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Reporting of Work-Related Stress: Disclosure Hesitancy Among a Sample of Construction Managers in Ireland †

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Abstract

Workplace stress in the construction sector is noted to have poor implications for employees and work procedures. Although workplace stress is discussed extensively in the literature, reporting of workplace stress-related matters remains relatively unexplored. This research explored the experiences of reporting stress-related issues among a sample of construction managers in Ireland. The study adopted an interpretative qualitative approach, comprising semi-structured interviews with twenty-five construction managers. The data were examined using interpretative phenomenological analysis. All participants reported experiencing various workplace stressors in construction settings. They expressed a strong hesitancy to report their experiences of workplace stress caused by these stressors, and reasons for disclosure hesitancy included fear, stigma, and possible repercussions. The inability to report these stressors exacerbated the issue and created a deep sense of mistrust, which resulted in low productivity and absences from work. Disclosure hesitancy of workplace stress undermines efforts to build safe, equitable, and inclusive construction workplaces by rendering a noteworthy occupational hazard invisible. When construction managers are reluctant to report work-related stress, organisations may remain unaware of both its presence and its impact, allowing stress-related risks to persist unaddressed. This lack of disclosure can effectively shield organisations from accountability in cases of litigation or regulatory enforcement.

Keywords: fear to report; workplace stress; manager; safety silence; Irish construction sector

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1. Introduction

Employment in the construction sector in Ireland reflects its importance, with 167,300 employees reported in the second quarter of 2022. This represented 6% of total employment in the Irish economy, and over 90% of Ireland's construction workforce is male [1]. Construction professionals bear noteworthy responsibilities for project success and have long experienced numerous workplace stressors in this demanding industry [2]. Construction settings are dangerous, challenging, and stressful, and, therefore, can adversely impact people's occupational health and safety [3]. The literature also notes that construction work is characterised by considerable dynamism and uncertainty, elevating its stressful nature [4].

Communication and reporting safety-related information within an organisation are vital to creating and maintaining a safe, equitable, and inclusive work environment [5]. Reporting workplace stress has been identified as essential for an acute, realistic understanding of workplace safety and for the generation and implementation of work-safe practices [6].

The apparent paucity of research on reporting workplace stress in Irish construction settings motivated the authors to engage in a scoping study to examine if this is an issue in the sector and to gain insight into potential prevalence, causes, and effects of reporting workplace stress in a sample of twenty-five construction managers in Ireland. The authors presented a conference paper in 2025 at the World Building Conference that offered a preliminary examination of this topic. The present paper seeks to further develop and extend upon that earlier work. Receiving reports of safety-related concerns can be beneficial for organisations by allowing for the investigation of the causes of these incidents. Organisations can then take measures to mitigate safety issues by learning how to prevent such events from occurring in the future.

Existing research has examined safety silence in certain industries; however, there remains a noteworthy gap in the literature regarding workplace stress reporting within construction-related environments, particularly in an Irish context. To identify literature and determine whether research on safety silence and workplace stress reporting exists in Irish construction settings, a systematic search was conducted across multiple academic databases. The strategy comprised the following steps. The following electronic databases were searched to capture interdisciplinary and construction-specific research: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, Engineering Village, Google Scholar, and a detailed search on the library Technological University library search engines. No studies were found on safety silence in Irish construction settings in the last 10 years, which led the authors to pursue this study further.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Workplace Stress

Existing research has examined safety silence in certain industries; however, there remains a noteworthy gap in the literature regarding workplace stress reporting within construction-related environments, particularly in an Irish context. The literature notes that the construction sector is a high-stress profession where professionals are subjected to many occupational demands that can be injurious to their psychological well-being and mental health [7]. Many construction managers experience excessive levels of workplace stress, which can have negative psychological, physiological, and sociological effects on employees [8]. The literature shows evidence that workplace stress has been linked to many negative health outcomes for individuals [9]. Despite the attention given to workplace stress and mental health in this sector, the implementation of programmes to mitigate this in the day-to-day operations of organisations appears to be limited [10]. The literature notes that workplace stress and burnout experienced by construction managers have noteworthy costs to the individual, the organisation, and the community [11]. Although workplace stress has been widely studied in the literature, the reporting of stress-related concerns, sometimes referred to as "safety silence," has received comparatively limited attention [12]. Consequently, this research examines an existing gap in the literature concerning stress reporting in Ireland's construction sector.

2.2. Masculinity and Workplace Stress

There is evidence in the literature that male-dominated industries, such as construction, have higher rates of safety silence. Higher suicide rates have been reported in the male-dominated construction industry in countries such as the USA, the United Kingdom,

Australia, and Finland [13]. Data also indicates that employees working in the construction sector have a 25 percent to 80 percent increased risk of suicide compared to the other employment sectors [14]. 'Macho' workplace culture and conformity to masculine norms, such as self-reliance, risk-taking, and emotional control, have been found in the relationship between construction workers' workplace stress and suicide [15]. It is also noted in the literature that men are less likely to discuss workplace stress and mental health problems, particularly among peers [16–18], which is of concern in male-dominated industries such as construction. Furthermore, the strong prevalence of traditional masculine norms in construction has been linked to negative and prejudiced attitudes toward mental illness and perceptions of unsupportive working relationships, which may further hinder good communication [19].

2.3. Reporting

Safety silence is a barrier to growth and development in organisations, as the silence culture within these organisations is generally driven by feelings of fear, disbelief, and lack of support from supervisors [20]. Reporting psychosocial risks, such as workplace stress, can be valuable for organisations by allowing the investigation of the causes to mitigate against their recurrence. Organisations can then take action to decrease their accident and injury rates by learning how to prevent such events from occurring. A study by [21] noted that to respond to stress-related concerns, organisations need information on their nature and impact; however, employees often hesitate to discuss their occupational health concerns with their employer.

Ref. [22] notes that psychosocial stressors, such as workplace stress, have differences from other workplace safety issues that may influence whether employees decide to report them. Firstly, psychosocial stressors are likely to be more subjective than other workplace safety concerns and are less observable than many physical workplace hazards. Finally, many employees assume that workplace stress is a typical job-related experience and, therefore, that discussing stress-related issues at work may be counter-normative. The literature also demonstrates that employees' hesitancy to report workplace stressors represents an important obstacle to improving stress-related occupational health [23]. Ref. [24] noted that victims of stress and bullying may lodge a formal complaint with their human resources personnel about inappropriate workplace behaviour and stress; however, complaining is an unusual occurrence and is subject to several uncommon facilitative conditions being met.

A U.S. study [25] noted that up to 80 percent of occupational injuries go unreported in settings such as large construction operations. Concerning workplace violence, a large proportion of incidents go unreported at work, and underreporting has long been recognised as a barrier to the improvement of psychosocial issues in the workplace [26,27]. Ref. [28] found that safety silence may have connections to unsafe coworker behaviors and individual safety violations. This finding is consistent with [29] empirical study, which found that the more frequently individuals observe negative behaviors in the workplace, the less inclined they are to report them to persons of authority. Ref. [30] have found that workers who report health problems or workplace stressors to supervisors may risk disciplinary action, reduced offers of overtime, reduced promotion opportunities, stigmatisation, drug testing, harassment, and job loss. Their study noted that some safety incentive systems reward workers who do not report health and safety incidents or injuries with money, goods, or recognition, thereby contributing to these issues being underreported. Although good working relationships and the ability to confide in colleagues can act as a buffer to workplace stress, evidence suggests that these supports are often not available for workers in construction settings [11,31].

2.4. Mental Health in Construction

The findings on the reluctance to report workplace stress are also supported in a study on workplace stress and mental health by [32], who found that employees in high-risk occupations, such as construction, may experience a heightened stigma with admitting stress-related problems and seeking treatment for them. Ref. [33] highlighted that safety silence can contribute to authoritarian leadership, which can negatively impact employees' voices and behaviors, such as psychological safety and mental health.

Ref. [23] notes that there may be stigma from co-workers and supervisors for admitting stress-related issues, and this is often accompanied by bullying within organisations, which may affect psychological well-being. Their study, entitled "Psychosocial safety climate and stigma: Reporting safety-related concerns at work," also found that if individuals are in an organisation where stress-related concerns are stigmatised, they are likely to be subjected to behaviours representing poor care for employees, such as bullying and harassment. Refs. [34,35] noted that there are several motives for this safety silence in organisations. Ref. [34] noted that a poor safety climate is not helpful in the reporting of workplace stress, and the perceptions of negative relationships with colleagues, characteristics of the job, and the employees' assessment of the safety concerns were all barriers to reporting. Psychosocial safety climate refers to the extent to which an organisation emphasises employees' psychological health and well-being. Some studies note that the psychosocial safety climate within an organisation is a noteworthy factor surrounding the reporting of stress-related concerns [36]. When viewed through a cross-industry lens, the mechanisms of workplace stress and reporting hesitancy identified in the present Irish construction study align with broader findings across other sectors. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Literature Synthesis Table: Workplace Stress, Reporting, and Mitigation.

Study/Source	Industry & Country	Causes of Workplace Stress	Detrimental Effects	Reporting Mechanisms	Mitigation Strategies
[7])	Construction (Australia)	Work intensity, time pressure, and role conflict	Burnout, reduced performance	Limited formal reporting structures	Organisational support, training
[11]	Construction (Australia)	Remote working, isolation, interpersonal conflict	Psychological distress, absenteeism	Informal peer networks	Peer support, work–life balance
[25])	Manufacturing/ General (USA)	Unsafe conditions, poor safety climate	Underreporting injuries, fear of repercussion	Safety reporting systems	Leadership safety climate change
[26]	Workplace violence across sectors (Global ILO)	Violence exposure	Physical injury, psychological trauma	Incident reporting systems	Formal reporting, de-escalation training
[37]	Multiple sectors	Perceived futility of voice, retaliation fears	Silence, engagement decline	Formal grievance procedures	Non-retaliation policies
[38]	Professional services (USA)	High accountability, hierarchical structure	Job dissatisfaction, burnout	Anonymous reporting options	Confidential reporting channels
[19]	Male-dominated industries (mixed)	Norms discouraging help-seeking	Anxiety, depression	Rarely formalised	Gender-sensitive mental health programming
[33]	Manufacturing (China)	Authoritarian leadership	Suppressed employee voice	Limited reporting	Leadership training for employee empowerment

Considering the context cited above, the authors set out to engage in a study to explore the prevalence of workplace stress and the reluctance associated with reporting in the construction management sector in Ireland. There is a clear research gap identified in the literature in construction settings, which led to this study, and the gap is the absence of literature on the underreporting of workplace stress in Irish construction settings. The

authors believe that this study is a unique contribution to research on safety silence in Irish construction settings. The research question that underpinned the study was "What are the experiences of reporting stress-related concerns among a sample of construction managers working in Ireland?"

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

After ethical approval was granted by TU Dublin, approval number (REC 20-247), a total of twenty-five construction managers from the construction sector in Ireland were recruited and interviewed individually using semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were formulated and finalised through a pilot study with two participants before the study began. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the method chosen to assess participants' own experiences of workplace stress. This methodological approach theorises that different people perceive the world differently depending on their personalities, prior life experiences, and motivations [39]. IPA attempts to explore, understand, and make sense of the subjective meanings of events, experiences, and states of the individual participants themselves. The use of non-numerical data study seeks to explore and describe the 'quality' and 'nature' of how people behave, experience, and understand [40]. Therefore, it was considered an appropriate methodology to evidence Irish construction managers' reluctance to report workplace stress. The participant's answers were recorded and transcribed verbatim and then entered into NVivo version 12 software.

NVivo was used as a technical and organisational support tool rather than as an analytical authority within the study. The software facilitated systematic storage, retrieval, and organisation of coded interview transcripts, but did not independently determine thematic interpretations. Through the IPA approach, analytical meaning was generated through researcher-led interpretation, iterative coding, reflexive analysis, and literature-informed theme synthesis. The use of NVivo enhanced methodological transparency and auditability while preserving human interpretative analysis.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the research sought to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes associated with workplace stress disclosure hesitancy among construction managers. Unlike grounded theory, which is concerned with generating formal explanatory models, or thematic analysis, which may focus on descriptive pattern analysis, IPA provides a deeper interpretative framework for examining subjective experience. The study was concerned with how participants understood and emotionally interpreted organisational trust, stigma, and career risk rather than quantifying reporting behaviour or developing predictive theory. IPA's idiographic focus was particularly appropriate given the relatively homogeneous professional sample and the study's emphasis on psychosocial meaning in construction settings within a male-dominated occupational context.

3.2. Bias

A study by [41] notes that recognising bias in oneself should be done at the beginning of conducting a qualitative study. Potential bias was considered when constructing the interview, and questions were suitably ordered, with open-ended, simple questions that were carefully worded to avoid introducing bias. Leading questions or gestures of the author were excluded from any interviews so as not to lead participants to answer in a particular way [42]. Reducing bias can include respondent validation, constant comparisons across participant accounts, prolonged involvement or persistent observation of participants, and independent analysis of the data by other researchers [43], which was strictly adhered to in this study. Therefore, participants were encouraged to clarify and recount their answers

at the end of their interviews, and participants' answers were transcribed verbatim and analysed through [39] eight-step cycle of analysis, which identified, analysed, and reported patterns within the data. The veracity of the participants' responses to themes in this study could be taken as an indicator of the experiences of participants and, therefore, reduce the possibility of bias.

3.3. Data Collection

The interviews were conducted between September 2022 and March 2024. Each face-to-face interview was conducted in the Leinster region of Ireland and lasted approximately 30 min. The interviews were recorded by a handheld device, which assisted in transcribing the interviews verbatim for further analysis. The participants recruited were all experienced professionals, with the mean length of years working in the sector being 15.30 years. Table 2 below shows some key characteristics regarding the sample of participants in this study.

Table 2. Participant Profile (Anonymised). This table is authors' own work.

Pseudo Name	Male or Female	Number of Years as a Construction Manager	Trade Background	Contract
Michael	M	25	Carpenter	Permanent
Joe	M	25	Plumber	Temporary
Ian	M	15	Carpenter	Temporary
John	M	20	General Operative	Permanent
Christopher	M	40	General Operative	Temporary
Arnold	M	50	Carpenter	Temporary
Richard	M	3	Electrician	Permanent
Tony	M	25	Plasterer	Temporary
William	M	12	General Operative	Temporary
James	M	5	Welder	Temporary
Jason	M	5	General Operative	Temporary
Morris	M	16	Carpenter	Temporary
Ruairí	M	12	General Operative	Permanent
Mark	M	12	General Operative	Temporary
Edward	M	9	Carpenter	Temporary
Alan	M	8	Carpenter	Permanent
Peter	M	10	Electrician	Permanent
Thomas	M	11	General Operative	Permanent
Joseph	M	8	Carpenter	Permanent
Michael	M	12	Carpenter	Permanent
Paul	M	6	Carpenter	Temporary
Luke	M	10	General Operative	Permanent
Mathew	M	6	General Operative	Temporary
Marcus	M	16	Welder	Permanent
Robert	M	22	Carpenter	Permanent

3.4. Participants and Sampling Strategy

The initial participants were recruited through the authors' contacts in the construction sector, and after that, snowball sampling was used to obtain further participants for this study. A snowball strategy is an effective way to locate subjects with specific attributes or characteristics necessary for a study [44]. Snowball sampling techniques offer benefits for research that requires access to difficult-to-reach or hidden populations. Snowball samples are particularly popular among studies interested in studying classes of deviance, sensitive topics, or difficult-to-reach populations [45]. Snowball sampling was chosen to recruit participants for this study, as it was felt to be best suited for recruiting from a hidden population, such as those reluctant to report work-related stress. Ref. [46] notes

that choosing a suitable sample size in a qualitative study is an area of debate and practical uncertainty. Ref. [42] advises a range between 12 and 30 participants for studies of a qualitative nature. Ref. [47] notes that studies using empirical data reached saturation between 10 and 17 participants, and for qualitative studies using in-depth interviews, this should suffice. It was therefore decided that 25 participants were an appropriate sample size for this study. Network bias was mitigated by recruiting diverse seed participants from different organisations, limiting each participant to one referral, and monitoring sample composition. Once participants were identified, a participant information leaflet was emailed to them one week before the interview. The leaflet explained the purpose and content of the study, and potential participants were asked to sign the consent form in the leaflet. Informed consent was received from all participants in this study and names have been disguised for anonymity.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study as an effective way of gathering data for small-scale research, as they permit interviews to be focused while still giving the investigator autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview [48]. They are particularly useful in scoping studies so that researchers can ascertain if there is merit in investigating further. Semi-structured interviews are characterised by a dialogue and interaction between the researcher and participant [49].

3.5. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded sequentially, allowing emerging themes to be tracked across cases. A theme monitoring matrix was maintained to document when new codes and higher-order themes appeared. By participant 20, no new first-order codes were identified, and subsequent interviews (21–25) reinforced existing themes rather than generating new conceptual categories. While minor contextual variations continued to emerge, no new themes were observed at both descriptive and interpretative levels. Data collection, therefore, ceased at 25 participants, as analytic sufficiency and conceptual saturation had been reached. A saturation analysis table is displayed below in Table 3. Inter-coder reliability statistics were not calculated, as the study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach where the primary objective was in-depth meaning interpretation rather than mechanical coding practice. Instead, rigor was maintained through reflexive journaling, iterative themed refinement, and peer discussion of coding decisions and analysis. Ref. [39] provides an eight-step cycle of analysis for interpretative phenomenological analysis, which was followed in this study. The steps in this process are displayed in Table 4 below. Saturation was assessed through an iterative analytic process consistent with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Table 3. Saturation analysis table. This table is authors' own work.

Participant Range	New Codes Identified	New Higher-Order Themes	Observations
1–5	14	3	Initial broad identification of organisational distrust, stigma, and career fear
6–10	8	2	Emergence of confidentiality concerns and masculine norm conformity
11–15	4	1	Normalisation of stress is identified as a structural mechanism
16–19	2	0	Reinforcement and variation within existing themes
20–22	0	0	No new themes; deeper illustrative examples only
23–25	0	0	Conceptual repetition and validation of thematic structure

Table 4. Eight-step cycle of analysis. This table is authors' own work.

Step 1	The data was read in detail, and initial notes were made, which involved reading the data and noting ideas or phrases in the NVivo programme.
Step 2	The data was then initially coded. This helped familiarisation with the individual interviews and get a sense of the data that had been collected.
Step 3	Step three involved developing subordinate categories under each code.
Step 4	Step four involved breaking down the subordinate categories into subcategories for a more in-depth understanding of the data.
Step 5	The next step developed superordinate themes, which consolidated codes from preceding cycles into a more abstract and literature-based set of subordinate themes, thereby creating a final framework.
Step 6	Step six involved writing analytical memos against the superordinate themes to accurately summarise the content of each category and propose empirical findings against each finding.
Step 7	Step seven saw validation and revisiting the analytical memos to self-audit proposed findings by seeking evidence in the data beyond textual quotes to support the findings.
Step 8	The final step involved the synthesising of analytical memos into coherent and cohesive findings.

The formation of superordinate themes followed the interpretative analytical process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, progressing from detailed examination of individual lived experiences to higher-level conceptual abstraction. The process began with repeated reading of interview transcripts to develop familiarity with participant narratives and identify meaningful units of experience. Initial descriptive and interpretative codes were then generated from noteworthy statements, emotional expressions, and contextually relevant observations within each transcript. These codes were subsequently grouped into subordinate categories based on conceptual similarity and experiential overlap. Through iterative comparison across cases, patterns of convergence and divergence were examined, allowing subordinate categories to be synthesised into broader subordinate themes. Superordinate themes emerged when clusters of related subordinate themes demonstrated consistent meaning across participants. The development of these higher-order themes was guided by the researcher's interpretation, cross-case analytic reflection, and iterative memo writing rather than by frequency. Final thematic structures were validated through reflexive review and alignment with existing literature, ensuring that the themes accurately represented shared experiential patterns while preserving the idiographic nature of this analysis.

3.6. Study Limitations

The sampling strategy is a convenience and snowball sampling procedure; it is not intended to generalise the findings from this data. However, the sampling strategy did produce twenty-five participants for this study. Given the modest sample size and limited geographical scope, caution should be exercised when interpreting these findings. Another possible limitation was the all-male sample selected; however, because the construction workforce in the study context is overwhelmingly male, the sample accurately reflects the demographic composition of the population under investigation. The focus on the Irish construction sector was adopted as there is a paucity of research on workplace stress disclosure in Irish construction settings, and this study is intended to be an initial scoping study of that sector.

All participants in this study were male, which is reflective of the demographic composition of construction management within the Irish context. While this limits the ability to explore potential gender-based differences in stress disclosure and safety silence, it is also analytically important. The findings may be shaped by gendered norms of masculinity prevalent in male-dominated occupational environments such as construction, where emotional restraint, endurance, and self-reliance are culturally reinforced. Therefore, the identified patterns of disclosure hesitancy may reflect the interaction between managerial identity and masculine norm conformity. The absence of female managerial perspectives restricts comparative analysis, and future research should examine whether similar disclosure silence operates across gender-diverse leadership contexts.

This is a qualitative study, and based on the data, further research is recommended to confirm these findings in the wider construction community. It can be argued that the under-reporting of workplace stress in this study does not reflect the wider construction industry, given the small sample size and limited geographic scope. While the limitations of this study may constrain the generalisability and transferability of the findings, they also provide direction for future research. Further studies conducted across different contexts and populations could help assess the robustness of the results and extend their applicability beyond this study setting.

Organisational descriptors such as company size, specific project type, and public/private sector classification were not reported to minimise disclosure risk within the relatively small and networked Irish construction management community. Given the visibility of major projects and the professional recognisability of senior managers, combining contextual identifiers with verbatim quotations may have compromised participant anonymity. The study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach focused on shared lived experiences of stress disclosure rather than comparative organisational analysis. Therefore, these variables were not treated as primary analytic categories. Future research may examine how organisational size or sectoral differences shape safety silence dynamics in more comparative designs.

4. Results

The main overarching themes derived from the interview data were the reluctance to report workplace stress and the absence of appropriate employer initiatives in terms of managing workplace stress. Collectively, these overarching themes had according to participants, caused them to reduce their productivity and resulted in absences from work. In addition, the reluctance to report workplace stress also caused mistrust among participants. Participants also believed that their employers could do more to assist them in coping with workplace stress. The themes below comprehensively answered the research question by enumerating the experiences of reporting stress-related concerns among a sample of construction managers working in Ireland. A summary table is displayed in Table 5 below of the coded items, themes, sub-themes, and participant occurrence for ease of reading.

To enhance clarity and transparency, the findings of this study can be understood as a set of interrelated factors contributing to disclosure hesitancy among construction managers in Ireland. These include organisational factors such as perceived lack of trust, fear of negative career repercussions for individuals, issues regarding confidentiality, and the absence of structured employer-led mental health initiatives. Cultural factors were also prominent, particularly stigma associated with stress disclosure and traditional masculine norms that discourage emotional expression. At an individual level, avoidance behaviours and silence were commonly adopted coping mechanisms, further entrenching the problem. Collectively, these factors create an environment in which workplace stress is normalised

but rarely reported. In response to these challenges, several practical strategies could be introduced, including the development of confidential reporting systems, implementation of clear non-retaliation policies, provision of role-specific mental health training, leadership commitment to fostering psychological safety, and the integration of psychosocial risk management into existing health and safety frameworks. The findings below will be presented in a more structured manner and provide a clearer articulation of both the barriers to disclosure and the potential pathways for organisational intervention.

Table 5. Summary of Coded Items, Themes, Sub-Themes, and Participant Occurrence.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Coded Item/Factor	Number of Participants Reporting (*n* = 25)
Trust and Organisational Vulnerability	Perceived lack of managerial trust	Fear that reporting stress would damage professional reputation	25 participants
	Future workplace suspicion	Belief that disclosure would lead to organisational mistrust	25 participants
Stigma and Masculine Norm Pressure	Cultural stigma of stress disclosure	Stress is seen as weakness or professional failure	18 participants
	Masculine endurance expectations	"Get on with it" workplace identity norms	25 participants
Career Risk Perception	Promotion risk	Fear that disclosure would affect career progression	25 participants
	Informal career signalling	Negative industry reputation effects	15 participants
Confidentiality Anxiety	Information leakage concerns	Fear that HR or colleagues would share information	25 participants
	Whistleblower labelling	Fear of being viewed as a "troublemaker."	12 participants
Absence of Psychosocial Support	Lack of mental health training	Limited organisational stress management education	18 participants
	Employer initiative deficit	Perceived absence of structured support programmes	20 participants
Avoidance Coping Behaviour	Active avoidance	Choosing not to report workplace stress	22 participants
	Spatial or social distancing strategies	Scheduling or interaction avoidance to reduce conflict	17 participants

4.1. Reporting

All twenty-five participants stated that they had experienced high levels of workplace stress and would not declare it to their senior manager, Human Resources, or employer due to perceived negative reactions. These participants believed that fear of reporting workplace stress increased many workplace stressors they experienced, often exacerbating them and contributing to a lack of trust in the organisation, which led to absences from work and lower productivity. These participants believed that if they had a safe, non-judgmental environment to express their concerns without fear of consequences, it could lead to a healthier and less stressful workplace environment.

- Theme 1: Trust

All the participants identified mistrust as a barrier to reporting workplace stress. These participants believed that they would not be treated the same way again if they declared workplace stress and that the organisation would mistrust them in future interactions. These participants believed that reporting workplace stress would be viewed as suspicious by the company and, in some cases, colleagues, and there was a reluctance to do so. One of the participants, Ruairí, noted: "I would not report anything relating to workplace stress as I do not think that I would be trusted. I believe that once you mention workplace stress, straight away the organisation believes that you are angling for something." Twelve of the twenty-five participants noted a deep sense of frustration because of the inability to report workplace stress to Human Resources or senior management. These participants believed that a true representation of the prevalence of workplace stress on their construction sites was not evident, which caused frustration. Thomas, a construction manager, explained, "Reporting workplace stress would not be done on any job that I know. I believe that could be a career-ending move; you would not be trusted ever again on the job. It would never be forgotten; I know this from experience". Another participant, Michael, noted, "I would not report workplace stress, I have heard in the industry of people reporting workplace stress and it has not gone well for them, in every case that I have heard workplace stress reported, the individual who reported it was not there 12 months later".

- Theme 2: Stigma

All participants believed that there was a stigma associated with reporting workplace stress and that this would have negative implications for them in their future within their organisations. The participants described a highly masculine, hierarchical environment where difficulties are discussed in a direct and sometimes aggressive way or not discussed at all. This was observed by Mathew, who noted, "I have seen actual physical fights on construction sites. This is not an uncommon occurrence. In one example I remember, a construction manager and a tradesman fought over delays on site; there was a lot of money involved, and a lot of pressure to get the job done. It started with a confrontation over a stressful situation, then shouting and pointing, and ended with punches being thrown". The reluctance of construction managers to broach or express their difficulties due to stigma meant that issues were rarely discussed at all in the workplace, and only a small number of participants were willing to discuss their difficulties with family or friends. Robert, who had worked as a construction manager for many years, noted, "I do not speak about workplace stress or mental health issues with my work colleagues; it would be taboo, and I would find this very uncomfortable". The stigma of reporting workplace stress may hinder an employee's ability to use positive coping strategies to assist them in addressing the problem. This finding correlates with [50], who also noted that the stigma of reporting workplace stress saw employees choosing poor coping strategies, which resulted in increased levels of anxiety and depression.

- Theme 3: Career progression

Participants had different reasons for their reluctance to report workplace stress. All of the twenty-five participants associated the reporting of workplace stress with negative outcomes for career development and promotion. Twelve of the twenty-five participants were aware of other construction managers who had reported workplace stress, and this reporting had negatively impacted their careers. This was demonstrated by William, who noted, "I am aware of other construction employees who brought up workplace stress when interacting with Human Resources and senior management, and it was not warmly received. It may be a complete coincidence, but I don't think so, hearing stuff like this on the grapevine does not fill you with confidence, you would be very reluctant to bring up

the subject, when I brought up workplace stress in the past with Human Resources, I could see by their reaction that they were very displeased, in any event, my comments were ignored, this does not bode well for an inclusive work environment". Career development would be a noteworthy reason for hesitancy to report workplace stress. Ref. [51] noted that workers who disclose workplace stress make them appear less resilient, potentially affecting promotions, training opportunities, or desirable assignments.

- Theme 4: Confidentiality

All participants noted that the fear of reporting workplace stress was justified because of their belief that their confidentiality could be compromised if workplace stress was reported. These participants believed that their concerns would not be handled discreetly by Human Resources or senior management and that their privacy would be compromised. There was, therefore, a reluctance to report workplace stress. This was exemplified by one participant, James, who noted, "If I reported workplace stress, it would somehow get out, and the whole company would know about it. This would have negative consequences for me; I would be known as a snitch or a whistleblower, and it would not end well. People are not treated equally. This actually happened to me in a previous construction setting some time ago." Ten of the participants took absences from work as a result of workplace stress, which lowered their productivity, and these ten participants noted the fear of reporting workplace stress as a contributing factor for these absences. Luke noted, "I have to take time off from work now and then because of workplace stress, the inability to be able to tell anyone in my employment about this stress contributes to a feeling of powerlessness and increases stress levels for me". While research on compromised confidentiality in workplace stress reporting is scarce, participants nonetheless expressed reluctance to disclose stress due to fears that their privacy might be breached.

4.2. The Absence of Appropriate Employer Initiatives for Managing Workplace Stress

- Theme 5: Lack of mental health training

All participants experienced noteworthy levels of workplace stress in carrying out their duties as construction managers. These participants believed that their employer could have more employer initiatives for them to assist in coping with work-related stress. Tony highlighted this point by noting, "We get lots of health and safety on safety issues with regards to accidents, but virtually no one trains us on mental health and stress-related issues. I think this is a real problem and a big oversight". Lack of mental health training can have wide-ranging consequences across different settings, and there may be a proclivity for negative outcomes for construction personnel.

- Theme 6 Avoidance

Twelve of the twenty-five participants used avoidance strategies to cope with workplace stress and did not seek assistance from their employer. These twelve participants believed their employer could be of more assistance by highlighting workplace stressors more effectively. Six participants sought assistance remotely from their employer to assist them with workplace stress. The reasons expressed by these construction managers for not seeking assistance from their employers were multifaceted. Edward highlighted the difficulty of resolving the common workplace stressor of interpersonal conflict and its impact, stating, "Sometimes preventing people from quarreling or fighting is very difficult; sometimes they turn on you when you are only trying to help them, senior management and employers do not want to get involved and only want to know when you have it sorted".

Another participant, Thomas, a construction manager, also highlighted this theme by noting, "there are a lot of stressors on construction sites, there are a lot of difficult people, I

have to get away from them sometimes, they are just too much. I have also witnessed a lot of conflict and bullying on sites, even seeing it is terrible, it affects you. There is no point in telling your employer, as they will be of no assistance whatsoever." Christopher noted in his interview, "I know of people who do not get on with each other, and some of these conflicts go back many years; they just exclude each other. I try to reduce this conflict by scheduling them to be on-site on different dates or at different times, which can save me a lot of trouble".

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

The main insights of this study indicate that participants were reluctant to report workplace stress due to factors such as lack of trust, stigma, concerns about career progression, confidentiality issues, insufficient mental health training, and avoidance behaviours. This reluctance resulted in negative outcomes for both individuals and organisations and contributed to a more stressful work environment. What is noteworthy is the extent of this reluctance, as all participants experienced a palpable sense of fear in reporting workplace stress, which could potentially affect safety management practices in the Irish construction industry. Although this study is situated in the Irish construction context, the cultural norms and organisational structures observed are consistent with those found in other male-dominated and high-pressure industries. Research across other male-dominated sectors such as construction, engineering, policing, and the military has demonstrated that hegemonic masculine norms often endorse endurance, emotional restraint, and self-reliance, thereby discouraging the disclosure of stress or vulnerability [16,52]. However, comparing this Irish study with other jurisdictions and studies from China, Australia, and America reveals a broad similarity in terms of underreporting; however, the extent of underreporting is in sharp contrast due to its prevalence.

This study does not propose a new conceptual model of safety silence. However, it extends and investigates existing safety silence and employee voice frameworks within the underexplored setting of Irish construction management. While prior research has examined safety silence largely in relation to physical hazard reporting and in international contexts, this study contributes theoretically by integrating psychosocial stress disclosure into the safety silence discourse and demonstrating how organisational trust, perceived career risk, stigma, and masculine norms interact to suppress reporting behaviours. The findings refine existing safety silence literature by highlighting the role of psychosocial risk normalisation and culturally embedded identity pressures within construction settings. The study, rather, offers contextual theory elaboration rather than model replacement.

The findings align with broader safety silence and psychological safety literature across sectors. Research by Detert & Edmondson and Morrison shows that fear of retaliation, career risk, and perceived futility commonly result in safety silence in hierarchical organisations. Similarly, Edmondson highlights psychological safety as essential for interpersonal risk-taking. The present study reflects these mechanisms, demonstrating that stress disclosure hesitancy in construction is structurally and culturally produced rather than individually driven. Compared with sectors that have formalised reporting systems (e.g., healthcare or aviation), psychosocial reporting structures in construction remain underdeveloped, suggesting the need for context-sensitive interventions.

International construction research, including work by Love, consistently identifies workload pressure, role conflict, and burnout across contexts. The Irish findings reinforce these stressors but extend the literature by emphasising managerial-level silence and confidentiality concerns. While such patterns are globally evident in male-dominated, project-based industries, Ireland's relatively close professional networks may

intensify reputational issues. Overall, the study contributes by situating psychosocial safety silence within an Irish context while demonstrating its consistency with international construction trends.

While this study is situated within Irish construction management, its contribution is not confined to geography. Ireland functions as a culturally and institutionally distinctive context in which safety silence operates through specific identity, relational, and structural mechanisms. The male-dominated and labor-intensive norms prevalent in Irish construction reinforce emotional restraint and self-reliance, making stress disclosure a potential threat to occupational identity. The relatively small and network-driven nature of the Irish construction sector amplifies perceived reputational risk, as career mobility is closely tied to informal professional relationships. In such environments, confidentiality concerns extend beyond formal organisational structures into broader relational networks. These contextual issues interact with organisational trust deficits and productivity pressures to sustain psychosocial risk normalisation. Therefore, the study contributes not merely by examining an Irish sample, but by analytically demonstrating how national culture, industry structure, and identity norms co-produce safety silence within a specific socio-professional ecosystem.

5.2. Consequences for the Participants

All participants experienced workplace stress in this study and were fearful of reporting this workplace stress to colleagues, Human Resources, or senior management. It is noteworthy that this reluctance was based on their own experiences and on what they had witnessed happening to colleagues and friends. The extent to which the Irish construction sector is being affected by the reluctance to report workplace stress remains unclear due to a lack of relevant research. However, the findings of this initial scoping study suggest that fear of reporting workplace stress is a cause for concern and strongly suggest that the issue may be commonplace. However, the authors recommend that a larger study on the underreporting of work-related stress concerns in the Irish construction industry is appropriate to investigate and empirically evidence this issue with sufficient sample power.

An inability to report safety issues at work, such as workplace stress, has been described in the literature as safety silence. Ref. [53] describes safety silence as the act of withholding safety concerns during hazardous scenarios. Although few studies have focused directly on safety silence in construction settings, it has been implied in research on communication and safety [54]. Due to its importance for safety management practices, safety silence is an important measure of organisational safety [55]. The reluctance of all participants to report workplace stress in this study indicates a proclivity of construction managers to engage in safety silence, which could have negative implications for safety management practices.

All participants reported an association between stigma and the reporting of workplace stress. Stress-reporting stigma is defined in the literature as the perceived real or imagined negative outcomes of experiencing and reporting a stress-related concern at work, including those concerns originating from others [23]. Ref. [56] noted that employees who report high levels of stigma for admitting stress-related problems are likely to experience discomfort and social exclusion associated with the experience, resulting in an exacerbation of mental health symptoms and increased levels of bullying.

Similarly to our study, Ref. [37] notes that reporters of workplace stress may be labelled as troublemakers or as complainers, losing the respect and support of others; subjecting themselves to a bad performance evaluation, not receiving a possible promotion; or putting themselves at risk of being disemployed. Furthermore, Ref. [57] notes that if employees decide to speak up, they can also put their colleagues in trouble. Thus, to avoid any social

discomfort due to the transmission of bad news and to provide a harmonious environment, employees often withhold information, giving rise to the MUM effect [37].

This study also highlights the negative impact on participants arising from mistrust linked to their inability to report workplace stress. All participants expressed mistrust regarding how declarations of workplace stress might be handled. Interactions characterised by mistrust suggest that mistrust tends to be associated with pervasive feelings of rumination and hypervigilance, resulting in stress [58]. Mistrust in reporting workplace stress may result in employees being less likely to engage in speaking out about unethical or harmful workplace practices, which can correlate with increased psycho-social hazards such as bullying incidents in workplaces, as found by [59].

The question now raised is why the prevalence of the fear of reporting workplace stress, as reported in this study, is not more widely publicised in the Irish construction sector. One theory to explain this is that previous research in construction settings has not explored this phenomenon to any great extent, as participants may be fearful of stigmatisation. Construction companies place a high emphasis on health and safety, reducing accidents and incidents. Indeed, incentive schemes for health and safety place monetary rewards to maintain safe working environments in construction settings [60]. Reporting workplace stress may impact employees financially or damage the company's reputation; therefore, there may be a perception that such reporting should be avoided for the good of all.

Employers' duty of care is implied in contracts of employment. At a broader level, the importance of the duty and its evolution to encompass a range of scenarios, including workplace stress, has been widely recognised. Its importance as a means of supporting positive mental health and well-being at work is linked to this overall development [61]. However, the reluctance of participants to report workplace stress as noted in this study seems to void this duty of care principle, as the employer is not made aware of the problem, thereby potentially absolving them of responsibility.

While further analysis of the reluctance to report workplace stress in the construction industry is important, it can be considered secondary to the need for pragmatic solutions. In this regard, strategies such as improving the psychosocial safety climate seem important as they are capable of attenuating the relationship between work-related stressors and employee outcomes [62]. A study by [25] shows high amounts of underreporting of occupational injuries, while [26] found similar findings of underreporting of workplace violence. These studies suggest that there may be a possibility of a comparable degree of underreporting of other workplace stressors in construction settings.

A possible solution for the high rate of underreporting workplace stress could be specific training for construction managers on the importance of reporting workplace stress and building trust in organisations. The use of confidential employee assistance programmes that employees could contact when experiencing workplace stress may also assist. Finally, more employer engagement with strategies for improving the safety climate would also be prudent.

The reluctance of participants to report workplace stress, as noted in this study, could be classified as conflict avoidance behaviour. Conflict avoidance has been studied by [63], who identified that employees use avoidance behaviours to mitigate conflict with other personnel. However, Ref. [64] warns against the use of an avoidance strategy, finding it is ineffective at preventing the recurrence of challenging workplace behaviours and can adversely lead to increased emotional exhaustion. The literature notes a lack of confidence in methods of dealing with workplace stress, which is not surprising given the evidence that interventions reported in the literature have shown little success [65]. This study reinforces these findings from the literature and notes the difficulties construction managers experience with reporting workplace stress. The reluctance of all participants

to report workplace stress exacerbated workplace stress for the participants in this study. Understanding these reasons can assist in designing better interventions to improve mental health and well-being in the construction industry.

Organisations could cultivate a supportive workplace culture where mental health and well-being are prioritised, and employees feel safe to discuss stress-related issues without fear of judgment or repercussions [66]. This could be achieved through leadership commitment, open communication, access to employee support, and recognition and respect for employees' efforts. Refs. [38,67] note that anonymous reporting systems allow employees to report workplace stress and other internal organisational issues without revealing their identities.

This could be done through anonymous surveys, third-party platforms, hotlines, or suggestion boxes. Role-specific training could be provided for construction managers in terms of stress recognition and support, allowing them to recognise signs of workplace stress and how to support their teams effectively. Communicating clear non-retaliation policies that protect employees from any negative consequences for reporting workplace stress or mental health issues could also be an important step to reducing safety silence. The societal impact of not reporting workplace stress may extend far beyond the individual or the organisation. When workplace stress goes unreported and unaddressed, it can spread into the economy, healthcare systems, and communities, with detrimental outcomes for all.

5.3. Consequences for the Employer

Refs. [68,69] note that the non-reporting of workplace stress in organisations may relate to higher rates of accidents and injuries. Accidents and injuries have noteworthy cost and time implications for organisations, including damage to their reputation. Participants in this study strongly associated the reluctance to report workplace stress as an additional workplace stressor. Workplace stress is strongly related to low productivity, high absenteeism, presenteeism, and poor job performance [70]. Additionally, safety silence or the underreporting of safety concerns, such as workplace stress, may cause leaders or teams to miss important information and thus fail to detect errors or correct recurring problems, resulting in mistakes and poorer performance [71].

The literature also notes that employees who believe that they will not be able to affect organisational outcomes will most likely choose to remain silent about safety concerns, potentially causing difficulties for organisations [72]. The literature has also shown that employees' decision to stay silent about workplace stress is strongly related to workplace burnout [73–75]. Decisions to remain silent about workplace stress could increase burnout due to the strain of holding back emotional expressions of distress or feelings associated with ideas being dismissed by colleagues or management. Ref. [76] notes that for organisations, burnout can have serious consequences, leading to high costs due to turnover, sickness absence, work incapacitation, and poor business outcomes regarding job performance, occupational safety, service quality, and productivity.

There seems to be much evidence in the literature that managers' and employees' reluctance to report safety-related concerns, such as workplace stress, negatively affects an organisation's productivity and profitability. In this regard, the very high levels of participants who noted a reluctance to report workplace stress, identified in this study, could potentially have negative implications for Irish construction organisations. Therefore, the need to introduce measures to encourage the reporting of workplace stress-related concerns would seem prudent.

6. Conclusions

This study found a reluctance to report workplace stress by construction managers in Ireland, which represents a considerable barrier to resolving stress-related concerns in the Irish construction industry. This study also noted a lack of employer initiatives in terms of managing workplace stress. Failure to report workplace stress can negatively affect individuals' health, well-being, and performance, while also impacting organisations through reduced productivity, increased absenteeism, and turnover, and can have negative implications for an organisation's workplace environment.

What this study contributes to the literature is evidence of the very real reluctance of construction managers in Ireland to report workplace stress and the negative consequences this resulting silence has on Irish construction organisations. What this study also contributes is the urgent need for development and trials of pragmatic and effective interventions to assist construction managers in reporting workplace stress. In this regard, the authors are currently engaging with Irish companies to develop and trial interventions specifically for improving the reporting of workplace stress for construction workers. Without such interventions, the negative effects of the reluctance to report workplace stress will likely continue to negatively affect workers in the Irish construction industry.

Building safe, equitable, and inclusive construction workplaces for the future requires more than compliance with traditional health and safety protocols; it would seem to necessitate organisational environments in which work-related stress can be openly reported without fear of stigma, reprisal, or career-damaging action. This study demonstrates that among construction managers in Ireland, the pervasive reluctance to disclose workplace stress renders a noteworthy occupational hazard effectively invisible. As a result, stress-related risks remain unaddressed, undermining both employee well-being and organisational safety. Without mechanisms that actively encourage disclosure and protect those who speak up, efforts to create genuinely safe, equitable, and inclusive construction workplaces are likely to remain aspirational rather than realised. Further empirical research is therefore required to support the idea that the perceived inability to report workplace stress is of more importance than currently appears to be the case. This would seem important if organisations were to build safe, equitable, and inclusive construction workplaces for employees.

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