

Reading: A Solution for Stressed Managers?

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Abstract

Stress has become a natural consequence of modern lifestyle. Numerous studies indicate that stress levels among global populations are on the rise as people are more prone to getting overwhelmed by stress. Therefore, effective stress management techniques are becoming more crucial for modern societies. This study surveyed 150 respondents across different countries and regions who were divided into two groups: managers and non-managers. Results show that reading is among the top three preferred activities for relieving stress among the majority of respondents (i.e. 88% of managers and 90% of non-managers) as they believed reading was a wise investment of their time, regardless of which reading type they read.

Keywords: stress management techniques, reading, manager stress, coping with stress, reading for stress relief



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1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), stress is "a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation" (WHO, 2023). While stress affects everyone, effective stress management enhances one's well-being (World Health Organization). Unfortunately, people are sometimes overwhelmed by stressful conditions and challenges in work and daily life. Consequently, many people who deal with too much stress risk damaging their mental health. Professionals, in this regard, have to deal with a certain amount of stress due to their exposure to job requirements and expectations. This study investigates the prevalence of stress and stress management measures among managers.

Mintzberg (1989) suggested that managers are all-round talents capable of handling various purposes, ranging from becoming a leader to their team to taking responsibilities, settling disputes, negotiating, and monitoring their team's performance (Mintzberg, 1973), making it understandable if they may develop the feeling of being overwhelmed at work. In this regard, WHO outlines several common stress management initiatives that managers may consider, including maintaining daily routines, getting adequate sleep, eating healthy, exercising regularly, connecting, and communicating with families and friends (WHO, 2023). Intriguingly, reading can become an alternative stress-relieving activity for managers as it helps reduce anxiety, stabilizes heart rate, and keeps manageable blood pressure. Some studies also confirmed that reading can serve as a crucial stress management measure.

This study involved an analysis of 150 respondents who participated in a survey, including managers and non-managers working in companies worldwide, as they responded to questions regarding their potential stressors, preferred stress management activities, and reading habits.

The work is structured as follows: in chapter 2 the results of the literature research are presented, in chapter 3 the research methodology and the most important results of the evaluation of the own questionnaire study are viewed in more detail, and finally, chapter 5 shows a summary and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

The broad consensus among health researchers outlines that stress leads to various health problems. They discovered an association between stress and a higher risk of diseases like cardiovascular disease, hypertension, infectious disease, and diseases of aging. Unfortunately, no consensus on the definition of stress has been made across different disciplines. An economist or social epidemiologist is more likely to define stressors in social or economic contexts, such as poverty or neighborhood disadvantage. Meanwhile, psychologists perceive stress as a condition triggered by overwhelming environmental stimuli (Epel et al., 2018). These stimuli harbor unpredictability and uncontrollability despite having a quantity dimension. When addressing these stimuli, someone can either have complete control or complete loss of control. Moreover, these stimuli may have consequences as significant as threatening people's lives (Koolhaas et al., 2011). While perceptions of stress and depressive symptoms or anxiety are not the same thing, there is some overlap between these constructs. In this context, stress responses include feelings of being overwhelmed or anxious. However, not all responses are considered harmful. Several key factors that contribute to individuals'

ability to cope with stress are their experience, supportive environment, high qualifications, and convenience with the topic (Epel et al., 2018).

Statistical materials published from 2007 to 2018 indicated a sharp increase in the prevalence of depression, anxiety, nonsuicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts among U.S. college-aged individuals (Duffy et al., 2019). This increase makes the urgency for stress management techniques arise. As Figure 1 shows, younger adults feel more overwhelmed with stress compared to their older counterparts. While 62% of 18 to 34-year-old women and 51% of 18 to 34-year-old men said they are completely overwhelmed by stress on most days, the same condition only applied to 9% of above-65-year-old women and 8% of above-65-year-old men. Women and men aged between 35 and 44 also felt highly overwhelmed by stress (see Figure 1). 48% of 35 to 44-year-olds of both genders said they felt completely overwhelmed by stress on most days (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

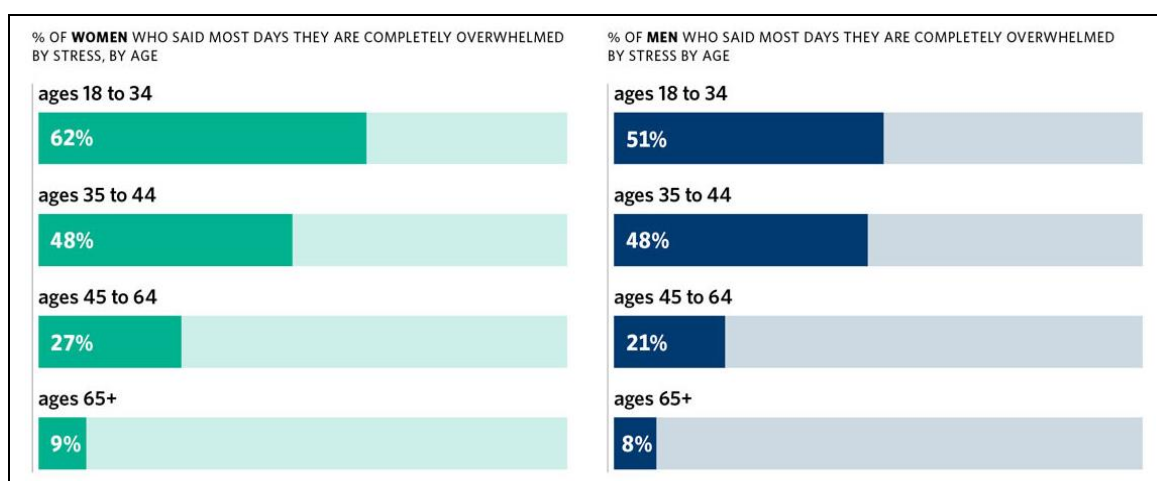


Figure 1. Younger adults feel completely overwhelmed by stress

Source: American Psychological Association (n.d.)

Furthermore, studies empirically found that one in 14 adults in the UK (United Kingdom) (7%) felt stressed every day while one in five people in the UK felt stressed every several days a month. The most overwhelming stressors among these samples included lack of sleep, money worries, work in general, and workload demands (Ciphr, n.d.).

Gallup's Positive and Negative Experience Indexes provide information about feelings and emotions and insights into the health of societies. Answers to five questions: "Did you experience the following feelings during a lot of the day yesterday?" and "How about physical pain?" are included in the Negative Experience Index. Although positive emotions rebounded in 2022 and the global rise of unhappiness stalled, negative emotions worldwide remained at an all-time high in 2022 compared to previous years with the score of 33 (see Figure 2). When asked about their negative experiences on the day before the survey, four in 10 adults said they experienced a significant worry (41%) or stress (40%), while nearly one in three respondents said they felt a significant physical pain (32%). More than one in four was undergoing sadness (27%), and 23% suffered from anger (Gallup, 2023).

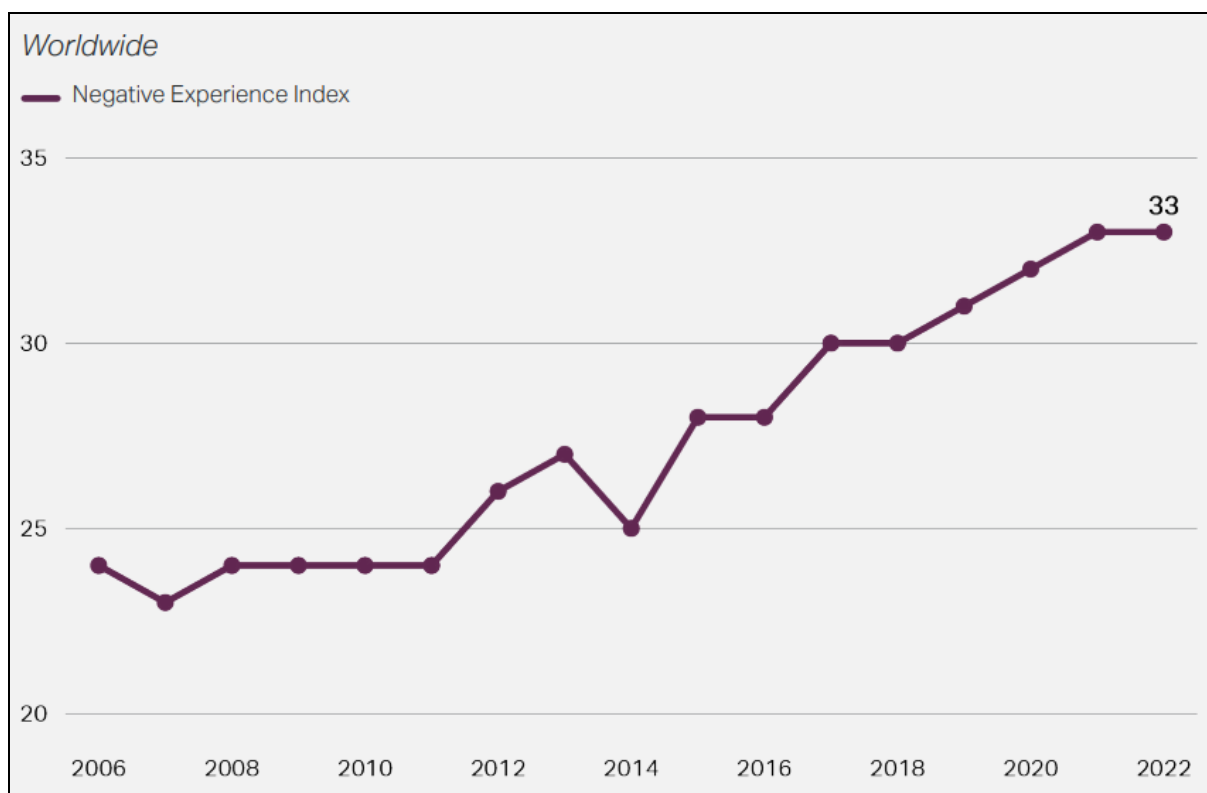


Figure 2. Negative Experience Index

Source: Gallup, 2023

A report published in October 2022 by the Future Forum showed that burnout resulting from excessive stress was a real problem. It reflected a 40% increase in burnout prevalence among managers globally. In the U.S., 43% of desk workers reported feeling burned out. Females were more affected than Males, expressed numerically by the fact that female workers were 32% more likely to feel burnout than their male counterparts. Intriguingly, younger workers were more likely to experience burnout (49% of 18-to-29-year-olds vs. 38% of workers aged 30 and older) (Future Forum, 2022).

Microsoft's Work Trend Index published in September 2022 found that stress can be too overwhelming for many, showing that more than half of managers (53%) and almost half of the employees (48%) felt burned out at work (Microsoft, 2022).

The alarming numbers regarding stress and burnout speak for themselves. It is urgently necessary to think about suitable stress management techniques. The following overview shows the results of research that examined reading as a stress management method.

The results in table 1 show some important insights from literature review.

Table 1: Important insights from literature

Author(s)	Jin (1992)	Rizzolo et al. (2009)
Findings	<p>Examined the effectiveness of different stress reduction techniques (tai chi, brisk walking, meditation, reading)</p> <p>Conducted a laboratory setting where mental challenges were generated (e.g. mental arithmetic, stressful film)</p> <p>Stress reduction techniques were applied to address these stressful situations.</p> <p>Study results showed that all techniques are equally effective for alleviating mood disorders caused by mental/emotional stressors.</p> <p>After a stressful task, reading significantly reduces anxiety, heart rate, and blood pressure.</p>	<p>Examined the effectiveness of yoga, humor, and reading (articles about historical events and innovative technology) on 22 students enrolled in graduate DPT and OT programs.</p> <p>All subjects took part in three interventions (each lasted for 30 minutes) over a period of three weeks.</p> <p>Stress was measured using the Daily Stress Inventory, systolic blood pressure (SBP), diastolic blood pressure (DSP), and heart rate (HR).</p> <p>Results showed that all three interventions had similar effects in decreasing acute stress among health science students.</p>
Author(s)	Levine et al. (2002)	University of Sussex (2009)
Findings	<p>Explored the relationship between recreational reading and psychological distress among college students.</p> <p>At the beginning and end of the academic year (a year-long study), online surveys on leisure reading, motivation, psychological stress and need frustration were completed by students from a large Canadian University</p> <p>To assess depressive symptoms, the 10-item Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale Revised was used (including questions like “I could not get going” and “I was bothered by things that usually don’t bother me”).</p> <p>Results showed that recreational reading was associated with reduced psychological distress over the school year.</p>	<p>Study of Mindlab International at the University of Sussex from 2009 concluded the following (Mansourati, 2019):</p> <p>That after only six minutes of reading a book, the subjects’ stress levels were reduced by 68%</p> <p>Listening to music reduced the stress levels by 61%</p> <p>Taking a walk reduced the stress levels by 42%</p>
Author(s)	Moyer (2007)	Vasquez (2005)
Findings	<p>Investigated recreational readers, or reading for pleasure, in the US</p> <p>Applied the mixed method approach</p>	<p>Explored college students’ ethnic identity taking part in weekly literature classes.</p> <p>Applied focus group research and</p>

	<p>which consisted of a survey (completed by 62 people) and 8 semi-structured interviews</p> <p>Indicated an association between reading for pleasure and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ability to understand people’s class, • ethnicity, • culture, • political perspectives. 	<p>observation of 18 students</p> <p>Showed that reading enhances the ability of understanding</p> <p>one’s and others’ ethnic backgrounds</p> <p>one’s and others’ cultural and world views.</p>
Author(s)	Bavishi et al. (2016)	Bal et al. (2013)
Findings	<p>Explored the reading patterns of 3.635 people aged 50 or older.</p> <p>Found that older adults who read books had a 20% lower risk of death over a 12-year period compared to those who did not</p> <p>Reading books provided a greater advantage than reading newspapers or magazines</p> <p>Those who read 30 minutes a day may live longer</p>	<p>Explored the relationship between reading fiction and becoming more empathic.</p> <p>Two experimental studies: 66 Dutch students reading a Sherlock Holmes story versus 97 undergraduate Dutch students reading a chapter from Blindness by Saramago.</p> <p>For the control condition, articles from a newspaper were used.</p> <p>Participants were directed to read either a few newspaper reports or a chapter from a fictional book filled out a digital questionnaire, including the empathy scale</p> <p>Self-reported empathic skills significantly changed during the observation period of one week for readers of a fictional story, whereby the level of empathy increased when readers were emotionally affected by the story.</p>

Source: own representation

3. Own Research: Methodology & Findings

A study on randomly selected respondents involved a search for potential study participants via LinkedIn to increase the likelihood of finding working managers and non-managers. It was essential to involve working people from various industries and countries in the study for diversity purposes. LinkedIn's search function supported the random selection of potential study participants by allowing the researcher to insert search queries, such as "people", "manager", "UK", and a combination of those. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, two of which were open-ended and the rest of which were single or multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire contained questions such as: “In general, how do you feel while working?”, and “How often do you read in a month?”.

The most important results of the own research are presented below.

Figure 3 shows that stress is omnipresent among the study participants. 66.7% of all participants (150 in total) felt stressed either sometimes (30.7%), often (28.7%), or all the time (7.3%) during the past month. 28.7% of respondents seldom felt stressed during the past month. Only 4.7% of respondents never felt stressed (as seen in Figure 3).

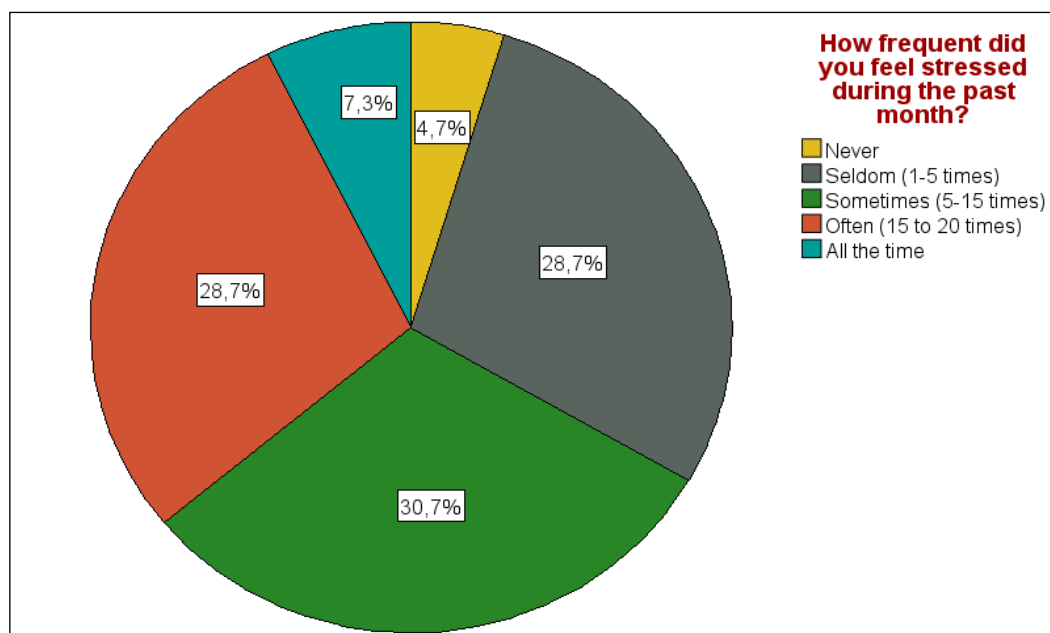


Figure 3: Stress is omnipresent

Source: own representation

Almost all age groups that participated in the study felt stressed in the past month, some more frequently than others (see figure 4). No respondent aged between 18 and 24 years old never felt stressed, with 54.6% of them admitting they felt stressed at least 15 times during the past month. As for respondents aged between 25 and 34 years old, only 2.1% never felt stressed and 78.8% of them felt stressed between 5 to 20 times during the past month. Respondents aged between 35 and 44 years old were more moderate in managing their stresses, with 67.5% saying they felt stressed between 1 and 15 times during the past month.

Participants aged between 45 and 54 years old showed the same trend, with 63.9% of them saying they felt stressed between 1 and 15 times during the same timeframe. More than half of those aged between 55 and 64 years old said they rarely felt stressed during the last month, and 80% of those aged between 65 and 74 years old rarely or never felt stressed (see figure 4). These findings suggested that as people get older, they are more capable of managing stress effectively.

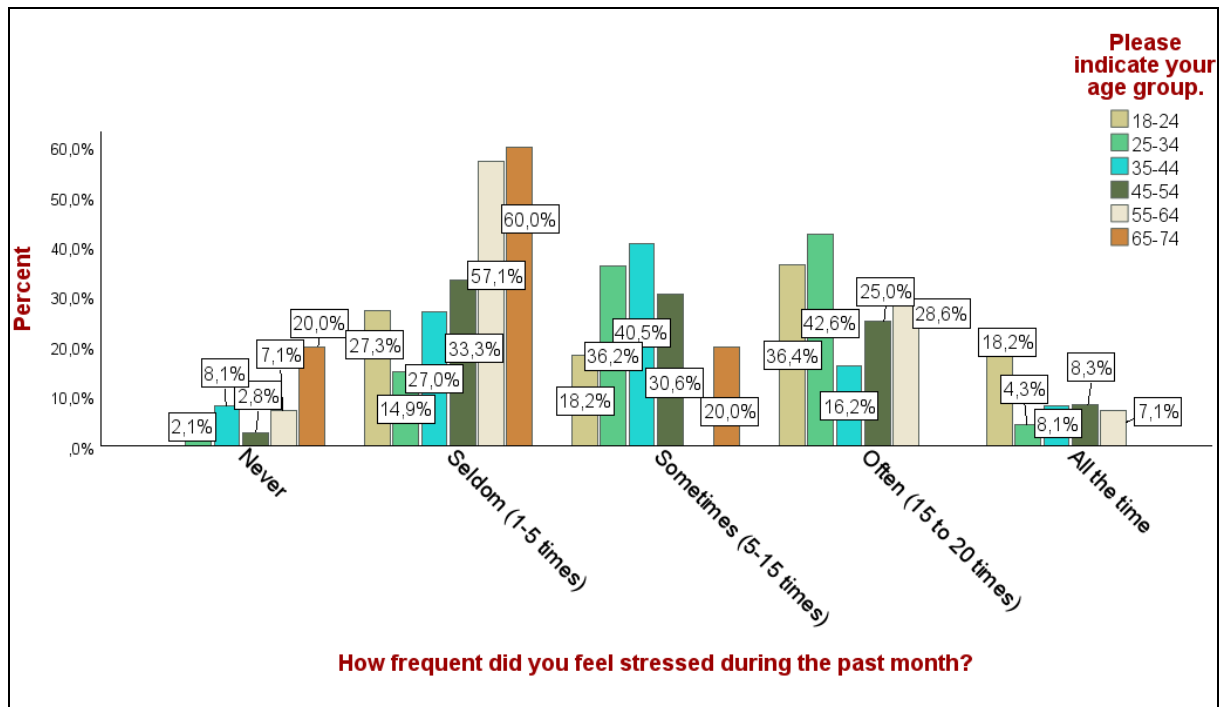


Figure 4: Stress is omnipresent

Source: own representation

Participants were given multiple response options to the question, "In general, how do you feel while working?", with 80 (53.3%) of them choosing "satisfied", 49 (32.7%) of them answering "neutral feelings", and 45 (30%) of them choosing "great". The value of 1 meant they answered the question, while the value of 0 meant they did not. In this context, 12.8% of all respondents admitted they encountered stress, and 20% said they were stressed while working although they felt positive at work (see table 2).

Table 2: Feelings while working

Case Summary						
	Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
\$feelingsatwork ^a	150	100,0%	0	0,0%	150	100,0%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

\$feelingsatwork Frequencies				
		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
In general, how do you feel while working?^a	GREAT	45	19,1%	30,0%
	SATISFIED	80	34,0%	53,3%
	NEUTRAL FEELINGS	49	20,9%	32,7%
	ANNOYED	7	3,0%	4,7%
	STRESSED	30	12,8%	20,0%
	UNABLE TO CONCENTRATE	8	3,4%	5,3%
	RATHER DISSATISFIED	5	2,1%	3,3%
	FRUSTRATED	9	3,8%	6,0%
	DEPRESSED	2	0,9%	1,3%
Total		235	100,0%	156,7%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Source: own representation

When answering the question, “How do you cope with life stressors?”, participants could choose more than one response option. In this context, 67 responses out of 544 (12.3%) said "relaxing", 61 responses (11.2%) said "spending more time with my loved ones", and 58 responses (10.7%) said, "reading books" as their stress-cope activity (see table 3). In this context, reading is among the top three preferred activities for relieving stress.

Table 3. Coping with life stressors

Case Summary						
	Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
\$stressors ^a	150	100,0%	0	0,0%	150	100,0%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

\$stressors Frequencies				
		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
How do you cope with life stressors?^a	spending more time with my loved ones	61	11,2%	40,7%
	doing sports	49	9,0%	32,7%
	communicating with others/ verbalizing my workload	37	6,8%	24,7%
	changing my behaviors	26	4,8%	17,3%
	relaxing	67	12,3%	44,7%
	reading books	58	10,7%	38,7%
	seeking assistance sharing workload	49	9,0%	32,7%
	rearranging my schedule	54	9,9%	36,0%
	watching movies	48	8,8%	32,0%
	getting my finances in order	19	3,5%	12,7%
	I am trying to look on the bright side of things	53	9,7%	35,3%
	cognitively switching off stress factors that cannot be changed at the moment	23	4,2%	15,3%
Total		544	100,0%	362,7%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Source: own representation

The majority of study participants (150 respondents in total) responded to the question "Do you believe that reading time is a time well-spent in your life?" by saying that reading time was a time well-spent in their lives, with 88,0% of managers and 90,0 % of non-managers (because this study categorized managers and non-managers into different respondent groups) providing that response (as seen in Figure 5).

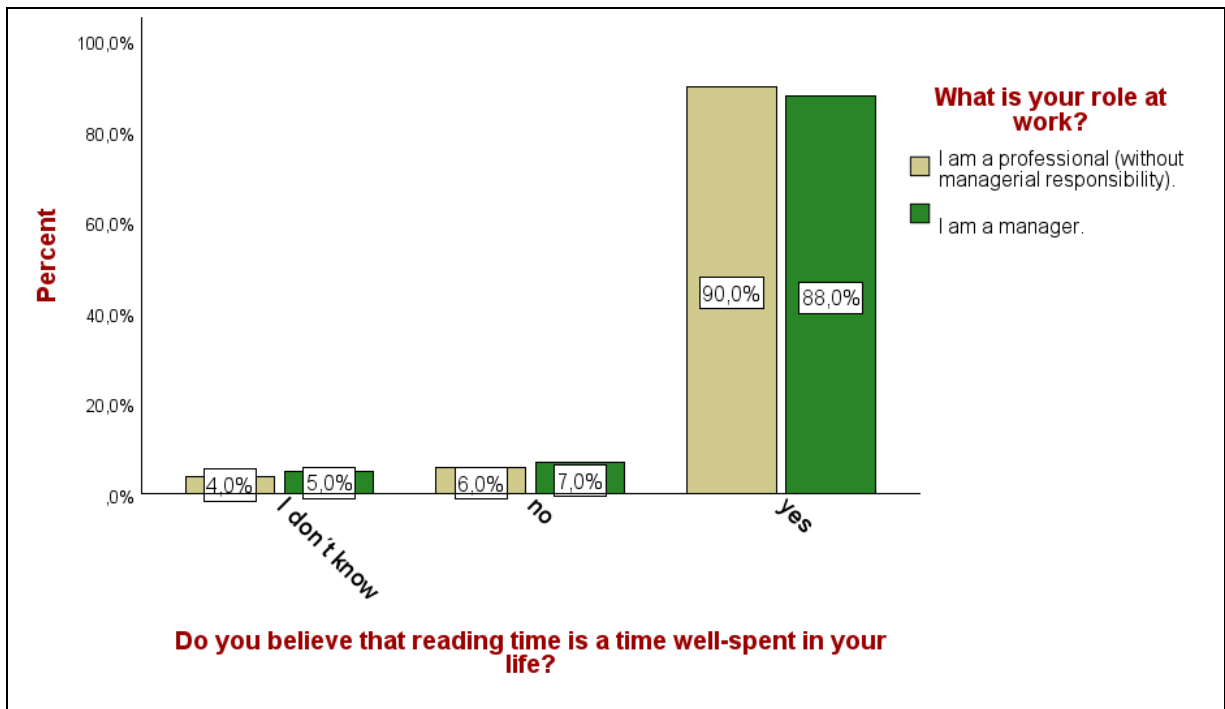


Figure 5. Reading time as time well-spent

Source: own representation

The answer was “yes” 654 times, meaning that the medium queried was read. So, the respondent reads the medium. To the question "what do you like to read" the answer option professional literature received the most answers (75), followed by internet articles (70), newspapers (61) and by informational (59). 50% of respondents read professional literature.

Table 4: Reading preferences

Case Summary						
	Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
\$readingpreference ^a	150	100,0%	0	0,0%	150	100,0%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

\$readingpreference Frequencies				
		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
What do you like to read?^a	nonfiction	40	6,1%	26,7%
	journals	38	5,8%	25,3%
	newspapers	61	9,3%	40,7%
	magazines	34	5,2%	22,7%
	professional literature	75	11,5%	50,0%
	novels	43	6,6%	28,7%
	action	15	2,3%	10,0%
	fantasy	20	3,1%	13,3%
	adventure	21	3,2%	14,0%
	autobiographies	24	3,7%	16,0%
	biographies	30	4,6%	20,0%
	love stories	25	3,8%	16,7%
	myths	9	1,4%	6,0%
	internet articles	70	10,7%	46,7%
	comics	9	1,4%	6,0%
	horror	1	0,2%	0,7%
	mysteries	7	1,1%	4,7%
	truestories	32	4,9%	21,3%
	informational	59	9,0%	39,3%
	comedy books	18	2,8%	12,0%
picture books	7	1,1%	4,7%	
poetry	16	2,4%	10,7%	
Total	654	100,0%	436,0%	

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Source: own representation

The following figure shows respondents' feelings when they read, with the question they responded to being, "How do you feel when you are reading?". Respondents could provide multiple responses to this question. As seen in Figure 6, 86 respondents said they felt relaxed when they read, followed by interested (74 responses), peaceful (68), satisfied (68 responses), inspired (68 responses), and curious (65 responses).

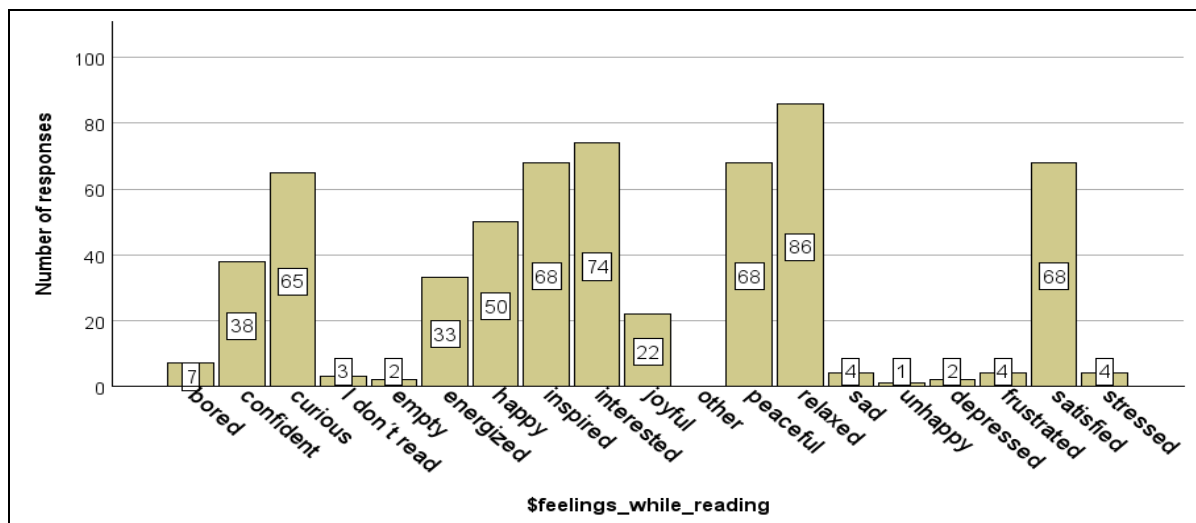


Figure 6. Feelings while reading

Source: own representation

Figure 7 provides an overview of how respondents answered the question, "Do you enjoy your reading time? Please elaborate". In this context, a number of respondents provided insights into reading's positive impacts on them, including "Reading is a pleasure in life. The ability of learning something is motivating" and "Yes, it educates me and helps me relax".



Figure 7. Do respondents enjoy reading time

Source: own representation

Table 5 provides an insight into respondents' answers to the following questions: "Which one do you prefer to read" and "What is your role at work". That said, 100 of 150 respondents were managers. 54% of the manager group read digital media, while the remaining 46% read

printed media. 32% within the non-manager group read printed media, 68% read digital media (see Table 5).

Table 5. Crosstabulation reading preferences and role at work

Case Processing Summary						
	Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Which one do you prefer to read? * What is your role at work?	150	100,0%	0	0,0%	150	100,0%

Which one do you prefer to read? * What is your role at work? Crosstabulation					
			What is your role at work?		Total
			non-manager	manager	
Which one do you prefer to read?	Printed media	Count	16	46	62
		Expected Count	20,7	41,3	62,0
		% within What is your role at work?	32,0%	46,0%	41,3%
		% of Total	10,7%	30,7%	41,3%
	Digital media	Count	34	54	88
		Expected Count	29,3	58,7	88,0
		% within What is your role at work?	68,0%	54,0%	58,7%
		% of Total	22,7%	36,0%	58,7%
Total	Count	50	100	150	
	Expected Count	50,0	100,0	150,0	
	% within What is your role at work?	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	
	% of Total	33,3%	66,7%	100,0%	

Source: own representation

4. Summary and Conclusions

This study confirmed that reading can be a preferred activity for relieving stress through a survey of 150 respondents divided into "managers" and "non-managers" groups. Reading is in the top three activities that the majority of respondents (i.e. 88% of managers and 90% of non-managers) think is a wise investment of their time. In this context, professional literature became the most popular reading material among participants, followed by newspaper and informational writing pieces. Some of their creative responses, such as "Yes, it educates me and helps me relax", "I do, it makes me feel very good. And relieves my stress", and "Reading time is value and investment time", further confirmed how they value reading as a worthy investment for their mental health, regardless of which type of readings they read. Given that previous studies and research suggested that younger adults tend to be

overwhelmed by stress, it is understandable that this study's findings offer a valuable recommendation for them, that is to consider reading to calm minds and relieve stress.

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