

What Does It Take? Changing the Tide on Staffing Issues in the Equestrian Industry

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Abstract

The equine industry faces increasing scrutiny regarding its social license to operate (SLO), with appropriate care for horses at its center. Grooms play a vital role in professional horse care and management, yet their own working conditions often remain poor, resulting in an increasing number leaving the industry. Building on previous research, this study explored grooms' perspectives on the changes needed to improve their profession's long-term viability, and the types of future initiatives they believe would effectively address these issues. An online survey targeting professional grooms received 1,318 valid responses. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative responses to two questions focusing on aspects related to Sustainable Workforce and Future Initiatives. For Sustainable Workforce, 15 unique lower-order themes were grouped into four higher-order themes: Working Conditions, Recognition and Respect, Future Prospects and Personal Development, and Acceptance and Status Quo. For Future Initiatives, 19 lower-order themes were organized into three higher-order themes: Working Conditions, External Recognition, and Change in General. Participants considered improved working conditions—particularly better pay, reasonable working hours, and legal protections—vital to ensuring the sustainability of the grooming profession. Respondents emphasized the importance of initiatives that address such tangible improvements, in addition to aspects such as unionization and health support, rather than symbolic recognition alone. Addressing these issues is critical for improving job satisfaction, retaining grooms, and ensuring horse welfare, ultimately contributing to the industry's SLO and long-term viability.

Keywords

Horse grooms; staffing crisis; equestrian industry; sustainability; working conditions

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the equine industry has been facing increasing pressure to uphold its social license to operate (SLO) [1–3]. The concept of SLO refers to the informal, ongoing approval granted by the public and key stakeholders for an industry to continue its activities. Unlike legal or regulatory permissions, the SLO is shaped by societal expectations regarding horse welfare, ethical practices, environmental sustainability, and the sport's broader impact on communities [1,4]. As public awareness and scrutiny increase, maintaining this license requires transparency,

proactive welfare measures, and responsiveness to evolving ethical standards within the sport.

In 2023, in direct response to these developments, the Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI) adopted the FEI Code of Conduct for the Welfare of the Horse, requiring all those involved in horse sports to acknowledge that horse welfare is paramount at all times [5]. The way in which horses are managed at home, in training, and in competition is widely acknowledged as essential for ensuring appropriate levels of welfare [6].

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In most, if not all, professional or semi-professional equestrian settings, grooms are responsible for the daily management and care of horses. Shortages of sufficiently skilled staff have increasingly been acknowledged to compromise welfare standards [7,8]. Furthermore, financial pressures within the industry exacerbate these challenges, with many establishments struggling to offer competitive wages or adequate working conditions, contributing to high staff turnover and recruitment difficulties [9]. Retaining skilled and motivated grooms is, therefore, essential—not only for maintaining optimal equine welfare but also for preserving the industry's SLO.

In 2024, the Grooms Consultative Group, established by the FEI to allow grooms to contribute to the developments within the FEI, submitted a proposal to prohibit show jumping classes from starting before 7.30 a.m. or ending later than 11.30 p.m., with a minimum of 10 hours between consecutive classes. The FEI, however, decided to postpone a definite decision on the proposal until the full rules revision in 2026 [10]. The proposal primarily aimed to safeguard equine welfare by emphasizing the importance of rest to help horses recover from, and adapt to, exercise-induced stress [11]. Additionally, it highlighted a related concern: the working conditions of grooms.

The impact of late-night jumping on grooms has been the subject of much debate [12], as such competitive schedules extend the length of the groom's working day without the opportunity for compensatory rest. Sleep deprivation becomes an even greater concern, as shows generally conclude on Sundays, with grooms having to load up horses and equipment and take to the wheel themselves to drive back home without the opportunity to sleep beforehand [13]. Several studies have shown that sleepiness at the wheel, poor sleep quality, and sleep deprivation substantially increase the risk of being involved in traffic accidents [14–16]. Requiring grooms to undertake journeys home when overtired, likely poses a considerable safety hazard on public roads, threatening the health and welfare of grooms, horses, and other road users.

Yet late-night shows are only one example of the many challenges faced by grooms. Long, unsociable hours carrying out physically and mentally demanding work with little time to recover, combined with a high degree of responsibility at a minimum wage, all contribute to an increasing number of grooms leaving the industry [17–19].

A previous study [18] investigated the effectiveness of several international initiatives designed to prevent grooms from leaving the equine industry. Perceived barriers for grooms to stay in the industry were categorized using the COM-B model of behavior [20,21], while grooms' perceptions of the different initiatives were aligned with intervention functions according to the Behavior Change Wheel [20,21]. Two of the initiatives—namely, the 2022 ECCO FEI World Championships that highlighted the role of grooms, and the establishment of the International Grooms Association (IGA)—were thought to impact the grooming profession as a whole. However, more than half of the grooms (58.8%) failed to see the relevance of any of the initiatives to them

personally, likely because they did not address salient issues such as mental and physical health and the provision of better working conditions. It was argued that, in order to prevent grooms from leaving the industry, future research should focus on what changes or initiatives grooms themselves consider essential to attain a grooming industry equipped to meet current and future societal demands. The current discourse on SLO focuses primarily on equine welfare [1,3]. However, ensuring high welfare standards requires not only ethical practices but also a well-structured, organizational framework of the industry. In such a context, workforce quality and stability are essential, as staffing shortages and poor working conditions have been shown to undermine appropriate levels of horse care [7,8]. Consequently, addressing staffing challenges in the grooming industry is not just a workforce issue but a necessary step in maintaining public trust and securing the equine industry's SLO.

Against this backdrop, the current study builds on the work of Ole and Wolframm [18] by exploring grooms' own perspectives on the changes required in the grooming industry to ensure a stable and capable workforce that supports the equine industry's SLO, as well as the types of future initiatives they consider most effective.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

The study employed a descriptive design using an online survey aimed at professional grooms. The survey, hosted on the Microsoft Forms platform, was available from February 1 to February 26, 2023. Prior to launching the survey, pilot testing was conducted with three professional grooms to ensure clarity and ease of completion. Eligible participants included individuals who were either currently or previously employed as professional grooms. The survey was available in English, open to participants worldwide, and restricted to individuals aged 18 years or older. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with respondents able to withdraw at any point before submitting their responses. Before starting, participants were provided with detailed information about the study's aims and were required to give explicit consent to participate. The first section of the study focused on demographics, the second section on grooms' familiarity with different initiatives, and the third and final section on the perceived impact of said initiatives, what aspects of the grooming industry should be improved, suggestions for future initiatives, and which stakeholders should lead the change.

The study employed a snowball sampling strategy and was distributed on social media via the university's and the authors' Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn accounts; through personal invitations by email and WhatsApp; and via various online equine media outlets. A representative sample size was determined at 357 participants, based on a 95% confidence level, a 50% population proportion, and an estimated population size of 5,000.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Hanze Hogeschool Ethics Advisory Committee (dossier number: heac.2023.006), and the research adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

2.2. Survey Design

The survey consisted of 31 questions and combined multiple-choice and open-ended formats to capture a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. Routing options were used to improve navigation. Survey questions included demographic and work-related information, assessments of initiatives aimed at supporting grooms in 2022, and open-ended prompts inviting participants to reflect on necessary changes for the long-term viability and sustainability of the grooming profession. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete (see **Supplementary Materials**).

Part of the survey data focusing on the impact of key initiatives aimed at the grooming industry has already been published in [18]. The current analysis focused on the qualitative responses provided by grooms employed in the grooming industry at the time of the study in response to the following two questions:

- Q13/28: What type of initiatives, if any, would you like to see to draw attention to the grooming profession (“Future Initiatives”)?
- Q15/31: What, if any, changes to the grooming industry would you like to see that would motivate you to stay in the grooming industry long-term (“Sustainable Workforce”)?

2.3. Data Analysis

All responses were imported into IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0 for analysis. Quantitative data related to demographics and work environments for all valid responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies). Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis [22] for each of the two questions (“Future Initiatives” and “Sustainable Workforce” separately). For both questions, the same approach was followed: The first stage of analysis involved immersion in the data, with the first author reading and reviewing the open-ended responses several times to ensure nuanced understanding. In the next step, initial codes were generated by analyzing the data line by line and tagging specific words or phrases relevant to the research questions. These initial codes were refined to reflect lower-order themes and reviewed by the second author. Any discrepancies in understanding were discussed between the first and second authors until a consensus was reached. Similar or related lower-order themes were subsequently grouped into broader, higher-order themes, which were once again refined through discussion between the authors. Finally, each theme was examined thoroughly to ensure coherence and distinctiveness, ensuring that the key areas of concern and improvement suggested by the grooms were captured appropriately.

Descriptive statistics were applied to count the frequency of mentions for each theme to provide a structured overview

of the themes and assist with interpreting priorities. Data were managed in compliance with the Research Data Management Policy Framework of the University of Applied Sciences Van Hall Larenstein and adhered to Open Science principles to ensure transparency and long-term accessibility.

3. Results

The survey yielded a total of 1,397 responses, of which 1,318 responded to at least one of the qualitative questions. The demographics of these 1,318 respondents are outlined in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Demographic variable	Category	N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	1202	91.2
	Male	104	7.9
	Non-binary	6	0.5
	Prefer not to say	6	0.5
Age	18–24	274	20.8
	25–34	566	42.9
	35–44	255	19.3
	45–54	134	10.2
	55–64	66	5.0
	65 and older	23	1.7
Main discipline/ area of work	Show jumping	975	74.0
	Dressage/para-dressage	125	9.5
	Eventing	92	7.0
	Driving/para-driving	7	0.5
	Endurance	1	0.1
	Other (e.g., different discipline, breeding stable, livery yard, riding school, vet clinic, etc.)	109	8.3
	Missing	9	0.7
Type of groom	Home groom	166	12.6
	Show groom	334	25.3
	Both	818	62.1
The most frequent type of shows	National	564	42.8
	International	588	44.6
	Missing	166	12.6
Frequency of shows	Twice a week or more	231	17.5
	Once a week	313	23.7
	Twice a month	437	33.2
	Once a month	106	8.0
	Every two months	25	1.9
	Occasionally	40	3.0
	Missing	166	12.6

3.1. Thematic Analysis – Sustainable Workforce

To improve readability and facilitate understanding, results relating to a Sustainable Workforce are presented first. Thematic analysis of the responses identified 15 unique lower-order themes, which were subsequently organized into four higher-order themes: Working Conditions, Recognition and Respect, Future Prospects and Personal Development, and Acceptance and Status Quo. An additional 59 comments (2.39%) did not fit into any other category and were excluded from further analysis. Explanatory definitions of the lower-order themes are detailed in **Table 2**.

3.2. Thematic Analysis – Future Initiatives

Thematic analysis of responses to the question on Future Initiatives identified 19 unique lower-order themes, which were subsequently organized into 3 higher-order themes: Working Conditions, External Recognition, and Change in General. Explanatory definitions of the lower-order themes are detailed in **Table 3**.

4. Discussion

The aim of the current study was twofold: to investigate grooms' perspectives on the changes required to develop a sustainable grooming industry and to determine which type of future initiatives grooms considered most relevant.

4.1. Higher-Order Theme: Working Conditions

Findings demonstrate that more than three-quarters of participants considered appropriate working conditions by far the most important aspects in achieving a sustainable grooming industry. A better salary and more reasonable working hours were considered vital, followed by improved conditions at shows and home, benefits, working legally, accommodation, and the ability to predict and plan work.

Nearly one-quarter of the grooms pointed out the need for better remuneration, which might be indicative of a lack of financial security, especially considering the economic situation of the past few years, also referred to as the 'cost of living crisis' [23,24]. There is very little pay transparency in the equestrian sector, making it difficult to assign exact numbers. However, it can be assumed that participants consider current compensation in relation to the workload insufficient. Lack of overtime pay and other benefits, such as insurance, pension schemes, and scheduling (paid) holidays, likely contribute to such views [19]. The nursing sector, which can be considered comparable to the grooming sector in terms of round-the-clock caretaking, has been facing similar issues for years [25], with research suggesting that national social security provisions appropriately reflect the nature of the work. Similarly, while the employment of grooms is subject to national employment laws in most countries if not all, current working conditions often

fail to reflect the physical and logistical demands of the profession [26]. Studies have shown that poor working conditions [27], high turnover rates, and staffing shortages [7,8] negatively impact horse welfare, which, in turn, affect industry legitimacy and SLO. Given that workforce stability is essential for maintaining public trust in the equestrian sector [3], the long-term sustainability of the industry depends on ensuring that grooming remains a viable profession. Sector-wide agreements on appropriate levels of remuneration could help address these challenges, contributing not only to workforce retention but also to the industry's ability to meet evolving societal expectations.

Similar to nursing [28], working hours have also long been a serious concern for grooms and are key in influencing job satisfaction [19,29]. Not surprisingly, survey participants identified it as a top priority for improvement. Grooms typically work six days a week, with hours stretching from early morning to late evening [30]. While the care for horses must, by definition, be structured differently from office work, grooms should also be able to work within the hours outlined by national employment laws. A good work-life balance has been shown to improve worker health and productivity [31], and workload is a decisive factor for many grooms when questioned about their careers. Being intertwined with staff retention and how the workload is distributed between employees, poor workload management has been identified as leading to burnout and intentions to leave the profession [28]. Seeing that for competition grooms, their working environment includes the showground, improving working conditions should extend beyond a groom's home base to competition venues.

Grooms also raised the issue of better accommodation. A groom's contract frequently includes bed and board, which is why paid-out salaries often remain below the national minimum. However, anecdotal evidence has shown that the accommodation provided is at times below par, risking the health and safety of a groom [32]. Article 25 of the United Nations Human Rights Declaration states that a person has the right to adequate housing [33]. Almost five percent of respondents raised the issue of working legally, indicating that working without a contract continues to exist in the industry. Having the correct paperwork not only helps clarify the responsibilities, rights, and obligations of all parties involved [34], but it also provides at least a modicum of predictability and therefore stability [26,35]. A study from 2024 highlighted the psychological impact of unpredictability, stating that constant ambiguity can result in chronic stress, anxiety, and burnout [36]. Ensuring that grooms work legally is therefore an essential step toward achieving more transparency and subsequently enhancing levels of trust and credibility in the sector [3,37].

Table 2: Detailed overview of higher- and lower-order themes for sustainable workforce, including the number and percentage of respondents who mentioned the theme.

Higher-order theme: Working Conditions (N = 1940; 80.46%)	
Lower-order theme	Further elaboration by survey participants
Better salary (N = 596; 24.72%)	Salary that reflects the skill/level of experience in the industry, workload, hours worked, and responsibility.
Benefits (N = 263; 10.91%)	Benefits such as pension schemes, (paid) holidays, insurance provided by the employer, access to (mental) health services, and overtime pay.
Better working hours (N = 461; 19.12%)	Fewer working hours per day. Abolishing 6–7 day work weeks and adopting a standard 5-day work week. Overall better work-life balance and the ability to take time off/days off when needed.
Reasonable workload (N = 93; 3.86%)	Increased number of staff to better manage the existing workload; less truck driving to the shows by the grooms themselves (hiring professional drivers instead).
Better working conditions at home (N = 135, 5.60%)	Pleasant work environment, as well as good facilities and equipment to work with.
Better accommodation (N = 35; 1.45%)	Proper living conditions if provided by the employer (enough space, warm water, light, cleanliness).
Working legally (N = 118; 4.89%)	Legal contracts between the employer and the groom follow national employment laws. Presence of human resources (HR) representative. Adhering to labor union rules, if applicable.
Better conditions at horse shows (N = 230; 9.54%)	More reasonable scheduling (no late-night classes, especially if followed by early classes the next day). Strict limits on the number of horses allowed per groom at shows. Providing grooms at all levels (1* to 5*) with the same quality of catering/affordable food, pleasant accommodation, and clean sanitary facilities. More 'groom-friendly' layout (proximity of stables/arenas/parking, enough space for lunging/unloading), and the possibility to stay for an extra night when the show is finished to avoid being tired while driving a truck.
Less pressure and/or uncertainty (N = 9; 0.37%)	More predictability and plannability in terms of work schedules.
Higher-order theme: Recognition and Respect (N = 378; 15.68%)	
Lower-order theme	Further elaboration by survey participants
More respect (N = 291; 12.07%)	Riders and grooms should be seen as equals, and grooms must be heard. Grooming should be taken as a serious profession by all stakeholders. All grooms, regardless of their level or role (home vs. show grooms), should be seen and treated equally. No sexual harassment. More respect among grooms themselves.
More recognition (N = 87; 3.61%)	Continued and increased coverage of grooms on all media platforms by all stakeholders (e.g., FEI, show organizers, employers). Mentioning grooms at shows (named together with rider and horse). More awards both at shows (either financial or material) and in general, including those that highlight the team at home.
Higher-order theme: Future Prospects and Personal Development (N = 72; 2.99%)	
Lower-order theme	Further elaboration by survey participants
Improved future outlook (N = 38; 1.58%)	Opportunities to progress within the industry (e.g., from groom to manager, groom to rider) so that working in the industry could be seen as a long-term career outlet. Possibility to have life after grooming (either retiring with a pension or when moving to another industry, have official qualifications to use at the new job).
Better education (N = 34; 1.41%)	Better education of both incoming/young grooms as well as a possibility to acquire transferable skills that can be later used at other jobs outside of the primary sector in the equestrian industry.
Higher-order theme: Acceptance and Status Quo (N = 21; 0.87%)	
Lower-order theme	Further elaboration by survey participants
It is what it is (N = 17, 0.71%)	Nothing is going to change in the industry and/or this is the nature of the job.
Everything is okay (N = 4, 0.17%)	The current conditions in the industry are acceptable.

Table 3: Detailed overview of higher- and lower-order themes for future initiatives, including the number and percentage of respondents who mentioned the theme.

Higher-order theme: Working Conditions (N = 639; 49.55%)	
Lower-order themes	Further elaboration by survey participants
Better salary (N = 116; 9%)	Salary that reflects the skill/level of experience in the industry, workload, hours worked, and responsibility.
Financial benefits (N = 53; 4.11%)	Benefits such as, but are not limited to: overtime pay including shows and night shifts, monetary awards for grooms at shows, and paid holidays.
Better working conditions at shows (N = 71; 5.50%)	Improved availability of food for grooms (considering the timetable of the show), easier working conditions in terms of proximity of different areas such as parking, water, hay/shavings, and shuttle for grooms if parking far. Implementation of such initiatives also in the United States and other regions, not just Europe.
Improved working hours at shows (N = 41; 3.18%)	Timetables that allow adequate rest times for both grooms and horses and fewer night classes.
Improved working conditions at home (N = 93; 6.98%)	Primarily related to reasonable workload and better staff management, but also regarding equipment used to work.
Improved working hours (N = 63; 4.88%)	Sustainable working hours would also lead to a better work-life balance.
Better accommodation (N = 10; 0.78%)	Acceptable living conditions both at home and at shows, if the responsibility of arranging it falls on the employer.
Health and safety (N = 53; 4.11%)	Helping grooms who struggle with mental health and providing access to relevant services when needed. Proper insurance would cover healthcare appointments. Assisting grooms who get injured on the job.
Legal contracts (N = 44; 3.41%)	Correct employment contracts that comply with national labor laws, including official salary payments, adherence to set working hours, holiday allowances, and pension schemes.
Collective labor agreement/unionizing (N = 95; 7.36%)	Industry-wide labor regulations and legislations. Protection for mistreated employees and holding employers responsible. Assistance with visas.
Higher-order theme: External Recognition (N = 512; 39.70%)	
Lower-order themes	Further elaboration by survey participants
More respect (N = 73, 5.66%)	Grooms are being listened to by the industry leaders and treated equally as important as the riders. Not to be treated as inferior.
More recognition (N = 229; 17.75%)	Frequent media coverage of grooms; industry awards that also include local/national/home grooms besides international show grooms. Keep in mind the grooms from outside of Europe. Recognition of the grooms by the sponsors.
Grooms' classes (N = 27, 2.10%)	Organizing classes or incentives for grooms at shows would allow them to showcase their skills and would be rewarded by the organizer/sponsor.
Behind the scenes/awareness (N = 111; 8.60%)	Transparency, showcasing the reality of the job, including salary and hours. Investigating how successful/good employers great positive workplaces.
Education of stakeholders (N = 72; 5.58%)	Education of (new) grooms and employers on horsemanship, labor laws, successful business practices, and life after grooming. Highlighting good experiences in the grooming industry.
Higher-order theme: Change in General (N = 139; 10.78%)	
Lower-order theme	Further elaboration by survey participants
Continuing with ongoing initiatives (N = 73; 5.66%)	More emphasis on already implemented initiatives or their future follow-ups. Even more publicity with emphasis on countries outside of Europe.
Future opportunities (N = 7; 0.54%)	How grooms can evolve within the industry or outside of it.
No initiatives but change in the industry in general (N = 36, 2.79%)	Initiatives will not fix/improve the existing situation, only fundamental change in practices will make the career more sustainable.
Whatever improves the existing situation (N = 23; 1.78%)	Any initiative is welcome if it helps retain more grooms.

4.2. Higher-Order Theme: Recognition and Respect

Fifteen percent of participants consider the industry to be lacking recognition and respect toward grooms, making it difficult for them to see their profession as a long-term career outlet. While steps have already been taken to represent the voice of grooms as a stakeholder by establishing the International Grooms Association (IGA) as well as national organizations such as the British Grooms Association (BGA), these measures have shown to be largely ineffective on an individual level [18].

Employee recognition programs have become increasingly popular in other industries, as they are closely tied to increased employee motivation and engagement [38]. Companies implementing verbal or written acknowledgment, performance-based incentives, or material awards have been found to outperform businesses without employee recognition programs [39]. In 2024, occasional efforts were made to award grooms at shows [40]. It is noteworthy that while grooms often talk about the importance of recognition, their suggestions focus predominantly on financial or material rewards, highlighting the weight extrinsic motivation holds in the grooming sector [41]. This emphasis suggests that rather than seeking symbolic acknowledgment, grooms may equate true recognition with tangible improvements to their livelihoods—a perspective likely shaped by their ongoing struggles to make ends meet in an undervalued profession.

4.3. Higher-Order Theme: Future Prospects and Personal Development

In addition to the more tangible aspects of their immediate working environment, grooms also considered their Future Prospects and Personal Development as important to ensure a sustainable grooming industry. Opportunities to move up the ranks within the industry or being able to change careers easily would assist grooms in developing a more sustainable career outlook, as it is vital for maintaining and improving job satisfaction [42]. However, according to the survey respondents, the lack of official, widely acknowledged qualifications associated with the grooming profession makes it difficult for most grooms to transition to another industry.

Well-structured onboarding practices to introduce new employees to the business have been proven to positively impact employee retention [43]. With the increased desire for better education from grooms, parallels can be drawn between grooming and nursing sectors, as learning opportunities have been brought up in studies on multiple occasions as suggestions to improve the work experience for nurses [44,45].

4.4. Higher-Order Theme: Acceptance and Status Quo

Encouragingly, the vast majority of grooms believe that change in the industry can be initiated by tackling various areas of concern and that a sustainable career is possible. While there are still those who deem the situation to be inevitable and everything happening in the industry to simply be 'the nature of the job,' they are in the minority.

4.5. Future Initiatives

Unsurprisingly, higher-order themes on future initiatives aimed at the grooms mirrored those considered essential to achieving a sustainable workforce. However, additional topics raised included collective labor agreements and unionizing, undoubtedly meant as a means to negotiate better working conditions on behalf of those employed in specific sectors [46]. Respondents also highlighted the need for initiatives on health and safety. A survey conducted by BGA in 2024 highlighted that 65% of grooms reported anxiety while 55% reported feeling depressed due to poor working conditions [47], emphasizing the need for initiatives that target mental health topics more effectively.

Current findings highlight a number of important issues that, if not resolved, could lead to the deepening of an already precarious employment crisis in the equestrian industry. Additional staff shortages would not only compromise the sector's operational capacity but also pose a direct threat to equine welfare, a key concern shaping public perception and regulatory scrutiny [8,27]. Addressing grooms' concerns is therefore not just about job satisfaction and retention rates; it is integral to maintaining the industry's social license to operate [4,48]. Public confidence in equestrianism depends on the industry's ability to demonstrate a genuine commitment to ethical and welfare standards—both for horses and the people responsible for their care. Ensuring that grooms view their profession as a viable long-term career will help stabilize the workforce, guarantee high standards of horse management, and reinforce the industry's legitimacy in the eyes of both the public and key stakeholders [6,9].

Lastly, while current findings provide a comprehensive overview of the most pressing issues as perceived by grooms, certain limitations need to be borne in mind. Almost three-quarters of participants were from the discipline of showjumping, potentially skewing the data toward that particular discipline. However, seeing that showjumping is considered the best-known equestrian discipline under the auspices of the FEI [49], current findings may provide an indicative frame of reference for those disciplines.

5. Conclusion

Current findings underscore the need to improve working conditions for grooms to ensure the long-term sustainability of the equestrian industry. Participants highlighted inadequate pay, long working hours, and poor conditions at both home yards and competitions as the most pressing concerns. While initiatives aimed at raising the profile of grooms have been introduced in recent years, they often fail to address these fundamental issues. Ensuring fair remuneration, legal protections, and better work-life balance would not only enhance career longevity but also contribute to improved equine welfare, reinforcing public trust in the industry.

Importantly, these findings have broader implications for the equestrian sector's social license to operate. As primary caregivers, grooms play an essential role in upholding welfare standards, yet they remain undervalued and underrepresented. Addressing their concerns is not merely a workforce issue but a matter of industry credibility. By

creating a more sustainable career pathway for grooms, the sector can demonstrate a genuine commitment to ethical and welfare standards—both human and equine—thereby strengthening its social license and ensuring its long-term viability in an increasingly welfare-conscious society.

Supplementary Materials

The survey conducted for this study is available as **Supplementary Materials**.

Authors' Contributions

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

Data Availability

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 upon request to the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

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