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## **Stress Factors and Ways of Coping for Public Relations Professionals in Romania**

### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate stress-related experiences and coping solutions for public relations (PR) professionals, as relevant dimensions related to their well-being, creativity, and outcomes. The framework of the study is linked to the state of the PR profession, its role, and potential developments. It is based on qualitative research, using in-depth semi-structured interviews with seventeen senior professionals in PR from companies in Romania. The thematic analysis revealed, from a top-level professionals' perspective, that Romanian PR activity is still a very fluid one and its role and value are not yet clearly integrated. This generates important levels of negative stress for PR professionals. Besides that, positive stress is associated to PR activity for enthusiastic PR professionals. The findings underline a series of seven stress factors and three categories of solutions for coping, involving the professionals but also academia, professional bodies, and, eventually, organizations. The authors of this study emphasize the importance of supporting the development of the profession as a premise for more positive working experiences of PR professionals. This can be achieved by precisely using PR tools, to establish a set of clear standards and increase PR literacy for non-PR people, both for the benefit of PR professionals and those who pay for their services. The lack of a coherent framework on the role of PR brings many challenges to the activity of PR professionals. The negative stress they perceive in daily activity is partially an extension of the fragmented and incomplete development of the PR profession, and the multivariate and disconnected pace regarding advances in theory and practice in the field. These must be considered and addressed equally within PR research, training and education, practice, and PR-dedicated associations.

**Keywords:** public relations, occupational stress, stressors, coping with stress, public relations profession

### **1. Introduction**

Occupational stress and solutions to manage it represent topics of interest in research and daily practice and public relations (PR) makes no exception. Even more, the field of PR provides interesting contexts for investigating stress-related coordinates. The present study is

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one of the few academic ones published internationally that studies the perceived stress at the level of experienced PR professionals. It is the first one to address European realities, specifically in Romania, a country with a diverse PR landscape.

The approach lies in *strategic communication* and is not intended as psychological research. However, it appeals to conceptual corpus from psychology, focusing on *stressors* and their effects, considered to affect in separate ways the well-being, creativity and productivity of people working in PR, and on solutions to *cope with stress*, which are already used by PR professionals or that could be further implemented. Stress is referred to, by following the transactional model of Lazarus and Folkman, cited in Ziegele and Zerfass (2021), as “a combination of the feeling of being tense and having no available resources to manage it” (p. 336). As noted by Carver and Connor-Smith (2010, p. 683), considering “the experience of encountering or anticipating adversity in one’s goal-related efforts, (...) stress exists when people confront situations that tax or exceed their ability to manage them”. Regarding stress-related impact and coping, important premises lie in the meaning attributed to the experience and the subsequent reaction respectively, not in the situation itself (Kenny & Cooper, 2003). An individual’s response to stress can alleviate stress or cause even more stress (Jiang & Shen, 2013; Mazzola & Disselhorst, 2019; Ziegele & Zerfass, 2021).

Analysis on stressors and ways of coping with them represent a relevant approach in PR research, considering particularities of the profession (Guo & Anderson, 2018; Ziegele & Zerfass, 2021). As stated by Guo and Anderson (2018, pp. 236-237), “odds of adversities may be high in this role, requiring practitioners to be resilient (...) PR practitioners are an ideal group to study resilience, due to the various challenges they face on a daily basis”. However, “research on stress in communication management is still in its infancy” (Ziegele & Zerfass, 2021, p. 339). There are gaps in the specialized literature in addressing stress in PR, particularly focusing on modern practices. Modern PR implies a strategic communication activity, grounded on ethics, meant to build positive reputation and relationships based on trust and partnership (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2019; Grunig, 2020; Theaker, 2020). PR mostly applies two-way or multi-way communication, especially in the context of new media which changed the communication environment, instruments, and its business model (Krishan, 2015; Jiang et al., 2017).

Regarding the role of PR specialists, Grunig (2020) differentiates between practices that illustrate a managerial rather than an instrumental process. The few existent studies on stress in PR approach the topic in a descriptive manner. There are interesting findings regarding stress factors, concluding with general recommendations. However, they discuss the source, impact, and possible viable solutions for stressors without taking into consideration the nature of PR practice, its multiple forms and particular model in which this activity is applied. Within this limitative approach, inquiring and listing stressors in PR is a relevant endeavor for factual knowledge and for theoretical general comparisons between this field of communication and other occupational areas. But it is only a small and insufficient step in finding sustainable solutions to occupational stress, particularly in PR. There are discrepancies and discontinuities between the latest theory in PR and varied practices. Despite of its theoretical developments and practical results, the field of PR still has unresolved issues. We argue that stress-related research can help highlight them and, by addressing critical points, it can substantiate positive changes.

To fill the gaps, the present study aims at particularly investigating the topic of stressors and coping with them, in relation to the nature of PR activity, focusing on the state of the pro-

profession and its role. The *first objective* of this study is to inquire the perceived experiences of internal PR professionals (working in-house) regarding stress factors and ways of dealing with them, within the framework of modern model of PR, as strategic, ethical communication, based on responsible complex decision-making, aiming for long-term positive impact. Practiced in this manner, PR becomes more than a formal communication tactic meant to support top-down organizational decisions or reactively solve particular problems. Subsequently, the main value of this paper is investigating stress-related problems and solutions as relevant topics correlated to the maturity level of this profession and the development potential.

Finally, *the purpose* of this approach is to promote the discussion about the stress of PR professionals, as a step forward in supporting the stabilization of this profession, to reduce unjustified pressures, by contributing to the recognition and capitalization of the role of PR activity. The paper equally addresses the academic community and PR professionals, calling for a closer look on realities in PR practice and on the need to find updated solutions for facilitating the implementation of modern PR. The research findings are relevant with respect to supporting the development of the PR profession and easing the burden of negative stress for PR practitioners, in countries where this activity has a relative tradition and yet lacks clear boundaries.

The PR industry in Romania is young, as compared to other developed countries. The first PR departments appeared in Romania after the fall of the communist regime (Dolea, 2017), mostly linked to advertising services or media relations. The PR market grew to a total estimated turnover of over EUR 70 million in 2022, based on the balance sheets reported to the Romanian Ministry of Finance by the Romanian PR agencies (Barbu, 2023). There are descriptive studies offered by market research companies and media players since 2012 (see Bizz & Unlock, Forbes) that illustrate the state of the industry, focusing on the work and results of PR agencies.

The annual *Top PR Romania* provides a complex ranking of PR agencies in the country, based on a mixed analysis considering both the financial coordinates (turnover, fees, profitability, growth rate), and the perceptions of the clients who pay for the services of these agencies. The analyzed indicators for this top are: the capacity of PR agencies to analyze, implement, and report; their creativity; and client satisfaction, and intention to recommend and to continue the collaboration with the agency, compared to other agencies they have previously contracted. The results of these market research initiatives indicate consistency for some of the agencies in top 10, over the years (such as in the case of McCann PR, Golin, MSL The Practice or Graffiti PR). There are considerable differences between the results of top PR agencies and the ones of the others, which occupy lower positions (over 20 or 30), pointing that currently in Romania there are several types of PR practices. This describes the current state of Romanian PR both regarding the professionals offering this type of services, and the clients and their expectations, correlated to their representations and perceptions on what such services can and should offer. Regarding the evolution of the PR practice, the last years brought significant changes in Romania, towards integrated communication packages. For this reason, in 2023 Biz Magazine and Unlock Market Research released a top of ten agencies which offer more than 80% PR services (*Top PR Romania*, 2023). There is an over 30 years tradition in Romania for PR practice, training, academic specialized education, and the existence of Romanian PR Professionals Association (ARRP). There are many self-declared PR agencies ( $n > 60$ ) and PR practitioners. However, these are not sufficient indicators for the maturity level of this profession in the country. Also, there is little academic research about Ro-

manian PR and no extensive study inquiring the experiences of PR professionals and their perceived challenges. Furthermore, there is a complete lack of in-depth analysis (either academic or market-oriented) regarding high-level PR professionals working in internal departments within companies in Romania.

The present study offers relevant insights regarding the stress-related experiences of internal PR professionals as linked to the practice of strategic, modern PR. The findings are valuable regarding PR practices in countries where the stage of the profession is similar to Romania, with a mixture between complex requirements, formal recognition, academic training and yet unclear relevancy and potential. Extensively, the result sought for this paper is to deepen the analysis and discussions on stress faced by PR professionals, beyond simple listing and segmentation of stressors and their contextual sources. The implications of the paper are relevant for researchers and practitioners in PR focusing on the analyses regarding PR practices and potential developments, by particularly stressing upon unsolved issues regarding the status and role of the PR profession. The aim is to potentiate debate and simulate solutions to stressors within PR activity, beyond stress management based on resilience and reactive behavior, and rather by accommodating proactive and structural changes for a more relevant and highly recognized role of this strategic communication activity. The authors of this paper argue that this can be achieved precisely with PR strategies and tactics, thus implying the need for meta-PR approaches.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. General picture regarding stress topic and research

Stress is a new field of research, considered as psychological phenomena only in the last one hundred years (Robinson, 2018). The last decades showed a raised awareness regarding stress as a problem that needs to be approached undeniably (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005), preferably in a proactive manner (Weinberg et al., 2015). However, stress is difficult to define (Barling et al., 2004; Contrada, 2011; Weinberg et al., 2015; Nerstad et al., 2023) as the concept showed fluid borders over the years and was portrayed as a response to disturbing or threatening stimuli, a transaction between the individual and the environment, based on a perceived negative factor, an indicator for employee-organization fitting level, an approachable challenge in the journey to individual and organizational well-being and efficiency (Kenny & Cooper, 2003; Adlwin, 2006; Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Weinberg et al., 2015; Nerstad et al., 2023).

The concept became highly popular in both research and practical realities and expanded from medicine and psychology to other related biological and social sciences. The meaning of the term stress has a wide span of valences, as “recurrent descriptor of negative experiences related to anything from daily hassles, relationship issues, and pressures at work to health concerns and debilitating phobias” (Robinson, 2018, 334). Within classical perspective, Selye, considered the father of modern stress research, used a linear approach coming from physics and engineering and defined *stress* as “mutual actions of forces that take place across any section of the body, physical or psychological”, as cited in Robinson (2018, p. 338). According to the *transactional model* of *stress* proposed by Lazarus and Folkman, in 1984, likely the most prevalent model used in work-related stress research, “stress occurs

when the individual perceives a stimulus as threatening, and this stress response has a direct positive relationship to detrimental physical and psychological outcomes (strains)”, as cited in Mazzola and Disselhorts (2019, p. 949).

Occupational stress deals with stressors and coping models for stress at work. As Kenny and Cooper (2003) show, classical research on occupational stress follows Cooper and Selye’s traditional linear *stimulus-response model*, by focusing on identifying issues to blame and eventually solve, related to either the personality of the individual or the organizational environment. However, more recent approaches evolved to circular models, analyzing stress as a state of disequilibrium, in a complex system and focused on diminishing stressors and raising support in a proactive manner. Within this framework, perception and the significance attributed to the situation are the ones to create stress and not the situation itself (Kenny & Cooper, 2003). Thus, individuals may present different responses to the same stress factors, as showed ever since Lazarus’s model which included both behavioral and cognitive dimensions into stress-related framework (Robinson, 2018).

## 2.2. Types of stress factors and their effects

Main *stress factors* have been highlighted and analyzed (Barling et al., 2004; Weinberg & Cooper, 2011; Weinberg et al., 2015): *job demands, control, lack of support, workplace relationships, role-related factors, change, schedule, leadership-related factors, work-family conflict, safety, economic factors, harassment, and discrimination*. *Technology* represents a distinct relevant stress generating source as it brought about a lot of change and anxiety, alongside its advantages (Weinberg et al., 2015). Berg-Beckhoff and collaborators (2017), conducting a systematic review and analysis on quantitative studies in occupational settings in different countries, emphasized *technostress* (stress generated using information communication technology) in work environments, especially for mid-aged people.

Stress is associated with numerous *negative effects*. For the individual, occupational distress can lead to *poor psychological or mental outcomes* (anxiety, burnout, anger, depression), *impaired immune function, physical disease, or detrimental behavior* (i.e., sleep disturbance, poor eating habits, violence) (Cohen et al., 1997; Baling et al., 2004; Weinberg & Cooper, 2011; Nerstad et al., 2023). For the organization, the negative outcomes of distress are seen in *lower performance, dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment, absenteeism, turnover, errors, accidents* (Barling et al., 2004; Weinberg & Cooper, 2011; Weinberg et al., 2015; Nerstad et al., 2023). These dimensions are highly relevant in the field of PR, especially considering the constant requirements related to creativity, intrinsic motivation, and networking. Effects of potential stressors can have long-term impact, as PR activity is associated with a management function. For example, low commitment, correlated with lack of motivation, can translate into a simple formal input from PR responsible, lacking the strategic, proactive perspective that this type of activity is supposed to offer, thus making it less relevant for the organization.

The distinction between *negative and potentially positive dimensions of stress* generated interest and critical approach in scholarship. First, Selye, as cited by Le Fevre and collaborators (2006), refers to *distress* and *eustress* respectively and *positive psychology* framework supported the interest in the latter dimension. Constructive stress is considered beneficial for both the individual and the organization and can also be seen as an indicator of the state of balance or within tolerable limits for job challenges, stimulating creativity and effort (Har-

grove et al., 2015). Positive stressors can be identified with many projects that PR professionals have. PR activity involves multi-sourced pressure and inspired decision-making regarding time management, limited human or material resources, or the need to find innovative solutions in tense situations. At the same time, it offers the opportunity to show inventiveness, escaping from routines. PR, as a complex, strategic type of communication, translates into more than the simple implementation of a pre-existing algorithm or delivering plain messages. Professionals working in PR face constant challenges, as they deal with unexpected situations, are supposed to offer rapid creative unfolding to them, and identify new people, places, and things, to run specific projects. These are just a few examples of stressful yet equally satisfying coordinates of PR activity, requiring constant and extended documentation, research, and learning. They add to the opportunity of developing professional and personal skills. Furthermore, PR professionals have the chance to bring changes that impact the company they work for, their target audience or sometimes even society.

*Eustress* is fueled by hope, self-esteem, locus of control, desire and can counterbalance levels of distress and burnout (Choudhary & Ranjan, 2020). *The challenge-hindrance stress* model proposed by Cavanaugh and his team (2000) distinguishes between *hindrance* stressors, pointing to *political barriers, role ambiguity* and *role conflict*. These aspects are likely to have negative outcomes on *performance* and *personal goals* and *challenge stressors*, indicating *workload, time demands* and *responsibility*, which generate *performance opportunities* and *sense of accomplishment*.

Mazzola and Disselhorst (2019) discuss the research based on this model and its limitations. They refer to the studies conducted on the impact of challenge and hindrance stressors on *performance* and on other factors, such as *physical symptoms, job attitudes* and *safety behavior*. However, as they emphasize, the findings of these extensive studies, conducted in the last decade, do not appear to support the model but fail to indicate consistent evidence on differential relationships and clearly linking the stress factors categorized as hindrance and challenge to specific variables of interest (such as performance, engagement, work behaviors, physical health etc.). Therefore, as Mazzola and Disselhorst argue, instead of rigid and incorrect general segmentation, appraisal analysis should be applied to each stressor of interest, to evaluate its positive or negative stressing potential, based on contextual interpretation. This is because each stress factor consists of elements of both challenge and hindrance, and there is the risk that, on long term, even currently perceived challenges might turn into high physical and psychological strain. Thus, simple investigation of stressors is not enough to understand their complexity and find solutions. The analysis of stress-related topic in PR can bring more valuable insights considering the coordinates of this communication activity, and the profile of people choosing this profession.

### 2.3. Stress management

Coping with stress is referred to by Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) as “responses to adversity and to the distress that results”, noting that there are diverse ways of coping, functional and dysfunctional ones, leading to various effects, ranging from emotional distress to physiological reactivity, to mortality. Adversity can turn into stress in the form of a *threat* or *risk* (in the case of expected negative consequences), *harm* (when one perceives the consequences as already present) or *loss*, which is perceived in relationship with one’s goals. (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010, p. 684). Literature (Skinner et al., 2003; Aldwin, 2007; Carver &

Connor-Smith, 2010; Weinberg & Cooper, 2011) provides extensive discussion regarding different *coping approaches* among which: *active coping* (problem-focused, meant to solve the negative situation or diminish its real impact) versus *emotional focused coping* (meant to minimize the emotional impact); *engagement* (dealing with the situation or adjust to it) versus *disengagement* (meant to avoid the stressor or the emotion, this is mainly ineffective on longer term, since it does not address the problem); *accommodative coping* (especially when discussing aging and the need to adapt to new life coordinates); *meaning-focused* (finding benefit and meaning in uncontrollable adversities); *reactive coping* (responding *post factum*) vs *proactive* (meant to prevent adversities).

As for the focus on *organizational input* related to stress management, literature (Kenny & Cooper, 2003, Barling et al., 2004; Le Fevre, 2006; Weinberg & Cooper, 2011; Weinberg et al., 2015) highlights the approach based on the level of intervention. Dealing with organizational factors is addressed as the *first level of intervention*, as compared to dealing with individual's abilities and potential, referred to as *second level* (by investing in trainings, education for better results and less perceived stress) or considering stress management leverages for the individual (support, counseling) as a *third level of intervention*. Le Fevre (2006) suggests that organization-based (first level) interventions are recommended as secondary ones, after the adoption of individual-focused (second level) interventions. However, Weinberg and collaborators (2015, p. 2) argue that any effective approach to stress management should be integrated into the organizational process. They also advocate for the need to focus on *proactive coping*, which is present/future oriented and aiming *prevention*, as opposed to *reactive coping* which is past time-oriented and focused mainly on *resilience* and *treatment* for already manifested or inevitable stress factors (found in most of the classical research and practice).

## 2.4. Public relations and stress research

### 2.4.1. Perceived stressors in public relations activities – a general picture

Studies on *perceived stressors* for PR professionals (Aldora et al., 2008; Shen et al., 2015; Guo & Anderson, 2018; Shen, 2019; Ziegler & Zerfass, 2021), mostly based on qualitative approach, and referring to western countries, are yet scattered, involving both agency and company department respondents. Guo and Anderson (2018) categorized stressors for PR professionals according to level of manifestation: at the *individual level* (*time pressure, difficult supervisors, unappreciative clients, ethical clashes, unfair accusations*); at the *PR function level* (*management misunderstanding, marginalization of PR, inner-unit conflicts, unrealistic expectations*); at the *organizational level* (*major changes or crises*). Ziegler and Zerfass (2021), in a qualitative study, based on forty in-depth interviews with PR professionals (senior leaders and young professionals from 30 agencies in United States and Germany), found a total of seventeen typical challenges and stress factors. The most prominent proved to be the following: *client responsibility, responsibility for teams and long-term agency success, lack of control and uncertainty, time pressure, work-life balance, and high workload*. The same research showed that perceived stressors are more diverse for juniors than for senior PR professionals. *Role stress* was addressed by Bunnell (2006), examining *role overload, role ambiguity, role conflict* and *role preparedness*, based on interviews with PR practitioners in thirty-four international schools.

#### 2.4.2. Stressors for professionals in public relations: poor work-life balance

*Poor work-life balance*, as a distinct stress source, received particular attention in research on stress in PR (Aldora et al., 2008; Jiang & Shen, 2013; Shen et al., 2015; Shen, 2019; Clark et al. 2021). Jiang and Shen (2013) conducted quantitative research on a national sample (N=820) of PR Society of America members and showed that *work-life balance* is negatively influenced by the *lack of supervisory support* and *lack of family supportive work environment*. These influence *salary* and *career interruption*, even more so in the case of women. Additionally, *negative working environment*, as a stressor itself, potentiates the perception on *work-live conflict* (Shen et al., 2015).

#### 2.4.3. Stressors for professionals in public relations: gender

*Gender* is an important topic regarding *work-life conflict* as a relevant stressor in PR. This seems natural, considering that this is a highly feminized field, with more than two-thirds being female (Shen, 2019), thus, “prevalence of women in the field, which calls for a deep examination of gender conflicts related to work-life balance” (Aldora et al., 2008, p. 1). There is a unitary perspective in the findings of the studies conducted so far (Aldora et al., 2008; Jiang & Shen, 2013; Shen, 2019; Clark et al., 2021), showing that there are differences pointing to higher perceived pressure in the case of women or that they are not treated equally (Clark et al., 2021). Aldora and collaborators (2008), based on a qualitative study involving 50 practitioners in PR, women and men, pointed out subordinated perceived stressor for *work-life conflict* and *gender* factors: *PR as the site of struggle*, *societal pressure*, and *norms*, *organizational “lip service”*, *women themselves as barrier (super-woman expectations)*, *new technology*, *struggle with separate yet fluid identities*, *parenthood*, *lengthening hours of work*, *guilt*.

#### 2.4.4. Stressors for professionals in public relations: technology and new media

*Technology* and *new media* bring more stress factors (Krishan, 2015; Ninas et al., 2015; Jiang et al., 2017; Gjyle, 2020). According to Theaker (2020), the use of social media instruments and advantages in the professional activity is perceived as a mandatory aspect by almost 78% of the PR professionals. Krishan (2015, p. 74) notes that social media “has simultaneously empowered and equipped PR professionals by offering a large number of communication platforms that remarkably strengthened their armory“. Social media enhances the inner nature of modern PR activity, supporting two-way communication (Gjyle, 2020) but also bringing challenges. Ninas and collaborators (2015) showed that the *pressure of being always connected*, associated to social media usage by professionals in PR, advertising and journalism, and its effects (*constant interruptions*, *challenges*, *increased work time*, *work-personal time disequilibrium*) is the negative counterpart of the resources it involves (*speed*, *flexibility*, *accessibility*). Furthermore, using a qualitative approach on a US national sample (N = 458), aimed to measure social media impact perceived by communication professionals, Jiang and collaborators (2017) show that the use of social media in their professional activity seems to increase occupational stress, adding extra work hours and workloads and generating a perceived lower control and strain-based work-life conflict.

#### 2.4.5. Stress resilience in public relations

*Stress resilience* in PR, seen as “the ability to deal with high demands at work, to cope with and recover from stress” (Ziegler & Zeffass, 2021, p. 336), is underlined as a necessary yet in-



sufficiently researched area (Moreno et al., 2019; Schoenmaker & Erskine, 2019; Ziegler & Zerfass, 2021) and highlighted as a natural topic, considering that “PR practitioners face workplace challenges as they cultivate PR hips, resolve conflicts, and manage crises. Odds of adversities may be high in this role, requiring practitioners to be resilient” (Guo & Anderson, 2018, p. 236). Schoenmaker and Erskine (2019) conducted a study on 26 Australian practitioners, and investigated understandings of resilience and identify protective factors used to maintain it. They concluded that resilience is a “multi-dimensional construct that embodies personal characteristics and individual abilities (...) being able to see the challenges of practice without being overwhelmed by them and practicing their craft without losing their humanity” (Schoenmaker & Erskine, 2019, p. 8). Guo and Anderson (2018) metaphorically categorize patterns of resilience as: *disengaging* or *bouncing forward strategies* (e.g., quit jobs, switch between sectors) – by withdrawing from the stressful experience or job environment and searching new opportunities, appealing to emotional resilience, career flexibility and commitment to one’s personal ethics; *persevere and bouncing up* (e.g., work harder, learn self-care) and turning the stressor into a motivator – by the use of positive attitudes, proactive actions and empathy; *risk and bouncing back* as “activist practitioners” who confront the stressor source itself (e.g., call for change in unethical organizational matters); and *struggle and bouncing around* that imply an iterative resilience process as the problem needs additional emotional or behavioral reintegration. (e.g., latent assertiveness after scapegoating for a crisis).

As *protective factors enacting resilience* scholarship shows empirical-documented perceived potential solutions. Moreno and collaborators (2019) conducted one of the few quantitative studies on stress in PR, by applying the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale on a large sample (N = 898) of PR practitioners, both in communication departments and agencies, from 18 Latin American countries working on different hierarchical levels. Their study showed that some factors prove to be predictors for *resilience* (*age, years of experience, type of organization, hierarchy, and social media skills*) while others are not (*education, salary, gender or working in an excellent, successful, and influential communication department*). Schoenmaker and Erskine (2019) present two types of interrelated protective factors: personal factors – *positive relationships, social support networks, self-efficacy, physical activity, self-nurturing activities*; and professional factors – *employment and work culture, high communication skills, sense of agency, emotional intelligence, and adaptability*. They emphasized the need to “move away from the outdated ‘tough-minded’ strategy replacing it with *compassion* and *empathy*, without being lost to the drama of what is being witnessed in professional practice” (Schoenmaker & Erskine, 2019, p. 1).

## 2.5. Gaps in scholarship and research questions for the present study

Stress in PR profession is a valuable yet under-explored topic. Its relevance is indisputable, considering the need for a balanced internal state of mind, to sustainably generate positive outcomes, especially in creative areas, such as PR. As shown in the previous section, research conducted so far, especially in the last years, approached the subject of stress in PR considering various dimensions of stressors. However, there are gaps to be filled, for linking the theoretical framework of modern PR and the yet unaligned PR practice, which include challenges, some generating stress. Stressors and resilience have been addressed in previous research in a general manner towards the practice of PR, without focusing on the specificity, core values and characteristics of modern professional PR as a particular field of activity in communication.

There is a difference between PR and other types of communication and between light (tactical) and manipulative PR and strategic, modern PR. PR practice influences and frames the working environment for PR professionals, including their perceived stress and coping solutions. However, this is not addressed in scholarship, which only offers descriptive insights of stress-related aspects, encountered in some PR environments, regardless of discussing their nature or practice.

The model of modern PR (Grunig, 2013b, 2013a) implies more than just a set of tactics or instruments for disseminating persuasive messages, aligned to advantageous contexts or outcomes. Professional modern PR differs from spin and manipulation and should go beyond reactive responses, only meant for ultimate damage control, in the case of crises. Instead, professional PR is a type of strategic communication, defined as a management function. It is primarily focusing on proactive efforts, meant to build trust, positive reputation, and relationships, and prevent risks and problems. It has the role of developing partnerships between the organization and its public, contributing to sustainable development, through collaboration and mutual understanding, by appealing to ethical decision making and responsible organizational behavior. Previous research focuses on stress in PR as a direct experience, or a phenomenon approached, and presented descriptively. It lacks the focus on the implications of the topic (stress and coping mechanisms for PR) towards the developments and potential of PR profession, as a distinct and complex type of communication.

There is no evidence of considering ways of coping with stress from a PR perspective, by using the strategic communication framework to address stress-related issues for professionals working in this field. This is a limitation in approaching PR, by not considering its extended potential. Considering stress management in PR, previous research point to either reactive coping or one actionable mostly at the level of the individual, focusing on solutions to better equip the professionals to be resilient when encountering stressful experiences. Stress can also be addressed in a proactive manner, as an approach aligned with the core values of PR practice. Nevertheless, it can imply solutions implemented at the level of the organization.

There are studies mentioning such directions: Jiang and Shen (2013) argue for a more *family-supportive organizational work environment*, to lower the perceived *work-life conflict*; Shen and collaborators (2015) list *organizational support* and fueling professional *identity and professional community ties*; Guo and Anderson (2018) assume boosting *assertiveness* and *adaptability* individual factors; Schoenmaker and Erskine (2019) refer to the role of the *work culture*. However, these are mainly general recommendations within the broader discussion on stress. They are approached as dimensions specifically studied, intended as focal points in research, and are not considered objectives correlated with the PR activity. Scholarship provides general descriptive findings and discussions regarding stressors and coping at the level of PR professionals, without advancing the discussion to meet the depth and potential of modern professional PR activity. This reveals only the beginning of the journey towards finding actionable perspectives in PR, a field of communication which is essentially a transformational and very offering one.

Whereas there are no previous academic studies conducted and published so far with respect to perceived experiences of PR professionals, including their stressors and coping mechanisms, for Eastern Europe and Romania in particular. The present study aims to fill these gaps by analyzing stressors and coping for PR professionals within the framework and coordinates of professional modern PR, as strategic communication activity, grounded on ethical, proactive decision-making, with medium and long-term impact. These are translated into the re-

search design, considering the profile of the respondents and the field research dimensions. This is the first study focused on the topic of stress in PR, addressing European realities.

The *assumptions* substantiating the analysis are presented below.

*A1: Stress levels are potentially high in professional PR.* However, stress-related discussion is not yet a practice. Existent scholarship does not indicate consistent concerns dedicated to structurally preventing stress. Instead, solutions to deal with it, when discussed, refer to reactive coping and resilience. The authors of this study hypothesize that *even if associated with evident challenges, stress factors are not addressed as problems, not even by the professionals facing them.* If validated, this stands as a viable premise for acting, firstly by amplifying the conversation on the subject, to stimulate awareness, and secondly by fueling responsibility towards proactive solutions within PR frameworks.

*A2: PR literacy and education among non-PR employees influence the perceived level of stress for PR professionals.* With respect to external factors contributing to both stress generating and coping, the working environment of PR professionals, including the profile of their peers and their attitude and understanding of PR activities, is expected to play a significant role.

*A3: The profile of PR professionals and its suitability for the requirements of this profession are relevant for perceived stress and coping solutions.* Scholarship on occupational stress indicates the importance of internal factors for managing the levels of perceived stress and coping with it. In PR it is expected that the characteristics of the PR professionals have a key role in stress management. If validated, this points to an extensive need to substantiate training, selection and job seeking for naturally PR-profiled people.

The *research questions* that the present research aims to answer are the following:

*RQ1: Which are the perceived stress factors for PR professionals working in companies in Romania, with respect to the practice of modern professional PR?*

*RQ2: Which are the associated ways of coping with these perceived stressors, implemented so far by PR professionals?*

*RQ3: How can PR-specific approach be used to better deal with stress in PR activity?*

The first two questions have an exploratory stake, meant to offer descriptive context to stress-related realities for PR professionals, within the context of modern, strategic PR, based on two-way communication, responsible decision-making, and ethical organizational behavior. The last question advances the discussion, into identifying practical coordinates – not only general recommendations – for meta-PR. This translates into using the potential of PR activity for PR profession itself, to improve the working experience of PR practitioners and foster the positive impact of this type of communication activity.

### 3. Research design and sample

The field study is based on *in-depth open-ended interviews*, as it aims at a deep understanding of perceptions and feelings regarding stressors and coping mechanisms for public relations professionals. The structure of the discussions started from general perceptions with reference to the daily PR preparing the core of the interview. The end was to identify and understand what bothers them, what helps them and to extract their learned lessons on how professional stress can be reduced in this type of activity. Aligned with the assumed approach of

the present study indicated in the previous section, the aim was to discuss about stress, by considering the practice of PR as a management function, as a proactive, strategic activity, meant to generate valuable complex outcomes with extended impact, and not as a set of contextual communication tactics. For that, the profile of the participants was selected accordingly.

The respondents were 17 experts in PR, four men and 13 women, working for at least seven years in PR departments of companies in Romania in very different industries: banking, telecom, retail, technology, auto, beauty, consultancy, medical instruments, NGO, cultural. All of them also had managerial positions. To reach relevant conclusions more industries were covered, while remaining homogenous in terms of type and level of work experience. The age range was between 33 and 47 years old, considering two reasons: (1) the study targeted the perceptions of professionals with a relevant work experience (at least five years) and (2) PR activities started in Romania the 90' and there are not many professionals over 45 year of age. *Table 1* provides the coding and profile of the participants in the study.

Table 1. Participants in the field study

Respondent code	Age	Gender	Management level	Industry	Experience in PR
R1	37	F	Middle manager / Head of communication	Consumer electronics	> 10 years
R2	38	M	Top management / Director of marketing and communications	Banking	> 10 years
R3	41	M	Expert with a team	Banking	7 – 10 years
R4	44	F	Expert with a team	Telecom	> 10 years
R5	45	M	Middle management / Head of communication	Auto	> 10 years
R6	41	F	Top management / Director of communication	Beauty	> 10 years
R7	34	F	Expert with a team	Banking	7 – 10 years
R8	45	F	Middle management / Head of communication	Telcom	> 10 years
R9	45	F	Top management / Director of communications	Professional services	> 10 years
R10	47	F	Top management / Director of communication	Retail	> 10 years
R11	45	F	Expert	NGO	> 10 years
R12	34	M	Middle management / Head of communication	FMCG / Medical care	7 – 10 years
R13	45	F	Top Management / Director of communication	Banking	>10 years
R14	43	F	Middle management / Head of communication	Banking	>10 years
R15	33	F	PR Director	PR Agency	7 – 10 years
R16	43	F	Middle management / Head of communication	Auto	>10 years
R17	40	F	Top management	NGO / PR Agency	>10 years

The study did not include practitioners working for PR agencies, neither ones with less experience. These represent assumed limits of the present study, correlated to the research objectives. The main selection criteria implied analyzing stress in PR not only as a fact, but in relation to the activities aligned to the model of modern professional public relations, derived from the objectives of the present study. There are differences between professionals from internal departments, who are only responsible for the public relations of the company they work for, and those from agencies, managing several accounts within a short or medium-time project-based contractual relationship with their clients. The differences are seen in the activity they carry out, the work style, the type of requests they deal with, the responsibilities and the decision-making power. With respect to the selection of interviewees who have at least five years of experience in PR, this proved to be an easy task, as respondents included in the study had even more than that (7-10 years). This criterion was aimed at ensuring a level of stability and legitimacy of these professionals and the position they hold as public relations responsables.

The interviews were conducted in Romanian, via ZOOM or Microsoft Teams between December 2022 – February 2023. Examples provided in the paper were translated verbatim to English by the authors. When the research subjects agreed, the discussions were recorded (13 out of 17), except for the cases in which the respondents were reluctant to have recorded sessions or the company policies would not allow it. Extended written notes were taken from all discussions.

The findings were structured by using *thematic analysis*, following specific dimensions, correlated to the three research questions: (1) stress factors in PR profession, according to perception on PR professionals, (2) ways of coping and (3) solutions within a PR applicable framework. Regarding the stressors, three dimensions were considered: the function and role of PR within the organization, PR activity and its coordinates, and internal factors, at the individual level. Positive and negative implications for the identified stressors were investigated, by focusing on the possibility and challenges of PR practice aligned with the modern, professional model of this strategic type of communication.

With reference to stress management and coping applicable within a PR framework, two dimensions were examined: strategic and tactical, considering potential interventions at the individual, organizational and academic and professional level, respectively. Many themes seemed to emerge even during the interviews, as the discussions about professional stress in PR proved to be indicating similar factors for many of the respondents. After analyzing the scripts of the interview, the commonalities became evident, which made it easier to compile a list of themes and sub-themes. The dimensions of the thematic analysis substantiating the study, including the inter-correlations between themes and sub-themes are graphically synthesized in the figures that accompany the verbal presentation of the research findings, in the next section of the paper.

To comply with research ethical standards, participation in the study was voluntary, based on informed consent, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. To protect the identity of the participants, their names do not appear in the analysis and interpretation of the data, only quotes from their responses.

#### **4. Results and interpretation**

As shown during the interviews, the level of professional stress is high among PR professionals. For most of the respondents, the first reaction when hearing about the topic of the study was “*should we talk about it?*”, since they are “*not used to talking about [oneself] a.n.*”,

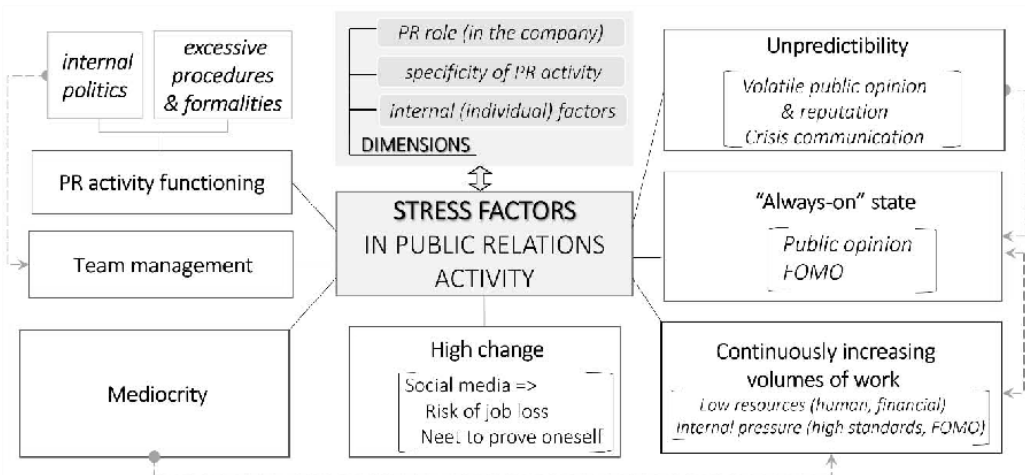
as [my a.n.] job is a lot about focusing on others”. It seems, from the interviews, that it is easy for PR professionals to discuss their job, the company they are working for, even the industry in general, but more difficult to talk about the way they feel and what triggers their stress. Nevertheless, this initial reaction led to extensive answers and explanations. At the end of discussions there was a general state of relief, more than half of respondents implying that the discussion was “like going to therapy” (R11), as they „don’t really have the chance to discuss about topics such as professional stress, and they don’t have time to internalize it and analyze it” (R9). This validates the first assumption (A1) and adds to the motivation to foster conversation and find in-depth solutions on the topic of stress for PR professionals. Further on, the results of the study will be presented in three subsections, to answer the three research questions.

#### 4.1. Answering RQ1: Stress factors in public relations professional activity

Based on the thematic analysis, *Figure 1* illustrates a graphical modelling of the main seven categories of stressors identified in the study and their interconnections, which will be further presented in detail.

The first category of *stress factors* are the ones related to how the PR activity functions in the company, which seems to be connected to managerial position. Specifically, the higher the management level of respondents, the more important the stress level related to the way the organization works, as perceived by them. The findings indicate strong impact of PR status, role and values, as perceived from non-PR people, on stress levels of PR professionals. The lower the PR literacy of non-PR people PR professionals must interact with in their projects, the higher the stress. This validates the second assumption of the study (A2), highlighting the need for a better PR-oriented approach of PR professionals and other stakeholders in PR community towards promoting PR activity itself. Depending on how structured the organization is, the research led to two sub-types of stress factors, connected to *PR activity functioning*. These refer to *internal politics* within the organization and *excessive procedures and formalities*.

Figure 1. Stress factors for PR professionals and their interconnections



Among the factors related to *internal politics*, the most common frustration pointed out by the respondents involves the very *fluid boundaries* as it comes to the coordinates of PR activity: “*everybody acts like they know how PR should work*” (R1), “*they all have an opinion on how I should do my work*” (R10). This could be linked to the fact that PR activity does not have fixed rules, but it is based on personal understanding, making it easier for other people working in the company to feel inclined and even entitled to engage, “*believing that they see things more clearly and know how to do this job better*” (R13). Thus, the “*PR intuition and personal touch that comes with expertise is harder to explain than a financial statement*” (R2). This translates into a more stressful endeavor in the activity of the PR professionals, who need to work harder to convince the other members of the organization that their proposals are the right ones.

Furthermore, as pointed out by most of the respondents, in order to be able to do their work properly, they need to identify or cultivate “*allies to support the ideas proposed by the PR department*” (R12), which becomes exhausting, as it leads to wasting time and energy resources that might be spent for proper activities: “*I am continuously explaining the top management why and what I am doing in order to gather their support (...) it takes a lot of my time (...) and every time we have a new board member, I need to start from zero to build a reputation for myself (...) it is tiring and I would rather spend that time building a new project to support the activity of the company*” (R10); “*it is a continuous power game with the internal stakeholders*” (R13). As a direct experience, high levels of stress come from the fact that the communication professionals feel like they have the tools but cannot use them: “*you see a communication need you can address and also an opportunity for a positive communication moment, as you are in close contact with the clients and the communities ... but you don't have the power to influence a result*” (R7).

The findings highlight the correlation between perceived stress and the general literacy of non-PR people about communication in general and PR in particular and to the maturity level of this profession, with an emphasis on PR types of results and measurements for success. Using common instruments, also available to anyone else (mainly based on language and direct interactions), as compared to other fields of activity, appealing to more restrictive set of tools and knowledge (financial, legal etc.), PR strategies and tactics might seem to be very accessible on the surface, which is misleading and counterproductive for everyone involved and for the organization. A solution in this respect might be raising education regarding the specificity of PR tools and especially results and, in this matter, PR professionals have a key role as curators of their own field of activity.

A subset of factors related to how *PR activity functions* within the organization are the ones derived from *excessive procedures and formalities*. Some of the respondents, mainly the ones that work for big international companies, complained about spending a lot of time making sure that they respect all the internal procedures, which are very strict: “*I spend more time making sure that I have covered everything the procedure says, than being creative and finding ways to do my job better*” (R4); “*I feel that the formalities of the company are limiting my inspiration while working in PR should be about creating something new*” (R1). Though they understand that many of the procedures they need to follow are “*protecting [them a.n.] from doing organizational mistakes*” (R1), they are also limiting the fast reactions needed in the job, also considering that “*people working in creative industries in general are less pleased to follow rules and procedures*” (R2).

*Unpredictability of the public's behaviors and reactions* is a second main category of stress factors. The audience of PR activity is the one deciding upon its success, and this is not only linked to the capabilities or effort of the communication professional. Moreover, it is a larger context with lots of unpredictable factors and potential disruptors. In this case, even considering a supposed perfect plan and implementation in the communication department, the outcome in the real world is subject to high levels of uncertainty. As the respondents stated, “*we work with the most volatile thing in the world: the public opinion*” (R2) and “*in this job you are not at all in control (...) all you can do is give your best and hope that it works*” (R10).

PR, as compared to other communication services, implies *bidirectional communication* and *partnership*. This places the public in a powerful role and leaves the organization and the communication professionals working for it with a lot less power, especially in present times. PR generates reputation which is not only the result of what the organization does or declares about itself, but also about how the environment in which it operates integrates these actions. Even more so, with social media, the communication environment and the positive *reputation capital* is highly *volatile*.

The topic of *crisis communication* is also important here and was explicitly mentioned by some of the respondents as a particularly stressful factor. In such situations, one does not have too much control on how the result will look like. Both the uncertainty regarding the present and the outcome, all to be analyzed and implemented under time pressure, create high levels of stress: “*you need to provide input in a very short time in order to be sure that your opinion will be taken into consideration and disseminated*” (R7); “*it is stressful to understand the situation, to find the right angle, to formulate the best possible answer and all in less than an hour*” (R4).

*High rates of change in the PR job* represent an important stressor, especially for professionals aged over 40 who find it more difficult to adapt to new contexts with the required speed. Changes that are not appreciated lead to even higher stress levels: “*I don't really understand, or I can't keep up with the new channels and the changes they bring to my job*” (R4). Additionally, stress levels increase for professionals who enjoyed “*the [old a.n.] way we used to work*” and will not or cannot adapt to more recent developments. In the context of these rapid changes, some of the professionals even wonder how relevant their activity remains, or whether they will still have a job in the next years. This adds to stress in two ways: (i) through the “*fear of job loss*” (R11) and (ii) through the “*need to work more to prove oneself*” (R4).

*Continuously increasing volumes of work* are linked to PR activity and especially to the changes brought to the profession by *social media* which created more channels for communication. Every new channel means a new adjustment of the PR message, new ways of writing and disseminating content, new measurement metrics and more. Furthermore, it becomes increasingly difficult to choose what and when and on which channel you want to communicate, because at some point they all seem relevant, which makes them all necessary, translating it into an increased workload. Also, it is not only the effort related to organization's communication initiatives, but also to managing feed-back: “*you have an immense diversity of people and channels, if they don't like what you say or do, you will have many reactions to which you will have to respond*” (R10).

To the increasing volume of work adds the diminishing of the resources: “*when it comes to people, there are two reasons for it – either you need to restructure your team or it is very difficult to hire new and competent people (...) when it comes to budgets, they don't keep the pace with the fast changes in the PR activity*” (R2). Therefore, in the context of *little resources*



and extended tasks and several ramifications of PR activity, this translates into work overload and added stress. The pressure is not only an external one, but also *self-induced*, linked to *high standards* and *fear of missing out*: “*there are many opportunities that arise and you need to be prepared all the time (...) planning works, but you always need to make space for taking advantage of a newly-created context (...) missing a good opportunity brings a lot of stress*” (R1). These findings paint a positive picture with respect to the state of PR practices, in terms of dedication and interest shown by the professionals, but also point out possible worrying indicators regarding the high pressure they face.

The professionals feel the “*always-on*” state as a strong stressor. Together with technological progress, even before the emergence of social media, but especially after it, “*there is no more time off (...) you are always connected [to your job a.n.]*” (R10). In PR, *public opinion* is the guiding map for past, current, and immediate flow of activities. The media points to the barometer of public opinion and it was always one of the central concerns of professionals in PR. The new media just raised the complexity and pressure, since it is not only the journalists that can contribute to or damage the image and reputation of the organization, but anyone having a social media account: “*before social media, you were expecting the morning paper, to see if there is something you need to address, then you had to check some tens of websites, (...) now you have millions of clients’ accounts that need to be followed... at this numbers it’s almost impossible not to give a reaction about your company that needs your attention almost every day*” (R16).

The communication channels multiplied and the boundaries etiquette is not yet established: “*on WhatsApp, on the email account which you have on your phone, on your social media accounts ... you are always reachable ... and there is always somebody who has a complaint, a request, an idea or a collaboration proposal*” (R10); “*I try to make some rules not to answer, but then you look unfriendly (...) nobody thinks that it’s not only him or her asking you something and people get very insistent and personal on these new communication channels (...) even the journalists – they believe that they can have a request at 9:00 in the evening and that it’s ok to drop you message on WhatsApp*” (R10). The theme of *fear of missing out* appeared again here, linked to the continuous pressure on creativity and inspiration, because “*with so many channels for communications available, there are always ideas and opportunities to be used and you don’t want to miss them*” (R15).

On the topic of *team management* respondents said they feel the pressure of keeping teams motivated and engaged, especially when they understand very well the unpredictability and the increased volume of work. This theme is intrinsically linked to the first one, especially to *internal politics* and the research emphasized once more that this stress factor is reducing efficiency, so PR professionals feel the need to keep it away from their teams, thus generating a vicious circle of stress, because this way they put even more pressure on themselves: “*I need my team, they are my main support in dealing with stress, but I try to shield them from internal discussions mainly, so they don’t get unmotivated (...) since, for me, these internal politics are the most important stress factors, I really try to keep my team away from it ... but this just adds an extra layer of stress*” (R10).

Working with people that are *not good professionals*, who *do not know* how to do their jobs properly or who just *do not really care* about doing a good job is another stressor mentioned repeatedly. The problem is also related to the fact that PR professionals need to present the best image of the company, to convince all the publics that the company is worth of their appreciation “*and when you have to do this while working with poorly prepared people,*

*you just need to work more and also to convince yourself that this is just an exception, it is not the general standard in the company”* (R2). The main stress comes from the fact that it is difficult to naturally maintain a coherent direction and keep oneself motivated when what you are supposed to communicate does not seem to be reflected in your own daily experiences. As perceived by the respondents, the nature of PR activity exposes these professionals to more frequent and frustrating situations, because *“as this job is about interacting with a lot of people, the probability of meeting more careless persons is naturally higher than in other jobs”* (R13). Also, because the outcome of PR depends on the entire activity of the company, these situations are perceived as a burden, portrayed in the answers as *“the curse of mediocrity”* (R2) or *“the lack of professional consciousness”* (R10). This is directly connected to the fourth stressor (*work overload*), since the frustration coming from unequal involvement transforms into stress, when *“in order to do your job, you have to compensate for the lack of professionalism of others, so it means more work for me”* (R1).

#### 4.2. Answering RQ2: ways of dealing with stress in public relations

The research highlighted different approaches in coping with stress. Some of the respondents had a methodical perspective and, for each stress factor perceived as important, they identified a specific solution. Others referred to more general strategies that can assist in the reduction of general stress levels. Some of the respondents even suggested extreme methods of coping, like quitting one’s job as a drastic measure. The analysis of the responses led to grouping them into two main categories: solutions emphasizing *positive framing*, based on the perceived *“good factors”* associated to the stressful situations of PR activity and *specific solutions* to one-sided stressors considered by PR professionals.

##### 4.2.1. General organic coping through positive framing: compensating the negative side by focusing on the bright side and on advantages of public relations profession

Most of the respondents said that the negative dimensions in PR activity, coming from high stressful experiences, can be counterbalanced by the positive ones, thus coping with stressors more easily. The positive *compensators* derive from the specificity and nature of PR activity, emphasizing on *people-related opportunities and sense of belonging, satisfaction when dealing with challenges, self-perceived importance, competency, and power* and nevertheless *opportunities for expressing one’s creativity*. Such positive framing provides a maneuvering range for dealing with specific stressors. These findings offer a valuable insight, also supporting the profile of a person suited for this area of communication.

The most common anchor the respondents referred to indicated *“people I get to meet doing this job”* (R7). Some respondents (n=5) talked about *“meeting new people”*, others (n=5) said *“interesting people”*, others (n=6) talked about *“people like me that are so into what they do”*. But the overall conclusion was that the opportunities to meet all types of people (focusing on the positive profiles) is one of the most appreciated outcome and stress relief factor for professionals working in PR, because these interactions give them *“a state of well-being”* (R5), *“help [me a.n.] connect to other human beings”* (R9) and *“learn new things”* (R4).

Another people-related answer, received from almost all the respondents when talking about what helps them deal with stress, was *“my team”* (R2). They emphasized that they rely significantly on their teams, because they feel they are part of the same story, that they understand and support each other.

Other common answers were related to the job experience in terms of *challenges*: “*the feeling of being in the middle of things*” (R5), “*the adrenaline of it*” (R1). While embracing challenge, for some, the pressure is rather the secondary side of the coin: “*that rush of adrenaline you have when you have a very short deadline, or when you need to organize a big event and you know that so many things can go wrong ... that’s a feeling I love!*” (R7).

The perceived *impact and relevancy* of their activity have their importance: “*I can see very clearly and very easily the impact of my work, of my ideas, I can make a difference*” (R2); “*in order to do my job properly I need to be in contact with most important and most relevant topics in society and I have the possibility to use my company’s resources to build relevant projects*” (R2); “*I work for memorable projects, the ones that you know for sure will improve somebody’s life*” (R3); “*you execute a campaign – you change a mindset and you just make a better world!*” (R); “*I strongly believe in the industry and in the benefits my company creates for society, and this is an important motivator for me*” (R15).

The same goes for the self-perceived *competency and power* which are perceived as positive factors. More than a third of respondents talked about the pride of “*working for a valuable brand*” and “*adding your own part to the relevance and the likeliness of the brand in the society*” (R1, R2, R4, R5, R6, R10, R17). Having a large understanding of the industry and of the company also offers many of the respondents a lot of peace of mind and helps diminish stress level. The associated skills and knowledge were mentioned: “*the arrogance of the expertise makes me feel really good (...) I managed to gather a lot of knowledge and I have the comfort that I am an expert now*” (R12).

Not least, *opportunities for expressing your creativity* are another positive anchor in PR activity, used to counterbalance stress: “*it’s amazing to challenge your creativity almost every day to come with solutions to different types of problems (...) I feel that I am free when I do this*” (R9).

The authors of this paper consider that these findings emphasize two main insights regarding PR field: (1) professionals perceive it as an area with many challenges but also opportunities, based on the complexity of the activity and the stake associated to its outcomes; (2) it takes a specific profile of a professional in PR to maintain a balanced and effective working framework and overcome the pressure associated to this activity and this profile should include attributes such as: people-oriented mindset, curiosity, adaptability, desire to look for and confront challenges, a certain type of ambition and positive ego and nevertheless optimism to focus on the bright side. This validates the third assumption (A3) of the study, that the level of correlation between the profile of the practitioner and the requirements in PR activity respectively influence the perceived stress. All these offer a positive framing for PR activity and its associated pressure. Lacking the appropriate profile, the PR professional, facing the important levels of stress in this area of communication, will find it difficult to remain focused and efficient but will rather feel overwhelmed, not having internal resources to find coping solutions.

#### 4.2.2. Specific ways of coping

The analysis of solutions pointed by PR professionals for dealing with stressors reveals that some problems remain unaddressed. On the other hand, for some, solving seems feasible. Even if it is not always implemented, the fact that it is perceived as possible and, being their choice to materialize it or not, turns it into a powerful coping instrument.

Discussing coping with stressors related to *internal politics*, which many respondents pointed to as important ones, *proactive solutions* were indicated. Some of these are based on the

human factor and building connections and *positive relationships*: “*by making friends in the organization on “sunny days” in order to insure support for the “rainy days” (...) though the problem is that my stakeholders change quite often, so I need to put a lot of effort in it*” (R1); “*I build alliances before I need them*” (R10). Since we talk about PR professionals, such a solution seems to come up organically, as building relations is what they are supposed to be doing. Another proactive solution is “*playing the competency card “: “the key is to be so good that they can’t ignore me (...) it is a lot of work in it, but it gives the best results*” (R2). Also, proving the *value of their work* in the general context of organizational objectives is helpful: “*I send a lot of reports about our activity and our results. I am careful to connect all we do with business initiatives and results (...) it seems to work in buying me internal support*” (R12).

Another stress factor that many respondents felt the need to address particularly was the one related to being “*always-on*”, when “*everybody writes on all channels at all hours*”. For that, *assertiveness* is considered a solution but it becomes possible only after becoming aware and accepting the necessity of specific boundaries, the right and advantages in setting them: “*I managed to convince myself that it is ok to tell people to write me an official email instead of using the messenger on different social media channels*”; (R10) “*I learned to be more selective with the topics I get involved with*” (R8). *Self discipline* and *professional-personal balance* are valuable assets: “*I have a clear rule: when I close the laptop I disconnect*” (R9); “*I have a clear evening program with my children, and when I do that, I don’t check my phone*”; “*I have learned to set and respect boundaries – mine and the ones of my team – we all win!*” (R13).

Even further on this theme, one solution mentioned by the respondents, though not referred to as often experienced, but rather as a potential choice, is *extensive time off or total disconnection* and *vacations*, “*the ones in which you don’t answer your phone nor read your emails*” (R10). Most of the respondents admitted that this is “*very difficult to implement, especially when you are connected all the time via phone, apps and email*” (R1). Again, the *controllability* note framed this solution in a positive light, associating it with a feasibly perceived coping factor: “*it is a lot about the discipline of it: you need to learn to resist the urge to check what’s happening when you are in your time off (...) some clear rules within the team also help a lot*” (R7).

Highly connected to the previous one is the stressor related to *a high volume of work*, sometimes involving also *fear of missing out* (R1, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R10, R15, R16). In this respect, the most mentioned coping solutions were learning how to *delegate*, and not only to the people in the PR department, but finding support also in other teams, as well as *learning to say “no”*. Assertiveness proved to be key again, but it becomes effective only given the perceived advantages of using it as being higher than the potential loss: “*it was a huge challenge, because I also know that most of the ideas lead to nice opportunities [which I will miss] (...) but I learned that I can’t do it all*” (R9). Also *prioritizing* and “*doing some of the activities more superficially*” could be a potential way of coping with the burden of overloads and extensive stress, “*in the sense of treating some of the things I do in a lighter manner, going less into details (...) this helps by lessening the pressure of time*” (R8). For that, one needs clear priority scales and consistent work experience in PR. This differentiates between senior experts and plain practitioners or even juniors, though dedicated ones. Regarding this matter, the authors of this article emphasize once more the importance of solid PR education and the maturity stage of the profession, which should contribute to the working models in this area of communication.

When addressing “*the mediocrity*” as working with colleagues from different departments that are not very good at their jobs, respondents referred to coping involving: “*training for the teams that a PR professional needs to work with*” (R2), “*very clear briefings, for everybody to understand what they are supposed to do*” (R8), and “*even coaching sessions (...)* which are time consuming, but also stress relieving” (R2).

4.3. Answering RQ3: Possible PR-focused solutions for addressing stress in PR profession

The levels of stress perceived over a longer period are also reflected in the organizational outcomes or opportunity costs. But even more so, on shorter term, when looking at the perceived efficiency and creativity, as important quality indicators in current PR activity, the stress factors pointed out by the respondents as being most important are the *volume of work* and the need to be ‘*always on*’. Figure 2 synthesizes solutions to cope with stress in PR, based on the responses of the interviewed professionals and the proposals of the authors of this paper. Most of these solutions are actionable at the level of PR professionals. However, there are also other relevant potentially active actors, at the level of organization management, academia, and professional bodies. The role of public relations as strategic communication activity is to build reputation, positive relationships, and trust, based on mutual understanding. Since this is the framework for PR professionals, used in their daily activity for the benefit of their company, it should be easily extended to a joint effort of experienced professionals and other PR- field stakeholders, to support the PR profession as well.

Figure 2. Solutions to cope with stress in PR, based on the field research and added proposals

Possible solutions	<b>Positive framework</b> <i>(based on)</i>	<b>Specific coping solutions</b>	<b>Set of standards for PR services</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>People related connections &amp; opportunities</b></li> <li>• <b>Challenges</b></li> <li>• <b>Perceived impact, relevancy, competency, power</b></li> <li>• <b>Expression of one’s creativity</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Assertiveness</b></li> <li>• <b>Prioritizing</b></li> <li>• <b>Self-discipline</b></li> <li>• <b>Building support (alliances &amp; constant reporting)</b></li> <li>• <b>Education for non-PR people (briefing, training, coaching)</b></li> <li>• <b>Time out &amp; time off</b></li> <li>• <b>Organizational support</b></li> </ul>		
		Organization		
	PR professionals			
Level of intervention	PR Academia & professional bodies			

Challenge, curiosity, and enthusiasm might represent progress factors, provided the correspondence between the nature of PR activity and the profile of the professionals working in this area, as shown previously when we referred to positive framing. However, too much challenge might turn into bad outcomes. In this matter, both the professional’s approach and the organization’s expectations and practices are relevant, implying a *clear set of limits* with regards to

when and how one can be expected to answer job-related requests. The academia and professional bodies can play a more active role. As highlighted by the respondents when talking about “*always on*” pressure, from the company side, “*it is important that one can find respect for the time out*” and also that “*there is a ‘response time’ indicator that allows for this time out*”, or, if this is not possible, “*to provide enough resources so each person can have enough time out [once in a while]*” (R10). The authors of this study consider that this can be included in a *potential work standards set for PR services*, contributing, together with other things that need to be addressed (such as unpaid pitches and types of services, to be named only), to a more clear and respect-based status and expectations regarding the professionals in PR.

Regarding work balance, firstly PR professionals are the ones that need to clearly decide about the type of opportunities they choose to follow. Only after that, they can advocate for their options in front of other organization members and maintain a strong and assertive position. As pointed out metaphorically, the experience of working in PR can be described as the one of “*Alice in Wonderland*”, with infinite possibilities, even more so given the great temptation to go after all opportunities. The challenge is that “*most of the time it is difficult to know what kind of choice to make, what will bring the most relevant results and here comes the experience and the professional instinct*” (R1). The interviews revealed that the less stressed PR professionals are the ones capable of making clear cut choices. This also allows the time and space required for creativity to flourish.

Organizational support is firmly important and that is to arise at the intersection between the clear understanding of the value and role of PR professionals and their ability to strengthen their position. But the organizational level is the last expected to initiate change. Instead, this could be fueled by the joint efforts of PR professionals, academia, and professional bodies. Setting professional standards, offering support to PR professionals, starting extended conversation about specific stress-related issues and general challenges regarding the state of the profession, finding particular solutions to the benefit of different members of the PR professional community and extensively fostering PR literacy for PR and non-PR people – these are structural endeavors substantiating effective support for implementation and positive outcomes in professional public relations. These can be achieved through collaboration, networking, strategic communication, positive reputation and trust among PR professionals and other stakeholders in the field, thus substantiating meta-PR practices, by using PR to promote PR.

#### 4.4. Limitations of the present study and possible further developments

As regards identifying stressors in PR activity, there are some research limitations derived from methodology design. First, as the field study aimed to address *experienced professionals* as respondents, most of them also had managerial and coordination attributions in addition to operational responsibilities. This had the added value of a deeper understanding and discussion on the PR activity but, in some cases, it meant there was a less detailed view on day-to-day operational activity, which might be a fruitful area for valuable findings. Second, having experienced respondents also meant their *age* span was rather limited (between 34 and 47 years old). This implies lacking the perspective of the younger generation that finds it easier to deal with social media and online channels, and who might be impacted by different stressors. Third, there is a methodological *gender* unbalance between the participants at the research, with only a third of the respondents being men. Nevertheless, there are significantly less men working in PR than women in Romania overall and the present study did

not indicate significant differences in responses based on gender. This can become an interesting topic for further study. Last, while the present article provides some suggestions for the companies on how they can better support PR professionals to overcome stress, there is no deeper discussion on the subject, focused on the perspective of *non-PR teams*. Extended studies, which could include the perceptions of *top management* representatives from organizations and other decision makers with direct interactions and influence over the work of PR professionals would be valuable research topics.

Additional research focusing also on professionals from public relations agencies, appealing to a mixed qualitative and quantitative component is an interesting and intended extension of the present study. The authors of this study argue that Romania is a relevant and interesting area of inquiry for public relations practice in general and Eastern Europe in particular, considering the high number of agencies and PR professionals in this country, the developments along the years and the present results in the Romanian industry.

Not least, the approach associated with this study brought about a set of other collateral questions which are subject to future research: (1) What kind of *support groups* can we create to support the professionals in the industry? Are the professional associations able to do it? Are people going to be opened to sharing more personal views in these types of groups? (2) Is *resilience* natural or built up for PR professionals? (3) Which is the *right balance between procedures and liberty* in the PR activity? The authors of this paper believe that the findings of such discussions would bring benefits to both PR practice and academic framework and contribute to the maturity of the profession in Romania.

## 5. Discussions and conclusions

Findings of the present study show that PR professionals face high levels of stress. However, they are not used to talk neither talk about it, but try to deal with it organically, even if sometimes this translates into burnout. High stress in PR is primarily correlated with low rates of literacy regarding the role, potential and coordinates of professional communication in general and PR in particular, among non-PR employees and partners that PR professionals must deal with. Secondly, PR, as a strategic, complex type of communication, implies a highly demanding yet rewarding professional activity. Alongside solid education, training, and experience in the field of PR, personal characteristics and fitting job requirements are necessary premises for fighting burnout and stress-related challenges. These are ingredients supporting a positive framing of potential stressors, turning them into challenges that motivate the individual.

In dealing with stress in PR and preventing it, professional and academic community bare relevant roles and responsibilities, in supporting the practitioners. The organizational level seems to be the most robust, as, although the organization is the final beneficiary, the focus and understanding is not primarily related to the internal process of performing communication services, but to their results. With a positive approach, solutions can be implemented at the organizational level, but PR professionals, collaborating with the academia and professional community, have the power to generate faster and more effective stress-fighting results themselves, by using specific strategies and tactics of their profession. By assuming stress factors and their impact, researching, and analyzing their source, valuing positive relations and reputation, and activating networks, PR professionals can not only address and overcome

stress more efficiently but initiate changes, thus contributing to the development of the PR profession itself. This is a relevant insight applicable not only in Romania, but in any country or region where the PR profession is not yet stabilized, or it is still developing.

The primary contribution of the present study is addressing the topic of stress in PR beyond descriptive approach on the stress phenomenon, found in previous studies, which consider stressors and copings as research final goals and analyze them separated from their contextual manifestation. Instead, this paper proposes an in-depth discussion related to the specifics and role of the PR profession and the need to strengthen the role and value of this communication activity, to also lower stress. By this, the authors use stress-related inquiry and findings to illustrate missing links between PR education and potential modern framework, and challenges in PR practice, respectively. The aim is to contribute to bringing PR practice and theory together, for better results in this field of activity. Perceived stress and coping solutions in PR mirror the maturity level of the profession. This needs to be considered in PR research on the topic and can bring valuable insights to support developments in the practice of this strategic communication activity.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The research supporting this article aimed to better understand *stress factors* in PR activity and identify ways of *coping* that could lower stress, as perceived by in-house professionals in Romania. It is the first study on this subject regarding European PR professionals. As compared to previously published scholarship, few on the subject, the present paper is focused on stress-related aspects, considering the implementation of the modern PR model, as a relevant framework for both identifying and explaining specific challenges PR professionals face and promoting solutions within a meta-PR approach.

Regarding stressors, some of the findings are in line with previous research, pointing to the following factors: *changes* (Guo & Anderson, 2018), *uncertainty* (Siegel & Zerfass, 2021), negative effect of social media translated into the pressure of being *always connected* (Nihaus, 2015), *high workloads* (Jiang et al., 2017) and *role stress – role overload, role ambiguity and role conflict* (Bunnel, 2006). Worth mentioning regarding the Romanian PR industry, *role preparedness* (feeling of lack of competence), the fourth important stressor underlined by Bunnel, was not highlighted by the present research for the interviewed professionals. On the contrary, feeling of competency was referred to as a coping positive premise, which is explicable considering the profile of the respondents (senior experienced professionals). Conversely, another relevant stressor was extensively discussed: *role independence/role credibility*, connected to the liberty PR professionals should have, to take decisions or the amount of energy they need to invest in convincing the company to allow them to implement their ideas which is aligned to the *role power* discussed by Grunig (2020). This confirms the fact that there are discrepancies between the professional training and orientation of the practitioners, aligned to latest theoretical models, and that of the people they interact with, who still do not have a clear picture of PR. This is an additional red flag, calling for the need to patiently align theory and practice, without assuming that in real life the PR concept bears all its theoretical significance. Without ensuring a similar pace of development on all levels for the status of PR profession, there is a risk that the missing links will generate challenges in the functioning of its processes, errors in relation to the expected results and potential burden to people practicing it.



Regarding coping solutions, some of the findings mirror the *protective factors* for resilience pointed out by Schoenmaker and Erskine (2019). An insight considered essential by the authors of the present study shows that, for PR professionals enthusiastic about their job, stressors, even highly leveled ones, can be rather easily managed when linked to the specificity of PR activity. They are felt as positive challenges, making them overcome limits and get out of the familiarity of the comfort zone. They consider this to be a satisfying and rewarding opportunity, associated with their job. But this is the case when there is the possibility to conduct their projects according to their skills and training, without interference from others in other departments, which, in many cases, do not understand nor respect PR activity and its coordinates.

This is a major relevant insight, pointing to the vulnerabilities of the PR profession, including its perceived roles and values, especially at the level of non-PR people. PR theory advanced towards finding and establishing clear conceptual frameworks, practical algorithms, and integrative paradigms. However, considering the evolution of the field, its various forms along the years, and its intersection areas with other types of communication, it seems that the existence of modern PR models, professional codes of conduct and the raising number of PR departments are not enough to have aligned theory and practice towards a strategic form of PR, as a management function within an organization. Scholarship focusing on PR practice overlooked the risks coming from unclear boundaries and standards of this profession, paying more attention to results and processes. Stress-related topic resumes the discussion regarding the status of the PR profession, calling for a clearer look at the contexts PR professionals are supposed to work in, sometimes lacking the support and recognition for their legitimacy and importance.

## 5.2. Practical implications

PR professionals can bring valuable results for organizations and society in general but to do so, they need to first put an extended effort into promoting their own professional input, to lower the sources of negative stressors. Theoretical training, practical skills, and a PR professional title, does not secure the opportunity to practice modern PR. As highlighted by the findings of the present study, high levels of stress arise from unclear intersection between the PR role and non-PR people's perceptions regarding it. PR professionals need to pay more attention to assertively advance their roles. Academia specialized in the communication area has multiple responsibilities. It needs to continue to educate PR professionals by stressing upon the importance of the modern PR approach but equally take into consideration the present state of the field, discussing practical realities and ways of overcoming challenges. Research should follow the same bidimensional coordinates, by focusing both on the desired, developed models while also investigating realities, by comparison, to support leveling the discrepancies. PR associations, together with experienced professionals, should find solutions for offering support to PR practitioners, to confront and overcome stress.

Discussing the need for a set of standards for PR activity is a relevant topic. Having the PR profession classified within the occupational nomenclature is only a formal matter. Codes of conduct are crucial but insufficient to generate positive premises for PR activity, as they mainly address practitioners, not also those they work with. Practice does not always easily follow developments in theory. This is a challenge that needs and can be solved through PR activities, by activating and potentiating relations, networks, reputation, partnerships, and collabora-

ration. Extensively, raising awareness regarding the role and value of services in PR and formally establishing a clear set of standards for PR activities and promoting them would be a relevant step further. This paper is a call to action in this respect, for a joint effort involving PR professionals, academia, and professional bodies in the field. This would not only contribute to diminishing the stress levels but also support developments in the PR profession.

## Acknowledgements

The field research included in this study was conducted during the MBA studies within Berlin School of Creative Leadership.

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