

# Quo Vadis Communication? Results of a survey among the Next Generation of PR and Communication professionals

## Quo Vadis Comunicación? Resultados de una investigación entre la próxima generación de profesionales de las Relaciones Públicas y la Comunicación

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### Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions of young PR/Comms professionals in Germany regarding the profession's current and future state, amidst the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the job market. The research builds on previous studies exploring the future of work and the PR industry, aiming to address gaps in literature regarding generational differences in attitudes and a critical reflective approach. The study used a standardized survey and purposeful and snowball sampling methods to select 160 PR practitioners under the age of 36. The results reveal that the next generation of PR/Communications professionals values intrinsic and idealistic factors when choosing an employer, but those without children pursue a more hedonistic agenda. Respondents perceive themselves as dealing with the ramifications of a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world and consider trust as the most significant challenge within the next five years. The study highlights a significant gap between the societal and internal dimensions of PR/Communications and its actual implementation. The implications of the study suggest a need to address contentious questions surrounding the role and mission of PR/Comms in society, focusing on social impact and social value, and advocating for more collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches in training and learning practices.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, future of PR, NextGen PR, professionals, future generation

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## Resumen

Este estudio investiga las percepciones de los jóvenes profesionales de Relaciones Públicas (PR) y Comunicación en Alemania con respecto al estado actual y futuro de la profesión, en medio del impacto significativo que ha tenido la pandemia COVID-19 en el mercado laboral. La investigación parte de estudios anteriores que exploran el futuro del trabajo y la industria de las relaciones públicas, con el objetivo de abordar las lagunas que existen en la literatura en cuanto a las diferencias generacionales en actitudes, con un enfoque crítico y reflexivo. El estudio utilizó una encuesta estandarizada con métodos de muestreo intencionales y de bola de nieve para seleccionar a 160 profesionales de relaciones públicas menores de 36 años. Los resultados revelan que la próxima generación de profesionales de PR/Comunicación valora factores intrínsecos e idealistas al elegir una empresa, y los que no tienen hijos persiguen una agenda más hedonista. Los encuestados se perciben a sí mismos lidiando con las ramificaciones de un mundo VUCA (V: Volatilidad (Volatility) U: Incertidumbre (Uncertainty) C: Complejidad (Complexity) A: Ambigüedad (Ambiguity)) y consideran la confianza como el desafío más significativo dentro de los próximos cinco años. El estudio destaca una brecha significativa entre las dimensiones sociales e internas de las RRPP/Comunicación y su implementación real. Las implicaciones del estudio sugieren la necesidad de abordar preguntas controvertidas sobre el papel y la misión de las RRPP/Comunicación en la sociedad, enfocándose en el impacto social y el valor social, y abogando por enfoques más colaborativos e interdisciplinarios en prácticas de capacitación y aprendizaje.

**Palabras clave:** relaciones públicas, futuro de las relaciones públicas, NextGen PR, profesionales, generación futura

## Summary

1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical framework. 3. Methodology. 4. Results. 5. Discussion 6. conclusions. 7. References.

## Sumario

1. Introducción. 2. Marco teórico. 3. Metodología. 4. Resultados. 5. Discusión. 6. Conclusiones. 7. Referencias.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

PR's 100-year anniversary<sup>4</sup> passed quietly, amid the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and potentially overwhelmed by both the visibility and impact of their work (Adi & Stoeckle, 2023). PR's first century has brought variety of paradigms (modern – see Cutlip & Center, 1978; Grunig & Grunig, 2008, postmodern – Holtzhausen, 2013; Beneke & Verwey, 2020, meta-modern – Meyer, 2021), theories (excellence – Grunig & Grunig, 2008, contingency – Cancel et al., 1997, queering – Ciszek, 2018) and themes present (ethics, measurement and evaluation, social impact, role and perceptions of the profession), as well as in the increase of publications dedicated to the profession – whether national, regional, at times bi- or tri-lingual, international and interdisciplinary. This confirms that PR not only

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<sup>4</sup> If one counts Eddie Bernays' (1891-1995) writing and teachings of PR (cca 1920) as the official birth of the profession.

“needs constant revisiting, revising and reconsideration” (Cernicova-Buca, 2016, p. 6) but does so, with consideration to the past, present, and future.

The profession too, grew tremendously and is expected to continue doing so, the size of PR market being projected to reach an estimated 133 billion US Dollars by 2027 more than 6% compared to its current revenues (Statista, 2023). The last estimates of the number of people working in PR are from 2006 (see Institute for Public Relations, 2009 citing Muzi Falconi, 2006).

Such expected growth in the current context, shaken by crises of many kinds that are increasingly complex and wicked, is due to pose new challenges to communication practitioners. An online survey carried out by the CIPR (2022) among UK based professionals in 2021 during the height of Coronavirus restrictions found an overwhelming number of respondents (85% out of 1,029) to suggest that the pandemic has “increased the value and reputation of public relations”. German practitioners seem to agree as they observe an increasing importance of PR/Comms within their organisations: Comparing a set of indicators used to measure the internal value of the communication function over 14 years Seidenglanz & Fechner (2021, p. 127) conclude that the crisis caused by the global pandemic has strengthened PR/Comms claim for leadership.

Additionally, developments in technology, work and society will also play a role in shaping the demands and expectations of and towards individual practitioners and the profession itself. As a result, research and practice have focused more recently on the future of PR/Comms as well as on the potential differences in expectations, perceptions and projections formulated by different age groups. Considering the long way the profession has come, the present study – embedded in the German market – pursues similar goals.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. The Future of PR (as research topic)**

The concern for the future and development of PR/Comms has emerged in the 1990s with renewed and more intense interest emerging in the mid-2000s. It might have been initially linked with efforts to establish PR as an independent profession (and not an occupation, see Bentele, 1994) or as a natural development to the descriptive research documenting the rise of PR degrees (see Grunig, 1989, cited in Neff, 1990). This has led on the one hand to the review to educational offers (especially in the US), and on the other hand to reflections and assessments of emerging trends. This latter focus aimed to provide suggestions and solutions for how to address emerging trends, business demands and university degree offerings, all aiming to secure the longevity and success of PR/Comms.

Following her literature review and analysis of 580 departments listing PR courses, Neff (1990, p. 11) suggested that “future program development in public relations curriculum will be most likely led by the communication departments [...] the concept of a ‘management’ orientation as being the ‘ideal’ focus for the public relations professional” not being satisfactorily established in the literature of the time. Later studies reviewing the perceived relevance of PR education and its content consistently pointed out to the need to focus more on research, ethics, reflecting more on their increasingly strategic role and the continuous globalization of the profession (Fawkes & Tench, 2004; DiStaso et al., 2009; Wehmeier, 2009).

What research also pointed out at the time, were contradictory views, especially among practitioners regarding PR education and its role in shaping the profession: “For example on the one hand employers perceive public relations education as over theoretical and lacking practical application; on the other, it is blamed for failing to instill the analytical flexibility found in non-PR graduates” (Fawkes & Tench, 2004, p. 22).

This has thus resulted in industry led initiatives aiming to establish benchmarks for the practice. It is in this context that Global Alliance commissioned the Global Body of Knowledge Project, aiming to identify the knowledge, skills and abilities of PR practitioners depending on their role and career level. An international project in its nature, what the GBOK also implied is that professionalization of PR remained a concern.

From here, two different areas have emerged – both future related. One aims to ensure the professional status of PR is attained and maintained (Piecicka & L’Etang, 2006; Gregory & Wolf, 2018; Zerfaß et al., 2008; Bentele et al., 2005). The first includes capturing the reflections of practitioners themselves about their own field and practice (Adi, 2019a; Doan & Bilowol, 2014; Knight & Sweetser, 2021) while the second investigates the context in which PR exists and the trends (societal, technological, and otherwise) influencing its application (see Edelman Trust Barometer, The Approaching the Future Report, the Relevance Report, Global Communication Report, or PR2025).

Here too, some common areas of concern emerge: VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), super-wicked problems, trust in the profession and in organizations, polarization of society, and technological developments, more particularly digitalization, social media, and artificial intelligence. Each of these topics is then reconsidered within the context of communications practice.

In 2023, the Edelman Barometer’s main finding is that distrust breeds polarization. USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2022) Report shares similar findings: 77% of the respondents agreed with the statement “Polarization is bad for the country which is bad for our company” with 61% of the respondents attributing polarization to partisan media outlets.

Communicators predict that organizations will increase their public engagement in dialogue around one or more social issues with 83% of them agreeing or somewhat agreeing that business has a powerful platform it can use to speak from on important issues. Thus, the report suggests that “professional communicators are the pioneers in this unfamiliar territory: 93% are spending more time navigating a growing list of complex societal topics” (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, p. 3). Based on examples like Procter & Gamble’s #likeagirl campaign in 2014 (Adi, 2019b), Patagonia’s documentary DamNation (Moscato, 2016), and PayPal’s and Deutsche Bank’s decisions to cancel plans involving business operations in Charlotte, North Carolina, after the state passed an anti-LGBTQ law known as House Bill 2 in 2017 (Dodd, 2016), one can expect businesses to become more vocal and visible (and thus their communication departs too) in social issues.

Both reports agree on the future directions of concern and potential focus for communicators and maintain the same points made by research into PR education two-three decades earlier (Fawkes & Tench, 2004; DiStaso et al., 2009; Wehmeier, 2009): trust, ethics, research,

measurement and evaluation, all on an increasing background of volatility and complexity and a higher expectation of responsible involvement from businesses.

Adi's (2019b) PR2025 study took the questions about the future of PR/Comms further, inviting participants to reflect on how they perceived their role as communicators and then to identify the trends (general, business, societal and technological) that they considered influential for the profession. In doing so, participants were then invited to focus on the solutions, in this case competences, attributes, responsibilities and frameworks to ensure appropriate preparation and response. In identifying that technological and digital changes are of concern for the near future (the next 5 to 7 years, hence the title of the report), PR/Comms practitioners agreed that it is digital literacies and associated ethics that are of more value as learning focus in the future rather than specific platforms. Equally, guaranteeing both time and budgets for learning is what it was suggested it was needed the most to ensure success.

## **2.2. Demographics and generational divides**

The multiple crises of our time (climate, health, technological and geo-political) are likely to create shared experience that could be defining for the current adolescents. The same was true for the old generation adolescents as "baby boomers" were shaped by the post-WWII prosperity, Generation Y (born from the 1980 to mid/late 90s, also referred to as Millennials) by the invention of the internet and Generation Z (born in the mid/late 90s to 2010) by the ubiquity of the digital world. As a result of the same historical, political, technological, cultural and social conditions under which they grew up age cohorts developed similar characteristics (attitudes, lifestyles, media usage habits, etc.) in which they differ from other age cohorts. That exactly is the main idea behind the social generation concept (Pottharst, 2022). Empirically speaking the generation is a non-disputed variable identified and coded based on self-reported age groups and/or year of birth (Curtin et al., 2011; Willis, 2020).

The distinctions between digital natives and digital immigrants, those who grew up with internet and digital technology and those who did not, respectively, have been widely recognized (Prensky, 2001). Several studies (including Randstad, 2021; Schnetzler, 2019; OC&C Strategy Consultants, 2018) have suggested that there are similarities between different generations within the digital natives group. Nonetheless, Generation Z differs considerably from its predecessor, Generation X, more than it does from Generation Y. Members of Generation X tend to be more individualistic, sophisticated, and hedonistic than previous groups, and they seek engagement in tasks they find meaningful, interesting, and varied (Klein, 2016). These characteristics have implications for their perceptions of their profession and its organizational and societal role, as well as for their work expectations and desire for recognition. Consequently, Generation X represents a high-maintenance workforce requiring a leadership style that Klein (2016) has characterized as "helicopter management."

While some researchers view these generational categorizations with skepticism (Jandura & Karnowski, 2015) and others even reject the concept (Schröder, 2018), in PR research they are rarely questioned or critically considered. In fact, even when focusing on generational research and differences, the focus stems either from generational bashing and interactional frustrations with one particular group: the millennials (Rosembloom, 2008 cited in Willis, 2020).

The present study aims to address the frustrations in the field of PR by critically examining a specific age-defined group: the likely next generation of PR leaders. Specifically, this study focuses on German-speaking PR and communications practitioners aged up to 35, who will potentially assume leadership roles and shape the profession in the upcoming years, hence the focus on the near future (as in the next 5 years) but also on future as in desirable and ideal. To investigate their professional attitudes, behavior, and opinions, the research question reads as follows: How do young PR/Comms professionals in Germany view their profession today and in the future?

### **2.3. Research framework**

The study draws upon occupational area research, such as the latest editions of Seidenglanz and Fechner (2021) and Zerfass et al. (2022), as well as the tradition established by PR2025 (Adi, 2019b). The study explores four aspects of how the next generation of PR/Comms professionals act, think about, and reflect on their profession.

The study presented here aims to explore and build upon the concerns surrounding the PR profession by critically approaching a specific age-defined group within the industry: the likely next leadership generation. The population under investigation consists of all German-speaking PR/Comms practitioners aged up to 35.

To explore their professional attitudes, behavior, and opinions, the study draws upon occupational area research and the tradition established by the PR2025 study. In doing so, it formulates 4 research theses guiding the analysis, aimed to facilitate the understanding of the views and expectations of young, German-speaking professionals:

- Research thesis #1 (RT1): Practitioners aged 35 and younger will consider VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) and its post-pandemic version, BANI (brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible), as shaping their work and the future profession. Both VUCA and its post-pandemic version BANI were identified in previous studies as shaping and influencing the profession (Adi & Stoeckle, 2021; de Godoy & Ribas Filho, 2021; Grabmeier, 2020; Mack et al., 2016).
- Research thesis #2 (RT2): Building and maintaining trust will be considered a major challenge by young PR/Comms professionals, who recognize the influence of VUCA and BANI on their work.
- Research thesis #3 (RT3): Young professionals perceive their current occupational practices to be lacking in social focus and they envision for the future a higher focus for such issues. This thesis links and explores (Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006) argument about PR/Comms still not meeting all the requirements a professional status.
- Research thesis #4 (RT4): Young PR/Comms experts will consider flexibility and a balance between work and private life as the most important factors when choosing an employer. Further details about their respective family status will be inquired to check the appropriateness of generational generalizations.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The current study was part of a much wider research project study. A standardized questionnaire was used to explore the research questions and looking more closely at the

appropriateness of research theses (RT1 to RT4). A list-based online survey was thus implemented. Data collection took place between the 17th of May and the 10th of July 2022 and produced 160 completed answers.

The sampling for this research was purposive. The databases used to recruit the participants were provided by the German PR/Comms Association (BdKom members), Quadriga University of Applied Sciences (alumni) and Quadriga Media (self-researched contact information for PR/Comms practitioners in the DACH region). All invited participants indicated previously that they would be interested and willing to support any research carried out by either organization.

Having cleared the ethics disclaimers and demographic questions (workplace, years of experience, age, gender, family situation and living conditions) all participants indicating that they were 35 years of age and younger proceeded with questions about their employment expectations, challenges facing PR/Comms, the purpose and role of the profession (present and future).

111 of 160 respondents identified as female (74%), 37 (25%) as male, and one as diverse (1%).<sup>5</sup> Most of them – exactly two thirds (67%) – work for companies. With an average age of 31 years at least two of three live in a relationship (69%), but only a few already raise children (16%). Overall, there is no indication that the characteristics of the sample vary considerably from the population – that is young PR/Comms professionals aged no more than 35 years.

Due to the nature of the sample, which is outlined above, no claim of representativeness (at least in a statistical sense) can be made. Consequently, the means of inferential statistics cannot be applied. Instead, the benefit of this study lies in its focus on a younger demographic, which is likely to take over leadership roles in the profession in the upcoming years, and critique the variables so far taken for granted in previous studies including their assessment of desirable and ideal practices. Like with the PR2025 study, the projection of upcoming trends and portrayal of the ideal future is seen as a proxy to desirable behavior. The use of descriptive statistics to evaluate the data is thus the most appropriate in this case.

## **4. RESULTS**

### **4.1 RT1: VUCA/BANI**

All participants of the study have been confronted with eight descriptive statements operationalizing if and to which extent phenomena associated with VUCA and BANI are visible specifically within their own PR/Comms practice (see Table 1). The task given was to indicate their level of agreement, considering the current status quo on the one hand and the future situation on the other.

The mean scores for agreement (3.7 out of 5.0) are higher for the VUCA dimensions. This means that despite the impact the pandemic and global health crisis (e.g. an acceleration of digitalization processes in all parts of society) BANI items (3.2 out of 5.0) have received less agreement. Stakeholder relationships are still considered stable and not brittle (mean: 2.5), causes and interdependencies in public communication are generally comprehended (3.1) and

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<sup>5</sup> Participants were not forced to disclose their gender.

the impact of communication measures can still be predicted albeit a few uncertainties (3.4). Only a considerable degree of anxiousness among stakeholders – operationalized by the BANI-item the complexity of public communication has made stakeholders increasingly uneasy – is identified as a more serious issue (3.7).

Participants consider the accelerating change of public communication (4.4) – that means volatility of societal developments – as most pertinent trend and thus potential threat. Other development typically associated with VUCA – that is more complexity (3.7), uncertainty (3.5) and ambiguity (3.4) – are also considered relevant. Moreover, nearly identical mean values for uncertainty, ambiguity, and anxious could be related to the increasing complexity of PR/Comms work.

Table 1. Agreement to VUCA/BANI statements. Questions: How do you perceive your work in the communication sector with regard to the following phenomena? Do you think those trends will continue in the next 5 years? Agreement measured on a scale from (1) for “do not agree at all” to (5) “totally agree”.

\*M ... mean / \*\*SD ... standard deviation/ \*\*\* MΔ ... mean difference (continuing trend – status quo)

Dimension	Item	status quo			continuing trend			MΔ ***
		n	M*	SD**	n	M*	SD**	
Volatility	Public communication has changed with increasing speed.	139	4,4	0,8	140	4,5	0,8	+0,1
Uncertainty	Developments outside the organization have become increasingly difficult to predict.	139	3,5	1,0	140	3,8	1,1	+0,3
Complexity	As their diversity has grown, so has the number of organizations' stakeholders.	140	3,7	1,1	139	4,0	0,9	+0,4
Ambiguity	It has become increasingly difficult to influence public communication about specific issues.	140	3,4	1,1	140	3,8	1,2	+0,4
Brittle	Organizations' relationships with their respective stakeholders have become increasingly unstable.	133	2,5	0,9	132	2,8	1,0	+0,2
Anxious	The complexity of public communication has made stakeholders increasingly uneasy.	133	3,7	1,1	133	3,9	1,1	+0,2
Non-linear	The impact of communication measures has become increasingly difficult to predict.	134	3,4	1,1	134	3,5	1,2	+0,1
Incomprehensible	Causes and interdependencies in public communication are becoming increasingly difficult to comprehend.	134	3,1	1,1	134	3,2	1,2	+0,2

Source: own elaboration.

Finally, mean differences between the status quo and the expected situation after five years are not major. All items record a higher agreement for the forward-looking statements indicating that participants expect all aspects of VUCA and BANI to be exacerbated in the future. Both the average VUCA (from 3.7 to 4.0) and BANI scores (3.2 to 3.3) confirm VUCA/BANI as current and future phenomena and thus relevant for the PR/Comms profession. However, the next generation of practitioners does not predict a change from VUCA to BANI as the average VUCA mean score (4.0) remains well above its BANI counterpart (3.3).

## 4.2. Specific challenges

Participants were asked to rank the most crucial challenges in the PR/Comms field. The results showed that most practitioners (31%) considered establishing and maintaining trust as the top challenge, with an average rank of 2.8 (see Table 2 for details). This was followed by communicating the environmental responsibility of organizations in social, economic, and environmental contexts (average rank: 3.4) and creating transparency with regard to organizational actions and explaining the respective contexts (average rank: 3.6). The challenge related to fast and flexible adaptation of stakeholder communication to constantly changing circumstances ranked fourth (average rank: 3.6).

Table 2. *Relevance of challenges within the field of PR/Comms* Question: What do you regard as the biggest challenges for communications managers like yourself in the next 5 years? Items had to be put in a rank order.

Item	n	rank					total	aver. rank
		1st	2nd	3rd	other			
Establishing and maintaining trust	121	31%	25%	13%	31%	100%	2.8	
Communicating the environmental responsibility of organizations in social, economic and environmental contexts	116	22%	16%	18%	45%	100%	3.4	
Creating transparency with regard to organizational actions and explaining the respective contexts	117	14%	21%	21%	44%	100%	3.6	
Fast and flexible adaptation of stakeholder communication to constantly changing circumstances	120	24%	13%	15%	48%	100%	3.6	
Communication in the context of organizational responsibility for equality, diversity and inclusion	105	8%	14%	19%	59%	100%	4.4	
Truthfulness of organizational communication (messages and content), refraining from unfair practices	103	9%	9%	12%	71%	100%	4.8	
Ensuring empathetic and considerate stakeholder communication	101	6%	6%	12%	76%	100%	5.4	
Communicative justification of organizational actions (e.g. compliance with the law or rules)	102	2%	13%	8%	77%	100%	5.5	

Source: own elaboration.

## 4.3 RT3: Objective and purpose of PR/Comms

Participants were asked to assess the current status quo and their - possibly idealistic - expectations for the objectives and purpose of PR/Comms (RT3, see Table 3). The results revealed that building public trust was seen as the second most sought-after task of the profession, with a mean score of 4.4 out of 5.0. The predominant objective identified was providing public information, which scored slightly higher (mean: 4.5).

Notably, young practitioners believed that the PR/Comms industry is currently doing too little to bring society together, as reflected in their desire to promote social cohesion. The mean values for public information (4.6), building public trust (4.5), establishing transparency (4.4), and promoting social cohesion (3.5) increased between 0.2 and 0.9 when considering the ideal state in the future. These findings indicate that young German practitioners view PR/Comms as having a crucial role in creating a more cohesive society.

While the relevance of organizational objectives might decrease in the future, they still hold value: building organizational reputation and trust scores 4.5 on first question (status quo), but only 4.3 on second (desired state in the future). Same goes for avoiding negative organizational publicity (4.0 vs. 3.8) and persuasion in the organizational interest (4.0 vs. 3.9).

Other items such as balancing the organisation's and external stakeholder's interest (3.8) and creating dialogue opportunities for external stakeholders (3.9) on the other hand gain significance for the next Generation.

Table 3. Purpose of PR/Comm Questions: Based to your professional experience what are currently the predominant objectives of public relations? In your personal opinion what should be the predominant objectives of public relations? Assessments measured on a scale from (1) for “not at all” to (5) “primarily”.

\*M: mean / \*\*SD: standard deviation / \*\*\* MΔ: mean difference (ideal state – current state)

Dimension	Item	current state			ideal state			AM
		n	M*	SD*	n	AM*	SD*	Δ ***
organizational external	Building organizational reputation and trust	160	4,5	0,7	156	4,3	0,8	-0,2
societal in general	Public information	160	4,4	0,7	160	4,6	0,5	+0,2
societal in general	Building public trust	160	4,2	0,8	159	4,5	0,6	+0,3
organizational external	Avoiding negative organizational publicity	160	4,0	0,9	155	3,8	1,0	-0,3
organizational external	Persuasion in the organizational interest	159	4,0	0,9	154	3,9	0,9	-0,1
organizational internal	Information of internal target audiences	160	3,6	1,2	155	4,1	1,1	+0,5
societal in general	Establishing transparency with regard to organisational decisions and actions	159	3,6	1,0	159	4,4	0,8	+0,8
societal integration	balancing the organisation's and external stakeholder's interest	159	3,5	1,0	156	3,8	1,0	+0,3
societal integration	Creating dialogue opportunities for external stakeholders	160	3,3	1,0	156	3,9	0,9	+0,6
organizational internal	Motivation of internal target audiences	160	3,2	1,1	154	4,0	1,1	+0,8
societal in general	Promoting social cohesion	159	2,6	1,0	160	3,5	0,9	+0,9

Source: own elaboration.

#### 4.4. RT4: Decisive factors choosing an employer

To understand the factors influencing the choice of an employer, participants were asked about the criteria that were decisive for their current employer. The results indicated that intrinsic values (see Ryan & Deci, 2000) were prioritized, with a high importance placed on a pleasant work atmosphere and assuming responsibility and decision-making freedom (both with a mean score of 4.3 out of 5.0). The compatibility of the organization's purpose with personal values was also deemed important (mean: 3.7). However, there was a conflict

between the desire for intrinsic values and the extrinsic motivation of a well-paid job (mean: 3.7).

The next generation of PR professionals demonstrated both a progressive and a hedonistic approach when selecting an employer (see Table 4). They valued employer-provided training for skill development (3.6), flexible working hours (3.6), career opportunities (3.4), and sufficient free time (3.4). The compatibility of family and career was more important for practitioners with children (4.0) compared to those without children (3.0).

Table 4. *Relevance of criteria for choosing an employer.* Question: What criteria were decisive for you personally when choosing your current employer? Assessments measured on a scale from (1) for “not relevant at all” to (5) “crucially relevant”.

\*M ... mean \*\*SD ... standard deviation

Item	overall			w/o childre n	with childre n
	n	M*	SD**	M*	AM**
Pleasant work environment	132	4,3	1,0	4,4	3,9
Assumption of responsibility, freedom to make own decisions	132	4,3	0,9	4,3	3,9
Compatibility of the organization's purpose with own personal values	132	3,8	1,3	3,8	3,5
Income, amount of salary	133	3,7	1,1	3,7	3,6
Employer-organized or funded training to further develop existing or acquire new skills	132	3,6	1,1	3,7	3,2
Flexible working hours	133	3,6	1,2	3,7	2,9
Career opportunities	133	3,4	1,2	3,5	3,4
Sufficient free time (limited working hours)	133	3,4	1,2	3,4	2,9
Compatibility of family and career	131	3,1	1,1	3,0	4,0
Free choice of work location (office, home office, etc.)	132	2,8	1,4	3,0	2,2

Source: own elaboration.

In summary, young practitioners in PR/Comms prioritize intrinsic values and seek a pleasant work environment. They also value a balance between work and personal life. While organizational objectives still hold relevance, the next generation intends to bring a more societal focus to the profession.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The current study confirms that VUCA dimensions explored in studies like PR2025 (e.g. Adi, 2019b; Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2022; CIPR, 2022) remain of concern even for younger PR practitioners (see both RT1 and RT2). More specifically, the comparison with a study conducted four years earlier by Bentele, Seidenglanz & Fechner (2018) shows some interesting developments although it has to be noted that the latter sample represents PR/Comms professionals of all ages. Taking this potential bias into account all VUCA items are deemed more relevant today as they have been back then. This confirms the pertinence of the associated phenomena. Moreover, volatility became by far the most relevant aspect of the theory indicating a steady acceleration of communication. Finally, this highlights the need

for practitioners, their departments, and organizations to pay more attention to well-being to cope and address potentially higher stress levels.

A change in mindset is also noted among the sample of this study. While trust, and transparency are top-of-mind topics that younger practitioners share with their more senior colleagues (Zerfass et al., 2022), it is their focus on and concern with sustainability that sets them apart, which corresponds with the findings of various non-PR/Comms related studies investigating generations Y and particularly Z such as Beckers & et al. (2022) or FIRST INSIGHT (2020).

Clearly, progressive attitudes affect how young practitioners see the purpose and mission of the PR profession as well. Nevertheless, the intent is not to reinvent, but to change the focus of the profession in the direction of more societal contribution is obvious. In fact, the reported status quo for PR/Comms objectives very much aligns with a previous study which evaluated the whole profession regardless of age (see Bentele, Seidenglanz & Fechner 2015, p. 185ff.). Young German practitioners do not dismiss PR's organized persuasive work, but strongly believe that social cohesion and transparency should have more weight within the professions work, which justifies making stakeholders a priority. This also echoes both Bleile's (1999) projections of PR/Comms becoming "a tool at the public's disposal, with the best communicators working for the public to provide value and legitimacy" (p. 44) and Adi and Stoeckle's (2023) call for a more accountable and responsible PR practice.

The potential change young communicators might bring to the profession has to be viewed at in the context of another observation. Typically for Generations Y and especially Z the personal "pursuit of happiness" (Randstad 2022, p. 14) becomes a central issue when deciding for a job and choosing an employer. Although idealistic values certainly do matter the hedonistic attitude makes them look for a pleasant work occupation, where they can do their own thing, are getting paid well and still enjoy a beneficial balance between work and private life – a contradictory situation, which Plastino (2022) generally observes within that particular age group. Interestingly, life situations also seem to also play a role here, as priorities seem to change once PR practitioners become parents. Hence it is not impossible that other factors as well may result in a change of attitudes. Overall, although this study is able to identify a few clear-cut trends there is still a lot of riding on the future of PR/Comms.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

This study offers insights into the future developments and trends of the PR/Comms profession in Germany, as perceived by 160 young professionals who represent the potential next generation of PR/Comms leaders.

The findings show notable differences between the current state of the profession and its desired state, particularly in relation the purpose and organization of the profession. The participants have demonstrated an idealistic mindset, driven by the pursuit of personal fulfillment, work-life balance, and financial stability. However, family circumstances can potentially influence this approach.

The study also confirms the relevance of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) characteristics in the profession. While participants acknowledge that the field has

not fully entered the BANI (brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible) territory, characterized by complex and unpredictable public communication, they anticipate increased challenges in the future.

### **6.1. Limitations**

The nature of the sample and sampling method obviously limit the degree to which the presented results can be generalized. Statistical representativeness thus cannot be claimed, which is a limitation faced by much of the current PR/Comms-related surveys – research fatigue, increased workloads, and difficulty maintaining respondent databases that are GDPR compliant being contributing factors. Despite this, the study offers a unique opportunity for research on a specific subgroup within the PR/Comms profession. Moreover, the results do echo the findings from other studies indicating to a developing mood and a set of common concerns shared by young communicators.

Looking in the crystal ball is always problematic. This is especially true for surveys with forward looking questions. It is just not within the capacity of the human brain to predict future behavior precisely and reliably. Complicating the situation some of the questions (e.g. those asking for the current and ideal state and practice of the profession) trigger a social desirability bias. So, what is measured are intentions based on limited sample, which only allow conclusions for likely tendencies. Moreover, the hedonistic attitude which became apparent while exploring the deciding factors when choosing an employer cannot be underestimated and may lead to a more pragmatic and less progressive approach to PR/Comms among some practitioners. Nevertheless, since advocacy for more reflective, transparent, accountable PR/Comms practice is shared widely, the assumption that idealistic values among the next leadership generation PR/Comms will lead to a change of the profession within the foreseeable future seems realistic. But the degree of change probably will be less obvious as today's data suggest.

### **6.2. Further research**

Having reflected the limitations future research should continue to challenge and explore these generational aspects while also integrating other variables – first language, country of birth vs. country of residence, personal values preferences. Additionally, more regional, and national data, including more European data is still highly needed. Methodologically, it would make sense to explore the attitudes, behavior and opinions of the next PR/Comms generation more deeply using qualitative techniques such as single in-depth-interviews, focus groups or Delphi designs.

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