

Are Current Efforts to Prevent Grooms from Leaving the Industry Effective? An Analysis Based on Principles of Behavior Change

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Abstract

Grooms play a vital role in the equestrian sector, providing horses with expert care. Yet the grooming industry is finding itself amid continued outflow of experienced staff due to poor working conditions, insufficient remuneration, and lack of respect towards the profession. In 2022, four high-profile initiatives, the formation of the International Grooming Association (IGA), the 2022 FEI ECCO World Championships, the #ChampionsAsOne initiative, and the Cavalor Best Groom Award aimed to galvanize the grooming industry. Drawing on the COM-B model and Behaviour Change Wheel as a theoretical framework and using a four-part online questionnaire, the current study aimed to determine whether these initiatives were perceived by grooms (N = 1389) as addressing prevalent barriers that currently prevent them from staying in the industry. Statistical analysis using chi-square tests, Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests revealed that the initiatives were not perceived as effective. 58.5% of the grooms indicated that the initiatives had no impact on them personally, arguably because the initiatives failed to address those issues perceived as most pressing, namely a high mental and physical workload (physical opportunity) and insufficient remuneration and time off (physical capability). Grooms considered employers, followed by the FEI and the IGA as the most important stakeholders to work towards sustainable change in the grooming industry.

Keywords

Grooming industry; human behavior; staffing crisis; equestrianism; sustainability

1. Introduction

Grooms are considered the backbone of the equestrian industry [1]. They are responsible for the daily care and management of horses, their health and welfare, as well as the running and general maintenance of the yard, be that at an equine veterinary clinic, a riding school, a stud farm, or the training and competition yard of a medal-winning rider. However, over the past few years, an increasing number of grooms have decided to leave the industry [2]. Challenging working conditions, including long hours of physically and mentally demanding work, resulting health issues, little recognition or respect from employers combined with below-minimum wages, and a poor work-life balance are being cited as the underlying reasons for giving up their life's work [3–5]. Grooms who have been doing the job for decades consider

their profession a "dying breed" and demand that "something needs to get done to get people back to the industry and feeling like it is a long-term career outlet" [4]. Showjumping Olympic Gold Medalist Ludger Beerbaum has been publicly quoted as saying that finding committed staff is "something we face in our [equestrian] industry as well," [4] while the director of the Dutch Federation for Riding Schools (FNRS) Haike Blaauw acknowledged that staffing is a "challenging area in many industries at the moment" [6].

In 2022, in response to the growing concerns regarding the grooming industry, the governing body for the equestrian sport, the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), newly initiated or supported four high-profile initiatives aimed at boosting the image of grooms and acknowledging the importance of their role in equestrian sports.

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1.1. Formation of the IGA

At the FEI's request, the International Grooms Association (IGA) was formed on 26th April 2022, formally representing all professional grooms within the equestrian sports community. The IGA aims to achieve greater representation and career recognition for grooms as well as to improve their working conditions [7].

1.2. #ChampionsAsOne

Prior to the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships, the FEI launched the initiative #ChampionsAsOne that "pays homage to each person's unique and valuable contribution and also allows them to be a part of the celebration," [8]. Essentially, the essence of the initiative is to demonstrate that it takes more than just the rider and the horse to achieve top results in the sport, but that it is the grooms and other individuals working behind the scenes who have an equally important role to play.

1.3. 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships

Moreover, the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships in Herning made a concerted and well-publicized effort to improve amenities for the grooms and to foster public recognition of grooms as vital partners to any horse-rider team [9]. In Herning, grooms had their own dedicated lounge with proper catering and an on-site accommodation opportunity and they were clearly included in the TV graphics which introduced each horse-rider combination [10].

1.4. FEI Cavalor Best Groom Award

Each year, the FEI announces the winner of the FEI Cavalor Best Groom award. Presented at the FEI Awards Gala, grooms can be nominated for this award by their athletes, colleagues, and others within the sport. The shortlist is drawn up by a judging panel and the winner is chosen from the said list based on 50% public votes and 50% by an FEI panel [11].

As a result of these initiatives, grooms have been experiencing increased media coverage as well as having been asked to attend prize-giving ceremonies and being given hot meals at shows or "goody bags" to take home [12]. Yet, while such public acknowledgment of grooms may be considered more than welcome, it is important to investigate whether these initiatives improved, let alone solved some of the more fundamental reasons why grooms decided to leave the industry in the first place.

So far, no concerted effort has been made to examine the grooming crisis within the context of human behavior change. Research has demonstrated that behavior is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors [13,14]. To carry out any type of behavior, an individual must have the relevant knowledge and skill set, be motivated to do so as well as have access to the necessary physical resources, and enjoy social support from their family, peers, and larger public [15]. The COM-B model (see Figure 1), developed by Michie *et al.* [15] captures these ideas and, together with the Behavior Change Wheel [15,16] (see Figure 2) serves as a framework for understanding behavior as well as establishing grounds for behavior change [15]. The COM-B model implies that regardless of whether the behavior is intentional or not, it depends on three behavioral sources, and their interaction:

capability, motivation, and opportunity [15]. Each behavioral source is further divided into two sub-categories. Capability may be divided into "capability psychological", which denotes the levels of knowledge or insight required to perform a behavior, and "capability physical", which describes the required skills, strength, or stamina. Opportunity focuses on both the "physical" aspects, i.e. time, money, and resources, as well as the "social" support provided by others, such as friends, family, employers, etc. Lastly, motivation may be divided into "automatic" motivation, affected by habit, desire, or emotional reactions, or "reflective", referring to conscious thought processes, such as planning or goal setting [15,16]. When trying to elicit behavior change, it is important to determine whether any (or all) of these six behavioral sources might present a barrier to the desired behavior being performed. Does an individual have the necessary knowledge or skills to perform a behavior? Are the physical resources and/or social support appropriate? Is the individual motivated to perform the behavior?

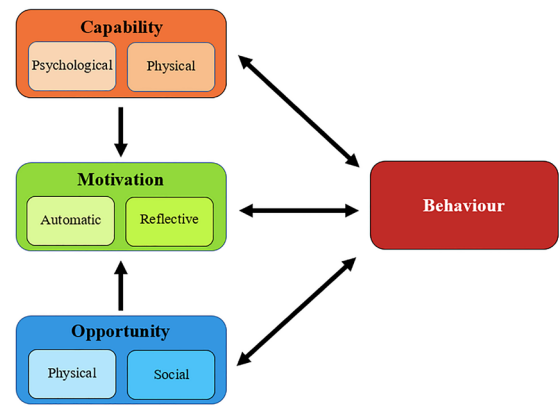


Figure 1: The COM-B model, showing the three sources of behavior and their sub-components. Reproduced with permission from [16].

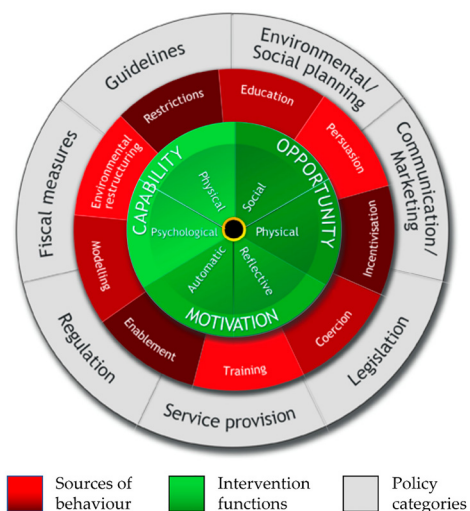


Figure 2: The original Behavior Change Wheel, showing the three sources of behavior, the nine intervention functions, and the seven policy categories. Reproduced with permission from [16].

In order to initiate behavior change, Michie *et al.* [15,16] furthermore describe nine intervention functions, e.g. education, training, persuasion, incentivization, coercion, restriction, environmental restructuring, modeling, and enablement. Each intervention function addresses specific COM-B behavioral sources, which in turn, affects behavior change [16,17] (see Table 1). It follows that any sustainable intervention strategy aimed at changing the underlying behavior of individuals or organizations should first identify existing barriers that prevent grooms from staying in the industry [15,17].

While there are very few scientific studies investigating the current state of the grooming industry, much media attention has been paid to why grooms might be leaving the industry, or rather, in the language of behavior change, what may be preventing grooms from staying in the industry [4,18,19]. These reasons or 'barriers' may be categorized according to the COM-B model as follows:

Capability physical: As horses are animals who do not take "days off" and need care 7 days a week, grooms regularly work longer than the average 8-hour work day [4,20]. This is taxing both physically and mentally, limiting the possibility of proper rest, and increasing the risk for mental and physical illness, and an increased risk of injury as highlighted in studies focusing on the UK horse racing industry [21,22].

Capability psychological: Caring for horses requires extensive theoretical knowledge of horse care and relevant rules/regulations [23]. In high-level sports, such rules and regulations can be complex and demanding as grooms have to be aware of general guidelines as well as discipline-specific regulations and equine medication rules dictated by the FEI [9].

Opportunity physical: A study [5] done on employment satisfaction among Dutch primary equestrian sector employees showed that employees are not only unhappy with current working conditions, but they also consider monetary remuneration to be insufficient while the opportunity to take time off is limited [21].

Opportunity social: Grooms rarely receive the support and understanding from the sector they would like. Their concerns are often not being listened to and attended to [24].

Motivation automatic: A groom's job is often not respected by employers, the public, etc. which negatively affects a person's self-worth.

Motivation reflective: The profession lacks possibilities for career progression [21] – grooms are often limited to move only laterally within the profession (home groom, show groom, stable manager).

In line with the theoretical foundations of the Behavior Change Wheel; any intervention strategy that hopes to evoke sustainable change in the grooming industry should be directed at what the target group – grooms – experience as the most salient barriers [15–17]. While the 2022 initiatives were arguably devised to address some of the underlying aspects of the current grooming crisis, it remains unclear whether the grooms themselves consider these initiatives effective in targeting the barriers they consider most important. Drawing

on the Behavior Change Wheel as a theoretical framework, the current study therefore aims to investigate whether the initiatives effectively addressed the perceived barriers that prevent professional grooms from staying in the industry.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

A descriptive study design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of how professional grooms perceived the four biggest initiatives directed at them in 2022. An online questionnaire was used to collect data from as many grooms as possible. The study received ethical approval from the Hanze Hogeschool Ethics Advisory Committee (dossier number: heac.2023.006) and the study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

The survey was hosted on the Microsoft Forms platform and was open for participation from 1st February 2023 until 26th February 2023 prior to which three grooms participated in pilot testing. The survey was aimed at current and former professional grooms from all over the world, aged 18 and over. Participation was voluntary and anonymous with an option to withdraw at any time before final submission of answers. The survey was distributed through various social media channels. Link to the survey was sent to both via private messages as well as to relevant parties and media channels such as the university, World of Showjumping, Horse & Hound, Equenews.com, and Equenews.be to facilitate snowball sampling. The questionnaire was available only in the English language. All submitted data were kept strictly confidential and processed anonymously. A representative sample with a confidence level of 95%, a population proportion of 50%, and a population size of 5000 was calculated to be 357 participants.

2.2. Survey Design

A four-part, 31-question online survey was developed using Microsoft Forms (see **Supplementary Materials**). Questions used both multiple-choice and open free text format. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete and included different routing options to improve ease of use. In the first section (1 question), prior to getting access to the rest of the survey, grooms were informed of the aims of the study after which they were asked to give explicit consent to participating in the survey. The second section (8 questions) focused on general demographics and work position-related information. The third section (6 questions) concentrated on initiatives directed at grooms in 2022. Those initiatives were: the formation of the IGA, the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships, the #ChampionsAsOne initiative, and the FEI Cavalor Best Groom Award.

The COM-B model [15] provided the theoretical framework for the questions aimed at establishing the effect that the initiatives had on behavioral barriers. Participating grooms were presented with a short description of the four initiatives and asked whether they were familiar with any or all of them. Subsequent questions in the same section focused on determining which of the initiatives was perceived as having the greatest impact on the industry as a whole and at a personal level. Respondents were also given the option of selecting "none" if they believed that none of the initiatives had any impact.

Table 1: Mapping of different Behavior Change Wheel intervention functions onto specific COM-B sources of behavior [16,17]. Shaded areas indicate a relation between intervention function and COM-B source of behavior.

Behavior Change Wheel Intervention functions	COM-B sources of behavior					
	Capability		Opportunity		Motivation	
	Psychological	Physical	Physical	Social	Automatic	Reflective
Education Increasing knowledge or understanding						
Training Imparting skills						
Persuasion Using communication to induce positive or negative feelings or stimulate action						
Incentivization Creating an expectation of reward						
Coercion Creating an expectation of punishment or cost						
Restriction Using rules to: i) increase the opportunity to engage in the target behavior or ii) increase the target behavior by reducing the opportunity to engage in competing behavior						
Environmental restructuring Changing the physical or social context						
Modeling Providing an example that people can imitate or to which they may aspire						
Enablement Increasing means/reducing barriers to increase capability or opportunity						

The fourth part of the questionnaire (16 questions) was directed at grooms who chose a personally impactful initiative in the third section. Participants were asked about the impact that their chosen initiative had on key areas associated with their work, drawing on the COM-B sources of behavior, capability psychological, capability physical, opportunity physical, opportunity social, motivation reflective, and motivation automatic. For example, in order to investigate whether an initiative impacted a groom's automatic motivation, participants were asked whether the initiative affected their feelings about their profession. To keep response options as simple as possible, answers were constructed on a three-point Likert scale: "It had a positive impact", "It had no impact", or "It had a negative impact". For questions regarding psychological and physical capability, the wording was adjusted to reflect the fact that it is not possible to unlearn knowledge or skills. In those two cases, the possible answers were: "Yes, significantly", "Yes, a bit", or "It had no impact".

Finally, participants were asked to indicate which industry stakeholders were primarily responsible for affecting sustainable change for grooms. The listed stakeholders were as follows: the FEI (International Equestrian Federation), IGA (International Grooms Association), EEF (European

Equestrian Federation), national federations, show organizers, employers, grooms themselves, and other.

2.3. Data Analysis

Once the survey was closed, all responses were downloaded from Microsoft Forms and transferred to IBM SPSS 28.0 for statistical analysis. To test for differences between grooms with various backgrounds, their familiarity with the different initiatives, and their perceived impact, Kruskal-Wallis, Mann-Whitney U, and Pearson chi-square tests were used. In order to determine differences in perceived impact between the initiatives and COM-B behavioral sources a Kruskal-Wallis test and subsequent post-hoc Mann-Whitney U tests were used. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Whenever multiple comparisons were carried out, a Bonferroni correction was applied to the alpha value with $p < 0.05/N$.

Data storage was conducted according to the Research Data Management policy framework of the University of Applied Sciences Van Hall Larenstein. Data management will adhere to the principles of Open Science.

3. Results

3.1. General Overview

A total of 1397 participants filled in the survey. Eight surveys were only partially completed and thus removed from further analysis, resulting in a data set of 1389 complete responses.

Participating grooms had a mean age of 34 (± 11.47 years). Fifty-four percent (54%) were former grooms and 46% currently worked as professional grooms. Ninety-one percent (91%) of participants were female, 8% male, 0.4% non-binary and 0.5% preferred not to say. Participants from the United States were represented by 33.8% (N = 469) followed by the United Kingdom (12.2%), Germany (9.1%), Canada (8.6%), and the Netherlands (7.8%). Most grooms worked in the discipline of showjumping (74%), followed by dressage (9.6%) and other (different discipline or type of stable) with 9%. A total of 87.4% of participating grooms attended competitions (49.5% national and 50.5% international). 94.2% of those did that at least once a month.

3.2. Familiarity with and Impact of Initiatives Directed at Grooms in 2022

Out of all the participants, 23.9% of current or former grooms had heard of all four of the biggest initiatives directed at grooms in 2022. 52.3% of them had heard of some, but not all of them, and 23.8% were not familiar with any of the initiatives. Formation of the IGA was named to be the most impactful initiative for the grooming industry by 36.4% of the grooms (see **Figure 3**), followed by the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships (27.9%). However, 20.1% of the grooms thought none of the initiatives had any real impact.

When asked about the personal impact of the initiatives (see **Figure 4**), the majority of participants chose none (58.5%). However, out of the four interventions, the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships (16.7%) was considered marginally more impactful than the formation of IGA (16.4%).

3.2.1. Familiarity with the Initiatives

A Mann-Whitney U test found a significant difference in familiarity with the initiatives between current and former grooms ($U = 198566$, $z = -6.04$, $p < 0.001$). Current grooms (N = 638) reported greater familiarity with the initiatives compared to former grooms (N = 751) (mean: 1.88 ± 0.69 vs. 2.1 ± 0.67). A significant difference was also found between show grooms (N = 1213) and home grooms (N = 176). Also, show grooms (N = 1213) reported significantly greater familiarity with the initiatives than home grooms (N = 176) ($U = 92397.5$, $z = -3.17$, $p < 0.01$; mean: 1.98 ± 0.69 vs. 2.15 ± 0.12 , respectively).

A Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a significant difference between grooms working in different disciplines ($\chi^2 (3, N = 1389) = 64.59$, $p < 0.001$). Post-hoc Mann-Whitney U tests with a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha value of 0.0125 showed significant differences between showjumping grooms (N = 1027) and other grooms (N = 133) ($U = 42137.5$, $z = -7.87$; $p < 0.001$; mean: 1.94 ± 0.48 vs. 2.44 ± 0.61); dressage/para-dressage grooms (N = 134) and other grooms (N = 133) ($U = 6136.5$, $z = -4.884$, $p < 0.001$; mean: 2.06 ± 0.63 vs. 2.44 ± 0.61) and eventing grooms (N = 95) and other grooms (N = 133) ($U = 4006$, $z = -5.168$; $p < 0.001$; mean: 1.97 ± 0.68 vs. 2.44 ± 0.61).

No significant differences were found between showjumping grooms, dressage/para-dressage grooms, or eventing grooms.

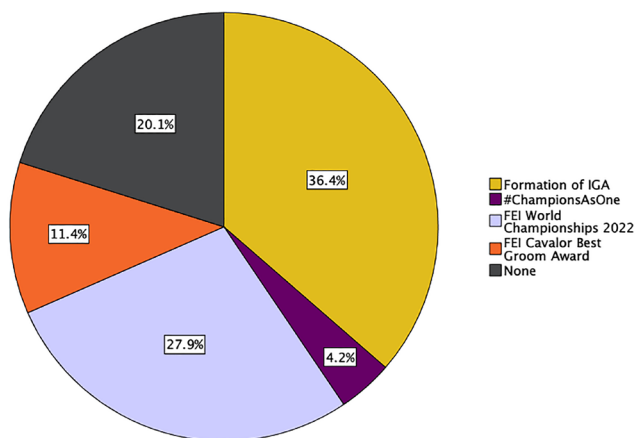


Figure 3: Most impactful initiatives for the grooming industry.

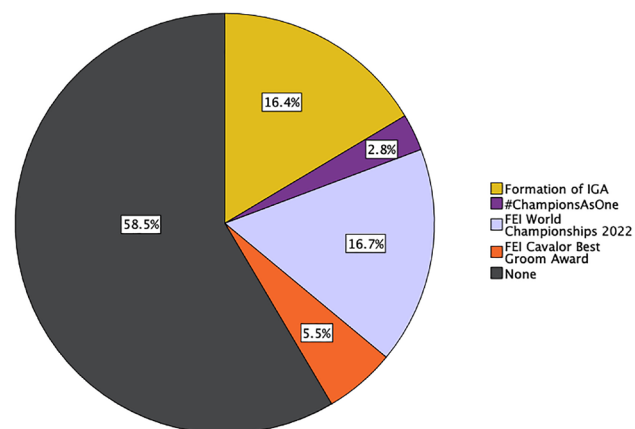


Figure 4: Most impactful initiatives for the grooms on a personal level.

3.3. Impact of the Initiatives on the Grooming Industry and Personally

Using the chi-square test, a significant difference was found between current and former grooms regarding which initiative they considered to have the most impact on the grooming industry ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1389) = 20.912$, $p < 0.001$). Former grooms considered the formation of IGA (34.3%) and 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships (24.6%) as less impactful compared to current grooms (38.6% and 31.3% respectively). FEI Cavalor Best Groom Award is seen as more impactful by former grooms (14.6% and 8.1% respectively). In terms of the personal impact of the initiatives, there is a significant difference between the current and former grooms ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1389) = 35.919$, $p < 0.001$). Former grooms see the formation of IGA (11.1%) and 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships (14.3%) as less impactful compared to current grooms (22% and 19.3% respectively).

A significant difference was found in the perceived impact of the initiatives when comparing show grooms to home grooms ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1389) = 10.319$, $p = 0.035$). Show grooms consider the formation of the IGA more impactful than home grooms (37.5% vs. 28.3% respectively), while home grooms consider the FEI Cavalor Best Groom award as more impactful compared to show grooms (16.5% and 10.7%, respectively). Regarding the personal impact of the interventions, no

significant difference was found between grooms going to shows and home grooms ($p = 0.127$).

Pearson's chi-square tests showed no significant differences between grooms from various disciplines, regarding the impact of the different initiatives on the grooming industry in general ($p = 0.183$) and on grooms personally ($p = 0.145$).

3.4. Initiatives and COM-B Factors

In total, 439 grooms found one of the initiatives to have had an impact on them personally. A Kruskal-Wallis test revealed that they significantly affected three COM-B factors (see **Table 2**). Psychological capability ($H(3, N = 439) = 18.479, p < 0.001$) and automatic motivation ($H(3, N = 439) = 9.860, p = 0.020$) were impacted in a positive direction. Physical opportunity ($H(3, N = 439) = 14.170, p = 0.003$) was the least impacted by any of the initiatives. The rest of the factors were not significantly impacted.

Post-hoc comparisons were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U Test with a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .01 (0.05/5). By comparing the two most impactful initiatives which were the formation of IGA ($N = 174$) and 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships ($N = 177$), the formation of IGA had a significantly more positive impact on psychological capability ($U = 12047, z = -3.921, p < 0.001$) and physical opportunity ($U = 12996.5, z = -3.820, p < 0.001$).

3.5. Responsible Stakeholder for Leading the Change

Out of 1389 participants, 29% ($N = 405$) would like to see employers take the lead in developing a sustainable grooming industry (see **Figure 5**). The FEI was chosen by 23.5% of participants ($N = 326$), followed by the IGA ($N = 215, 15.5%$) and national federations with 10.7% ($N = 148$).

4. Discussion

The current study aimed to determine whether any of the four recent initiatives directed at grooms were perceived by grooms to address the barriers preventing them from staying in the industry. The Behavior Change Wheel was used as a theoretical framework in the analysis. Findings showed that participating grooms viewed the formation of the IGA and the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships to be most impactful to the grooming sector as a whole. Arguably, these two initiatives were the most high-profile and promoted unity for a profession (the IGA) and within the realms of competitive sports (the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships) [7,10].

However, these results did not appear to translate to perceptions of effectiveness at the personal level. More than half of the grooms who indicated that they were aware of the campaigns (i.e. 58.5%) failed to see the relevance of the initiatives to themselves personally, likely because the initiatives failed to address the issues grooms perceive as the most salient barriers.

The 2022 initiatives appear to have failed to address barriers relating to physical capability. Effective interventions would have focused on reducing the mental and physical workload of grooms, thereby 'enabling' them to take better care of their

health and physical fitness. The initiatives also failed to tackle barriers related to physical opportunity. Providing better remuneration or time off would likely have been much more effective seeing that these are concrete examples of the relevant intervention functions enablement or restructuring of the (working) environment. Lastly, the initiatives seem to have done little to clamp down on, or 'restrict' levels of disrespect by employers (rather than the general public), thus failing to attend to pervasive barriers relating to social opportunity. In fact, most of the barriers that were left unaddressed fall within the responsibility of employers. Tellingly, grooms named employers as the responsible stakeholders for leading the change in the grooming industry. These findings mirror those from previous studies investigating the effectiveness of public health interventions, where, in the case of the study, the responsible governmental stakeholders, refrained from implementing numerous appropriate intervention functions, and subsequent behavior change failed to manifest [25,26].

Findings did demonstrate that the initiatives appear to have successfully addressed the behavioral sources of automatic motivation and psychological capability. The 2022 ECCO FEI World Championship, #ChampionsAsOnes, and the Cavalor Best Groom Award all focused on raising the image of the profession by evoking a positive emotional response, categorized by Michie *et al.* [15,16] 'persuasion', as well as creating expectations of reward, i.e. 'incentivization'. Both these intervention functions will affect levels of automatic motivation. What is more, the IGA, as an organization focused, at least in part, on educating grooms as well as helping them voice their concerns in the industry, may be perceived as increasing levels of knowledge, i.e. psychological capability.

Results also indicated that overall, 76% of grooms had heard about at least one initiative. However, levels of familiarity differed between grooms according to employment status and type of discipline. For example, former grooms were found to be less familiar with the initiatives. In all likelihood, this is due to them having retired from their profession prior to 2022. A study in 2023 on the acceptability of behavior change interventions reported that the success of interventions is tied to their relevance to a specific demographic group [27]. Therefore, former grooms may have not perceived the initiatives as particularly relevant to them and thus failed to familiarize themselves with their aims and activities.

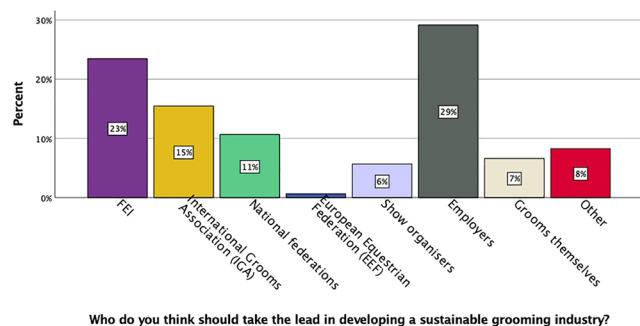


Figure 5: Responsible stakeholder to lead the change.

Table 2: The degree of impact of different initiatives on various COM-B factors (in %), with significant factors highlighted in bold.

	“Yes, significantly” ^a	“Yes, a bit” ^a	“It had a positive impact” ^b	“It had no impact” ^{a, b}	“It had a negative impact” ^b
Physical capability ^a	2.5%	29.4%	n/a	86.1%	n/a
Psychological capability^a	7.7%	48.3%	n/a	44%	n/a
Automatic motivation^b	n/a	n/a	67%	31%	2.1%
Reflective motivation ^b	n/a	n/a	41.7%	55.4%	3%
Social opportunity ^b	n/a	n/a	35.3%	61.5%	3.2%
Physical opportunity^b	n/a	n/a	16.2%	81.8%	2.1%

^a These response options only applied to the questions relating to the behavioral sources 'physical capability' and 'psychological capability'

^b These response options only applied to the questions relating to the behavioral sources 'automatic motivation', 'reflective motivation', 'social opportunity', and 'physical opportunity'

Grooms involved in one of the Olympic disciplines (showjumping, dressage/para-dressage, eventing), were much more likely to have heard of one or more initiatives. For example, the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships in Herning were held only for showjumping and dressage/para-dressage, meaning grooms working in these disciplines were the main group exposed to the initiative. Grooms not involved in the aforementioned disciplines are likely to be less aware of initiatives aimed primarily at the Olympic disciplines. Again, these findings echo the conclusions drawn by Novoradovskaya *et al.* [27], that the success of an intervention strategy depends on its relevance to the target group. By failing to take the diversity of the grooming population into account, the initiatives may have ended up being less effective.

Additionally, compared to show grooms, home grooms perceived the initiatives to be less impactful. It could be argued that the formation of the IGA made less of an impact in the eyes of home grooms due to their lack of connection to the FEI. Since the FEI is best known for representing the international equestrian sports scene, home grooms are much less directly affiliated with the FEI. Secondly, it is important to note that 25% of the home grooms who took part in the survey are not involved with any of the Olympic disciplines. Since the initiatives were primarily publicized through FEI and affiliated media channels and at FEI events [8,10,11,28] the message and intended impact of the interventions might not have resonated with home grooms. Even though the formation of the IGA may arguably be relevant to all grooms, regardless of their specific tasks, the close connection of the IGA with the FEI may have led home grooms to assume that the work of the IGA is as irrelevant to them as other FEI activities. Such a phenomenon is a commonly acknowledged bias, the so-called 'halo effect', which leads individuals to base their assessment of a specific aspect of a person, product, or organization on the nature of previous assessments of that person, product or organization [29]. As such, the close association of current initiatives with the FEI may have inadvertently led to the alienation of certain groups of grooms and the subsequent perceived ineffectiveness of the initiatives. As has been highlighted by Henley *et al.* [30], identifying the themes most relevant for a target group is essential to evoke sustainable behavior change in that group.

The minority of grooms who did choose a personally impactful initiative also settled on the formation of the IGA and the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships. To reiterate,

both initiatives focused strongly on automatic motivation (i.e. feeling about the job) and psychological capability (i.e. levels of knowledge). However, as research from Michie *et al.* [15] has shown automatic motivation and psychological capability are only pieces of the larger puzzle. Successful behavior change is a result of addressing all relevant behavioral sources and using appropriate intervention functions in the process [13,31]. Research within the nursing sector indicates that interventions which target all COM-B factors could help improve staffing shortages. Successful interventions include expanding the educational capacity and opportunity, expanding career options and improving compensation, regarding nurses as strategic assets and making positive changes in the work environment [32] as well as increasing funding for educational purposes, non-profits and organizations helping nurses [33].

The findings of the current study demonstrate that, albeit undoubtedly well-intentioned, the effect of the four initiatives aimed at galvanizing the grooming sector is perceived to have been marginal at best. However, by drawing on the existing theoretical frameworks such as the COM-B model and the Behavior Change Wheel [15,16], it has become possible to pinpoint why this might be: launching initiatives that target secondary issues, rather than attempting to tackle those barriers considered essential. As such, the current approach of using the Behavior Change Wheel shows considerable promise in assisting governing bodies when drawing up initiatives aimed at (behavior) change within the equine industry in general and the grooming profession in particular. Future research should focus on investigating how grooms themselves see the future of the industry, what changes they consider essential, and what might be needed to prevent fellow grooms from leaving their jobs.

The main limitations of the study include the high number of showjumping grooms taking part in the research. This was largely due to the fact that the main media outlets who spread the survey are highly active in covering news related to that specific discipline. However, showjumping is also by far the biggest equestrian discipline in the world so the high number of showjumping grooms might, in fact, be considered highly representative and may reflect the overall opinion of the grooming industry. Also, it needs to be borne in mind that the initiatives were launched in the spring and summer of 2022, while the current study was executed at the start of 2023. Seeing that the process of change is incredibly complex [34]

and time-consuming [35], it may be that the perception of the effectiveness of the initiatives may change as time goes on.

5. Conclusions

The main aim of the current study was to determine whether professional grooms consider the initiatives launched in 2022 by the FEI and stakeholders to be effective in addressing the current staffing crisis and the underlying issues that prevent them and their colleagues from staying in the industry. The answers from participating grooms indicate that last year's interventions have – so far – failed to address the issues perceived as the most pressing barriers to grooms staying in the industry. Current results showed that, in general, the initiatives investigated were perceived as unsuccessful in addressing barriers related to physical opportunity and physical capability. In addition, a majority of the grooms were not personally impacted by any of the initiatives.

Out of four presented initiatives, the formation of IGA and the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships were considered to be the most impactful both on a personal level and to the industry at large. There was a significant difference in the behavior barriers that the initiatives addressed with psychological capability, automatic motivation, and physical opportunity being the behavioral sources most readily addressed. Employers, the FEI, and the IGA were considered to be three of the most important stakeholders responsible for initiating and managing relevant interventions to affect change in the grooming industry. Future interventions have to focus more on tackling the barriers of physical opportunity and physical capability which may be argued to be the most relevant in ensuring the longevity of a groom's career.

Supplementary Materials

A four-part, 31-question online survey was developed using Microsoft Forms®.

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Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, S.L.O. and I.W.; methodology, S.L.O. and I.W.; formal analysis, S.L.O.; writing—original draft preparation, S.L.O.; writing—review and editing, I.W.; visualization, S.L.O. and I.W.; supervision, I.W.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data storage was conducted according to the Research Data Management policy framework of the University of Applied Sciences Van Hall Larenstein. Data management will adhere to the principles of Open Science and data is accessible on request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

The study received ethical approval from the Hanze Hogeschool Ethics Advisory Committee (dossier number: heac.2023.006) and the study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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