

A global exploration of workplace well-being in public relations

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ABSTRACT

We explored aspects of workplace well-being from a global Delphi study conducted amongst nearly 300 public relations participants (practitioners, educators and academics) across 24 countries, examining nearly 1500 qualitative responses. Although the study's panelists were not specifically asked about well-being, they frequently articulated unprompted expressions of purpose, ethical tensions, and professional identity.

Using a deductive coding framework we analyzed sentiments, triggers, and some interpersonal and intra-personal measures of *eudaimonic* well-being across the dataset. Statistical analysis revealed that positive sentiment was most strongly predicted by a sense of success at work and ethical autonomy, while negative sentiment was closely associated with disconnection from management and misalignment between personal values and professional roles. These findings lead us to propose 'profession-practice alignment' as a core condition for sustainable, workplace well-being, with implications for leadership, culture, and retention in PR. Furthermore we link such 'professional-practice alignment' to a sense of communitarian purpose in eudaimonic work-place wellbeing.

The study contributes to a reframing of well-being in PR, rooted in profession-practice alignment, ethical resilience, and the social dynamics of work, highlighting the need for the profession to apply its own relational expertise inward, to support the emotional and ethical conditions of its practitioners.

1. Introduction

"Good well-being" is of global societal importance, being prioritized in UN Sustainability Development Goal No. 3 (United Nations, 2015). Furthermore, 'well-being' is the fourth dimension in the quadruple bottom line sustainability frameworks of Christ and Schmidkonz (2016) and Purcell and Nikolova (2021).

The World Health Organization (2001) defines positive mental health as a state of well-being in which individuals realize their "own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully" and can contribute to their own community." The importance of work in it is also reflected in the inclusion of 'meaningful work' in the WHO's seven-point holistic model of well-being. This framework includes other measures like social relationships, environment and sense of future (Silva et al., 2024).

Workplace well-being is critical to organizational success. It is intertwined with the performance and prosperity of organizations and

individuals (der Kinderen, 2023; Pagán-Castaño et al., 2020). It is also associated with better creativity, loyalty and client service (New Economics Foundation Consulting, 2014). Well-being issues have negative consequences. Kim and Chon (2022) found that employees' after-hours, digital work communications, increased participants' negative behaviors and their word-of-mouth communications.

Public Relations scholars' and professional organizations' growing recognition of the importance of well-being to public relations practitioners, is comprehensively documented (Anton, 2024; Răceanu & Deliu-Pasol, 2023) and reflected in the PR conference circuit (Verčič et al., 2024). The International Communications Consultancy Organization (ICCO) urges PR consultancies to prioritize well-being. Its commissioned researchers found that over 60 % of 18–35 year old respondents reported a negative impact on their mental health from PR work (ICCO, & Opinium, 2024). Chmiel (2024) calls on employers to take organization-wide measures to protect employees from loneliness, after finding 30 % of Gen Z PR and Comms professionals in the UK PR

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industry being at risk of depression or anxiety.

Typically, PR scholarship in well-being focuses on single countries (e.g., Cunha et al., 2024; Geiger Zeman et al., 2025; Muñiz-Velázquez et al., 2022). Nevertheless, Moreno et al. (2019) looked regionally at PR practitioners' resilience in South America, across 17 countries, while the European Public Relations Education and Research Association's (EUPRERA) Women in PR Network conducted five country studies on gender and well-being (e.g., Anton, 2024; Cunha et al., 2024), and Chmiel (2024) focused on the UK and US. There is also some international industry-body research on well-being that does not specify the samples' number of countries (Fajardo, 2025; ICCO, & Opinium, 2024). Our study is explicitly the most global to date.

Most research into PR workplace well-being is subjective, drawing on PR practitioners' perceptions (e.g., Anton, 2024; ICCO, & Opinium, 2024) of well-being. This contrasts with an objective approach, which refers to the measurable outcomes of well-being, such as health, environment and job opportunities (Voukelatou et al., 2020).

We take inspiration from De Neve and Ward's (2023) definition of Workplace Subjective Well-being (WSWB). This has three elements: how subjects *evaluate* their job satisfaction, how they *feel* about their work on a short-term basis, and the *meaning and purpose* they derive from work. We adapted and applied the latter two elements. We did not have data to address job satisfaction. We adapted the second dimension by drawing sentiment analysis given that the panelists were not explicitly asked about their emotions. We explored aspects of the third element, *meaning and purpose* by applying specific interpersonal and intrapersonal measures identified by Bartels et al. (2019). By developing this conceptual lens, we aim to interpret how sentiments may signal unprompted deeper forms of professional meaning or misalignment.

Our research pivots on the first round of a global Delphi study that was focused on social impact, value and priorities relating to the PR discipline. This included the perceptions of nearly 300 PR practitioners, educators and academics representing 24 countries across six continents. We conducted a secondary analysis of nearly 1500 qualitative responses to five open-ended questions (see Section 3.1) to explore some underlying aspects of workplace well-being. Our analysis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What types of sentiments do PR practitioners, academics and educators convey about the roles and their experiences of PR?

RQ2. What factors drive these sentiments expressed by PR practitioners, academics and educators?

RQ3. What meaning and purpose do PR practitioners, academics and educators convey in relation to the sentiments they associate with the PR profession and practice?

2. Literature review

Drawing on literature about WSWB, we adapted De Neve and Ward's recent framework (2023), to explore sentiments, and selected aspects of an *eudaimonic* approach. With specific regard to public relations scholarship, we considered established drivers of well-being, together with purpose and meaning in the discipline.

2.1. Subjective workplace well-being

Classically, studies of subjective well-being predominantly took the hedonic approach (der Kinderen et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2001). More recently, scholarship on subjective workplace well-being (WSWB) have integrated both hedonic and eudaimonic approaches (De Neve & Ward, 2023; Mahoney, 2023), with De Neve and Ward integrating hedonic, eudaimonic and evaluative approaches.

The hedonic approach examines positive and negative effects, emphasizing happiness and the minimization of pain (Bartels et al., 2019). In workplace well-being, it involves examining recent emotions

felt at work (De Neve & Ward, 2023). Job satisfaction may also be categorized as hedonic (e.g., der Kinderen et al., 2020) or as evaluative (De Neve & Ward, 2023).

An *eudaimonic* approach relates to the meaning of work, purpose and self-realization (der Kinderen et al., 2020; Ryff et al., 2021). Theories relating to the *eudaimonic* approach include Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Ryff's Model of Well-being. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2001) concerns intrinsic motivations relating to individuals' sense of autonomy, competence and personal relatedness. Ryff (1989) also includes these three elements in her psychological concept of well-being that extends beyond happiness or positive emotions, emphasizing optimal psychological functioning and human development. Her framework has the six key dimensions of: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth.

Whilst eudaimonic studies are increasingly important in scholarship, there has been limited consideration of the *eudaimonic* approach in workplace well-being (Bartels et al., 2019; der Kinderen, 2023). De Neve and Ward (2023, p. 15) suggest an all-embracing *eudaimonic* question: "Overall, how purposeful and meaningful do you find your work?" Amy Bartels and colleagues (2019, p. 17) suggest that *eudaimonic* workplace well-being "consists of two key broad components – interpersonal and intrapersonal – that together reflect what it means to have optimal functioning and growth at work." The interpersonal questions they recommend relate to the interviewee's sense of closeness with colleagues within the interviewee's work-place (2019 p17). Their intrapersonal questions concern the interviewee's sense of personal energy, development and purpose, and the importance of their work to them.

Recently, der Kinderen (2023) developed the concept of Eudaimonic Well-Being Behavior (EWBB), in which she positions "well-doing" as a route to "well-being" in the workplace. *Eudaimonic* well-being behaviors, she states, consist of personal growth, the pursuit of purpose, and positive relationship behaviors. She associates them with servant leadership and workplace civility climate.

2.2. Positive and negative sentiments

A hedonic, subjective approach to workplace well-being involves the identification of emotions. These range from positive emotions like joy or hope, to negative ones like anger or sadness. Emotions are short-lived biological and psychological responses. Their regulation has a longer impact. Positive as well as negative emotions can also be experienced over a longer period and influence anxiety (Cisler & Olatunji, 2012) or contentment. In addition, mixed-emotions have been linked to eudaimonic well-being.

Sentiments are not synonymous with emotions. Vendrell Ferran (2022, p. 21) explains that "While emotions have been regarded as episodic responses with a specific phenomenology, it is widely agreed that sentiments as enduring states cannot be acutely felt". Sentiments are more stable states.

Sentiments are influenced by organizational culture, stakeholder relationships and career progression, with scholars identifying additional factors such as multi-generational influencers (Candello & Mohammadpour, 2024), workplace resilience (Guo & Anderson, 2018), as well as influencing professional identity and career development (Anton, 2024; Candello & Mohammadpour, 2024).

Sentiments are not independent of the environment in which PR professionals find themselves. Positive sentiments such as job satisfaction and engagement are reportedly contributing to the meaning and purpose of work, with increased productivity and creativity (van der Voordt & Jensen, 2023). A healthy working environment fosters creativity, job satisfaction, collaboration and strategic thinking, which are all crucial skills in PR practice. Support provided by the leaders, recognition and career growth opportunities are important influencers of subjective workplace well-being (Anton, 2024).

Negative sentiments are well-documented due to their substantial influence on the workplace. The role of a PR professional is to ensure

inclusivity and diverse voices of stakeholders they engage with, but in addressing well-being experiences affecting themselves, remains an under-studied topic despite an increase of attention, particularly post-Pandemic. Various studies by international bodies for practitioners and academics like the ICCO and EUPRERA, (e.g. Geiger Zeman et al., 2024; Topić & Chmiel, 2024), research by national associations (e.g. CIPR, PRCA and Opinum, 2022; Fajardo, 2025) and many PR scholars cited in this paper, have been creating awareness around the topic of well-being in the PR field. Many highlight the devastating effects of negative sentiments on the individual as well as the organization. The risk of mental illness (e.g., Chmiel, 2024; CIPR, PRCA and Opinum, 2022). In addition to the well-known effects such as work-absenteeism, stress and burnout, consequences such as retention and lower productivity directly influence the sustainability of an organization and society in general (van der Voordt & Jensen, 2023). Howlett's (2024) *PR Moment* article asks, "Is PR shedding its bad reputation for employee well-being?", highlighting both the industry's troubled past and its growing focus on welfare. Although awareness exists, much needs to be done to further understand and improve the lived experiences of PR professionals in their working environments.

2.3. Drivers associated with the well-being of PR professionals

Public relations is regarded as a high-pressure profession (Guo & Anderson, 2018; Ziegele & Zeffass, 2021; Răceanu & Deliu-Pasol, 2023) which influences how organizations and individuals are perceived by their fellow colleagues, stakeholders such as the media, as well as the communities they operate in. It requires individual resilience (e.g., Guo & Anderson, 2018; Moreno et al., 2019).

Drivers can refer to factors that influence well-being positively, negatively or a mixture of the two. They include organizational structure, psychological, work-related social, and/or economic drivers. General drivers emerge in the PR industry as a need for organizational support and leadership, a demanding work context, with the inability to meet stakeholder expectations often resulting in negative sentiments, and with pressures of work/life imbalances.

Work-life (in)balance is highlighted by professional bodies (CIPR, PRCA and Opinum, 2022) and academics alike (e.g. Kim & Chon, 2022; Geiger Zeman et al., 2024). Fielden et al. (2003) and Ravina Ripoll et al. (2022) argue that work-life balance is dwindling, signifying increased stress and reduced performance caused by emotional instability.

Stress factors can be critical. In Romania, Răceanu and Deliu-Pasol (2023) correlate high stress with a lack of PR literacy from colleagues and partners in other disciplines. This issue of 'role credibility' affects the liberty PR professionals have to make decisions and the amount of energy they need to try and convince colleagues. This can also be associated with Grunig's (1990) call for more autonomy for PR practitioners decades ago, which she associated with a lack of authority. Răceanu and Deliu-Pasol (2023) point to the need for the PR training of people who interact with PR professionals. Contrastingly, Fajardo (2025), in a more positive industry report of 300 internal comms specialists, recruited from international US-based companies, found that 63 % participants felt their organizational leaders listened to them. Nevertheless, this left a sizable minority of less respectful leaders.

According to Anton (2024), organizational support significantly impacts PR professionals' well-being within the workplace. Candello and Mohammadpour (2024) highlighted mentorship and leadership as an additional factor impacting workplace well-being for PR professionals. Financial stability and consistent income are drivers identified by Voukelatou et al. (2020) and seen as essential to reduce stress and anxiety, both for full-time employees and freelancers (Moise et al., 2025). In a developing country such as South Africa, this driver is especially significant, with many PR practitioners doing freelance or contract work, often associated with a lack of financial stability. Financial precarity and contract positions also influence access to personal development and exposure to professional associations and

networking with fellow PR professionals. According to Guo and Anderson's research there are challenges to PR practitioners at individual, PR functional and organizational levels. They noticed though (2018, p. 240) that they did not find 'adversities on a community or societal level'.

In addition to these drivers, well-being studies in public relations and articles in practice-based reports indicate the importance of demographic and cultural perspectives. Generational outlooks are explored (Anton, 2024; Candello & Mohammadpour, 2024). For young PR professionals flexible working hours, work-life balance and a supportive working environment promote employee well-being, help prevent stress and create good health that enables employee engagement and organizational performance (Waworuntu et al., 2022). Notably, Gen Z PR professionals value the compatibility of their work with their personal values (Adi, Stoeckle 2023a,b). Women's well-being is affected, for example, by their multiple roles (e.g., Anton & Moise, 2025; Jiang & Shen, 2013), experiences of networking stress and threats of sexual harassment (e.g., Anton, 2024; Bridgen & Williams, 2024; Geiger Zeman et al., 2025; Topić & Chmiel, 2024). Several studies highlighted the need to develop cultural and context-specific measurement criteria due to the influence of language and cultural norms (Cummins, 2018; Ji et al., 2021), with Sollis et al. (2024) stating the need for non-Western measuring criteria which are more inclusive of diversity and participatory in their approach.

Research into well-being clearly identified the concepts involved as well as the drivers influencing subjective well-being due to its complexity. However, understanding the sentiments of PR experts globally given the major disruptions experienced with global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the climate change emergency and the influence of technology (Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication, 2025), requires a global review of the well-being in public relations.

2.4. Well-being and the meaning and purpose of PR

Public relations can be used to develop the trust, reputation and support for organizations and brands (CIPR - Chartered Institute of Public Relations n.d; Mudzanani & Anani-Bossman, 2023) through strategic communications and stakeholder management. Public relations primarily focuses on the strategic use of communication to build and strengthen relationships between various stakeholders in an ethically conscious manner (Azionya et al., 2019). As a human-centered activity, communication involves multiple actors, actions, and platforms, and occurs in diverse contexts.

While dialogue, ethics, and public value are often presented as normative aspirations of public relations (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006), scholars have critiqued their universal applicability. These ideals are historically rooted in liberal-democratic contexts and may not translate uniformly across diverse cultural and political environments (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). Furthermore, they can function more as aspirational signposts than as operational norms, contributing to tensions between professional identity and everyday practice (Holtzhausen, 2012).

Stakeholder relations (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) occur in an increasingly complex and fast-moving environment. This turbulent context, previously referred to as VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous), has been superseded by the acronym BANI (brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible) to signal an increasingly chaotic world. Part of this context is also that there is a common critique of many companies' implementation of Elkington's (1994) bottom line for sustainability with corporations' overarching focus on profit at the expense of people and planet (Elkington, 2018; Loviscek, 2020).

Despite the growth in PR, the discipline also has legitimacy issues. PR's professional project (Larson, 2017) has had some impact with corporate communication having a strong presence in many top-listed companies and with the Institute of Public Relations in the UK having been awarded Chartered status in 2005. The development of PR is

highlighted in a study by Garsten et al. (2024) which demonstrates the emergence and promotion of specialist identities that redefine and expand the professional boundaries PR professionals negotiate. Nevertheless, despite growth, public relations continues to grapple with its professional legitimacy (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Merckelsen, 2013). Some critical scholars like L'Etang (2016) and O'Brien (2018) argue that issues management models prioritize organizational interests rather than putting societal issues at the heart of communications, creating a trust deficit for PR professionals. Topić and Chmiel (2024, p. 4), in their UK study, recommend several well-being interventions, including, identifying the “needs and values” of employees, and “finding alignment between private and organisational [...] values” to “improve overall satisfaction”. Nevertheless, the balance struck between societal and corporate interests can vary geo-culturally. Bravo (2023, p. 20), reflecting on the state of the profession in Latin America, stated that public relations is “anchored in social and communitarian concerns to serve society”. Legitimacy issues can influence both the perceived value of PR in organizations (Benecke et al., 2025) and the confidence of the PR professionals as to the value they add to the business success. By extension, legitimacy issues can be experienced by PR professors in academic settings (Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2020).

Finding meaning in work is an important eudaimonic aspect of subjective workplace well-being and influences the loyalty and sustainability towards the employers and the PR profession. Yeomans (2007) refers to the emotional labor PR professionals are involved with daily and the role that identity construction and retrospective, or past experiences, play in developing a meaningful PR career. Other important meaning-making aspects include the continuous development of meaning-making through experience and acquiring new information, the individual approach to complex situations and the relevance of information to a specific context (Weick, 1995).

Taking into consideration the need to retain employees and prevent high employee turnover in the PR industry (Blum & Tremarco, 2008), it is important to explore meaning-making, emotions and job satisfaction of PR professionals in relation to well-being.

3. Methods

3.1. Study context, data collection and focus

We were invited to explore workplace well-being from the data of the "Future of PR/Comms and their Social Impact" global study, carried out in 2022–2023 across 24 countries on six continents. Although the original study did not directly pose questions about well-being, the researchers focused on the qualitative responses to questions about the perceived value, social impact, and future direction of public relations (see questions below in 3.2) to explore unprompted, underlying indicators of workplace well-being. PR practitioners, educators and academics, participated from Africa (46): Botswana (4), Ghana (5), South Africa (19), Tanzania (18), Uganda (1). Others came from Asia (48): Japan (5), Malaysia (24), Türkiye (19). They were also based in Europe (100): Belgium (2), Germany (9), Italy (10), Lithuania (21), Netherlands (6), Romania (37), Slovenia (2), United Kingdom (13). Other panelists worked in: North America (15): Canada (10), USA (5); Oceania (22): Australia (8), New Zealand (14), and South America (61): Argentina (4), Costa Rica (10), Ecuador (22), Uruguay (25).

The Delphi research design was structured into four rounds. The first two rounds gathered qualitative data, while the latter two collected quantitative input, via a specialized platform. We only analyzed the qualitative data from the first round. This was to avoid potential bias as only the first round responses were blind to participants. Additionally, many second-round reflections reiterated earlier input, risking over-representation. The research was conducted in English, Spanish, and Turkish. The responses were translated into English for analysis. They were then curated to ensure clarity of meaning.

Specifically, this study's researchers analyzed 1465 individual

responses provided by the 293 participants across five open-ended Delphi questions. The questions concerned how PR panelists addressed conflicting interests (Q12); and perceived the value and social impact of PR (Q16 and Q17), and how PR should manage conflicting interests and impacts (Q18 and Q19). Each participant had the opportunity to respond to all five questions; most provided substantive answers to at least one, with the majority contributing across multiple questions.

3.2. Analytical framework and coding approach

This exploratory study applied quantitative content analysis to qualitative data (Niederberger & Homberg, 2023). Statements were manually coded, indicating the presence (1) or absence (0) of a sentiment - categorized as positive, negative, neutral, or mixed. A statement could only be coded into one category. The “mixed” code was introduced after a collaborative coding session revealed that some responses contained both positive and negative elements.

Sentiment drivers were identified. These included those relating to the PR Function/Clients and the Institution (Guo & Anderson, 2018) and after initial coding, in response to the data, to PR professionals in the industry and other societal publics.

We explored whether the commentaries could cast light, unprompted, on underlying aspects of panelists' eudaimonic well-being related to “finding work purposeful, worthwhile, or meaningful” (De Neve & Ward, 2023, p. 8). This focus was appropriate given the centrality of PR's social impact and value to the original study. Four interpersonal positive and negative sub-codes were adapted from Bartels et al.'s (2019, p. 17) questions concerning degrees of closeness to colleagues. Please see Table 1 (see Appendix) outlines the resulting interpersonal and intrapersonal coding scheme, capturing both supportive and constraining dimensions of workplace well-being. They were coded with 1 or 0 for presence or absence.

Coding was performed by three in-team researchers using an iterative and collaborative approach. Ten responses to Q16 were jointly coded to align interpretations. Then, an inter-coder reliability test, based on 25 responses to Q16 coded by all three coders, resulted in a satisfactory average percent agreement of 85.6 % amongst the coders (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020), calculated as the mean proportion of coding instances in which all three coders assigned the same code across all units.

3.3. Operationalization of variables and constructs

The analysis examined sentiment, its drivers, and the presence of workplace well-being indicators. A positive sentiment statement could be associated with emotions such as enjoyment, hope, inspiration, or contentment. Negative sentiment statements could be associated with frustration, disconnection, or discomfort. Mixed sentiments included statements with both affirming and critical elements, while neutral statements lacked identifiable affect.

Drivers of sentiment were identified based on the actors or structures referenced, including senior management or employers, colleagues in PR teams or other departments, clients, the media, the public, the PR work itself, institutions, and other PR professionals.

Workplace well-being was operationalized through both interpersonal and intrapersonal sub-codes, each with positive (+) and negative (-) variants. Interpersonal dimensions captured levels of connection or disconnection with management, team members, colleagues, clients, and the broader PR industry. Intrapersonal dimensions reflected personal engagement with work, including feelings of energy, growth, ethical autonomy, success, and alignment of personal values with professional roles.

In this study, sentiment was coded separately from well-being variables but analyzed in relation to them. Drawing on subjective workplace well-being theory (De Neve & Ward, 2023), sentiment was explored to consider how associative expressions of emotional tone might

correspond with measures of purpose. This approach allowed for a structured analysis of how sentiment may signal underlying well-being conditions.

3.4. Data analysis

Following the coding process, the qualitative data were transformed into categorical variables and analyzed statistically. Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the strength and direction of linear associations (Field, 2013) between positive, negative, and mixed sentiments and variables such as work importance, ethical autonomy, success at work, and disconnection from management. To examine predictive relationships, we conducted multiple linear regression analysis, a method used to estimate the influence of several independent variables on a single outcome while controlling for confounding effects (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Standardized beta coefficients were calculated to facilitate comparison of effect sizes across predictors. All statistical relationships presented in the Findings section are significant at $p < .05$ (two-tailed), unless otherwise indicated. Model fit for each regression was assessed using R^2 , which represents the proportion of variance in sentiment explained by the well-being dimensions. The results were also presented visually through regression plots, highlighting how both intrapersonal and interpersonal elements shape sentiment in the global PR profession.

3.5. Ethical considerations

The broader study received ethical clearances through the lead researchers' affiliated universities. Volunteers in the Delphi study gave informed consent. The dataset was anonymized and managed in compliance with established confidentiality and data protection protocols.

4. Findings

4.1. Sentiments about PR work: positive, negative and mixed

Correlational analysis revealed strong positive associations between *Positive sentiment* and key triggers such as *PR work* (ranging from .56 to .77 across the five Delphi questions), and dimensions like *Success at work* (.42–.52), *Work importance* (.41–.52), *Alignment of personal values to work* (.21–.52), and *Professional ethical autonomy* (.18–.43).

Conversely, strong correlations were found with *Negative sentiments*, and *Disconnection from management* (.51–.52, notably in Q12, Q16, and Q18), and *Lack of success at work* (ranging from .37 to .66, especially in questions Q17 and Q19). One educator from Türkiye (R288) lamented that whilst PR “could have extraordinary impact”, the discipline “only fulfills a tenth of what it could do”. This was because PR had become “a tool that serves profit maximization and corporate interest”. One participant noted, “The media portrays public relations as spin doctors, and that attitude flows through to the public and to general business.”

The *Lack of professional ethical autonomy* was similarly significant, with correlations between .31 and .59, and *Not feeling energized by work* emerged as an important factor ($r = .31$ to .43). For instance, one Canadian practitioner (R017) reflected, “I and my team typically feel powerless”. The pressures and deadlines foisted on the team rendered it reactive rather than proactive. Here a lack of autonomy and a sense of being overwhelmed sapped and dissipated team members' energy. Similarly, a PR academic from the UK (R166), observed that many PR professionals were, “in a weak position” and frequently didn't “feel able to challenge management”. They might “feel precarious and over-worked”, following client demands and prioritizing the “bottom line”, instead of leading “more sustainable practice”.

Mixed sentiments revealed a moderate degree of complexity, with moderate positive correlations with both positive and negative drivers. *Connections with colleagues* (ranging from .145 to .222) were observed

with *Disconnections from institutions* (ranging from .175 to .413). For instance, one Romanian PR consultant (R124), positively chose clients “based on the way they do business”. This followed negative experiences, where they “chose not to work/ continue to work with a client” given issues like “environmental impact”.

Practitioners generally reported stronger *Positive sentiment* patterns than academics who tended to show comparatively weaker *Positive sentiment* and higher *Neutral sentiment*. For instance, one practitioner from the Netherlands (R097) felt that the challenge of addressing multiple and conflicting impacts could be addressed through conducting research and working with consultancies, thereby identifying potentially useful external perspectives and PR support.

To complement the correlational findings, predictive modelling was conducted to identify which well-being dimensions most strongly predict *Positive* and *Negative Sentiment* when controlling for other influences. The analysis suggested that *Success at work* (+0.462) and *Work importance* (+0.458) were the strongest positive predictors of *Positive sentiment*, with the regression model explaining 46 % of the variance ($R^2 = 0.46$). Conversely, *Disconnection with management* (+1.128) emerged as potentially the most powerful predictor of *Negative sentiment*, while *Work importance* (-0.418) and *Feeling energized by work* (-0.244) were likely protective dimensions against negativity, with the regression model accounting for 52 % of the variance ($R^2 = 0.52$).

The suggested predictors of positive sentiments are illustrated in Fig. 1. Higher coefficients indicate greater positive influence on sentiment after controlling for other variables.

In the suggested predators of negative sentiments in Fig. 2, higher coefficients suggest stronger positive prediction of negativity. In both figures, all other statistically relevant predictors are intrapersonal ones, except for the interpersonal predictor *Dis/Connection with Management*.

4.2. Sentiment drivers

Positive sentiments were most often directed towards immediate professional environments and the PR profession itself. Notably, *Colleagues in the PR team* (Q16.07) correlated at $r = .195$, the *PR work itself* (Q16.12) at $r = .564$, and *Other PR professionals/Industry* (Q16.13) at $r = .303$. This pattern suggests that peer relationships and professional identity form key pillars for positive experiences in PR. Practitioners predominantly directed their positive sentiments toward colleagues and clients, whereas academics showed slightly more positive connections to the broader profession and ethical standards. For instance, one academic (R031-Germany) spoke of the importance of “clear ethical guidelines and open discussions” when there are multiple conflicting impacts.

Negative sentiments were primarily aimed at organizational structures. *Senior management/Employers* (Q12.05 and Q18.05) and *Institutions* (Q12.08) were central targets, correlating strongly with negative sentiments (ranging from .243 to .385). One educator (R187-South Africa) lamented, “PR practitioners often lose the battle and

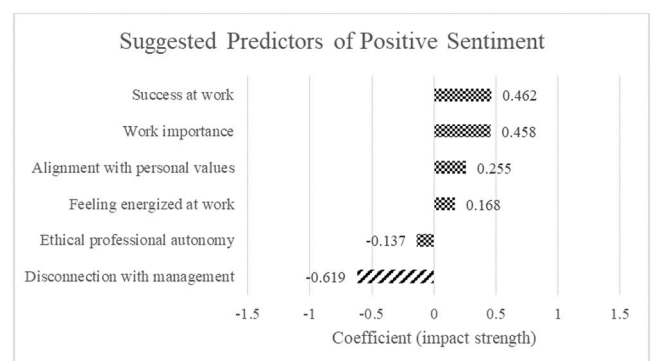


Fig. 1. Standardized regression coefficients predicting Positive Sentiment among PR practitioners, educators and academics.

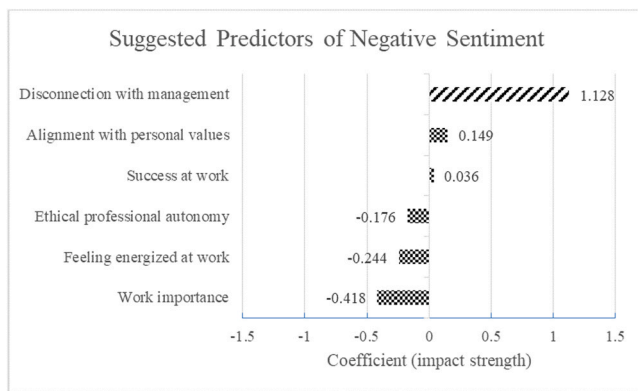


Fig. 2. Standardized regression coefficients predicting Negative Sentiment among PR practitioners, educators and academics.

simply comply with management's wishes". An academic (R196 South Africa) stated that strategic communications was undeservedly undermined in most organizations as practitioners were "often not kept in the loop." Academics, in particular, expressed more negativity toward institutional failures, while practitioners were more critical of immediate management practices.

Mixed sentiments were directed at a broader range of stakeholders, including both internal actors such as *Senior management* (Q16.05, Q17.05) and external actors such as *Clients* (Q16.09), with correlation values ranging from .145 to .251. This pattern highlights the ambivalent perceptions across organizational boundaries, where a positive professional identity can coexist with systemic frustrations about both internal and external relationships.

4.3. Meaning and purpose narratives

Positive sentiments were strongly tied to the interpretative codes of *sense of success at work* (Q16.24 and Q17.24). The associated *Sense of work being important/Work importance* (Q16.21 and Q17.21) correlated highly with *positive sentiment* ($r = .524$). *Feeling energized by work* (Q16.20) were significantly associated with *positive emotional experiences*. Similarly, *Professional ethical alignment* (Q16.23) also contributed to the construction of meaningful professional identities. Practitioners tended to derive meaning predominantly from success, energization, and peer affirmation, while academics placed greater emphasis on ethical autonomy and social impact.

Negative sentiments corresponded to challenges in meaning-making. *Disconnection with management* (Q12.25 and Q18.25) exhibited strong correlations ($r = .516$). The ethical dimension is particularly challenging, as practitioners often navigate conflicts between their values and organizational demands. One participant stated, "Protecting the reputation of one's organization and defending it against public criticism may not be a huge deal for some professionals, but a huge dilemma for those with a very narrow 'acceptance' limit." This highlights the internal conflict and emotional toll of maintaining professional integrity. A *Lack of professional ethical autonomy* (Q16.33 and Q18.33) was a prominent feature of negative narratives ($r = .413$). For instance, one practitioner reflected (R172-UK), "Practitioners should have the agency and the influence within management within their organizations to highlight and address areas of conflict of interest. This only happens in exceptional organizations." Participants expressing negative sentiments frequently indicated diminished self-development and ethical misalignment. Another practitioner (R105-New Zealand), indicated a lack of autonomy, "It is very difficult to convince corporate managers to do the right thing for society and the environment." Academics more frequently reported difficulties reconciling personal values with institutional demands compared to practitioners.

Mixed sentiments suggested dual patterns, reflecting simultaneous

experiences of connection and disconnection. For example, participants' statements were positively correlated to *Alignment with personal values* (Q17.13, $r = .183$) while simultaneously being strongly disconnected from management (Q17.28, $r = .247$).

5. Discussion

5.1. Sentiment conveyed about PR work (RQ1)

Findings suggest that sentiments about PR are shaped by both intrapersonal dimensions (such as perceptions of success, ethical autonomy, and personal values alignment) and interpersonal dimensions (such as management relationships and collegial support). *Positive sentiments* were primarily driven by an intrapersonal sense of achievement, whereas *Negative sentiments* often arose from deteriorated interpersonal dynamics.

5.2. Drivers of these sentiments (RQ2)

Work-related well-being in PR may therefore be understood, in part, as the outcome of both intrapersonal drivers (internal perceptions of success, values, and ethics) and interpersonal conditions, such as supportive or disconnected organizational relationships.

5.2.1. Positive sentiment

The findings may suggest that *positive sentiment* is fostered when PR work resonates with personal success, meaning, and ethical values. This finding resonates with der Kinderen's concept of Eudaimonic Well-Being Behavior (EWBB) where active 'well-doing' leads to 'well-being'.

Also, the suggested positive impact of enacting values supports Topić and Chmiel's (2024) well-being recommendations of aligned organizational and personal values to support employee satisfaction, and individuals' responsibility to find ethically compatible employers.

5.2.2. Negative sentiment and sustainability concerns

In contrast, *negative sentiment* may be driven by leadership disconnection and ethical misalignments. PR is practiced in the societal context of sustainability. Panelists' frustration often stemmed from ethical conflicts and the challenges of convincing corporate management to adhere to sustainability responsible practices. The monetary focus that panelists found frustrating can be related to critiques (Loviscek, 2020) of Elkington's (1994) classic sustainability, triple bottom line framework. These uncertainties represented by VUCA and BANI influence the role PR practitioners play when organizations attempt to apply the triple bottom line, especially when stating a stakeholder-focused approach, yet the stakeholders do not experience inclusion in corporate decision-making.

Notably, sustainability concerns expressed by our panelists fill a 'challenge' gap relating to societal issues that Guo and Anderson (2018) identified when examining challenges faced by PR practitioners. Furthermore, it contributes knowledge about the causes of ethical issues. Notably, Kang (2010, p. 155) identifying that it would be helpful to have "qualitative data depicting causes of ethical conflict", in their study on ethical conflict and job satisfaction.

Mixed sentiment reflects the simultaneous pride in PR craftsmanship and dissatisfaction with organizational systems, while *neutral sentiment* may point to either emotional disengagement or the profession's predisposition to frame discourse in a nonconfrontational way. Importantly, practitioners generally indicated stronger engagement with success and collegiality dimensions, while academics were more attuned to ethical tensions and systemic disillusionments.

Across all sentiment categories, the alignment of personal values with professional work seems to emerge as the most critical dimension influencing emotional well-being among the PR panelists. This finding underscores the centrality of ethical autonomy and purpose in the construction of a meaningful PR career. However, it also raises a deeper

paradox: if well-being is increasingly shaped by alignment between personal and organizational values, professionals may gravitate toward roles where their ethical outlooks are reinforced rather than challenged. Therefore, while practitioners may find fulfillment by operating within ideologically aligned environments, they also risk deepening silos within the profession, undermining PR's role as a connector across differing social interests and weakening the inclusive and dialogic mandate of the profession. Overall, this paradox raises the question of whether and how PR can maintain its commitment to pluralism and public dialogue while supporting the wellbeing of practitioners.

5.3. *Meaning and purpose in PR-work related to conveyed sentiments (RQ3)*

The panelists found meaning in PR work through various avenues, including ethical practice, stakeholder engagement, and professional standards. Those who are able to uphold ethical standards and engage in meaningful stakeholder relationships report a greater sense of purpose and job satisfaction.

The ethical dimension is particularly challenging, as practitioners often navigate conflicts between their values and organizational demands. Participants also expressed that their work is often undervalued and misunderstood, with PR not being strategically involved with corporate decision making. This lack of recognition can diminish the sense of purpose and meaningfulness in their roles, and as noted by Kang (2010) prevent them from being involved in discussions about organizational behavior when they could have ethical influence.

5.3.1. *Interpersonal relationships and conflict*

Interpersonal dynamics within organizations significantly impact PR professionals' well-being. Conflicts often arise from the misalignment between PR strategies and management expectations, indicating a strain in managerial support for PR initiatives. This aligns with Bartels et al.'s (2019) findings on the importance of feeling supported and understood by colleagues for overall work satisfaction.

5.3.2. *Strategic impact and professional recognition*

Despite the strategic importance of PR, many participants felt their contributions were undervalued. This undervaluation undermines the meaningfulness of their work and can lead to decreased job satisfaction.

There is a clear need for greater recognition of PR's strategic role within organizations in order to enhance the overall well-being of practitioners. Indignation was expressed about the spillover effect of PR's legitimacy issues internally. Such internal scepticism is ironic when panelists spoke about their ethical frustrations concerning sustainability. This lack of understanding about PR's strategic role confirms the findings of Răceanu and Deliu-Pasol (2023) in Romania, taking the toll on well-being, of the under-recognition of PR, to a global level. The negative findings, however, vary from Fajardo's (2025) more positive industry study of comms practitioners in US-based companies. There may therefore be important cultural differences to further interrogate.

Ethical disquiet of practitioners often related to the privileging of profit over people and planet. Their observations resonate with critiques of executions of the Elkington's Triple Bottom Line, being too weighted on profit, that Elkington himself expresses (2018). They suggest that a lack of corporate commitment to sustainability may not only have a detrimental impact to broader society and the environment, but also to some PR employees' well-being and by extension, to some practitioners' motivation.

5.3.3. *Profession-practice alignment as a hidden dimension of well-being in public relations*

Our findings suggest that the workplace well-being of public relations professionals is shaped by the degree of alignment between professional identity and everyday practice. We propose *profession-practice alignment* as a critical and under examined dimension of well-

being. This concept captures the extent to which PR professionals are able to act autonomously in accordance with the normative aspirations often associated with the profession - such as dialogue, ethics, and public value - even though these ideals are variably interpreted and enacted across different cultural, organizational, and political contexts. This stands in contrast to the instrumental, performance-driven realities of daily work. It contributes to how PR practitioners feel, in an individual context, as they go about their work (hedonic) and how they experience relationships in the workplace and derive a sense of purpose, or not, from their careers (eudaimonic). It also contributes to how they feel and consider their work-based relationships, and the value of their work, in the context of their professional communities.

Participants frequently articulated negative sentiments, including frustration, disenchantment, and a sense of disempowerment. These were not merely reactions to workload or task demands, but deeper indicators of sentiment dissonance - a misalignment between what practitioners believe PR should stand for and what they are asked to do. This dissonance undermines long-term professional engagement, corrodes meaning-making, and may contribute to disengagement or burnout. These findings echo long-standing critiques of PR's ambiguous legitimacy (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006).

We argue that profession-practice misalignment is a core structural driver of negative sentiment in PR, and a threat to the sustainability of the profession itself. Restoring this alignment is essential not only for individual well-being but for rebuilding professional coherence and legitimacy. This profession-practice misalignment can also be interpreted through the lens of eudaimonic well-being theory, particularly the emphasis on autonomy as a foundational psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryff, 1989). Autonomy in this context is not simply about individual control, but about the freedom to act in accordance with deeply held values and a coherent professional identity. Many participants did not call for independence from institutional structures, but for the ability to pursue work that reflects the ethical, communicative, and public-serving ideals of their field. Their expressions of ethical autonomy and purpose were not abstract ideals but practical indicators of workplace conditions that enabled or constrained their well-being. While participants did not always specify how such autonomy could be enacted, these findings suggest a need for workplace conditions that allow PR professionals to exercise judgment, voice concerns, and contribute to communication decisions in ways that align with their professional values.

5.3.4. *A critique of over-individualized approaches to sentiment and well-being in PR research*

Frameworks like De Neve and Ward's (2023) Workplace Subjective Well-being (WSWB) model offer useful insight into affective experience, meaning, and job satisfaction. We applied eudaimonic well-being measures that were both intrapersonal and interpersonal to our analysis.

Our findings emphasize not only the importance of interpersonal relationships but also how elements of intrapersonal well-being were shaped through organizational cultures, leadership practices, and the degree to which professional values could be enacted. Sentiment, in this sense, is not only internal - it is relational and systemic, emerging from the alignment (or misalignment) between the self-as-professional and the affordances of the work environment. Hence, the risk critical scholars have identified (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Fotaki, 2023), with locating responsibility for well-being too much within the individual - emphasizing resilience and coping, is relevant to the PR industry. This confirms the importance of recommendations for organizational responsibility for PR practitioners' well-being (e.g. Anton, 2024; Chmiel, 2024). We newly suggest the importance of a sense of connection with professional practice in the well-being of those working in the field of public relations. Part of a sense of purpose at work comes from a sense of communal, professional alignment.

5.3.5. A relational and metamodern approach: a holistic reframing of well-being

We suggest integrating communitarian perspectives related to ethical professional practice, within interpersonal measures of eudaimonic work-place well-being. The Zulu philosophy of *Ubuntu* - "I am because we are" - offers a powerful communitarian alternative to Western models grounded in individualism (Hofstede, 2011). Ubuntu positions well-being as a collective and co-constructed condition, rooted in mutual recognition, connection, and shared values. From this standpoint, professional well-being is not just an individual achievement but also a communal outcome related to occupational culture and in alignment with professional practice. It depends not only on individual endeavor but also the presence of meaningful relationships, ethical cultures, and spaces for reciprocal validation.

This approach aligns with a metamodern sensibility (Adi & Stoeckle, 2021; Nothhaft & Overton-de Klerk, 2025), which embraces "both/-neither" thinking over binary oppositions. A metamodern framing allows us to hold together the individual and collective, the affective and the structural, the ideal and the pragmatic. Profession–practice alignment, then, becomes a dynamic, ongoing negotiation between the practitioner's values, the organizational context, and the broader role of PR in society.

5.4. PR must apply its relational expertise to itself

Finally, our findings reveal a paradox at the heart of public relations: practitioners are trained to foster relationships on behalf of others - clients, brands, institutions - yet often lack the space, autonomy, or legitimacy to nurture these relationships, which can undermine their professional identity. The result of the lack of internal support is a gap not just in recognition or resources, but in sentiment alignment: a disconnection between what PR is expected to facilitate externally and what it experiences internally.

If public relations is to survive as a meaningful and ethical profession, it must redirect its relational expertise inward. This includes creating cultures of mutual support, fostering professional communities grounded in shared values, and resisting institutional pressures that erode ethical coherence.

6. Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. Our analysis is based on unprompted reflections embedded within broader discussions of PR's value, purpose, and impact because the Delphi questions did not focus on well-being. While this offers insights, key aspects of workplace well-being, especially those that are personal or emotionally sensitive, may have gone unexpressed. The analysis is interpretive and employs a pre-defined coding framework grounded in theory. Nevertheless, only intrapersonal and interpersonal measures of eudaimonic well-being are included, and coding decisions necessarily involve subjective judgement.

There were inherited limitations with the sampling strategy. The Delphi research design inclusively recruited practitioners, educators and academics to secure different perspectives on the profession. Demographic variables such as gender, age, and years of experience in PR were not analyzed, as these were not consistently available within the broader Delphi dataset. Additionally, no comparisons were made between in-house and consultancy roles, or across institutions of different sizes, or between in-country and international management structures, as such distinctions were not captured in the study design. This limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader global PR workforce.

Cultural dimensions were not analyzed systematically, due to the complexity of individual cultural identity and differences in the national weightings of the dataset. While cultural and linguistic variation likely shaped how sentiment and workplace dynamics were expressed, this was beyond the scope of the current analysis. Nonetheless, the

universality of key psychological needs, such as autonomy, relatedness, and competence, is well established (Martela & Sheldon, 2019), and well-being was approached here as a psychological construct.

These limitations suggest the need for future research employing more inclusive sampling, demographic segmentation, and well-being-focused instruments.

7. Conclusion

The global study contributes to a reframing of well-being in PR, rooted in profession-practice alignment, ethical resilience, and the social dynamics of work, highlighting the need for the profession to apply its own relational expertise inward, to support the emotional and ethical conditions of its practitioners. The study newly suggests the importance of a sense of professional identity in workplace well-being.

This study reveals significant challenges in workplace well-being for PR specialists in 24 countries across 6 continents. Ethical concerns and the undervaluation of PR's strategic role by senior management notably diminish job satisfaction. The research suggests prevalent negative sentiments, stemming from ethical conflicts and insufficient recognition. Additionally, PR practitioners often struggle to find meaning and purpose in their work due to conflicts with management and ethical dilemmas. Addressing these issues requires a better public understanding of PR's strategic importance, improved managerial support, and stronger adherence to ethical standards in the industry, related to sustainability issues and diverse stakeholder relations, in an era of permacrisis.

8. Recommendations for further research and practice

8.1. Recommendations for research

This study provides exploratory insights into how workplace well-being manifests in PR specialists' unprompted reflections. Future research should more directly investigate PR practitioners' self-reported well-being using established frameworks like that of De Neve and Ward (2023). Global studies with structured sampling frames should support comparative geo-demographic analysis and segmentation across variables such as in-house versus consultancy roles, gender, age, ethnic identity, and seniority. Longitudinal or intervention-based research could further assess how organizational practices and ties with professional associations influence well-being outcomes over time. Furthermore the impact of professional identity and occupational culture on well-being warrants further research. Finally, future scholarship should explore the efficacy of training interventions aimed at strengthening ethical autonomy and professional purpose. There is also a need for frameworks that enable professionals to engage constructively across ethical and ideological boundaries, cultivating both personal integrity and democratic responsibility. Future research should explore how value alignment can coexist with critical reflexivity and inclusive communication practice.

8.2. Recommendations for practice

Enhancing workplace well-being in public relations requires action at both the organizational and industry levels. Organizations should begin by addressing key intrapersonal and interpersonal drivers of sentiment identified in this study. Promoting a sense of personal success and perceived importance of PR work can significantly increase positive sentiment. Conversely, reducing disconnection from management, through transparent communication, inclusive leadership, and formal feedback systems, can mitigate negative emotional outcomes. At the interpersonal level, strengthening peer and managerial relationships is critical. Structured mentorship, team-building, and leadership development initiatives may help build a sense of connection and professional identity. From an intrapersonal perspective, practitioners should be supported in aligning their work with their core values.

At the industry level, professional associations have a critical role to play. They need to enhance recognition of PR’s strategic and relational value among business leaders. The findings reaffirm the need for PR to be included in business education, particularly MBA programs, as championed by professional institutions such as the CIPR (UK), PRSA (USA), Global Alliance, ICCO and IABC (global). Embedding PR’s ethical and communicative competencies within broader leadership curricula will help elevate its relevance and strengthen profession-practice alignment. They should optimize membership enrollment and engagement, to help foster a communitarian sense of belonging, share values and encourage best practice. This includes revisiting how professional

training and qualifications are designed: curricula should incorporate reflective exercises to help PR professionals articulate their ethical positions within a professional context, assess alignment with their roles, and conduct stakeholder advocacy.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix 1

Table 1
Interpersonal and intrapersonal positive and negative sub-codes

Sub-code +	Sub-code -
Interpersonal 1a: a sense of connection with management/Institution	Interpersonal 1b: a sense of disconnection with management/institution
Interpersonal 2a: a sense of connection with colleagues in other departments/ some clients	Interpersonal 2b: a sense of disconnection with colleagues in other departments/some clients
Interpersonal 3a: Sense of collegiality with colleagues in immediate PR/comms team	Interpersonal 3b: Lack of collegiality in immediate team
Interpersonal 4a: Sense of positive shared identity with PR practitioners in the country’s PR industry	Interpersonal 4b: Sense of disconnection with some PR practitioners in the country’s PR industry
Intrapersonal 5a: Aligning personal values to work	Intrapersonal 5b: Not aligning personal values to work
Intrapersonal 6a: Feeling energized by work	Intrapersonal 6b: Not feeling energized by work
Intrapersonal 7a: Sense of PR work being important to interviewee	Intrapersonal 7b: No or little sense of PR work being important to the interviewee
Intrapersonal 8a: Sense of the interviewee’s growth through self-development	Intrapersonal 8b: No or little sense of the interviewee’s sense of growth through self-development
Intrapersonal 9a: Sense of professional ethical autonomy. Ability to align of sense of professional purpose/ethics to work	Intrapersonal 9b: No or little sense of ethical professional autonomy. Lack of being able to align of sense of professional purpose/ethics to work
Intrapersonal 10a: Sense of success at work	Intrapersonal10b: Lack of sense of success at work

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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