charismatic megafauna (Carpenter & Konisky, 2019; Mkono, 2018, 2019).

Such hashtag activisms are an iteration of boycotts, which are a means to gather concerted attention and effort to refuse consumption of a particular product or ban (Friedman, 1991). Boycotts have been in existence for several decades, in forms such as taking a stance against fur products, conglomerates that are allegedly associated with child labour exploitation, or brands that have been linked with animal testing of products. The diversity of boycotts has given rise to academic literature seeking to unpack the motives and impacts of such actions, where there is consensus that consumers are taking a moral stance towards social justice issues (Albrecht et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2004; Shim et al., 2021). The advent of the digital age has also promulgated the viral effect of boycotts via a range of tools, including hashtags (Hosseini et al., 2023; Makarem & Jae, 2016.

While the global scale of hashtag movements is beyond doubt, several studies point to their dangers and shortcomings. First, clicktivism does not always lead to action or change in the real world (Halupka, 2018). The ease of clicking and sharing a post means that even social media users who have no actual investment in the success of the movement get to 'participate'. Second, clicktivists can be merely virtue signalling – enhancing their social image through demonstrating and showing off their ethical and 'woke' credentials. This phenomenon is the subject of derisive references to 'keyboard warriors' (Loebach et al., 2019) and cancel culture (Wood et al., 2021).

The latter, cancel culture, is viewed negatively by some scholars who see it as a symptom of over-correction when society engages in self-reflection over a recognised injustice or unfairness (Bouvier, 2020; Clark, 2020; Wood et al., 2021). It is also seen as stifling healthy debate and the balanced consideration of facts and context (Norris, 2020). Other scholars however view criticisms of cancel culture themselves as prejudicial and intended to dismiss legitimate critiques of societal structures

and practices (Clark, 2020). We draw on these polarities to position #Nuptothecup in the contemporary, digital activism space.

Moral pluralism

It is useful for us to briefly outline a philosophical positionality that underpins the study, about animal ethics. We adopt a position best described as *moral pluralism* - the idea that there can be conflicting moral views that are each worthy of respect (Brennan, 1992; Raus et al., 2018). As Brennan (1992) puts it, moral pluralism recognises that our feelings and reactions to situations are drawn from many sources and often cannot be simplified without distortion. As such, it accepts that moral compromise is often necessary for creating a middle ground and moving towards consensus between the different factions in an ethical debate (Raus et al., 2018).

A pluralist stance then allows us to examine the #Nuptothecup movement without making a value judgement on its claims and goals, while still evaluating its theoretical and practical implications. #Nuptothecup started in 2010 as a petition against the use of horses for the Melbourne Cup, especially when these animals appear as tools for the gaming industry (Francis, 2022). Proponents of #Nuptothecup also call for businesses and individuals to boycott the event, which has gained traction to some extent (Ward, 2019). The intent of the petition was not to cancel the event in its entirety, but rather offer alternative perspectives of how one can have an enjoyable day out without necessarily subjecting the horses to potential mistreatment, and possible death on the racetrack (Modaro, 2022). Nevertheless, the hashtag has since been appropriated by political parties calling for the ban of whips and the removal of public funding to the horse racing industry (Ractliffe, 2022). #nuptothecup enables us to see more holistically 'how moral values can often come into conflict – interculturally, interpersonally, and even intrapersonally – and thus allows us to see how getting people to enact their moral values might not be a normatively desired end goal for all people at all times' (Graham et al., 2015, p. 166). With this framework, while focusing on the voices of those opposed to horse racing, we can still acknowledge divergent attitudes and arguments around horse racing as a human-animal phenomenon occurring in an evolving social context.

Methods

The unit of analysis takes the form of Twitter 'tweets' using the hashtag #Nuptothecup. Twitter allows for a rich introspection of the hashtag and has been utilised in other studies to examine online activism and boycotting behaviour and communication, both in tourism and leisure contexts (see for instance, Makarem & Jae, 2016; Sanderson et al., 2016; Shaheer et al., 2022). Qualitative analysis of the hashtag was largely grounded, allowing thematic patterns to emerge inductively from the data, without imposing an *a priori* framework that might otherwise exclude insights that have not previously been captured (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Data collection and analysis

Data were downloaded into an Excel file using Netlytic, a free digital data software that has gained popularity in social media analyses (Santarossa et al., 2019), covering the first 1000 tweets posted on 3 November 2020, the day of the 2020 Melbourne Cup, and the first 300 tweets posted between October 1 and 15 October 2021, leading up to the 2021 Melbourne Cup. The 1300 tweets were collated for qualitative thematic analysis. Of these, 70% were original tweets, while the remaining 30% were retweets. A further 100 tweets posted after 15 October 2021, yielded no new insights, indicating data saturation.

The 1300 tweets were coded into 17 categories as shown in Table 1. These categories were subsequently grouped under three themes (Figure 1). All stages of analysis were conducted

Table 1. How #Nuptothecup activists critique horse racing.

Categories	Frequency (% of total comments)
Death of racehorses	53.00
Cruelty, abuse, exploitation of horses/animals	29.66
Gambling/addiction/greed/money	16.30
The hedonism of the race	16.00
Petitioning to ban the race and horse racing/equestrian events	14.00
Drunkenness/rowdy behaviour/trashy/barbaric behaviour	9.33
Condemnation of industry and people within the industry	9.33
Celebrity and media criticism	5.66
General opinions on the state of humanity/morals/ethics	5.66
Role of politicians and government	4.33
Mistreatment of ex-racehorses	3.33
Remorse or statement on previously celebrating the race day tradition	3.00
Mobilising anti-race/pro-horse protests and movements	1.33
Questioning the legality of the race i.e. Corruption	1.00
Other ways to engage with horses/race day tradition	1.00
Links to domestic violence	1.00
Exposure of children	0.66

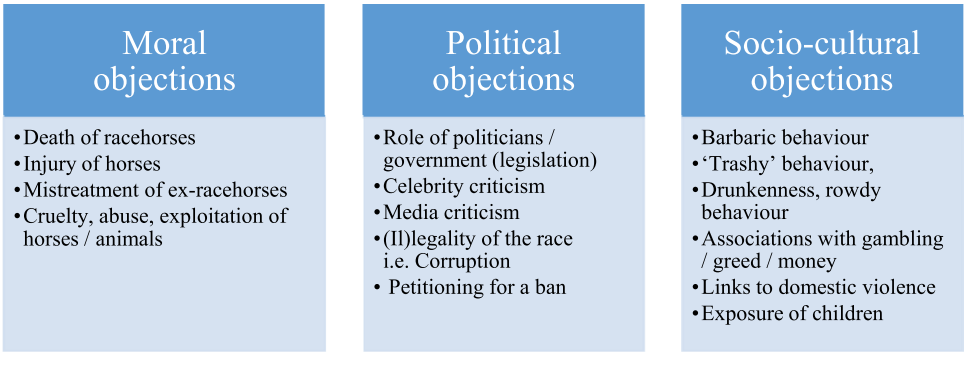

Figure 1. Criticisms of horse racing.

independently by the four authors, followed by the iterative exchange of notes, brainstorming, and debriefing, until agreement was reached on the final themes. It should be noted that each post could be coded in multiple categories and therefore, the sum of frequencies exceeds 100%.

The goal of the analytic process was to create an inventory of the criticisms of horse racing levelled by #Nuptothecup activists. We sought to understand how they frame horse racing as a human-animal interaction and as an activity occurring in a broader social context. Why are they motivated to participate in this collective action online? This inventory will then help to determine which managerial responses would be appropriate for the racing industry. It should be noted that the scope of our analysis does not however extend to 'real world' activism, that is, what the activists may do 'offline' to further their cause.

Findings

Criticisms of the race are presented under three categories, detailing the moral, socio-cultural, and political objections recurrent in #Nuptothecup Twitter activity (Figure 1)

Moral objections

The deaths and mistreatment of racehorses connected to the Cup and the horse racing industry more broadly was a key theme highlighted by most tweets (87%). For those holding this sentiment,

animals should not be used for entertainment and should not be subjected to cruelty, an apparent violation of animal rights (Markwell et al., 2017). The death of the celebrity racehorse, Anthony Van Dyck (AVD), was mentioned frequently and incited highly emotional responses from posts. During the 2020 Melbourne Cup, the Irish stallion was euthanised on the tracks after breaking down during the race after a fetlock fracture (ABC News, 2020). This is not an uncommon occurrence within horse racing, and to many, the death was an apt symbol of horse racing's dangerous underbelly, for example: '*No animal deserves to suffer like this for gambling money* 💔*RIP Anthony Van Dyck', and:* '*. . . A horse dies *at least* once every 3 days in Australian racing. The risk is known but deemed to be a risk worth taking in the pursuit of gambling profits . . . '*. Posters also referred to cumulative horse deaths to illustrate the scale of the problem, often using emotive and empathic language to draw attention to the suffering of horses:

> @bastardsheep – They love them so much that they won't think twice about turning them into glue and pet food if they slow down or get injured.
>
> @FlickReynolds – I admit I always had a bet on the Melbourne Cup. But when I understood the cruelty involved & saw several horses dead because of the Cup I realised we're all better than this. . .
>
> @Peter_Fitz – I don't need to be amused to death by some blood sport that kills countless horses.
>
> @SteveM_ac @Peter_Fitz – No one gives a fuck about that horse race anymore. It is so last century and so uncool. Rather watch Rugby League on repeat 10 *hours straight* than watch a race that causes horses to fall and get a bullet in the head!

Whipping practices were frequently mentioned, with several posters raising the 2020 incident when champion jockey, Kerrin McEvoy, was fined $50,000 and put on a 13-meeting suspension for excessive whipping on Melbourne Cup runner-up winner, Tiger Moth. Tiger Moth's second-place winnings brought more than $1.1 million with McEvoy reported to receive $55,000 of the money, which negated the punishment, according to one poster: *Details explain why this isn't good enough. The jockey is fined $50,000 allowing him to take home $5,000 and the horse winnings are 1.1 million.*

#Nuptothecup posters were also concerned with the way ex-racehorses are treated, including being sent to knackeries, slaughterhouses, and dog food factories: *@AusFarms revealing nothing has changed since last year's 7:30 Report. Gerry Harvey sends horses straight from his stud to slaughter, despite assurances from the industry it doesn't happen*. Elaborating on the plight of these racehorses, @AnimalLibORG revealed 💔 *Thousands of others suffer from bleeding lungs, respiratory distress, abrasions, lacerations, cardiac arrhythmia, bowed tendons, colic, fractures, thumps, & lameness*. Other forms of animal mistreatment were also raised by several others, such as @susanamet *Watch and see the horses struggling with those horrible tongue ties. Ugly, cruel, distressing, far from glamourous*. These tweets illuminate perhaps a lesser-known angle of animal rights and welfare that are associated with the glamorous image presented of the Melbourne Cup, where media representation is narrowly confined to the fine fashion, celebratory tones of betting wins, and other event festivities (Marko et al., 2022; McManus, 2022). To further highlight the torturous nature of horse racing, one poster invoked Indigenous sprinter Cathy Freeman. By drawing a human-animal analogy using an iconic, well-known Australian athlete, the poster can portray horse racing as a barbaric, morally reprehensible practice:

> @abcnews Cathy Freeman wins the World Champs and the Olympics.
>
> At her next event, they make her carry 30 kg weights, and push her to run as fast as before – just to even up the betting odds better.
>
> She falls, snaps her neck, and dies. And they do it again the next time.

Notably, highlighting personal moral evolution, some posters showed genuine remorse for previously celebrating the event, having now considered the ramifications of race day on the animals: '*@keegs Agree. My attitude has completely changed – used to love the carnival but can't ignore the*

cruelty'. Within this personal reflection on past behaviour, some posters expressed the need for society to evolve, rather than upholding tradition as an end, arguing '*I think humans can evolve to be better than subjecting horses to racing and killing them when they're hurt from it'*. The tweets further cast a spotlight on animal ethics and welfare because the horses are seemingly subjugated into the 'win-at-all-cost' mentality, with high gambling stakes and exposure to whips seemingly acceptable in the racing fraternity (McLean & McGreevy, 2010; O'brien, 2022).

Socio-cultural objections

Posters (43%) also drew several negative associations with the race, including perceptions of greed and excess, as well the many socially undesirable connotations of the gambling industry: '*This beautiful creature died today because of money and greed, proving once again – for the 7th year in a row – that horse racing is deadly and inhumane'*.

Others also made allegations of illegal activities involved in the industry and the staging of the event, thus questioning not just the morality, but also the legality of the event, and in many instances invoking discourses of '*Corruption', 'Doping', and 'Gambling'*. In addition, racing was linked to alcohol-fuelled violence, with posters positioning this critique within the context of other social justice issues in Australian society, for example: '*Today, the day when *adults* celebrate flogging for entertainment, problem gambling, organised crime, drug and alcohol-fuelled violence. Hooray!'* This point illustrates the irony of declaring a public holiday for the race when the horses themselves do not benefit from it whatsoever and are instead tools for the public display in the festivities of the Melbourne Cup, arguably a violation of their animal rights (Winter & Frew, 2018).

There was discomfort with the stark contradictions between the image and reality of the race. On one hand, the posters commented, the event is promoted as a 'glitz and glamour' affair, while on the other it is marked by post-race day snaps of drunken punters, the antithesis of classiness: '*See past the carefully cultivated image of "glitz and glamour" the racing industry wants you to see'*. This elicited an instance of cultural cringe among the activists.

The fashions of the race were also derided as shallow and pretentious, especially when juxtaposed with what posters saw as depraved and abhorrent behaviour: "*You all realise you can wear a stupid hat and get black-out drunk without horses having to die, right?* Posters drew vivid caricatures of the race scenes, to portray the imagery as grotesque and tasteless: '*Whoooo go Melbourne, who's getting vaccinated so we can all get together and watch a horse break its leg, then pass out blackout-drunk on the nature strip?'*. Racing was therefore often evaluated by the activists within its wider social context, and not just as a human-animal interaction.

Political objections

A significant proportion of the posters (19%) named and shamed politicians, celebrities, public figures, and organisations associated with the race. For example, Comedian Dave Hughes, who was covering the 2020 event on a television panel, was 'called out' as a hypocrite for being a vegan and yet commentating on an event they viewed as exploiting animals: '*Given Dave Hughes is a vegan I would have thought he would have said no to racing but he is his beast. #Nuptothecup'*.

Not surprisingly, politicians and the government were denounced for their financial support of the event, and their lack of action on regulating the industry: "*Idea34 @oz_f I'm a greens MEMBER & have voiced my DISGUST regarding the Member for MELBOURNE unwillingness to speak out against the corporate fat cats and gambling tycoons that he sucks up to on an annual basis*. Politician Bill Shorten was criticised for not supporting lobbying against the industry. This was often interpreted as a result of politicians benefiting from the industry's political donations to his party: '*@billshortenmp You're on the wrong side of this. You should be helping us stop the lobbying & sneaky political party donations the gambling industry exploits to influence govt decisions on legislation'*. Thus, the activists saw an opportunity to bring attention to the regulatory and legislative

gaps they perceived in Australia's human-animal ethics practices. By naming and shaming specific individuals, and 'speaking truth to power', they sought to use the affordances of social media to call out culture to force political change.

Horse racing is wired into the political agenda, where government and private sector support in terms of funding and other resourcing fuelling a large-scale industry that generates economic and sociocultural benefits not limited to gambling revenues, but also employment (Cusack & Digance, 2009). This research further amplifies that animal ethics and welfare need to take on board a refreshing perspective on how social licences are framed, and how this is to be operationalised in the future (Heleski, 2023). Comparisons can be made to the greyhound industry that was shut down temporarily amidst animal abuse and betting syndicate allegations, where the 'new' *modus operandi* was to institutionalise a national body to oversee the sector and uphold animal welfare and ethical practices in the form of a Greyhound Welfare & Integrity Commission.

Discussion

The findings point towards increasing adoption of Hashtag activism calling for boycotting of the Melbourne Cup, reiterating Monterrubio and Perez's (2021) posthumanistic framing of horses employed in leisure events. The movement's animal rights and animal welfare concerns are consistent with other activists against the use of animals in leisure and recreation, in Australia, and globally, where animals are defended as feeling, beautiful beings that should not be exploited for human entertainment (Fennell, 2012; Mkono & Holder, 2019). This sentiment is shared by Street (2019, p. 1): 'In the racing industry the horses always lose, no matter how it seems, even if they win'. The activists portrayed the Melbourne Cup as an outdated and barbaric practice that no longer belongs in a modern, civilised Australia.

Notably, #Nuptothecup tweets in many instances also expressed regret for having previously celebrated or participated in the race – by their admission, their values and norms had evolved. As Sparrow (2019, p. 38) argues, 'the growing contempt for the Cup doesn't just reflect the obvious social polarisation of contemporary Australia', but also 'expresses a related shift in attitudes to nature, in the context of a planet on the brink of ecological meltdown'. The result, Street (2019) argues, is that horse racing might be slowly losing its 'social licence'. According to Duncan et al. (2018), existing practices of social licence to operate have been very restrictive, and the lack of transparency in dealing with the horse racing industry has led to greater mistrust and potential exploitation of these animals for leisure. For this reason, McGreevy and McManus (2017) argue that as societal attitudes are evolving, organisations that govern human-animal relations will have to respond to these changes or face their demise. This is not just true for horse racing in Australia, but for all contexts involving the use of animals in recreation (Mkono & Holder, 2019).

The hashtag also drew attention to what Winter and Frew (2018) refer to as the backstage of thoroughbred racing, beyond the glitz and glamour of the frontstage – the sense that what the public sees is a misrepresentation of what happens 'behind the scenes'. However, with the advent of digital technologies, Winter and Frew (2018, p. 457) noted, that social media is being used to 'breach the front-back boundary', by providing easy access to information about the treatment of horses. Such outcomes extend the work of other media sources such as television features on the unknown aspects of the horse-racing industry in programmes like 'The Final Race' (ABC, 2019). This documentary shed light on the predicament of retired or injured racehorses subject to alleged cruelty at abattoirs, which triggered a swath of policy regulations across Australia (Martin & Reid, 2020).

The many negative associations of the race, including its wider societal ramifications also came to the fore in #Nuptothecup, with links to domestic violence, corruption, gaming, and greed. These criticisms corroborate Wilson et al. (2021) findings from a 2020 attitude poll which revealed increasing criticism of the welfare of racing horses and greater awareness of the ethics of gambling (see also McManus & Graham, 2014).

There was a pattern of disdain directed at the race's pretentiousness and its 'trashy' aftermath, observations which resonate with Wahlquist's (2019, p. 1) assessment that people are increasingly 'appalled by the cultural cringe of seeing dozens of well-dressed adults vomiting into port-a-loos at 2 pm' and see the spectacle of horse racing as both 'insufferably stuffy' and 'unbearably gauche'. This is viewed as undermining the 'elite', 'high culture' image orchestrated by the holders of the event, who want the attention to remain on the convivial atmosphere, elaborate fashions, and exclusive pavilions (Winter & Young, 2014).

The drive to stop the Melbourne Cup is particularly interesting in the context of cancel culture. On the one hand, as critics of cancel culture will argue, such movements can lead to 'mob rule' and 'vigilante justice', producing an outcome that is as unjust as the original problem (Ahmad, 2015; Bouvier, 2020). On the other hand, cancel culture can be viewed positively as an expression of collective agency, where ordinary people can band together to express censure of a powerful institution (Bouvier, 2020; Duque et al., 2020). In this instance, it is a way to keep the horse racing industry accountable, ensuring that the treatment of horses at least broadly meets societal expectations.

The naming and shaming of individuals and organisations in the tweets are another element of the social media zeitgeist and its call-out culture (Bouvier, 2020). Ahmad (2015) cautions that this kind of call-out and shaming can be toxic as it reduces people to representations of the systems from which they benefit. In the present study, this behaviour manifested as criticisms of politician Bill Shorten and television personality David Hughes.

While an in-depth analysis of the views of those who support the race falls outside the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that the race continues to enjoy the support of many Australians. Not everyone in Australia engages in the ethical reflection that we find in #Nuptothecup. Indeed, for many Australians, as Cusack and Digance (2009) write, the race constitutes a secular pilgrimage, and its traditions are quasi-religious or 'spiritual' rituals that reinforce Australian identity. And as one tweeter laments: 'The culture of horse racing is so entrenched here. Until things like #Nuptothecup become way bigger in Melbourne nothing will change'.

Overall, the digital landscape further drives the pursuit of animal welfare and ethics across a global audience, as hashtags are a powerful medium to prompt urgent responses to complex underpinnings associated with horse racing. Furthermore, reports of horse racing becoming less popular with the younger generation may indicate that this is an opportune moment to initiate changes that matter (Hoffman et al., 2020; Roult et al., 2017). In summary, the data reflect the opposition between animal rights (that animals ought not to be used for any purpose), and an opposing anthropocentric view (where humans can use animals for any purpose). The anthropocentric view is tempered by the welfare ethic (which assumes animals can be used, but that their welfare should, but not always 'must', be considered). Through hashtag activism using #nuptothecup, this paper foregrounds the potential value of digital tools such as social media to galvanise collection awareness, attention, and action to bring about desired changes to the horse racing industry.

Conclusion

The study makes a significant theoretical contribution to the literature on animal ethics and animal-based recreation. It unpacks an example of hashtag activism and its socio-ethical nuances as they emerge within a globally important social media platform, Twitter. Specifically, the study explores the #Nuptothecup movement and its lobbying efforts to boycott horse racing in Australia. Through immersion in these social media texts, the paper offers theoretical and practical insights relevant to the future of human-wildlife interactions in leisure.

#Nuptothecup highlights that the horse racing industry if it exists, will have to contend with outrage among those who hold strong animal rights and animal welfare views. Furthermore, considering cancel culture and call-out culture in the social media age, the influence of such movements is set to grow. To continue thriving, horse racing will require

a strong social licence to operate, strong enough to counteract the increasingly loud critical voices. This study suggests that obtaining and retaining such a licence is by no means guaranteed.

For managers in the racing industry, in Australia and globally, the appropriate course of action is a complex question. How does the industry respond to its critics while preserving the sport? How does it reinvent the sport and its image to deal with changing societal attitudes towards racing? McGreevy and McManus (2017) suggest that the industry can re-earn and protect its social licence by taking responsibility for improving horse and rider welfare in everyday practices and committing to reporting on and incrementally improving the welfare metrics of animals. Employing education strategies like those in zoos and aquariums may also help.

Managing the behaviour of people attending Melbourne Cup events may also assist in assuaging the concerns of detractors. The oft-touted mismatch between the glamourous televised images of 'Fashions on the field' and people gambling, consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, and engaging in disorderly behaviour are difficult to reconcile. While challenging to envisage, it may become necessary to ban alcohol and gambling at the venue to ensure the event's long-term viability. Another more amenable approach would be to solicit event attendees for donations towards the welfare and rights of horses, and such 'soft' appeals may assist towards a more responsible, and ethical stance within animal-human leisure interactions (Sands, 2019).

Certainly, there are, and will always be, those who continue to defend the practices and ethics surrounding horse racing. Indeed, the importance of the Cup in the national psyche is well established, and virtually guarantees its survival, at least in the short to medium term. Nonetheless, we cannot rule out the power of social media, and the possibility that in time, opposition to the race may gain enough momentum to threaten the long-term future of the industry.

There could also be a remote, yet possible scenario where the entire horse racing industry is shut down by governments pulling out of financial agreements. As several reports have indicated, many racecourses, and racing clubs are funded by government agencies and the disappearance of these key sponsors for animal ethics and welfare reasons could very well spell the end of such an industry. This was the case of the greyhound industry in Australia, where legislation forced the sector to close in the Australian Capital Territory as incidents of animal abuse, illegal substance use, and gambling rorts began to populate.

Perhaps a more likely outcome is the formation of animal welfare and ethics governance across sport, leisure, and other forms of entertainment to regulate matters within horse racing, and elsewhere, as proposed by Stallones et al. (2023). This could expedite the use of technologies in the sector, e.g. blockchain, to ensure accountability and transparency of reporting and systems over the life of a horse (see for instance Hogan, 2022).

A few limitations to the study are noted. First, it was conducted from the perspective of supporters of a single hashtag movement on a single social media platform. Opponents of the hashtag, or responses on other hashtags, or social media platforms, may have been less extreme and may have elicited more support for the continued running of the Melbourne Cup. Other scholars may wish to compare several movements, including those affiliated with the supporters of horse racing, across different national, language, and cultural contexts. Future studies may also include interviews or surveys with boycotters and non-boycotters, to examine their views in more depth. We envisage that many other lines of inquiry will continue to reveal the complex socio-ethical influences that shape people's interactions with animals, in sports, and beyond. Such projects advance theoretical and practical contributions such as in the field of ethics theory and biocentrism.

Disclosure statement

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