

Article

Influence of Work Environment Factors on Burnout Syndrome Among Freelancers

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Abstract

The problem associated with the manifestation of burnout syndrome is the subject of ongoing interest. In recent years, occupational burnout has been actively studied among professionals in the helping professions (teachers, physicians, social workers, psychologists, prison officers, etc.). However, the phenomenon has been poorly studied among freelancers. Therefore, the aim of this study is to fill this gap by determining the level of burnout syndrome among Bulgarian freelancers and investigate the influence of some work environment factors on professional burnout in the sample. A survey of 1138 freelancers was carried out using the Burnout Self-Assessment Questionnaire developed by Maslach and a questionnaire developed in-house to explore the factors of the occupational environment and ask questions related to socio-demographic factors. Hypotheses are tested using correlation analysis and structural equation modelling. The study reveals high levels of emotional exhaustion (40.91%, $n = 484$). High values on the scale of depersonalization were reported for 26,3% of the respondents ($n = 311$). Only 3.1% of the respondents ($n = 37$) had high values on the reduced personal accomplishment scale. The high levels of burnout among freelancers could be influenced by the specific characteristics of their work environment and the nature of their tasks.

Keywords: work stress; burnout; freelance; stressors; work environment



Academic Editor: Domenico
De Berardis

Received: 19 May 2025

Revised: 21 June 2025

Accepted: 25 July 2025

Published: 5 August 2025

Citation: Ianakiev, Y.; Medneva, T. Influence of Work Environment Factors on Burnout Syndrome Among Freelancers. *Psychiatry Int.* **2025**, *6*, 95. <https://doi.org/10.3390/psychiatryint6030095>

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1. Introduction

The concept of “stress at the workplace”, along with categories such as psychosocial risks and job security are some of the most discussed topics in social psychology and the sociology of work and management [1]. The shift toward a knowledge-based economy, increased reliance on technology, and the emergence of flexible, innovative organizational models, coupled with upward mobility for diverse groups, have fragmented the once stable career landscape. These structural changes have heightened job insecurity, as continuous adaptation and career mobility become the new norm. Consequently, working life is now filled with more uncertainty than ever before [2].

Maslach and Leiter defined burnout as a psychological syndrome “emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job”. They specify that the three key dimensions of this response are an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment [3].

Burnout syndrome can occur in anyone who is strongly committed to their job, although it occurs with greater frequency in the so-called “helping” professions [4–6]. Its causes are diverse, ranging from individual factors (such as attitudes, pretensions,

wrong perceptions, self-assessment, and an insufficient ability to balance between work and everyday life) to organizational factors (including organizational culture, pressure, and the overall work environment).

Today, we already know that burnout syndrome occurs in every professional field, as well as in self-employed individuals. Currently, “freelance” refers to all independent professionals who commit themselves only to work on a specific project and can decide for themselves when, how much, and how to work. With the development of Internet technologies this employment opportunity is becoming more and more real, accessible, and preferred [7].

Freelancers, with their different approaches to work and different philosophies, can be flexible and innovative and provide added value to businesses and economies. They point the way to a new kind of organizational structure—open networks of highly skilled employees who collaborate on projects. According to Upwork, one of the key benefits of freelancing is the ability to continuously improve skills and stay updated with new trends. This adaptability is crucial for freelancers to remain competitive and provide high-quality services to their clients [8]. Businesses consider working with them as the best way to access scarce resources with high potential [9,10].

Probably the most important advantage of freelancing is having a flexible work schedule. Recent studies demonstrate that the benefits of “working from anywhere” allow higher satisfaction, better income opportunities, and a good work–life balance. This is aligned with the desires of many freelancers who embrace the digital nomad trend, allowing them to earn an income while working from wherever they choose, including while traveling [11].

Freelancing is a dynamic and flexible form of labour that offers a range of economic opportunities, but it is also associated with various challenges. Access to global markets through digital platforms like Upwork and Fiverr highlights the financial advantages of this practice, the flexibility and control over personal work schedules, the ability to choose a workplace and employer, as well as the opportunity to design a personal career, among other benefits [12]. Such platforms offer extensive opportunities for professional realization, but they do not guarantee a continuous stream of projects or financial security and stability for freelancers [13]. This is reflected in studies that identify key factors contributing to overwork among freelancers, including financial insecurity, poor time management, and the constant need to network [14,15]. Researchers have shown that this is a real issue for the self-employed and can lead to mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety [16,17]. These factors increase stress levels, ultimately resulting in burnout, which is characterized by decreased morale and reduced work quality [18,19].

Taking on multiple work commitments is closely tied to the number of hours worked. In this sense, the notion that freelancers have a lot of free time is incorrect. In fact, freelancers work as many hours as salaried employees, and sometimes even more. Despite the lack of regulated working hours typical for salaried positions, freelancers often work longer hours, as their earnings depend on meeting project deadlines. In other words, a freelancer’s income is tied to their productivity, efficiency, and professional competencies [13]. The Freelancer Study presents the results of an international survey among 3424 freelancers and self-employed and indicates that 49% of freelancers work 30 to 40 h per week, 31% work between 39 and 40 h a week, 27% work between 46 and 50 h, and 9% work more than 50 h [20]. This study adds that freelancers spend an average of about 6 h per week on “unproductive work” such as client acquisition, accounting, and customer care.

Another work environment stress factor is competition, often perceived as influential in terms of increasing work ability and potential career development [21]. In examining competitiveness in the job market, some authors found that working in a competitive psychological climate accompanied by low trust leads to burnout [22]. An additional source of

stress is building good communication between freelancers and their clients. For a significant number of freelancers, interactions with clients take place in a virtual environment where digital feedback is the primary, if not the only, channel of communication.

The entry of freelancing as a new integrated form of entrepreneurship, using the possibilities of modern information and communication technologies, gives the opportunity to create new technologies, goods, and services and introduce them to the market [23,24]. The specificity of the work of freelancers is related to online platforms that require highly specialized skills, a significant volume of communication with clients, and immediate feedback [25]. Working with high-tech platforms greatly facilitates the activity of freelancers, while at the same time becoming a powerful stimulus for the development of their creativity. In practice, however, it turns out that the use of digital technologies leads to digital overload, which leads to a significant increase in the risk of burnout [26].

There is insufficient evidence in the literature to differentiate work environment stressors comparing freelancing with traditional employment in the context of burnout. However, several researchers point to key stressors in freelancers that increase the risk of burnout:

- Uncertain income. Freelancers often face financial instability due to irregular income streams. This lack of predictability can lead to chronic stress and anxiety because there is no guaranteed salary [16,17]. Constant financial uncertainty necessitates continuous efforts to secure new projects, which contributes to a high-stress environment and increases the risk of burnout.
- Short deadlines. Freelancers often face tight deadlines imposed by clients, which can lead to long working hours and increased pressure [27]. This often leads to extended periods of intense work, reducing recovery time and therefore increasing the likelihood of burnout.
- Creativity and innovation requirement. Freelancers must constantly provide creative and innovative solutions to remain competitive, which can be mentally draining [28].
- Offering lower prices. Competitive bidding often forces freelancers to underbid to secure projects, devaluing their labour and increasing financial pressures [29].
- Poor customer communication. Effective communication is critical to a successful implementation. Poor communication leads to misunderstandings and hinders productivity [25].
- Intense competition. The freelance market is highly competitive, requiring constant self-assertion and development [21]. Working in a dynamic and competitive environment often leads to emotional exhaustion.

This study contributes to the literature by showing that freelancer burnout is already a fact. The added value of this study is to enrich and complement the scientific knowledge of distress by studying professional burnout in freelancers. This is a significant contribution, as this target group is still poorly researched. Given the heterogeneity of the self-employed, official statistics cannot capture and unify them. An additional difficulty is the legal categories that qualify these workers [30]. Despite the observation that freelancers do not form a homogeneous group and that there are differences in their work and needs, a large-scale study of freelancers in Bulgaria was conducted based on the factors of the work environment characteristics of this business as a unifying element. Due to the great heterogeneity of subjects falling under the definition of freelance [31], we used the psychosocial factors of the work environment as a uniting element for the group.

The aims of the study were to determine the level of occupational burnout, define the factors of the work environment, and determine the degree of influence of work environment factors on the manifestation of burnout syndrome in freelancers.

In terms of these aims, the following hypotheses were raised:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *It is assumed that the level of burnout among freelancers, in view of the nature of their work, is high. The study looked at the following work environment factors: customer communication, deadlines, competition, remuneration, and creativity/innovation.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *It is assumed that a statistically significant effect of the work environment on the level of burnout will be found.*

New technologies are forcing employees to do more work and faster. We assumed that the factor “short deadlines” is logically related to the number of working hours, which leads to burnout. Likewise, the “uncertain income” factor should be logically linked to taking on more than one project, leading to burnout. In addition, communication with customers is tied to meeting deadlines. Highly skilled employees must be mentally committed to creative outcomes, take risks, try new things, explore boundaries, and understand what they can achieve after using them. However, the main resource for creativity is time, which they do not have, and this, in turn, inevitably leads to overwork and burnout [26,32].

In this regard, the following sub-hypotheses were developed (Figure 1):

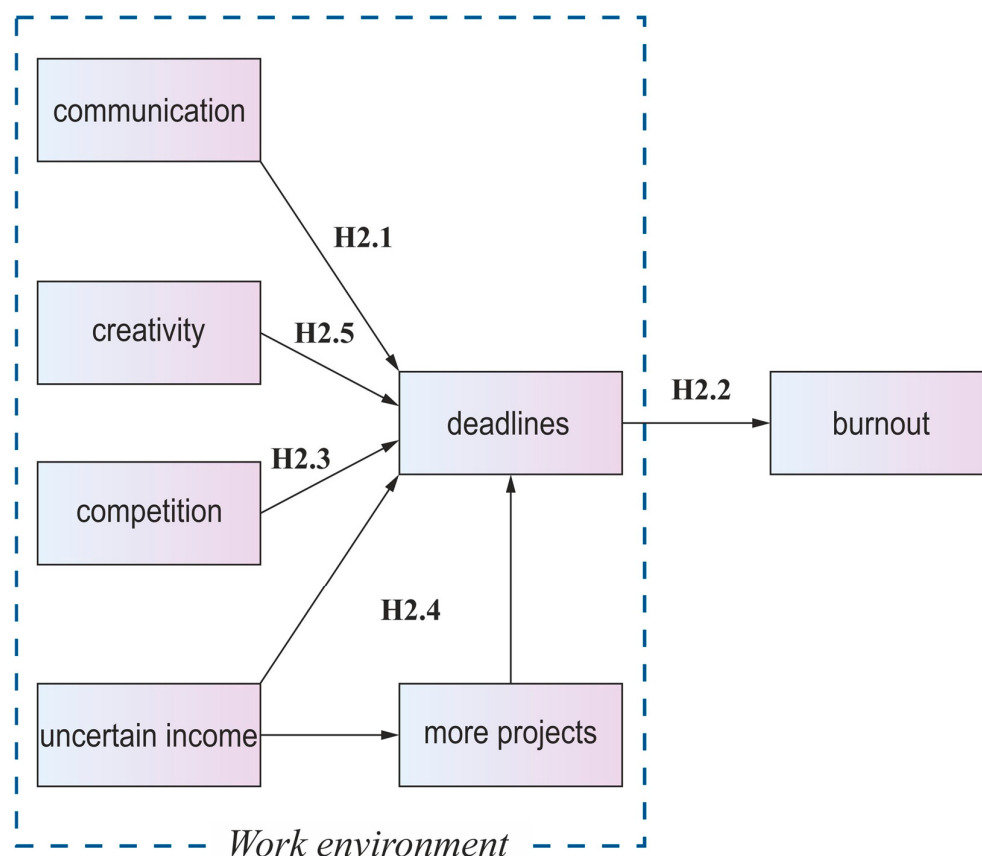


Figure 1. Research model with hypotheses.

H2.1. *There is an inverse relationship between poor communication and burnout levels.*

H2.2. *Tighter deadlines indicate high stress.*

H2.3. *High competition is associated with high burnout levels.*

H2.4. *Uncertain monthly income levels indicate high burnout levels.*

H2.5. *The requirement for creativity levels indicates high burnout levels.*

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

A test involving 1138 freelancers was carried out. The demographic profile of the sample is outlined by grouping the surveyed persons by gender, age, marital status, place of residence, employment, and profession (Table 1). The survey data was collected between May 2019 and September 2022. The sample of freelancers was recruited from all regions of Bulgaria. The interviewed persons are Bulgarians. Our intention was to obtain data from all employment sectors. In practice, the recruitment of participants is performed by sending invitations to professional groups on social media and by sending invitations to freelancers from our personal contacts and emails. In sampling, we purposefully sought to achieve a balanced participation in terms of gender, age, and occupation of the target group. Eligibility criteria for participation are based on the requirements that the individual has worked as a freelancer (self-employed persons who pay their own social security and tax obligations) for a period of more than one year and is of legal age (over 18 years).

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the three factors of the questionnaire and for the entire scale.

Burnout	Cronbach α	Standardized α	Number of Items
Emotional exhaustion	0.783	0.766	9
Depersonalization	0.702	0.695	5
Reduced personal accomplishment	0.767	0.776	8
Total scale reliability	0.706	0.684	22

It is important to emphasize that the majority of respondents (83%) participated in the study before the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample size also includes a small number (17%) of completed tests and surveys from during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria. At the beginning of the study (before the COVID-19 pandemic), the freelancers invited to participate willingly completed the surveys, which allowed us to quickly accumulate a significant amount of data. Often their responses were accompanied by emotional reactions, comments, and recommendations. Subsequently, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria, the number of people willing to participate in the study decreased sharply, and the comments were limited to "likes" only. That is why we did not consider it necessary to control this variable by observing if there are differences in the results obtained with the participants who answered before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The surveys were conducted in full compliance with the requirements of the Personal Data Protection Act. The criteria for science and ethics, as approved by the "Paisii Hilendarski" University of Plovdiv's Scientific Ethics Committee (RD-38-134/08/06/2022), were fully met. The study complies with the requirements of the Helsinki Declaration of Ethics in Science, the principles of good clinical practice, and Bulgarian laws and regulations for conducting clinical and scientific research involving human beings.

All data was anonymized. The detailed information that would enable the participants to be identified has been carefully reviewed and removed or modified. The confidentiality of electronic data is ensured by password protection. The results obtained are used solely for scientific purposes. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

2.2. Instruments

The participants were invited to anonymously complete an online survey that contained the following:

2.2.1. Maslach Burnout Inventory

Burnout levels were measured by Maslach Burnout Inventory [33]. The tool consists of 22 items using a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 6 points (0 = never; 6 = every day) that measure the three independent dimensions of the burnout syndrome: emotional exhaustion (EE, 9 items), depersonalization (DP, 5 items), and reduced personal accomplishment (RPA, 8 items). High scores on both the EE and DP subscales correspond to higher levels of burnout, whereas lower scores on the RPA subscale correspond to higher levels of burnout.

Emotional exhaustion is perceived as a core component that manifests as frustration, indifference, exhaustion, or indifference. Sample items are “I feel tired as soon as I get up in the morning and see a new working day stretched out in front of me”, “I feel frustrated by my job”, and “I feel used up at the end of my day”.

The second component (DP) affects the quality of relationships with other people. It often manifests as detachment, negativity, a cynical attitude towards others (clients, patients, colleagues), and a tendency towards self-isolation. Included here are sample statements such as “I’ve become more callous toward people since I took this work” and “I don’t really care what happened with some recipients”.

The third component (RPA) can manifest itself in a tendency towards lower self-esteem, absenteeism, and negativity towards work merits and career. Example items are “I feel I’m positively influencing other people’s live through my work” and “I feel very energetic”.

The reliability of the questionnaire subscales was measured using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for each scale and for the entire questionnaire (Table 1).

The reliability of the EE scale, which consists of 9 questions, is $\alpha = 0.78$ and is considered reliable. Cronbach’s alpha for the DP scale is also reliable (>0.7). The results of the measured Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the RPA scale are $\alpha = 0.767$. The overall factor of occupational burnout, based on all items on the three scales, is $\alpha = 0.706$. No differences were noted between the arithmetic mean and the variance for the items, so we used the unstandardized alpha α to assess reliability.

2.2.2. Work Environment Factors Questionnaire

An author’s pilot-tested questionnaire based on the example of a questionnaire for a study on the influence of socio-demographic, occupational, family and social environment factors on the manifestation of burnout syndrome among educational professionals [34]. The questionnaire contains a total of 17 items whose psychosomatic structure is organized around the following semantic cores: finding projects; reward-related stressors; stressors in the organization of work; stressors in dealing with clients; stressors in the work environment; social support. The Work Environment Factors Questionnaire included items oriented to the advantages and disadvantages of freelancing, which offered answers such as freer time, greater independence, the possibility of creativity, financial independence, and the possibility of additional income. We asked what the biggest stressors were in a freelancer’s work, with suggested answer options such as uncertain income, short deadlines, demand for creativity/originality and innovation, lower pay, lower (attractive) prices, poor communication with clients, great competition between colleagues, lack of vacation opportunities, insufficient time for family and yourself, and lack of working hours and workplace. The author’s questionnaire included other sample questions such as “have you ever been unemployed without work or in order not to lose”. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic profile of the sample by gender, age, marital status, employment, and professional direction.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics		<i>n</i>	%
Age group	20	22	1.9
	21–30	446	37.7
	31–40	380	32.1
	41–50	244	20.6
	over 50	91	7.7
Profession/occupation	IT sector	122	10.3
	Graphic, fashion, web design	64	5.4
	Administrative activity	73	6.2
	Finance and accounting	125	10.6
	Marketing and advertising	112	9.5
	Education	122	10.3
	Human resources	43	3.6
	Medicine	133	11.2
	Engineering and construction activity	57	4.8
	Law	48	4.1
	Trade and sales	58	4.9
	Journalistic and translation services	66	5.6
	Art	53	4.5
	Consulting services	53	4.5
	Hairdressing and cosmetics	54	4.6
Gender	Male	594	50.2
	Female	589	49.7
Marital status	Living together	504	42.6
	Single	137	11.6
	Family	101	8.5
	Divorced	441	37.2

“A client to commit to more projects” and “Because you work at home, my family and friends start asking for all sorts of favours during the day”.

To assess the overall extent of burnout symptoms, we analysed the percentage distribution in the three dimensions of burnout in the study group. In terms of emotional exhaustion, 40.91% of the participants ($n = 484$) scored high on this scale. High values on the DP scale were reported for 26.3% of the respondents ($n = 311$). RPA—the third dimension of burnout—is related to the self-assessment. The results of the analysis of the conducted study indicate that only 3.1% of the respondents ($n = 37$) had high values.

The results of the influence of socio-demographic factors on the levels of the studied constructs showed statistical significance, with a smaller than typical effect size $d < 0.20$

according to Cohen [35]. This result does NOT mean that they have no impact on the level of professional burnout. This is an indication that, if such an influence exists at all, it was not detected in this sample. For this reason, these factors are not considered in this research.

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationships between the nine identified work environment factors and two core dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion (EE) and depersonalization (DP). These two components were selected for analysis due to their strong theoretical and empirical links to acute stress responses in occupational settings. In contrast, RPA was excluded from this analysis, as its values in the current sample showed low variance and relatively low intensity. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 3. Several statistically significant associations were found between the selected work environment factors and the two burnout dimensions.

Among all environmental factors, only “poor customer communication” shows a direct, statistically significant correlation with the “depersonalization” scale. The correlation is negative, with a small or smaller-than-typical effect size, $r = -0.178$, $p < 0.01$. This suggests that lower levels of one construct are associated with higher levels of the other.

A similar relationship exists between the “emotional exhaustion” scale and the “tight deadlines” factor. The correlation between these variables is of a moderate or typical effect size, $r = -0.295$, $p < 0.05$. Additionally, tight deadlines are statistically associated with “high competition”, $r = -0.124$, $p < 0.05$, indicating that increased competition reduces the feasibility of setting adequate deadlines. Although small, this effect size is statistically significant.

High competition is also correlated with “emotional exhaustion” at a small effect size, $r = 0.181$, $p < 0.01$, and with “insufficient time for family and oneself”, $r = -0.123$, $p < 0.05$.

The effect size is typical or near-average in the correlation between “high competition” and “insecure monthly income”, $r = 0.289$, $p < 0.01$.

“Tight deadlines” are statistically significantly correlated with “insecure monthly income”, $r = -0.288$, $p < 0.05$, with an effect size that is typical or near-average.

A significant correlation is observed between “insecure monthly income” and “emotional exhaustion”, $r = -0.151$, $p < 0.05$, with a small effect size.

Importantly, insecure monthly income and poor customer communication show a positive, statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.201$, $p < 0.01$, small effect size), indicating that higher financial insecurity is associated with more difficulties in client communication. This relationship highlights how economic and relational stressors can reinforce each other in freelance work.

There is also a statistically significant linear correlation between “insecure monthly income” and “requirement for creativity/originality and innovation,” with a small or smaller-than-typical effect size, $r = 0.178$, $p < 0.01$.

Finally, a positive correlation was found between tight deadlines and offering lower (more attractive) prices, $r = 0.113$, $p < 0.05$, although the effect size is small. This suggests that price pressure and time pressure tend to co-occur, possibly as a competitive strategy in saturated marketplaces.

Pearson correlations only allow us to assess bivariate relationships. To explore the interaction in depth, we tested a more complex model that simultaneously includes the burnout dimensions and potential explanatory variables (such as tight deadlines, insecure income, high competition, etc.) using structural equation modelling.

Table 3. Correlation analysis between the variables.

Correlation Between	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Emotional exhaustion	1	0.495 **	−0.151 *	−0.295 *	0.009	−0.034	−0.079	0.181 *	0.031	0.051	0.014
2. Depersonalization		1	0.076	−0.084	−0.044	−0.011	−0.178 **	−0.025	−0.028	−0.066	−0.065
3. Insecure monthly income			1	−0.288 *	0.178 **	0.073	0.201 **	0.289 **	−0.070	−0.175 **	0.112
4. Tight deadlines				1	−0.007	0.113 *	0.062	−0.124 *	−0.002	0.091	0.046
5. Requirement for creativity/originality and innovation					1	−0.002	−0.080	0.037	−0.007	0.049	0.280 **
6. Offering lower (more attractive) prices						1	0.197 **	0.044	0.062	−0.057	0.031
7. Poor customer communication							1	0.045	−0.025	−0.033	−0.015
8. High competition								1	−0.076	−0.123 *	0.012
9. Lack of an opportunity to take vacation									1	0.261 **	0.071
10. Insufficient time for family and oneself										1	0.118 *
11. Lack of regular working hours and workplace											1
Mean ($\bar{x}$)	19.40	18.01	1.49	1.70	1.91	1.78	1.84	1.76	1.78	1.64	1.87
Std. Deviation	4.213	4.365	0.501	0.457	0.290	0.413	0.371	0.426	0.417	0.479	0.339

Pearson's linear correlation coefficient. The correlation is statistically significant: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) are presented in Figure 2. It illustrates the strength of the relationship between the latent variables identified in the Work Environment Factors Questionnaire and the relationship between the environmental factors and burnout. Burnout was modelled through two of its main dimensions: emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

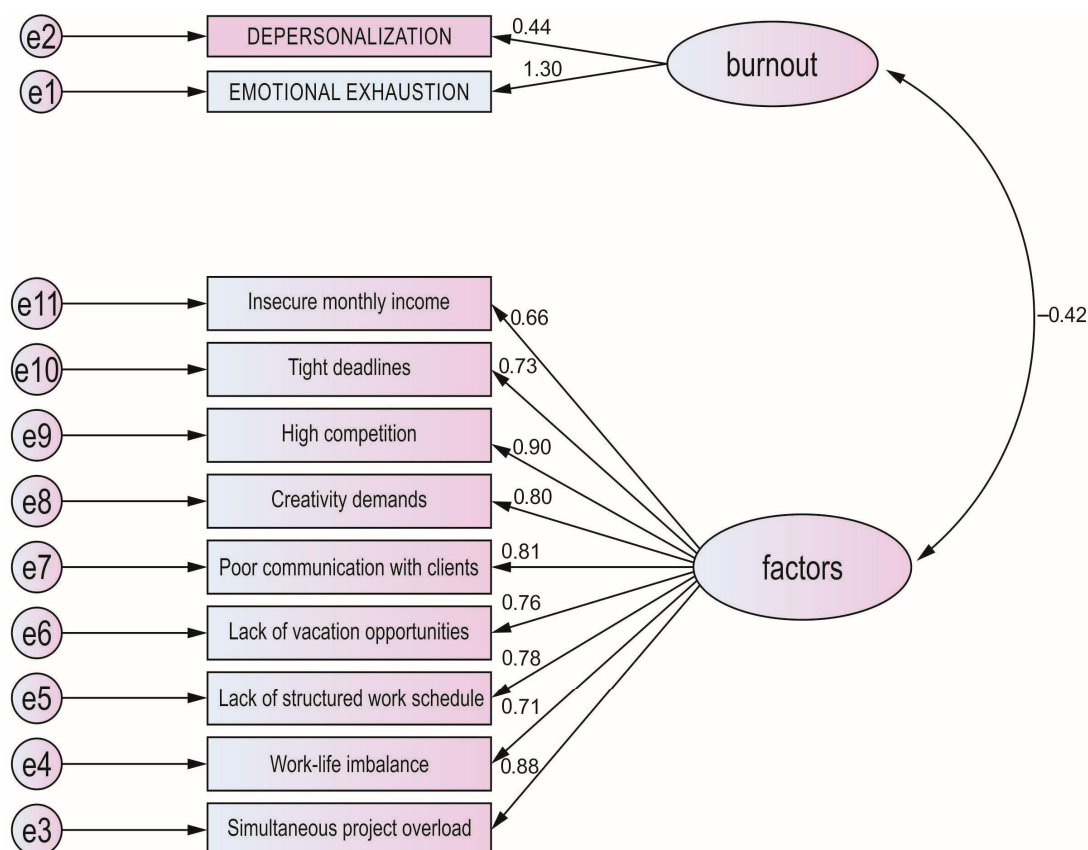


Figure 2. CFA model of the burnout dimensions and the work environment variables.

The results suggested that the fit indices for the resulting CFA model are acceptable, despite being statistically satisfactory (Table 4): χ^2 (df = 43) = 476.1, $p < 0.001$, standardized root mean square residual (RMSEA) = 0.082, and comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.947.

Table 4. Fit indices for CFA model.

Fit Measure	Good Fit	Acceptable Fit	Obtained Values Two-Factor Model
χ^2			476.1
df			43
P			0.000
RMSEA	$0 < \text{RMSEA} < 0.05$	$0.05 < \text{RMSEA} < 0.08$	0.082
NFI	$0.95 < \text{NFI} < 1.00$	$0.90 < \text{NFI} < 0.95$	0.942
CFI	$0.97 < \text{CFI} < 1.00$	$0.95 < \text{CFI} < 0.97$	0.947
GFI	$0.95 < \text{GFI} < 1.00$	$0.90 < \text{GFI} < 0.95$	0.929
AGFI	$0.90 < \text{AGFI} < 1.00$	$0.85 < \text{AGFI} < 0.90$	0.891

RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; NFI, normed fit index; CFI, comparative fit index; GFI, goodness-of-fit index; AGFI, adjusted goodness-of-fit-index [36].

In this result, the value of the RMSEA is satisfactory, whereas it is close to the 0.08 cut off for acceptable fit [37]. The chi-square (χ^2) test is sensitive to sample size, and this sensitivity can lead to significant results even with small differences between expected and observed values when the sample size is large [38]. This could lead to the rejection of a model that would otherwise be considered adequate if only the χ^2 statistic is relied upon. Due to this sensitivity, researchers using CFA typically rely on additional indices such as CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR, which provide a more accurate assessment of model fit and are less susceptible to sample size effects [36,39,40]. Given these factors, while the RMSEA could be slightly improved, overall, the model demonstrates the adequacy of the model's fit to the data in the context of CFA, especially when considering the strong CFI values as well as the limitations of the χ^2 test in large samples. Therefore, it would be reasonable to describe the model fit as acceptable, depending on the level of strictness in the criteria applied.

The standardized factor loadings with standard errors for the CFA model are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Standardized estimators of factor loadings for CFA.

Factors	Standardized Estimators	Standard Error	Z-Value	p-Value
Insecure monthly income	0.66	0.01	66	***
Tight deadlines	0.73	0.019	38.42	***
Requirement for creativity/originality and innovation	0.9	0.017	52.94	***
Offering lower (more attractive) prices	0.8	0.017	47.06	***
Poor customer communication	0.81	0.016	50.63	***
High competition	0.76	0.006	126.67	***
Lack of an opportunity to take vacation	0.78	0.012	65	***
Insufficient time for family and oneself	0.71	0.018	39.44	***
Lack of regular working hours and workplace	0.88	0.009	97.78	***
Emotional exhaustion	1.3	0.005	260	***
Depersonalization	0.44	0.015	29.33	***

Note: All factor loadings are statistically significant at *** $p < 0.001$.

Using the rules of thumb, all the factor loadings are considered fair to excellent, and all indicator variables significantly load on the expected latent variable [41]. The covariance analysis between factors and burnout indicates a negative relationship with values of $\beta = -0.47$; $b = -0.37$; $SE = 0.07$; $p < 0.01$, suggesting a moderate effect size with high statistical significance. This means that an increase in factor values is associated with a decrease in burnout levels. The correlation analysis also shows a negative relationship ($r = -0.42$), which confirms the observed model and further suggests a moderate interrelationship between these variables.

3. Discussion

The present study on burnout syndrome determines the degree of influence of work environment factors on the manifestation of burnout among freelancers. Given the nature of the work, which is associated with a balance between work and personal life, isolation, and pressure from self-employment, we hypothesized that the stress levels in the sample would be high.

We found highly elevated levels on the EE Scale, while the levels on the DP and RPA scales are significantly lower. Low levels on the “reduced personal accomplishment” scale

cannot be unequivocally related to certain organizational, personal, or situational factors, as they are instead the result of a complex interaction between personal characteristics and the specifics of the work environment. Independent professionals do not commit to work only on a specific project that corresponds to their professional competence. Therefore, it is difficult to assess to what extent essential factors such as “lack of social support at the workplace”, “lack of motivation”, and “poor relations with the colleagues” affect the reduction in personal achievement.

Due to the low values of burnout in relation to the third dimension of RPA, it was excluded from the analysis of the influence of work environment factors. This decision is consistent with prior research, which consistently shows that RPA demonstrates weaker and less consistent associations with situational work stressors compared to emotional exhaustion (EE) and depersonalization (DP) and may instead reflect more trait-like or dispositional aspects [3,42].

Additionally, studies have highlighted that RPA is less sensitive to variations in work environment factors. For instance, a study on healthcare workers found that work-related psychosocial factors explained only a relatively small amount of variance in reduced personal accomplishment, suggesting its limited responsiveness to situational stressors [43].

Furthermore, research has indicated that RPA is more strongly associated with individual personality traits than with work environment factors. A meta-analysis examining the Big Five personality traits and job burnout reported that neuroticism was positively related to all three burnout dimensions, with medium-sized effects found for emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and a small effect size found for reduced personal accomplishment [44].

These findings collectively support the decision to exclude RPA from the analysis, as its low variance and weaker associations with work environment factors may confound the interpretation of the impact of situational stressors on burnout.

The results based on the correlation analysis reveal a broad network of interconnections among the examined factors. Although not all of them correlate with the investigated construct of burnout, they demonstrate interrelationships with statistically significant effect sizes. This suggests an indirect, cumulative influence of environmental factors on the manifestation of the syndrome, with the overall effect size potentially characterized as significantly larger than typical. To verify this claim, a CFA was conducted using structural equation modelling. This approach also allowed for testing the metric aspects of the questionnaire in terms of content, construct validity, and reliability [45,46].

There are claims that burnout is strongly dominated by emotional exhaustion and that the additional burden of the other two dimensions is limited [47,48]. The authors view exhaustion as the primary cause (component), while other manifestations of emotional and behavioural disharmony are considered as consequences. Although the multidimensionality of burnout is widely recognized, there are both theoretical and practical reasons for burnout to be considered as a unified construct. Based on this, it can be concluded that the first hypothesis (H1) related to the assumption that the level of burnout among freelancers is high has been supported.

Their activity requires the development of generic leadership competencies related to managerial competence (planning, organizing, and coordinating projects), decision-making skills, building relationships (conflict resolution, teamwork, negotiation), business effectiveness (initiative, orientation to results, responsibility, will, attention to detail), communication competence (effective meetings, presentation, writing skills), attitude to changes (creativity, innovative thinking, conceptualization), and emotional stability (perseverance, resilience, stress, failures). The development of these competencies requires additional energy and time, which has its “price” from the point of view of work motivation. It is

important to emphasize that the group of freelancers is extremely diverse in terms of their workplace and professional employment.

However, emotional exhaustion is the core feature of the syndrome [49]. Many researchers agree that emotional burnout is a consequence of occupational stress, but it occurs and progresses when a person's adaptive capacity to overcome a stressful situation is exceeded [50–53].

Although there is evidence about chronic stress in freelancers, an extended literature search failed to find sufficient data about the influence of work environment stressors and their association with burnout.

Our assumptions of an interrelationship between reward, communication, dead-lines, creativity seeking, and high competition and their superior influence on burnout were not confirmed as we expected. While not all these factors correlate directly with the manifestations of burnout, they exhibit significant interrelationships with notable effect sizes. This suggests the possibility of an indirect, cumulative influence of environmental factors on the manifestation of burnout, with the overall effect size potentially being larger than expected. To prove this assumption, we included a CFA model, which simultaneously accounts for both the environmental factors and burnout measurements. The results confirmed our hypothesis of a cumulative indirect effect of environmental factors on the manifestation of burnout, which supported Hypothesis 2.

Maintaining relationships with clients requires effective communication skills. Good relationships and communication increase team efficacy, thus reducing negative consequences such as burnout [54]. The correlation analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between depersonalization and the factor “poor communication with clients,” which partially supports sub-hypothesis H2.1. Our data confirms previous studies [25,55] suggesting that the poor communication is critical for work quality, applying and managing projects, building a reputation, and personal brand. In this respect, worse customer communication increases stress levels. According to Deci, Olafsen, and Ryan, professionals engage in interpersonal relationships at the workplace not only to achieve their functional goals but also to satisfy their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and connectedness [56]. All of these results suggest that poor communication skills seem to influence the developmental dynamics of burnout.

The sub-hypothesis H2.2 (there is a relationship between deadlines and burnout) received partial confirmation. Our study shows that a great deal of work-related stress is due to work overload because of offering unrealistic deadlines, which leads to feelings of being overwhelmed and a loss of control. Freelancers can negotiate their rates when taking on a project but are often forced to accept tight deadlines. This is provoked by financial insecurity and high competition in the marketplace, which causes enormous stress, leading to several potential problems such as burnout, low morale, and low work quality [29,57,58].

Competition regarding delivery time is especially important in online business. To compete for increasingly time-sensitive customer projects, freelancers offer unreasonably tight deadlines. The proposed tight deadline is a prerequisite for a greater customer interest. However, this can lead to overcommitment, which prevents meeting time expectations, while the consequences of the delay of delivery can be costly not only in terms of business but also in terms of health [27]. Bunjak et al. note the positive influence of competition in terms of trust and teamwork [22]. Freelancing does not imply teamwork, and trust should be the subject of future research. Either way, our study shows a correlation between competition and EE, which supports the sub-hypothesis H2.3. Also, by examining this factor of the work environment we indirectly obtain information about the typology of the behaviour of a person who would start freelancing.

The sub-hypotheses H2.4 (there is a relationship between monthly income and burnout) received partial confirmation. The likely reason for this is that it is perceived uncertainty that predicts burnout; otherwise, statistics point to an increase in freelancers' incomes [59]. In the studied group, no correlation was established between the factor "requirement for creativity" and the two dimensions of professional burnout, which does not confirm sub-hypothesis 2.5. The possible explanation for why the requirement for creativity does not correlate with emotional exhaustion (burnout) may be related to the differences in these demands and their impact on employees. Research shows that creativity and innovation can serve as driving forces for engagement and motivation, which in some cases leads to reduced stress rather than increased stress [32]. Creative demands do not necessarily lead to stress and often generate a sense of satisfaction when they are properly guided and supported by the work environment [60]. The review of the data presented in the CFA model is crucial for understanding the burnout dimensions (EE, DP) and potential work environment variables. The factor weights range from 0.66 to 0.90, indicating that each of the studied variables has a significant effect size on the formation of the cumulative work environment impact factor.

The model that was used represents the first empirical study of its kind, i.e., examining the psychosocial risks of the occurrence of burnout because of the influence of the factors of the work environment in freelancers. Our data supports earlier studies showing that the surrounding environment is an extremely important prerequisite for a sustainable career, a successful personal life, and the well-being of independent workers [55,61,62].

Although most of the factors of the work environment are difficult to control, we believe that they can be the target of preventive interventions. At the individual level, training focused on improving social and stress management skills, alongside the development of boundary-setting, assertiveness, and negotiation skills, would be particularly beneficial.

Finally, we note some limitations when interpreting the results. First, the focus of the study is mainly on burnout and the impact on psychosocial factors of the environment and does not consider the influence of anxiety and depression symptoms because of factors outside the work environment. Further, the current study does not provide a definitive answer regarding the influence of demographic factors on the severity of burnout among freelancers. However, this article is one of the few large-scale surveys of burnout in freelancers conducted to date, so these limitations did not affect the purpose of the study, and it would be useful to investigate this in future research.

4. Conclusions

This research sheds light on a problem that is currently very poorly researched—professional burnout among freelancers. Based on an in-depth study, a questionnaire related to the factors of the work environment of freelancers was developed. Its metric aspects in terms of content, construct validity, and reliability are adequate. The existing interrelationships between the studied constructs are deduced and statistically substantiated. Changes in the economic, political, social, and cultural spheres in recent decades place increasingly high demands on participants in labour activities, including their intellectual and professional levels, the development of their abilities and talents, and their personal characteristics. The manifestation of burnout syndrome is a consequence of a discrepancy between the requirements for performing the activity and the necessary resources for performing this activity. If the work environment is unable to meet people's needs, it can reduce their energy and enthusiasm, leading to negative consequences such as high absenteeism, poor job performance, mental illness, anxiety, and work-related accidents.

The level of burnout among freelancers, in view of the nature of their work, is high. This is supported by the analysis of the results. A statistically significant relationship

between the factors of the work environment and the level of burnout is found. The study found statistical significance for the correlations between the environmental factors themselves. This gave us a reason to conclude that there is an indirect, cumulative interaction between these factors and the manifestation of burnout syndrome.

Therefore, accessible resources for researching and managing occupational stress and developing resilience in freelancers should be created and promoted. The expected benefits are aimed both at providing effective strategies for dealing with workplace stressors and preventing burnout and improving freelancer well-being to build a positive work environment.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Y.I. and T.M.; investigation, Y.I. and T.M.; methodology, Y.I. and T.M.; software and formal analysis Y.I. and T.M.; writing—original draft preparation, Y.I. and T.M.; writing—review and editing, Y.I. and T.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the University of Plovdiv's Scientific Ethics Committee (protocol code RD-38-134, approved on 8 June 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Each participant gave written informed consent.

Data Availability Statement: Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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