

# TOURISMUS

## TOURISM

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### THE USE OF ANIMALS FOR URBAN TOURISM: HORSE SPORTS AND EQUESTRIAN EVENTS IN ST. MORITZ, SWITZERLAND

Niklas F. ELVERICH and Frauke KRAAS (both: Cologne [Köln])\*

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### *Summary*

*Animals contribute to tourism, but tourism-related research focuses primarily on free-ranging or captive wildlife tourism. St. Moritz in Switzerland is a premium destination where horses have been used for tourism for more than 160 years, for instance in White Turf racing and Snow Polo. Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyse how*

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\* Niklas F. ELVERICH. M.Sc., B.Sc. (*corresponding author*), Institute of Geography, University of Cologne, Albertus-Magnus-Platz, D-50923 Cologne [Köln], Germany. ORCID: 0003-3657-6848. – Prof. Dr. habil. Frauke KRAAS, chair and full professor, Institute of Geography, University of Cologne, Albertus-Magnus-Platz, D-50923 Cologne [Köln], Germany. ORCID: 0002-3498-6758. – Email: [nelveril@uni-koeln.de](mailto:nelveril@uni-koeln.de), [f.kraas@uni-koeln.de](mailto:f.kraas@uni-koeln.de).

*horses contribute to the tourism event economy of St. Moritz and how locals and tourists perceive equestrian event tourism.*

*To address these questions, a survey with 352 questionnaires and ten expert interviews were conducted. A total of 74.7 percent of the inhabitants surveyed found the equestrian events positive, with the main reasons they cited including the traditional nature of the events locally (equestrian events have been held regularly since 1906), the associated entertainment and marketing for St. Moritz, the horses themselves as animals and related equestrian sports. The equestrian event tourism is responsible for many primary and secondary effects that are important for the region, resulting in an added value of at least CHF 47,000,000 annually, generated by at least 60,000 visitors. The effort expended, including the preparation of infrastructure for the horse races and polo on the frozen lake in winter, is internationally unique.*

*This equestrian tourism demonstrates how forms of animal-based tourism can contribute significantly to the economy while ensuring international recognition derived from the annually held events that contrast clearly with other established forms of animal-based tourism like zoos or safaris. This demonstrates that successful animal-based tourism can be achieved not only with unique wildlife species in their natural habitats, but with non-unique domesticated species.*

*Keywords: Animal-based tourism, animal geographies, more-than-human geographies, equestrian sports events, frozen lake, White Turf, St. Moritz, Switzerland.*

## *Zusammenfassung*

### DER EINSATZ VON TIEREN IM STÄDTISCHEN TOURISMUS: REITSPORT UND REITVERANSTALTUNGEN IN ST. MORITZ, SCHWEIZ

*Tiere sind ein signifikanter Bestandteil des Tourismus, jedoch konzentriert sich die Forschung diesbezüglich primär auf freilebende oder in Gefangenschaft lebende Wildtiere. Eine Destination, die seit mehr als 160 Jahren Pferde für touristische Zwecke nutzt, ist St. Moritz in der Schweiz (zum Beispiel mit den Events White Turf und Snow Polo). Das Ziel dieses Artikels ist es, zu analysieren, wie Pferde zur Tourismuswirtschaft von St. Moritz beitragen und wie Einheimische und Touristen dies wahrnehmen.*

*Zur Beantwortung dieser Fragen wurden 352 quantitative Umfragen und 10 qualitative Experteninterviews durchgeführt. 74,7 Prozent der befragten Einwohner von St. Moritz / dem Engadin bewerteten die Pferdesportevents positiv; die Hauptgründe hierfür waren, dass die Veranstaltungen Teil der lokalen Tradition sind (seit 1906 finden Pferdesportevents regelmäßig statt), weiters der gebotene Unterhaltungswert und die damit einhergehende Werbung für St. Moritz sowie das Pferd als Tier selbst und der damit verbundene Reitsport. Die Pferdesportevents sind für viele primäre und sekundäre Effekte in der Region verantwortlich, die jedes Jahr eine Wertschöpfung von mindestens 47 Millionen Schweizer Franken durch mindestens 60,000 Besucher generieren. Dazu gehören der Aufbau einer außergewöhnlichen Infrastruktur auf dem gefrorenen St. Moritzersee für die international einmaligen Pferderennen sowie Polo auf Eis und Schnee im Winter.*

*Die Pferdesportevents in St. Moritz haben gezeigt, wie tierbasierte Tourismusformen durch jährlich stattfindende Veranstaltungen im Kontrast zu anderen etablierten Formen wie Zoos oder Safaris erheblich zur Wirtschaft beitragen und gleichzeitig zu internationaler Wahrnehmung führen. Dies zeigt, dass erfolgreicher tierbasierter Tourismus nicht nur mit einzigartigen Wildtierarten in ihren natürlichen Lebensräumen möglich ist, sondern auch mit domestizierten Arten erreicht werden kann.*

*Schlagwörter: Tierbasierter Tourismus, Tier-Geographie, nicht-menschbezogene Geographie, Pferdesportevents, gefrorener See, White Turf, St. Moritz, Schweiz.*

## 1 Introduction

### Animals in Tourism

Tourism is an internationally important economic sector, contributing about 10 percent to global GDP and creating every tenth job worldwide, which can be an important economic driver for rural areas (UN Environment Programme, n.d.). However, not all the actors involved are human, as seen in animal-based tourism, which can be highly significant for destinations with species suitable for tourism (e.g. DE VASCONCELLOS PEGAS 2015; RAASAKKA and OJUVA 2018). As an attraction or as labourers, animals contribute particularly to the economy of rural areas, moreover, they function as marketing symbols and can create place identity (DE VASCONCELLOS PEGAS 2015, pp. 240f, 247; GARCÍA-ROSELL and ÄIJÄLÄ 2018, p. 12; MARKWELL 2015a, pp. 3, 20; RAASAKKA and OJUVA 2018, p. 8; WEARING and JOBBERNS 2015, p. 78).

Animals are important for tourism and thus GDP, which is made evident by captive forms of wildlife tourism: about 2,600,000 animals in over 10,000 zoos and aquariums annually attract over 700,000,000 visitors worldwide (SCOLLEN and MASON 2024; SPEIRAN and HOVORKA 2024). Wildlife tourism (captive and free-ranging forms) makes up an estimated share of about 20 percent of all international tourism, with annual trips growing by 10 percent per year (MKONO and HUGHES 2025; SPEIRAN and HOVORKA 2024). Certain animal species are physiologically best suited to certain habitats, allowing destinations in these habitats to profit directly from the related tourism, as illustrated by the example of Lapland, where 15 percent of all tourism businesses offer animal-based forms of tourism (like sledge-rides with dogs or reindeers) and 68 percent of tourists consider animal-based activities to be an important reason for visiting (GARCÍA-ROSELL and ÄIJÄLÄ 2018, pp. 11f).

Research on animal-based tourism focuses mostly on free-ranging or captive wildlife tourism rather than on domesticated animals, which are not perceived as equally exotic or authentic (cf. FENNELL 2015; JEŃCZMYK et al. 2021). While research on (free-ranging) wildlife tourism is relevant for the natural habitats of these species and surrounding destinations (like national parks), animal-based tourism with domesticated species can be implemented in many more destinations and may contribute substantially to the economy. One destination that has implemented such animal-based tourism in the form of equestrian events is St. Moritz, which lies in a remote alpine area of Switzerland.

In recent years, debates on more-than-human and human-animal geographies have emerged with a broad range of research foci, including wildlife (conservation) conflicts (for instance between humans and wolves or boars) and related territorial tensions between animals and humans; varied theoretical approaches have been applied to explore the role of animals as actors in space and in networks (including their related agency) (cf. FLEISCHMANN et al. 2024; PÜTZ 2017; STEINER et al. 2022; SCHRÖDER 2022). Animal-based tourism can be regarded as a sub-category of these debates. This article focuses on horse-based events as a business branch, including horses and related sports as attractions.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the use of horses for tourism and their importance for animal-based events that create income in St. Moritz, Switzerland. The main research questions are: How does equestrian event tourism contribute to the economy of St. Moritz and how is equestrian event tourism in St. Moritz perceived by tourists and locals?

In the following, the use of animals for tourism is contextualised and then the more specific role of horses in this sector is discussed. The case study of St. Moritz is presented, summarising first the historical importance of horses for this destination, before turning to a situational analysis of the current situation, combined with key information on equestrian tourism in St. Moritz. After the research methods are explained, the results are summarised and discussed with regards to the literature. The article closes with a conclusion and suggestions for further research with consideration of the limitations of the methods and findings.

### **Animal-based Tourism**

Many different forms of animal-based tourism exist, like zoos, animal parks and shows, wildlife-, safari- and hunting tourism, animal cafés, animal races (greyhound or horse), swimming with animals (dolphins) or whale watching, carriage or sledge rides (horses or dogs) and agri-tourism (pet zoos) (GIAMPICCOLI et al. 2020; JĘCZMYK et al. 2021; VON ESSEN et al. 2020).

These forms can be categorised into four settings: fully natural (wilderness), semi-natural (national parks), semi-contrived (zoos) and fully contrived (circus) (GIAMPICCOLI et al. 2020, pp. 3f; RICKLY and KLINE 2021, pp. 8f). The modes of interaction between tourists and animals include direct involvement (e.g. an “employed” donkey carrying tourists up the steps on Santorini) and indirect involvement (e.g. horses carrying supplies to isolated tourist camp sites), and similarly can be non-consumptive (whale watching), low-consumptive (zoos) or consumptive (hunting, fishing tourism) (cf. CURTIN 2013; DASHPER 2021; GIAMPICCOLI et al. 2020; GUO 2021; KLINE et al. 2021; TULLY and CARR 2021). The non-consumptive forms are considered to have a smaller impact in terms of sustainability and wildlife conservation (TAN 2022, p. 212). Impacts of consumptive forms can include a loss of endangered fauna, but non-consumptive forms can also have undesirable effects like animal abuse or non-intended fatalities (JĘCZMYK et al. 2021; LEGG et al. 2022; VON ESSEN et al. 2020). In all settings and modes, factors influencing the experience of (wildlife) tourists can be authenticity, excitement generated by an experience, uniqueness, duration, species popularity and whether animals are endangered (MUTANGA et al. 2017, p. 3).

Some animals are clearly more favourable than others for economic or tourism use, as different species have different (aesthetic) charisma and attractiveness (e.g. horses vs. snakes) and are of varying appeal to tourists, as has been addressed by the literature (cf. DE VASCONCELLOS PEGAS 2015; FLEISCHMANN et al. 2024; GIAMPICCOLI et al. 2020; LORIMER 2007; MARKWELL 2015a; MARKWELL 2015b; MKONO 2015; SKIBINS 2015; WEARING and JOBBERNS 2015; WIENER 2015). Large, rare, exotic, charismatic or “flagship” species (e.g. bald eagle and bison for the USA, moose for Sweden, panda for China, elephant for Thailand, kangaroo and emu for Australia or the African “Big Five”, i.e., lion, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant and Cape buffalo) are favourable for animal-based tourism and often a primary motivation for a trip (CURTIN 2013; DE VASCONCELLOS PEGAS 2015; PÜTZ and SCHLOTTMANN 2020; SKIBINS 2015).

While animal species can enhance the tourism potential of a destination, as is the case with feral rabbits on Ōkunoshima Island (the number of tourists increased by more than 4,000 percent from 2013 to 2015), they can also decrease the tourism potential of a destination (for instance through aggressive street dogs, mosquitos, rats in gastronomy or sharks at bathing destinations) (cf. CHEN 2024, pp. 76–78; MARKWELL 2015a, pp. 8, 15f). In both scenarios, officials can support or counter the effects, for example by making certain species a mascot for destinations, e.g. otters in Singapore, or by removing unwanted animals before major tourist events, e.g. street dogs in Bangkok or rats in Paris before the Olympics 2024 (BBC News 2003; OLI 2024; TAN 2022). A species that has long been widely used for tourism is the horse. Equestrian tourism has developed in many destinations while related research has also been conducted examining tourism based on this species.

### Horses for Animal-based Tourism

After the horse lost its function for transportation, what remained were its role in specialised work (like logging horses, police horses) and to a greater extent in sports, recreation and tourism (e.g. rodeo) (DANBY and GRAJFONER 2022; REZAPOURAGHDAM et al. 2025). Prominent examples of equestrian tourism are horse races (events), which can attract many tens of thousands of spectators, in some cases even exceeding 150,000 visitors (e.g. Kentucky Derby, Royal Ascot) (cf. CHANCE and REYNOLDS 2019; MARINITSCH and SISCHKA 2007).

Equestrian tourism is defined as “*all equestrian activities undertaken by tourists outside their normal place of residence, i.e. training courses, improvement courses and other aspects or diverse types of vacation principally revolving around the horse*” (International Federation of Equestrian Tourism 2012, as cited in CERNAIANU and SOBRY 2019, p. 4). This includes activities in which the horse is the main focus of interest (e.g. sporting events) (ibid., p. 4). The literature identifies several elements necessary for the development of equestrian tourism: a real equine sector, a structured tourism sector and an environmental policy, all of which are coordinated to work together (CERNAIANU and SOBRY 2019, p. 14).

Research indicates that equestrian tourists are mainly motivated by entertainment (and therefore the quality of the events), the aesthetics of horses, group affiliations, family and

eustress, while attention has also been drawn to the importance of complementary activities (e.g. gastronomy, museums, sports) and the quality of accommodation for increasing the likelihood of overnight stays (DANIELS and NORMAN 2005; GALLARDO and ROJAS 2025; PAVIĆ et al. 2019). This indicates that offers and services need to meet expectations, but also that the animal itself is a very important attraction and a main actor, partly due to its historical importance, aesthetics, beauty and charisma (DASHPER 2020; SUTHERLAND 2021). Further, social components of equestrian tourism are significant, as can be seen at Royal Ascot or the Kentucky Derby (DANIELS and NORMAN 2005, pp. 208f).

Equestrian tourism can in some cases result in very large business clusters due to the variety of services related to equestrian sports and tourism, like breeding, auctioning, training, specialised veterinary services and racing events. One example is the town of Newmarket (UK) with more than 340,000 annual visitors and a total of 8,500 direct and indirect jobs (District Council Forest Heath 2015, p. 3). In rural areas, equestrian services can be a driver for tourism, as in Iceland where an appreciable percentage of tourists (14.2 percent of foreign tourists in summer 2014) ride horses and small businesses work together in clusters (DASHPER 2020; MHLAULI and EZEUDUJI 2022; SIGURÐARDÓTTIR and HELGADÓTTIR 2015; SIGURÐARDÓTTIR and STEINTHORSSON 2018). Equestrian tourism is far from a small elite market niche (BAMBI et al. 2023; REZAPOURAGHDAM et al. 2025). Horses can be part of the image and branding strategy of destinations as well as a unique selling point and equestrian tourism can be a lifestyle business (see ADELMAN 2020; HELGADÓTTIR and SIGURÐARDÓTTIR 2020; PÜTZ et al. 2022; REZAPOURAGHDAM et al. 2025).

Research on equestrian tourism is quite limited, with some exceptions for horseback riding as a form of sustainable (eco-)tourism and a development model for rural areas, but there has been little research to date on equestrian event tourism, especially luxury equestrian event tourism (cf. REZAPOURAGHDAM et al. 2025, pp. 473–475). Although studies on the types, functions and effects of event tourism exist, interdisciplinary assessments of event tourism in general are not sufficiently developed (NILUFAR 2025).

## 2 Case Study St. Moritz, Switzerland

The premium alpine tourism destination of St. Moritz in Switzerland has a deeply rooted tradition with horses, which ensured tourism even before the “birth” of winter tourism in the mid-1860s (QUIN 2023 p. 138). One important reason for its development as a tourist destination lies in its unique geographic conditions, as the town is located 1,800 m above mean sea level and next to a lake that is 1.6 km long, which ensures low temperatures and large amounts of snow and ice in winter, as the nearby mountains mostly exceed 3,000 metres and are most suitable for winter sports (KRAAS and SPOHNER 2023, pp. 45f).

Horses have been used in St. Moritz for tourism – sledge rides through the snow – and sporting purposes since the establishment of tourism. In 1899, British soldiers created a polo field in St. Moritz as one of the first in continental Europe (Evviva Polo St. Moritz AG n.d.; LÜTSCHER 2014, p. 205). Horse racing was introduced shortly afterwards. Hoteliers together with a carriage company owner and officials, arguably influenced or inspired by British tourists or soldiers, introduced horse races on the frozen lake of St. Moritz in 1907;

these races have since been held annually and since 1994 have been known as “White Turf” (CONRAD 2021, p. 9; JEGEN et al. 2007; LÜTSCHER 2014).

Not only was the idea of a horse race on ice and snow revolutionary, the race modes themselves were innovative, for example the unmounted and untethered Skijöring – i.e., a race where a skier is pulled behind a horse – which was the first of its kind (DELAQUIS 1980; LÜTSCHER 2014). The unique races led to the involvement of royals (e.g. Austria’s archduke Ferdinand) and catered for both the premium and standard segments (DELAQUIS 1980, pp. 17, 42; LÜTSCHER 2014). With growing numbers of spectators, additional trains were organised to reach St. Moritz for this annual event (DELAQUIS 1980; LÜTSCHER 2014). In 1959, the “Winter Concours Hippique”, a show jumping competition, was introduced and is now called the “St. Moritz Concours Hippique, n.d.” (Engadiner Post 1959; SCHIESS 2019; St. Moritz Concours Hippique, n.d.). In 1985, “Snow Polo” was established as the only polo tournament on ice and snow worldwide, held like the horse races on the frozen St. Moritz Lake (Evviva Polo St. Moritz AG n.d.; LÜTSCHER 2014). The introduction of the smaller (and therefore less significant) summer events followed with the “Summer Concours Hippique” in 1996 and the “Summer Polo Cup” in 2011 (Engadiner Post 1998, p. 9; Engadiner Post 2011, p. 10).

Nowadays, the winter events White Turf and Snow Polo attract the largest numbers of visitors (combined, 61,000 visitors in 2026) to St. Moritz, together with the “Audi FIS Ski World Cup” (14,000 visitors in 2025) (ASESE n.d.; Evviva Polo St. Moritz AG 2026; Gemeinde St. Moritz 2022, p. 102; Rennverein St. Moritz 2026). White Turf and Snow Polo take place on the frozen lake in winter, together with other non-equestrian events. All events on the lake share temporary infrastructure, e.g. in the form of VIP tents, food booths and sanitary facilities, which need to be built on the frozen lake every year (JEGEN et al. 2007). Additionally, permanent facilities like the stables are required in close proximity.

The infrastructure on the lake results in a temporary “village” consisting of 75 (partially heated) tents, which is built under a tight time schedule dictated by the thickness of the ice and the date of the first events (see: CONRAD 2021; JEGEN et al. 2007). The racecourse and the event area cover a combined surface of 130,000 m<sup>2</sup> (JEGEN et al. 2007, p. 40; OERLEMANS and KELLER 2023, p. 1085). The annual construction costs of White Turf alone are in range of CHF 1,100,000 (2024) and if mechanical (not artificial) snow is required, the costs of racecourse preparation can increase by an additional CHF 70,000 (2002) (cf. JEGEN et al. 2007; Rennverein St. Moritz 2023; Rennverein St. Moritz 2025a, p. 15). The ice and the conditions of the track are measured and monitored throughout the events to ensure the safety of horses and riders (OERLEMANS and KELLER 2023). The prize for the main race is CHF 100,000 (2024), making it the largest of the country (JEGEN et al. 2007; Rennverein St. Moritz 2024b).

Many primary and secondary effects are generated by equestrian tourism. Primary tourism effects refer to direct tourism expenditures, including hotels, restaurants and flights, while secondary effects refer to indirect expenditures, including retailers or construction and infrastructure (KOUTOULAS 2024; MIOČIĆ and ČAVLEK 2024). In St. Moritz, first and foremost, the hotel businesses benefit, but also gastronomy, other connected events, the operators of sport infrastructure and sport equipment businesses, stores – especially the many

stores offering luxury brands, museums, construction companies – including the annual temporary construction of infrastructure on the lake, arts and crafts (like ice sculptures for events and gastronomy) and, of course, the event sponsors (JEGEN et al. 2007, pp. 84–87).

It is estimated that the horse races alone contribute to the economy of the region with about CHF 25,000,000 (2024) and 35,000 visitors (2026) annually, while most annual visitors (up to 150,000) stay in St. Moritz during the winter equestrian events (cf. Gemeinde St. Moritz 2023, p. 103; KRAAS and SPOHNER 2023, p. 45; Rennverein St. Moritz 2024a; Rennverein St. Moritz 2026). These visitors spend CHF 652 (1995) per day and stay an average of six days, which is twice as long (2022) as tourists spend in St. Moritz through the year as a whole (Gemeinde St. Moritz 2022, p. 96; JEGEN et al. 2007, pp. 86f). Snow Polo attracts about 26,000 visitors annually (Evviva Polo St. Moritz AG n.d.; Evviva Polo St. Moritz AG 2026). Clearly St. Moritz has remained closely involved in and has profited from equestrian events ever since they were introduced by entrepreneurial hoteliers for British polo-playing tourists in 1899, 126 years ago.

The equestrian events of St. Moritz are an internationally unique selling point, as there is now no other location worldwide where horse races or polo are held on ice and snow since Arosa, about 100 km away, abandoned a 100-year-old tradition of races on ice and snow in 2017 as the ice on the lake no longer froze sufficiently (BOSSHARD 2017; Davoser Zeitung 2015; GRHeute 2018; KAVALLIO 2019; LÜTSCHER 2014). Whether St. Moritz Lake will continue to freeze annually to the required degree and a sufficient amount of snow will be available to prepare the racetrack and polo field is an open question – forecasts suggest that by 2060 the day of freezing-over will have shifted by about 11 days (KRAAS and SPOHNER 2023, p. 50; OERLEMANS and KELLER 2023, p. 1089).

### 3 Materials and Methods

A mixed-methods approach was chosen for this research project, including quantitative anonymous surveys of residents, tourists, households and shops as well as expert interviews. The quantitative surveys were chosen to analyse the perceptions of locals and tourists. However, as data regarding primary and secondary tourism effects cannot be obtained well using this method, expert interviews, a common method in more-than-human geographies, were conducted to provide a more complete understanding of the actors involved and their motives in this equestrian tourism destination (cf. MARIANI and BAGGIO 2020; MASON et al. 2021; STEINER et al. 2022, pp. 23f).

As equestrian events in St. Moritz take place in July and August for the Summer Polo Cup and the Concours Hippique, and in January and February for the Horse Snow Cross Week, Snow Polo and White Turf, the fieldwork was conducted in July and August 2023 and January and February 2024. The quantitative surveys were voluntary and anonymous and were distributed in person and online in the form of flyers in German and English with QR codes leading to online surveys explaining the research topic and stating that the Institute of Geography at the University of Cologne was conducting them. Whenever potential participants were met on the street, comprehensive information about the purpose of the research and the use of personal data was provided and all their ques-

tions were answered. Participants could voluntarily scan the QR-Code, fill out the surveys at will and exit at any time. To take part in the surveys, participants needed to confirm their submission by clicking a “send” button at the end; incomplete surveys without “sent”-status could not be received by the researchers, as only complete “sent” surveys were saved by the system. The final sending of the survey was rated as clear informed (active) consent by the participants to join the research study. Only adults could participate.

The QR-code flyers were handed out in person to pedestrians throughout St. Moritz (residents and tourists) and to almost every store owner (in the winter season); they were displayed at multiple sites during the events, at multiple information centres and on public notice and billboards in St. Moritz; they were delivered to the mailboxes of almost every household in St. Moritz and were distributed to the town administration and further afield in digital form by the administrative e-mail distribution system. In the summer, 1,500 flyers were distributed and 111 surveys were filled out (7.4 percent response rate), during winter 3,440 flyers were distributed and 241 were filled out (7.0 percent response rate), resulting in a total of 352 responses.

The surveys employed only non-critical questions with no coercion, deception or physical involvement, had no risks for the participants and were unlikely to trigger strong emotions or discomfort among them. The survey questions were partially derived from the literature in terms of motivations of equestrian tourists and the reasons for positive perceptions (entertainment and preferences for horses as animals, partly due to aesthetics, and social contacts) and aimed at understanding, first, the perception of the events by tourists and locals (positive perceptions enabling the maintenance of a social license are important for long-established events), second, the reasons why people perceive the events differently and, third, whether people profit from the events thanks to secondary effects (BLANCO et al. 2023; DANIELS and NORMAN 2005; DASHPER 2020; GALLARDO and ROJAS 2025; PAVIĆ et al. 2019).

The results of the summer and winter surveys were combined for analysis, which involved basic statistical methods such as the evaluation of percentages. No ethical approval was required for the surveys based on the DFG (German Research Foundation) guidelines due to the methods used and the results generated by this research (cf. Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2023). While 50.0 percent of the participants were male, 49.4 percent were female and 0.6 percent were diverse. The 18- to 29-year-olds represented 12.2 percent of all respondents, 30- to 39-year-olds 14.2 percent, 40- to 49-year-olds 17.3 percent, 50- to 59-year-olds 24.2 percent, 60- to 69-year-olds 17.9 percent, 70- to 79-year-olds 12.2 percent and the 80+ year-olds 2.0 percent. Inhabitants of St. Moritz and the Engadin accounted for 56.3 percent of all respondents, tourists for 43.7 percent. People living in Switzerland represented 85.8 percent of all respondents, people living in Germany 8.2 percent and people living in Italy 1.7 percent.

One online and nine face-to-face interviews were conducted with experts responsible for the events: an official of Snow Polo (Interview 07), an official of White Turf (Interview 10), a participant in the sports events (Interview 09), a former host for horses participating in the sports events (Interview 08), different departments of the municipality of St. Moritz (official of the department for tourist infrastructure: Interview 03, a municipal official: Interview 04), an expert for the annual construction of the lake’s infrastructure (Interview

06), an expert from a carriage company (Interview 01) and sponsors of the events (Interviews 02 and 05), thus covering different perspectives by different occupational groups.

The interviews were guided expert interviews held in German with questions derived to some extent from the literature (HELGADÓTTIR and SIGURÐARDÓTTIR 2020; KOUTOULAS 2024; MIOČIĆ and ČAVLEK 2024; PÜTZ et al. 2022; REZAPOURAGHDAM et al. 2025) and related to the importance of the equestrian events for St. Moritz (unique selling point and connected primary and secondary effects), their identity function (image and branding for St. Moritz), the function of the equestrian events as folk festivals, event innovations, uniqueness of the sports, motivations behind creating, supporting and participating in these events and the future of equestrian sports in St. Moritz.

The shortest interview was 14 minutes, the longest lasted 89 minutes. The average length of the interviews was 43 minutes, the median duration was 35.5 minutes. The interviews were recorded and manually transcribed in German. The codes were partially derived deductively from the aforementioned literature, but as literature on equestrian tourism is quite limited, codes were also inductively developed from the expert interviews to capture information about financial profits and secondary effects, the situation during the events, sponsorship, future prognoses and adaption to climate change, image and media, infrastructure, uniqueness of equestrian tourism and services for luxury tourism (FLICK 2023; MAYRING and FENZL 2022). For this article, the interview quotes were translated as closely as possible from German to English. Additionally, field observation and photo documentation of the events were undertaken and further information derived from a visit to a carriage museum.

The significance of the surveys is limited to a certain extent, as the proportion of people who own a horse (11.9 percent) or practice equestrian sports (18.2 percent) is higher in our surveys than for the Swiss population in general (0.5 percent equine ownership rate; 0.7 percent people who practice equestrian sports) (cf. Swiss Equestrian 2023, p. 8; PEREY und SCHNEIDER 2024; Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs 2023; Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research 2023). A certain bias might have influenced the findings, as the surveys took place during the equestrian events when the number of equestrian tourists could be expected to be greatest. For the summer surveys, only a smaller percentage of households were given the QR-codes and they were not distributed to businesses in St. Moritz. Linguistic barriers might have caused an impact on the surveys, as a substantial proportion of Italian tourists did not speak English, which could have led to a certain selectivity of respondents.

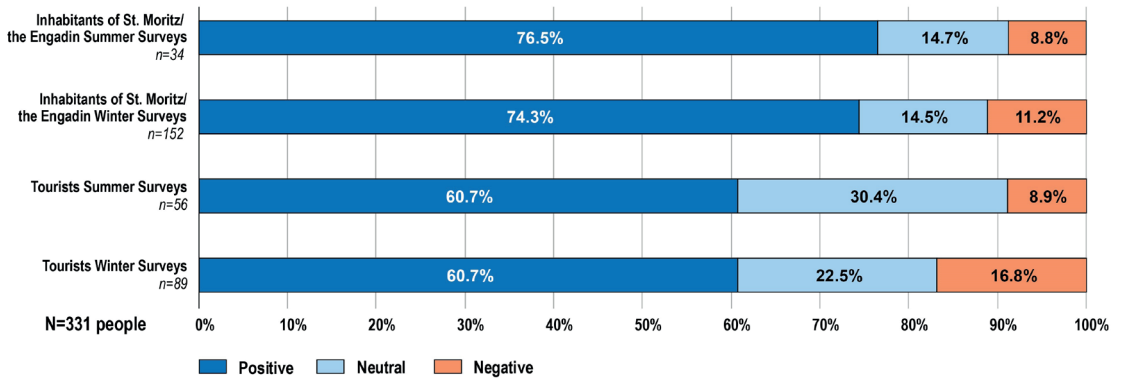
## 4 Research Results

### Perception of the Equestrian Events

The quantitative surveys showed important differences in the perceptions of the equestrian events between tourists and inhabitants of St. Moritz respectively the Engadin. The events were rated positively by 74.7 percent of the surveyed inhabitants of St. Moritz/ the Engadin, compared to 60.7 percent of the tourists, while both groups had almost the

same positive perception in the summer and winter surveys. Only 8.8 percent of surveyed inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin rated the events negatively in the summer surveys and 11.2 percent in the winter surveys, while 8.9 percent of tourists rated the events negatively in the summer surveys and 16.8 percent in the winter surveys (Figure 1).

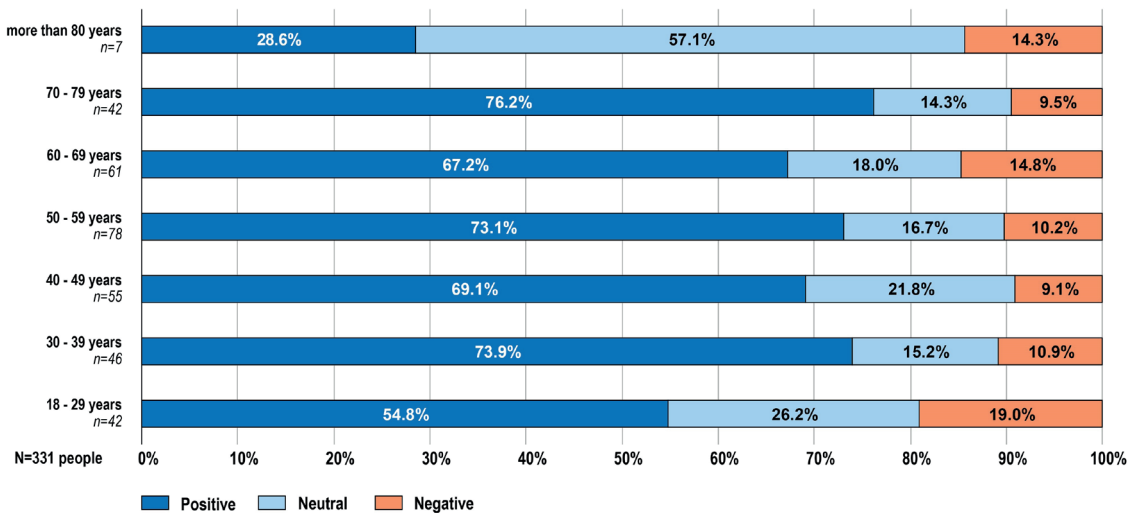
**Do you perceive equestrian events in St. Moritz positively, neutrally or negatively?**



Source: Own surveys (summer 2023, winter 2024). Graphic: N. ELVERICH.

Figure 1: Perceptions of equestrian events in St. Moritz by inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin and tourists

**Do you perceive equestrian events in St. Moritz positively, neutrally or negatively?**



Source: Own surveys (summer 2023, winter 2024). Graphic: N. ELVERICH.

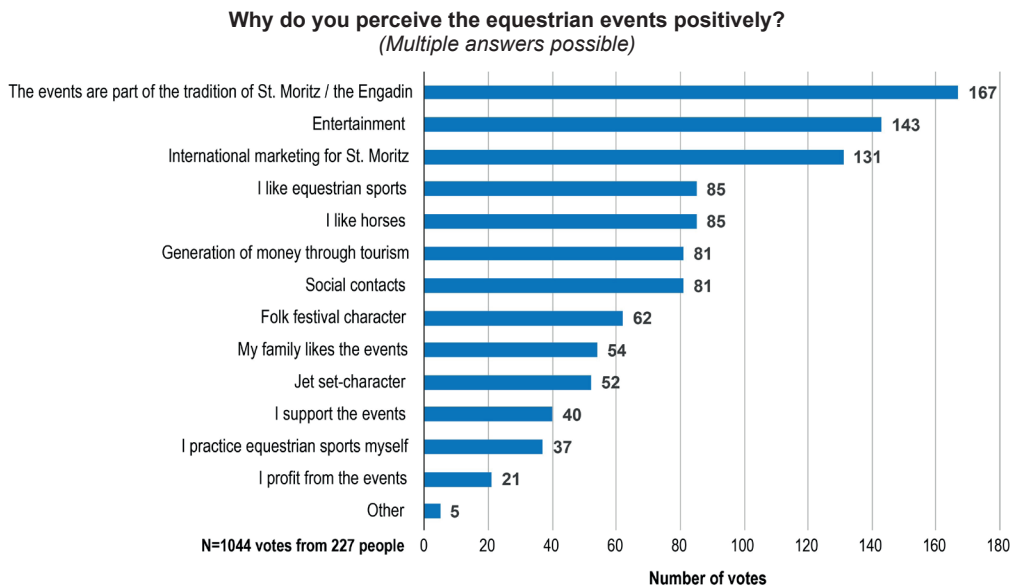
Figure 2: Perceptions of equestrian events in St. Moritz by different age groups

Perceptions differed considerably by age groups. The 70–79 age group perceived the events most positively (76.2 percent), while the 18–29 age group (54.8 percent) followed the 80+ year-olds as those with the least positive perceptions (28.6 percent) (Figure 2).

Another important difference in the positive perception of the events was found between people who practice equestrian sports (84.7 percent positive) and those who do not (65.1 percent positive).

### Reasons for Perceptions

The main reasons for a positive perception were that the events are part of the traditions of St. Moritz (16.0 percent of all votes), entertainment (13.7 percent of all votes), international marketing for St. Moritz (12.5 percent of all votes), horses as animals and equestrian sports in general (both 8.1 percent of all votes) and the generation of money through tourism and social contacts (both 7.8 percent of all votes) (Figure 3).

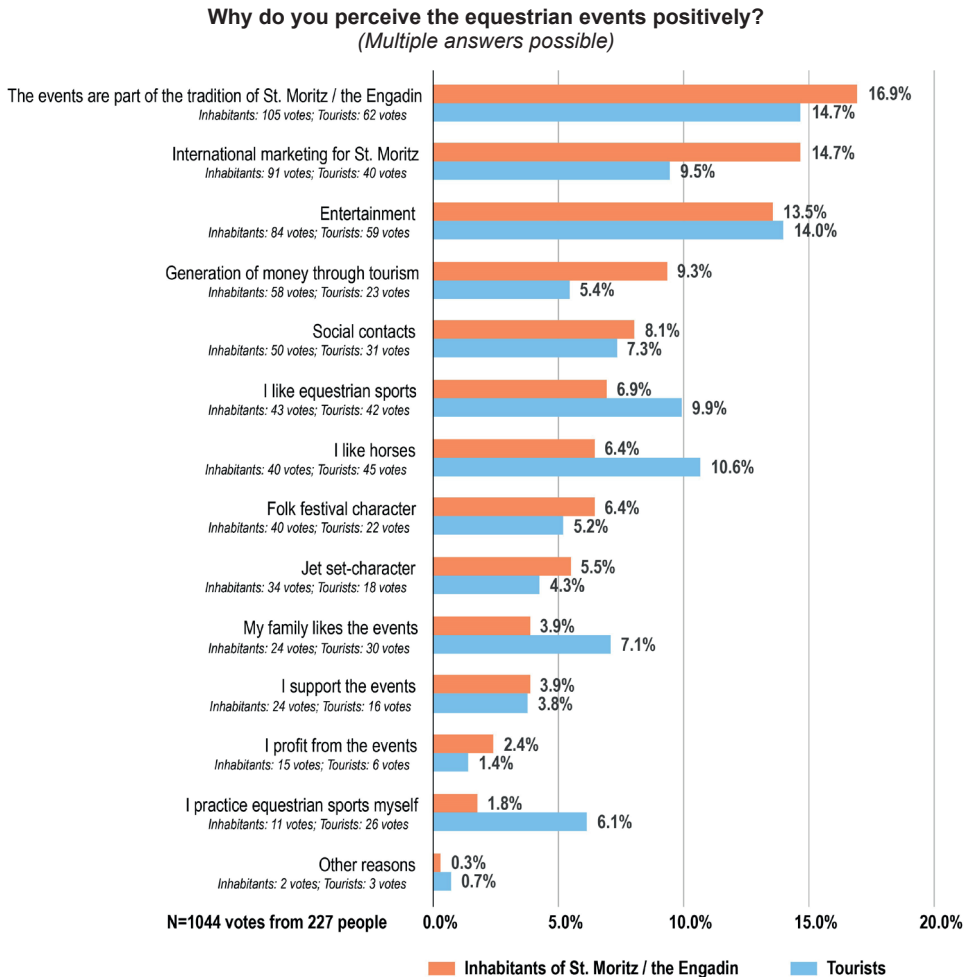


Source: Own surveys (summer 2023, winter 2024). Graphic: N. ELVERICH.

Figure 3: Reasons for a positive perception of equestrian events in St. Moritz

Compared to tourists, a greater proportion of inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin viewed the equestrian events as positive because they are part of local traditions, they allow international marketing for the town and generate revenue (Figure 4).

A greater proportion of inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin stated that the events are part of the traditions of St. Moritz in the summer surveys (20.0 percent) than in the winter surveys (16.3 percent) (Figure 5).

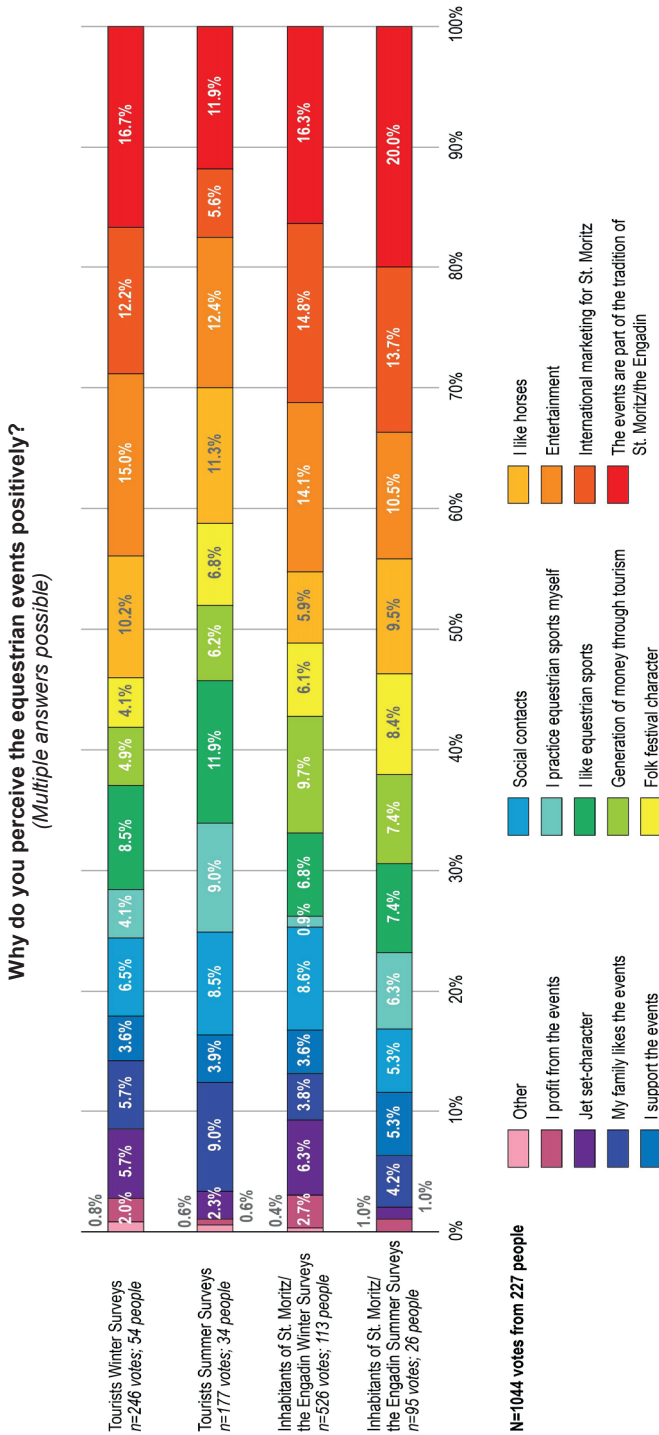


Source: Own surveys (summer 2023, winter 2024). Graphic: N. ELVERICH.

Figure 4: Reasons for a positive perception of equestrian events in St. Moritz by inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin and tourists

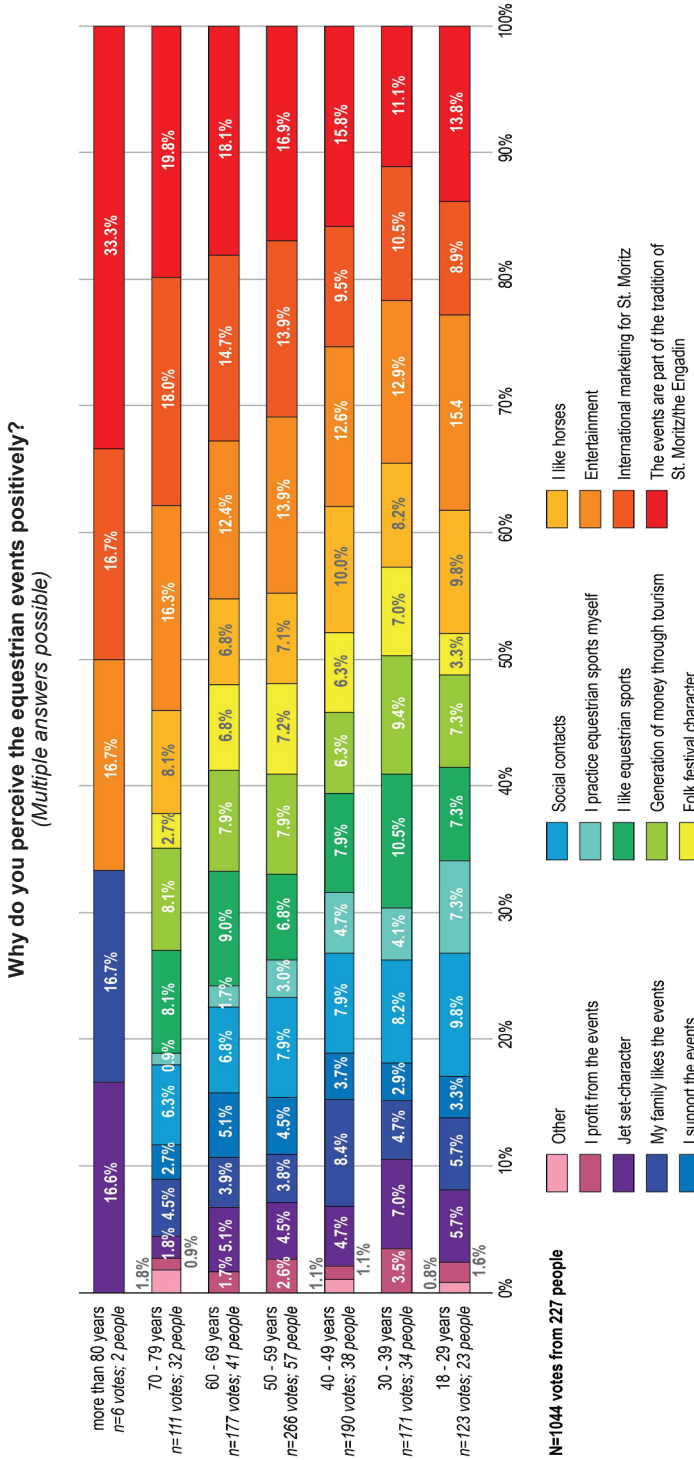
Differences between age groups became evident with older groups having the highest proportion of positive perceptions because of the traditional nature of the events, thus the 70-79 group (19.8 percent) was second only to the 80+ year-olds, while the group of 30 to 39 year-olds had the lowest proportion (11.1 percent) (Figure 6).

The international marketing for St. Moritz was valued most by the 70- to 79-year-old respondents (18.0 percent) and least among the 18- to 29-year-olds (8.9 percent). Negative perceptions of the events were most often put down to the jet-set character of the events (23.1 percent of all votes), environmental damage (21.2 percent of all votes) and too much traffic (17.3 percent of all votes) (Figure 7).



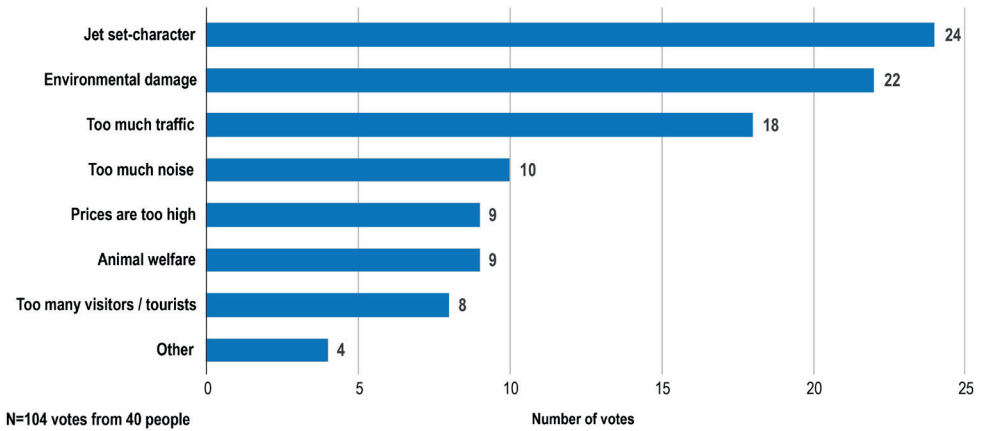
Source: Own surveys (summer 2023, winter 2024). Graphic: N. ELVERICH.

Figure 5: Reasons for a positive perception of equestrian events in St. Moritz/the Engadin and tourists in the summer and winter surveys



Source: Own surveys (summer 2023, winter 2024). Graphic: N. Elverich.  
 Figure 6: Reasons for a positive perception of equestrian events in St. Moritz by different age groups

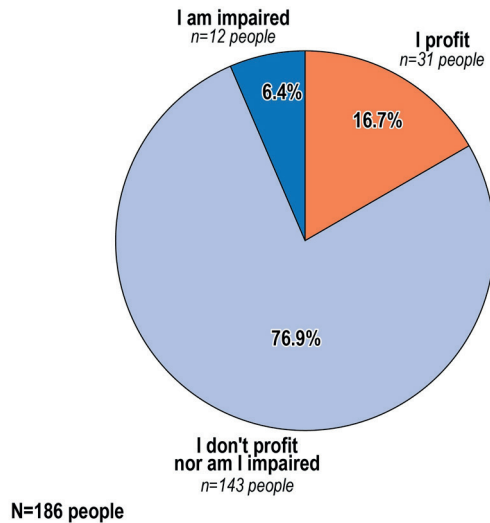
**Why do you perceive the equestrian events negatively?**  
*(Multiple answers possible)*



Source: Own surveys (summer 2023, winter 2024). Graphic: N. Elverich.

Figure 7: Reasons for a negative perception of equestrian events in St. Moritz

**Do you profit from the equestrian events or are you impaired by them?**  
*(Multiple answers possible)*



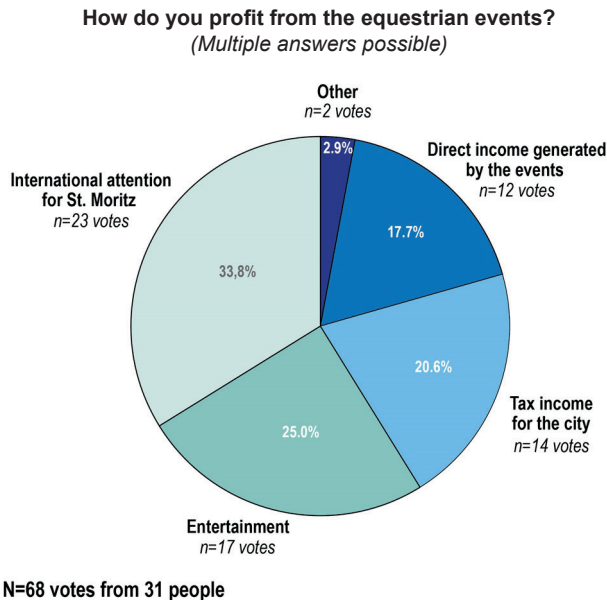
Source: Own surveys (summer 2023, winter 2024). Graphic: N. ELVERICH.

Figure 8: Effects of equestrian events in St. Moritz on inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin

### Profiting from the Events plus Primary and Secondary Effects

In terms of profiting from the events, 76.9 percent of the respondents said that they neither profit nor are impaired, while 16.7 percent profit and 6.4 percent said they are impaired (Figure 8).

The reasons for profiting comprised international attention for St. Moritz (33.8 percent), entertainment (25.0 percent), tax income for the city (20.6 percent) and direct income generated by the events (17.7 percent) (Figure 9).



Source: Own surveys (summer 2023, winter 2024). Graphic: N. Elverich.

Figure 9: Reasons for profiting from equestrian events in St. Moritz by inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin

The interviews confirmed that people and their businesses in St. Moritz profit especially from primary and secondary effects:

*“[...] You generate a lot of overnight stays, that’s one thing, but people are also here to enjoy themselves, some of them are here on vacation beyond the whole White Turf, these are people who have racehorses themselves, train or own or breed them and they don’t always have to have a horse at the start, but of course they come and spend their vacation here, that’s one thing. The other is [...] what you generate in the catering trade and so on, and then [...] you have to know the many pictures that go out where you can see for example the skyline here or whatever that ultimately benefits all of us locals” (Interview 10).*

It was indicated that the local hotel industry is one of the biggest profiteers (especially from the winter events):

*“[...] The five-star hotels live well from it and when they are full, then we actually have good business”* (Interview 02), while the guests of such hotels are important for other local businesses: *“[...] there is a certain amount of added value involved, but I think the hotel industry is way ahead of us retailers in this respect [...]”* (Interview 02). But it is not only the people and businesses of St. Moritz who benefit from the events: *“[...] I would say that these events are very, very important. And I would even say for the whole region. So St. Moritz alone doesn't just benefit. I think that certain hotels from Maloja, Sils to [...] Champfèr will probably also benefit from the fact that something is happening on the lake [...]”* (Interview 06). *The value of the equestrian tourism in St. Moritz is very high: “[...] the added value of Snow Polo [...], the University of St. Gallen found out a few years ago, is about 22,000,000 Swiss francs [...]”* (Interview 07).

This income is largely generated by visitors to the events:

*“People have become used to the fact that there are 10–15,000 people on this lake every Sunday in February”* (Interview 04).

However, the large number of visitors and tourists during the (short) period of the winter events was also described as problematic:

*“It's extremely full [...] during that time, so the whole of Switzerland is on vacation, then we have the events, whether it's polo or the three race Sundays, [...] the infrastructure really reaches its limits [...]”* (Interview 02).

This concentration of equestrian events in January and February in combination with other events leads to the problem of insufficient hotel infrastructure:

*“We've even had discussions about the gourmet festival, because it is at the same time as the Snow Polo, certain customers complained that they couldn't find a hotel room, [...] because you have an event calendar in February that's almost too tightly packed, [...] and then they poach each other's customers because there's almost too little infrastructure available in terms of accommodation”* (Interview 06).

This potential loss of customers was seen as problematic, while simultaneously the financial potential of the tourists was stressed:

*“It's a bit of a shame that all the events take place somewhere in the same month, but that's just the time when people are there, when it's worthwhile, but you could*

*spread it out a bit over 3 months, [...] the place is full and there are also some very wealthy people. [...] equestrian sport is an expensive sport and that's why it's not pensioners who come up here [...]"* (Interview 02).



Source: Photo by authors.

Figure 10: White Turf on the lake on 4 February 2024. An example of the larger winter events



Source: Photo by authors.

Figure 11: Summer Polo Cup on 23 July 2023. An example of the smaller summer events

## Sponsoring

This concentration of financially potent customers in peak season was seen as a primary motivation for sponsoring the equestrian events:

*“But where there are sponsors, of course they want to present to as many people as possible, but not sometime in March when no one is there, or in September [...], then it makes little sense”* (Interview 02).

Other primary reasons for sponsoring the equestrian events are important:

*“Why does a sponsor sponsor us? So the three most important points: It's St. Moritz, it's polo, so it's local, we have a local market that already exists for these services. They have the opportunity to bring their customers or business partners to St. Moritz as an incentive, it's a high-quality package and then the message to the outside world”* (Interview 07). This can relate to the sponsor's image: *“[...] the acquisition of these sponsors [...] is achieved via the emotional channel [...] i.e. events that are well received that correspond to the image, that correspond to the philosophy of the sponsor, of the company [...]"* (Interview 10).

Although big international sponsors can be found, many sponsors of the equestrian events are local to St. Moritz or from the Engadin, and profit directly or indirectly from their sponsorship:

*“[...] White Turf, for example, we [...] sell on the lake. That’s pretty important for us and the volume of people is also important for us”* (Interview 02).

As the sponsorship of the winter equestrian events is financially important for sponsors, the sponsorship of the smaller events in summer can be seen as a zero-sum game:

*“So if we don’t lose out, that’s fine, let’s put it that way”* (Interview 02). Sponsorship is especially crucial for the smaller equestrian events without an entrance fee: *“[...] there’s also financial sponsorship involved, [...] because most of the events up here are, it’s just without admission. [...] But without sponsors up here, it’s just impossible”* (Interview 02).

In addition to private sponsors, the administration of St. Moritz and the surrounding villages are involved in sponsoring the events, also because of the awareness of secondary effects:

*“[...] they get event subsidies from the municipality, then something comes from tourism, then we get infrastructure contributions and with this money it works on the lake. So if these events had to finance [...] all by themselves, without any subsidies, I think that not every event would exist anymore. So the municipality is well aware that it is something important for them, which is why they finance it”* (Interview 06).

This also underscores the problem of finding sponsors for the events:

*“So it’s not as easy as it used to be, because the sponsors are breaking away. [...] But as the organiser of a festival, [...] you can’t pick and choose. No event is in a position to simply say we can turn it down”* (Interview 04). *“I don’t think it’s the case anymore that these events are simply self-propelled”* (Interview 03). As social media is an attractive platform for sponsors due to its reach, the events may face difficulties: *“If there are [...] 15,000 people on the lake every weekend, that’s a lot. But if you have a million followers somewhere on the internet these days, then of course you have a different kind of reach”* (Interview 06).

### **Future Developments and the Problem of the Freezing Over of the Lake**

The large number of tourists and problems of sponsoring are partly the reason why some events have become smaller than they once were:

*“There were peaks where people said, we’ve reached a point where we can’t go any further; it was almost too much [...]. Today, [...] we’re taking it down a notch to the normal, to the simpler; and that suits us wonderfully”* (Interview 10).

But as conditions for the construction of infrastructure on the ice have shifted due to rising temperatures, this development also suits capacities:

*“So there were years already when you had to do slimmed-down versions. For example, the hospitality was then on land, or in the riding hall, instead of on the lake”* (Interview 03). Such adaptations are seen as options for the future: *“You can certainly make some adjustments to the infrastructure, with weight. That has already been done. Here the tents have been taken apart and there are fewer tents and smaller stands. They have already reacted and I think it can only go in that direction. [...], everything else will depend on the weather [...].”* (Interview 10). In addition, a timewise adaptation could be possible: *“[...] [if] the whole lake freezes over later, maybe they’ll have to postpone the whole thing somewhere for a week”* (Interview 02).

The shorter time span during which the ice on the lake is usable was noted by officials of the events, while for Snow Polo (which requires less space than the horse races) an alternative seems to exist:

*“What is clearly happening is that the time window is getting smaller and smaller. So where it just freezes and then stays frozen. So I assume we can still do this for a long time and if we can no longer do it on the lake, [...] I’ve had a plan B for a long time”* (Interview 07).

Like in Arosa (where horse races on the frozen lake had to be given up), the problem of the lake freezing sufficiently is seen with concern:

*“[...] and it doesn’t get any easier for us in winter with the lakes. [...] Arosa already has the same problem, they no longer have horse sports on the frozen lake, they had them for a very, very long time. And I think the only question is, when will it happen to us?”* (Interview 06). But there are other opinions about St. Moritz: *“[...] at the moment we just have less snowfall and less snow insulates less, and because of that we still have almost better ice than everyone else”* (Interview 06).

But if the lake does not freeze reliably in the future to the degree necessary for horse races, the future existence of this event is doubtful:

*“[...] White Turf is what we see here today and otherwise it’s not White Turf”* (Interview 10). Although it is also emphasised that it is the location that makes the events special: *“Polo and horse racing is the lake. When the lake was [...] close to not freezing over, they thought about doing it in the village, in St. Moritz Bath*

*and on the polo field, but it's an event on the lake and that's what makes it special'* (Interview 02).

The international uniqueness of the winter events is also recognised by the officials of St. Moritz who are involved in sponsoring the events:

*"That [the winter events] was of course a sensation and remains a sensation to this day"* (Interview 04). Their importance is equally highlighted: *"These are the events that make St. Moritz famous and are also extremely important for [...] it. No effort is spared to make them possible"* (Interview 03).

### **Infrastructure and Efforts for the Events**

The infrastructure that needs to be built every year on the ice of the lake reveals that no effort is spared:

*"So the entire basic infrastructure that [is constructed] for four major events [...] Snow Polo, for White Turf, for The ICE and for Amusements on the Lake with the preparation for the ice rink and so on. But the turnover is around 3,000,000 CHF. So that's about the effort [...]. Only for January to the beginning of March"* (Interview 06). This marks a significant cost factor for the events, a reason why they are special and a fundamental difference to normal equestrian events that can use permanent infrastructure: *"[...] because if we build something on a greenfield site, then we have the advantage of already having a basic infrastructure of water pipes, sewage pipes and power lines. We redo everything every year"* (Interview 06).

In addition to these investments in the infrastructure, the schedule is a major challenge, as it depends on the freezing of the lake and the date of the first event:

*"We almost had a week and a half because it was very, very tight. [...] And we were able to do a relatively large amount of preparatory work thanks to helicopter flights, because our problem was, [...] we have to have around 30 cm [of ice thickness] to be allowed to drive with vehicles on the lake. And we didn't have that, we were always so close to 24 [cm]. And then we were allowed to go up on foot, with light machines, [...] but [...] they can't come with their light trucks and simply bring material"* (Interview 06).

Even after the successful construction of the infrastructure, sudden snowfall can endanger the events:

*"[...] [If] the night before the event there is half a metre of snow, that's the worst case scenario. So then everyone has to drive in the middle of the night, clear it,*

*do it and the effort is brutal. But it has happened before and it has worked”* (Interview 06).

In addition, the transport infrastructure of Engadin Airport is important for visitors to the events:

*“And then we have the airfield, which is also important. The horses don’t come in there, but the people, the guests [...]. For the Polo, 60 to 70 jets come in. That’s incredible”* (Interview 07). The events also require work power: *“[...] if you look around here, all those in the blue jackets, around 200 volunteers as we call them, [...] without them, we all know, none of these events would be possible”* (Interview 10). The same number of people work for the Snow Polo: *“In total, around 200 people work for us at the weekend”* (Interview 07).

Another immense cost factor is the insurance to cover losses for events that are cancelled due to unfavourable weather conditions (e.g. too much snow) or an insufficiently frozen lake, but: *“[...] they are very expensive [...]”* (Interview 10).

## 5 Discussion

St. Moritz has experienced fundamental changes in respect to the use of horses since the 1860s, like almost everywhere in the world. A difference to other cities and towns is the continued importance of the horse for tourism. To assess how this animal contributes to the economy of St. Moritz today and how it could continue to serve this purpose, it is important to understand the perception of stakeholders and their motives in combination with historical and possible future developments.

Differences in the perceptions of the equestrian events by inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin and tourists are evident. Inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin see the equestrian events more positively than tourists, which reveals their greater relevance for inhabitants. As the events in summer and winter differ in respect to their size, economic relevance and uniqueness, stronger differences between the positive perception in the summer and winter surveys for inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin and tourists could have been expected. This was not the case. But among tourists, the percentage of people in the winter surveys with a negative perception of the events (in total only 16.8 percent) was almost twice as large as in the summer surveys (8.9 percent), which seems counterintuitive because there are far more tourists for the winter events and the events are bigger attractions.

Further, the differences between age groups were notable, although no continuous trend could be found. The group of 18- to 29-year-olds had (after the very small group of 80+ year-olds) the least positive perceptions, which may become a risk factor in the future in terms of recruiting newcomers to the events and finding new supporters and volunteers. As there are few studies about perceptions of the concept of equestrian event tourism in the literature, this case study provides useful contributions about the perceptions of locals (about 75 percent rated the events positively) and tourists of equestrian

events in the luxury sector, providing useful insights about the public social licensing of animal-based events.

Inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin in general rated the tradition of the equestrian events as being more important than tourists did. This indicates the significance of the longstanding equestrian events for inhabitants of St. Moritz and the region, likely connected to place identity. But inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin rated the tradition as being more important in the summer surveys than in the winter surveys, which is surprising, given the fact that the winter events have a longer tradition (White Turf since 1907, Snow Polo since 1985).

The contrary was found in the tourists' surveys, which indicates contradictory perceptions of the traditions of the summer and winter events for inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin and tourists. The general linking of positive perceptions of the events with their role in local traditions, by especially local people, suggests that longstanding animal-based events can become part of local lived traditions, although little relevant literature exists on this point.

The fact that inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin rated the marketing of St. Moritz and the economic benefits of the events higher than tourists was unsurprising. It shows their economic awareness and indicates that direct and secondary economic effects are important for a local positive perception. The relevance of the equestrian events for the marketing and related destination branding and lifestyle business is somewhat similar to existing literature on horse-based tourism (ADELMAN 2020; HELGADÓTTIR and SIGURÐARDÓTTIR 2020; PÜTZ et al. 2022; REZAPOURAGHDAM et al. 2025).

Furthermore, older people tended to value the traditions more than young people (with the exception of the 18- to 29-year-olds), which could cause difficulties in the long run as younger generations must be attracted to the events. Older people tended to value the marketing and economic aspects more than younger people, which may be due to younger people being less economically involved or failing to recognise the economic value of the events, or due to older people overestimating their economic relevance.

The fact that horses and equestrian sports were among the major reasons for a positive perception of the events indicates the horse's importance as a main driver and attraction (likely because of the species' popularity, charisma and aesthetics) and possibly as a marketing symbol (for which media representation is provided, as revealed in the interviews), suggesting that the horse can thus be viewed as a "destination ambassador" – in line with existing literature but enriching it thanks to the focus on animal-based events (DASHPER 2020; HELGADÓTTIR and SIGURÐARDÓTTIR 2020; REZAPOURAGHDAM et al. 2025; SUTHERLAND 2021).

Furthermore, entertainment (presumably a part of the quality of the events) was among the most popular reasons why people perceived the events positively, which also aligns with the literature on the motivations of equestrian tourists, and the interviews demonstrate recognition of the uniqueness and excitement of these one-off events. Similarly the literature describes the importance of one-off events as a quality factor for the experience of visitors (DANIELS and NORMAN 2005, pp. 206f; GALLARDO and ROJAS 2025, p. 807; MUTANGA et al. 2017, p. 3).

The (limited) negative perceptions of the events were mostly due to their perceived jet-set character, environmental damage and high traffic congestion. As the traffic in St. Moritz culminates mainly on the road along the lakeside and the road network's capacities are limited, the infrastructure is at maximum capacity during the winter events (and cannot be extended) due to the limited time span in which the ice is usable.

Many inhabitants of St. Moritz/the Engadin said that they neither profit from the events nor are impaired by them, while the percentage of people who profit is more than two and a half times higher than the percentage that is impaired. In addition to the large neutral position, there is clearly a positive rather than negative perception of the events by the inhabitants in terms of mostly economic factors. This has not yet been demonstrated in the literature on equestrian event tourism and could indicate an "economic" social license for equestrian events.

As the interviews revealed, the five-star luxury hotel businesses profit directly from the many tourists and many secondary effects are generated, especially on a local level, while other towns in the Engadin also profit from the equestrian events in St. Moritz. Thus in addition to an excellent (five-star) hotel industry (with supreme accommodation quality), complementary services like high-class gastronomy, luxury retail stores and museums not only profit from equestrian tourism, but also increase the likelihood of overnight stays by tourists – which is in line with the results of previous studies but adds findings in terms of secondary effects in this unique luxury setting (cf. DANIELS and NORMAN 2005; PAVIĆ et al. 2019).

In total, equestrian tourism leads to an added value of at least CHF 47,000,000 per year generated by 60,000 visitors to White Turf and Snow Polo alone (Snow Polo: CHF 22,000,000, Interview 07; White Turf: CHF 25,000,000, year 2024) for St. Moritz and the Engadin (Evviva Polo St. Moritz AG 2026; Gemeinde St. Moritz 2022, p. 102; JEGEN et al. 2007; Rennverein St. Moritz 2024a, p. 4; Rennverein St. Moritz 2026). This illustrates the great degree to which equestrian tourism contributes to economic well-being and what an important economic driver it is for this alpine area.

It is clear that, in line with the literature (e.g. CURTIN 2013; DASHPER 2021; GIAMPICCOLI et al. 2020; RICKLY and KLINE 2021; SCOLLEN and MASON 2024; SPEIRAN and HOVORKA 2024), animal-based tourism in fully-contrived, low-consumptive settings with direct involvement of animals can be important for the economy and may be successful even under such difficult and challenging circumstances (frozen lake with snow cover at 1,800 m. above sea level), enabling a new perspective on how animals can contribute to tourism.

As the added value is generated in a short period of time, the problem of cramped event schedules from January to March is not easily solved, for example by adjusting the schedule, as many events depend on the lake being frozen and on the well-coordinated labour- and cost-sharing of construction. Thus, infrastructure and hotels will remain at maximum capacities due to the natural circumstances dictating the presence of a usable ice layer for the equestrian sports. This ensures high occupancy rates in peak season and guarantees maximum attention and attractiveness for sponsors of the events. The high concentration of tourist attractions in the period in which the lake is usable for the top winter events caused interview partners to recommend stretching out the calendar with events that do

not rely on the lake in order to gain a longer peak season, so that particularly expensive infrastructure like hotels and roads could be used more efficiently and economically throughout the year.

For sponsors, this peak season is highly interesting, as not only are there a large number of tourists and particularly extremely wealthy guests, but furthermore networking and co-creation by tourists has benefits, e.g. networking with business partners, as shown in interviews. The uniqueness of St. Moritz as a high-quality destination in combination with the uniqueness of the equestrian sports, which are not to be found anywhere else in the world, is seen as a primary investment reason for sponsors.

These findings about the attractiveness of sponsoring such animal-based events represent a valuable addition to the literature as almost no sources on this topic can be found. Even though tourist numbers at the equestrian events are high and especially VIP tickets quickly and regularly sell out, advertisements on social media can reach more people than the sponsorship of such events, so finding sponsors has become somewhat harder in recent years (DUSCHLETTA 2023). Many events do not charge an entrance fee and it seems unlikely that they can all be financed solely with money spent at the event site. Thus, especially for smaller equestrian events, sponsorship will remain very important.

As the equestrian events are an important attraction for people to visit St. Moritz, even indirect effects are worth sponsoring, as sponsorship by companies and municipalities in the surrounding towns shows (Rennverein St. Moritz 2025b). It is thus unsurprising that, in addition to the private sector, municipal officials also support the equestrian tourism. This in combination with the well-structured tourism sector, the environmental policy (e.g. surrounding use of the lake) and a real equine sector (carriage companies and connected agricultural businesses) whose actors work together (especially for the winter events), complies with the literature in terms of the indicators necessary for the development of equestrian tourism (CERNAIANU and SOBRY 2019, p. 14).

How futureproof the equestrian events in St. Moritz and connected economic benefits will be, depends to a large extent on the reliability of the freezing of the lake. While most events that take place on the lake could, despite drawbacks, be relocated, the horse races can only take place on the lake, as it is the only area in St. Moritz large enough for such an event.

The move towards decreasing the load on the ice compared to times of maximum use (when visitors' cars are additionally parked on the ice) and hosting slimmed-down versions of the events is appropriate to the momentaneous developments. But an important challenge arises from the fact that there are currently few concepts for tackling a situation with an unusable ice layer on the lake. Future climate change scenarios seem unclear, as different place-specific prognoses exist. If relatively warm, snow- and ice-less winter scenarios develop, like in Arosa, it may be possible that equestrian events in winter could turn St. Moritz into a destination for last chance tourism – like glacier tourism in the Alps or polar bear tourism in Kaktovik, Alaska (cf. MILLER et al. 2020; SALIM et al. 2023).

In 1907, entrepreneurial hoteliers, carriage companies and officials initiated the pioneering horse races on the frozen lake, embracing risk-taking and creativity, however, it remains to be seen whether the current actors have enough foresight to tackle potential future problems in lake usability – which requires at least two of three important dimensions

of entrepreneurship in the equestrian sector identified by the literature (LUPOAE et al. 2023 p. 35; SIGURÐARDÓTTIR and STEINTHORSSON 2018, p. 262).

Despite the uniqueness of the horse races in St. Moritz, which can hardly be implemented and organised anywhere else in the world given the necessary infrastructure (especially in the luxury segment), the innovative equestrian sports of St. Moritz have also led to spin-offs in other locations, namely polo on snow (but not ice) in towns such as Aspen (USA), Cortina (Italy) or Kitzbühel (Austria), showing the way in which a unique equestrian event can be exported and providing insights into exportable events with attractions in the form of horses and equestrian sports (LÜTSCHER 2014). But due to the unique geographical landscape setting in combination with the highly specialised (tourism) businesses, the horse races on ice and snow cannot be copied in Europe, thus protecting St. Moritz's world-class image.

The exceptionality of the equestrian events and the general premium orientation of St. Moritz in the tourism segment leads to a need for highly specialised businesses and infrastructure like the nearby Engadin Airport, which allows visitors, especially VIPs, to access St. Moritz quickly and conveniently. As interviews with experts have shown, the airport is intensively used during the events and is thus an important, if not an essential, piece of infrastructure.

The infrastructure on the lake is also highly specialised, with construction costs of around CHF 3,000,000 each year. Its annual construction can be very demanding under difficult circumstances and tight schedules (which sometimes make helicopter deliveries necessary) and demands a high degree of flexibility from all actors – ranging from those who construct the infrastructure on the lake to secondary actors such as decision-makers, sponsors, hotels, artists (e.g. for ice sculptures) and carriage companies.

There has been little research on this aspect of unique animal-based events that feature cost-sharing to facilitate additional animal-based events and diversify existing offers, so that the case of St. Moritz can provide a valuable contribution. Not only the events on the lake, but also all the equestrian sports and equestrian tourism in St. Moritz require detailed planning and interaction of all actors, which is important for the long-term strategy of equestrian tourism and enabling adaptation and diversification, according to the literature (cf. ESA and ISMAIL 2023, p. 387). This can be seen historically by the establishment of multiple equestrian disciplines, carriage services and horse-riding vacations in the surrounding valleys.

Clearly, equestrian tourism in St. Moritz involves a fully contrived setting which includes direct and indirect involvement with horses while being low-consumptive, as categorised in the literature (e.g. CURTIN 2013, p. 197; RICKLY and KLINE 2021, pp. 8f).

## 6 Conclusions

The case of St. Moritz shows how horses kept in the region were the fundamental basis from which entrepreneurial hoteliers and (mostly British) tourists created (winter and summer) tourism in a remote alpine area through the invention and creation of very significant, unique tourism infrastructure and innovations. From the emerging industrial period onwards, the use of horses for transport purposes was transformed to a focus of use in

tourism, sport, recreation and events that has been preserved until the present day, undergoing further evolution and specialisation.

Horses and the sports they are involved in continue to be one of the main foundations of the outstanding uniqueness of St. Moritz as a destination, beyond other forms of exclusive tourism. Today, the equestrian events are the largest and most prominent events of this kind worldwide, far from other (alpine) luxury destinations, attracting more than 60,000 visitors and generating CHF 22,000,000 of added value from Snow Polo and CHF 25,000,000 from White Turf each year, in addition to the other equestrian events, while being positively perceived by locals and tourists.

Numerous secondary economic effects and other forms of equestrian tourism are initiated by the events, resulting particularly during the winter events in booked-out hotels and facilities, bringing the available infrastructure to its limits. Not only the tourism destination itself, but also the events, equestrian sports and complementary services (e.g. in the form of carriage rides) are located in the premium segment, generating high value and involving very demanding efforts to meet the expectations of global clients. These efforts include unique equestrian tourism services, which complement other tourist structures in St. Moritz, such as the five-star hotel businesses, high-class gastronomy and luxury retail stores. The unique geographical circumstances, such as the prominent lake and typical scenery that are well connected by place-specific infrastructure like the nearby heritage train station, also help distinguish St. Moritz from all other international destinations offering equestrian tourism.

The innovative equestrian events combine with the carriage rides, which were initially a necessary form of transport and later a tourist attraction, to create the fundamental preconditions for an equestrian tourism that has been successful for 120 years. The blend of established traditions, pioneering spirit and the special exclusivity of St. Moritz as a destination, combined with the large number of visitors to equestrian events on ice and snow, has contributed to the world-famous image of St. Moritz and its attractiveness.

The international uniqueness and attractiveness of the winter events in particular have rendered St. Moritz internationally famous. Modern developments show that competitors are beginning to copy the winter equestrian events of St. Moritz (with the associated up-branding of existing horse races), for instance in Tibet and (for Snow Polo) in Tianjin, China, especially profiting from a boost in interest in snow sports through megaevents like the Winter Olympics 2022, which was held in China (cf. LÜTSCHER 2014; ZHU et al. 2020).

Possible future research could focus on the significance of long-standing animal-related events for local traditions, as these are a major reason for the positive perception of the events in St. Moritz. In addition, innovations for further improving safety in equestrian tourism could be discussed. Some participants and experts in St. Moritz mentioned possibilities for improvement beyond the current standards.

## 7 Recommendations

The tight event schedule in peak season is caused by the limited time span in which the lake is usable but combines with the winter vacation time in Switzerland to create a high

touristic impact. To mitigate the annual running costs of hotels and other infrastructure, it is recommended to extend the peak season into the off-season by creating additional attractions, e.g. by additional events that attract different target groups. Such an extended tourism season could also be used for equestrian destination branding. In general, equestrian tourism could be placed more at the focus of branding strategies – as is the case in other destinations, e.g. in France, Hungary, Iceland, Mongolia or Kyrgyzstan (cf. HELGADÓTTIR and SIGURÐARDÓTTIR 2020 p. 4; REZAPOURAGHDAM et al. 2025, p. 473).

One way of enhancing the visibility of the equestrian events involves using the horses as advertising symbols. For example, the horseshoes of the winners of White Turf could be placed on the footpath around St. Moritz Lake with the dates of the races run (like stumbling stones, local legends or a Walk of Fame), which could raise awareness and the interest of tourists in the events. Due to St. Moritz's position in the premium segment, equestrian tourism could further specialise and diversify in this segment by providing special offers and services such as more complete packages with stays in Grand Hotels, carriage transport to events and VIP-options at events.

Besides recommendations for St. Moritz, this study has shown that large and charismatic domesticated animals are favourable attractions that can be used to create unique animal-based tourism experiences. Therefore, other destinations could also use such species, as domesticated animals are not dependent on (rare) natural habitats. Such attraction-oriented animal-based tourism would have a lower ecological impact than animal-based tourism in rare and exotic habitats that need to be developed for tourism and that may suffer negative effects by human activities.

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