

European Journal of Social Work

ISSN: 1369-1457 (Print) 1468-2664 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cesw20

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To cite this article: Sofie Henze-Pedersen & Sine Kirkegaard (2025) Digital communication and child participation in child welfare services: a scoping review of potentials and challenges, European Journal of Social Work, 28:2, 300-312, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2024.2353854

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2024.2353854

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Published online: 16 May 2024.

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EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK
2025, VOL. 28, NO. 2, 300–312
https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2024.2353854

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Digital communication and child participation in child welfare services: a scoping review of potentials and challenges

Digital kommunikation og børneinddragelse: et litteraturstudie af muligheder og udfordringer

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ABSTRACT

The digitalisation of society has transformed the way people interact with each other – a development that has also influenced social work, pushing the discipline into a digital sphere. Today, social workers communicate with clients through e-mails, text messages, video calls and apps. The digitalisation of social work has entailed innovative ways of conducting social work, including the potential to strengthen children's and families' engagement with child welfare services. This paper investigates how digital communication can support child participation in casework. Based on a scoping review, the paper identifies three key themes related to digital communication in child welfare services: technologies and digital skills, the client–professional relationship and ethical and juridical dilemmas. We use the findings from the three themes to discuss how digital communication can support child participation in child welfare services. We focus on the potentials and challenges regarding access to the social worker and information sharing, control and influence as well as modes of closeness and distance brought about by the digitalisation of social work.

RESUMÉ

Digitaliseringen af samfundet har ændret den måde, som mennesker interagerer på – en udvikling, som også har fået betydning for praksisser indenfor socialt arbejde, og skubbet fagområdet ind i en digital æra. I dag kommunikerer sagsbehandlere og klienter gennem e-mails, tekstbeskeder, videoopkald og apps. Digitaliseringen af socialt arbejde har medført innovative måder at udføre socialt arbejde på, herunder potentialet for at styrke børns og familiers inddragelse i myndighedssager. Denne artikel undersøger, hvordan digital kommunikation kan understøtte børns inddragelse i myndighedssagsbehandling. Baseret på et litteraturstudie identificeres tre nøgletemaer relateret til digital kommunikation på myndighedsområdet: Teknologier og digitale færdigheder; relationen mellem klient og professionel; og etiske og juridiske dilemmaer. Vi anvender resultaterne under de tre temaer til at diskutere, hvordan digitale kommunikationsformer kan understøtte børneinddragelse i myndighedssagsbehandling gennem et fokus på de muligheder og

KEYWORDS
Digital communication; digital social work; digital technology; child participation; child welfare services

NØGLEORD
Digital kommunikation; digitalt socialt arbejde; digital teknologi; børneinddragelse; myndighedssagsbehandling

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udfordringer, der er forbundet med adgang til sagsbehandleren og deling af information, kontrol og indflydelse samt forskellige former for nærhed og distance, der er opstået i kølvandet på digitaliseringen af socialt arbejde.

Introduction

The digitalisation of social work has been a continuous development over the last three decades as the digitalisation of society has introduced new forms of communication and transformed the way people interact (Peláez & Marcuello-Servós, 2018; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). This has entailed a rise in the use of digital communication in social work – a development that was propelled even further by the COVID-19 pandemic that started in the early months of 2020 and called for a rapid change of practices across fields and sectors, including social work (Ferguson et al., 2022).

Digital communication is today an integral part of many social work practices (Nordesjö et al., 2022). Digital communication refers to technologies and forms of communication, such as e-mails, text and image-based messages, video calls, video conferences and social media (Ferguson et al., 2022; Steiner, 2021). The increasing digitalisation of social work has transformed the way clients and social workers interact. Digital communication enables asynchronous interaction, which means that clients and professionals do not have to meet at the same time and in the same space to communicate (Mishna et al., 2017). Thus, contact, planning and information sharing can take place without the direct interaction – or synchronic interaction – between the two parties, and take place from various and changing locations (e.g. the workplace and the home). This transformation entails both new possibilities and challenges (Nordesjö et al., 2022). One of the potentials of digital communication is to assist the participation of children involved with child welfare services. Research has shown that participation is challenging to realise in practice (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). For children, the relationship to the social worker is characterised by a duality: the social worker holds a strong position of (statutory) power but must also facilitate a collaborative environment based on trust (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Cossar et al., 2016). Furthermore, children depend on relevant and continuous information throughout the casework process to understand and influence decision-making (Dillon et al., 2016; Pastor et al., 2022). In a participatory perspective, digital communication has the potential to strengthen communication and interaction between children and social workers by affecting relationships of power, as well as by helping children be heard and influence decisions (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). This potential – and its associated challenges – is the focal point of the present paper.

Through a scoping review of 18 studies concerning digital communication with children involved with child welfare services, this paper investigates how digital communication can support the participation of children in casework. We explore three key themes developed from a thematic analysis of the studies: technologies and digital skills, the client-professional relationship and ethical and juridical dilemmas. We conclude by discussing how digital communication can support child participation in child welfare services. Even though our focus is on social work practices between social workers and children involved with child welfare services, since most child welfare cases involve the child's primary caregiver(s) (e.g. parents) as well, we also include their perspectives when they are reported alongside the perspective of the child. For the sake of clarity, we use the term *children* throughout the paper to refer to children and youth aged 0-18 even though a few studies also concerned young people over the age of 18 who have been involved with child welfare services.

Methods

This paper is based on a scoping review that followed Arksey and O'Malley's (2005, p. 22) five stages of identifying and reviewing literature: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant

studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data and (5) collating, summarising and reporting the results. In the following section, we describe these five stages in the context of the current study.

Stage 1: This study set out to explore how digital communication can support the participation of children in social work practices. However, after a preliminary viewing of the potentially relevant studies, it became clear that while most studies concerned the perspectives of social workers, only few studies included the perspectives of children. Thus, even though the paper is primarily concerned with digital social work practices between children and social workers, the analysis also includes studies solely concerned with the perspectives of social workers as well as studies that report on the experiences of children's caregiver(s) when these experiences appear alongside children's perspectives or concern digital practices within child welfare services.

Stage 2: We conducted a comprehensive search for relevant studies in the following electronic databases: Web of Science, Proquest, IBSS, Academic Search Premier, ERIC, APA, PsycInfo and SocINDEX. Furthermore, searches were conducted in key academic journals, the reference lists of relevant studies and Google Scholar. The second author and a research colleague conducted these searches. The searches employed a number of search terms, including 'digital communication', 'digital technology', 'e-social work', 'digital tool', 'social media', 'social work(er)', 'casework(er)', 'social services', 'child protection', 'child welfare', 'child(ren)', 'young people', 'participation', 'involvement' and 'relation(ship)'. Through this search strategy, 507 potentially relevant studies were identified (after excluding duplicates).

Stage 3: The potentially relevant studies were screened based on a range of inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria concerned study type, empirical context, language and year of publication. Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed articles based on empirical material collected in a Western context (to facilitate comparison across contexts) and published in English between 2015 and 2022. Thus, reviews, meta-analyses, reports and dissertations were excluded. Furthermore, if a study focused solely on digital technology without investigating communication between social workers and children (or caregivers), the study was excluded. Some included studies use the broad term 'clients' without specifying who (e.g. children or caregivers). The first level screening based on title resulted in 71 articles included for abstract reading. The subsequent reading of abstracts resulted in 32 potentially relevant studies. The final level of screening based on a full text reading of these studies resulted in 18 studies being included[1] (see Figure 1).

Stage 4: The 18 included studies were charted according to descriptive categories by the authors: type of publication, country, sample, methodology and results. These categories were chosen to facilitate comparison across the included studies, such as diverse methodologies (e.g. quantitative and qualitative studies), different perspectives (e.g. social workers' perspectives and children's perspectives) and various contexts (e.g. North American and European countries). It is important to note that only six of the studies include the perspectives of children. Three of these studies include the perspectives of both children (and caregivers) and social workers, while two studies include the perspectives of children and caregivers and one study focuses on children solely. Finally, the remaining studies include the perspectives of social workers and one study was based on documents describing digital communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stage 5: After charting the information about the individual studies, we conducted a thematic analysis across the studies. We identified three key themes: technologies and digital skills (e.g. types of communication), the client-professional relationship (e.g. the experience of client-social worker relationship) as well as ethical and juridical dilemmas (e.g. the privacy of clients). The three themes were the most common overarching themes across the studies. The themes are not mutually exclusive, and some of the studies dealt with one or several of these themes.

Results

In the following analysis, we organise and describe the results of the scoping review according to the three themes developed from the thematic analysis: (1) technologies and digital skills, (2) the client–professional relationship and (3) ethical and juridical dilemmas.

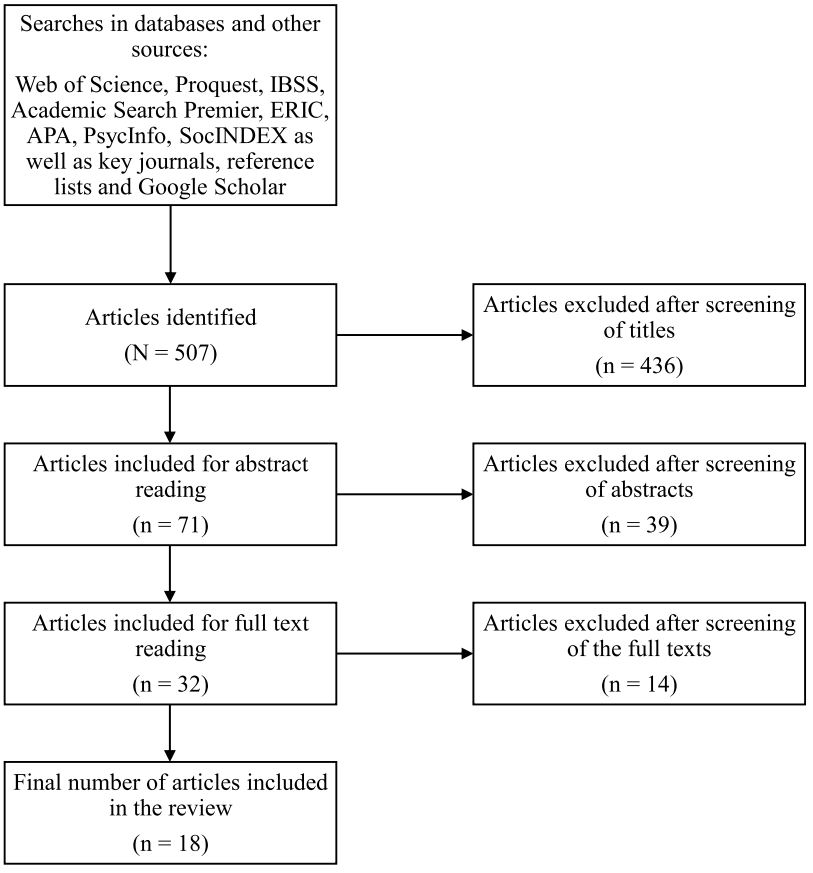


Figure 1. Flowchart of the literature search and screening process.

Technologies and digital skills

The digitalisation of social work has introduced new technologies that clients and social workers must learn how to use and navigate. While some technologies have been developed for social work specifically (e.g. social work apps), other existing technologies have been incorporated into social work (e.g. text messages). In this section, we describe the technologies used in social work, the new demands for digital skills and strategies these technologies have entailed and their technical challenges and limitations.

Most of the included studies concern existing technologies that have been incorporated into social work, such as e-mails, text messages, video conferences and social media. A study among social workers shows that e-mails and text messages are among the most common forms of digital communication (Breyette & Hill, 2015). In addition, some social workers find that families prefer text messages because they are less intrusive and the recipient can respond at their convenience (Gross et al., 2022; Jeyasingham, 2020). While e-mails and text messages have been used in social work for years, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of video calls and video conferences (e.g. virtual court hearings) (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022; Pink et al., 2022). Social media is also used in social work. Sometimes clients know the social worker has accessed their social media and sometimes they do not (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Cooner et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2022; Sage et al., 2017). A few studies describe new technological applications that have been developed for social work specifically, for example, the app 'MySocialworker' for children in care (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018; Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). The app enables children and their social worker to monitor

the children's wellbeing, positive behaviours, disturbances, interventions and agreements. Another app targets children in foster care (Denby et al., 2016; Gomez et al., 2021). This app enables contact between foster youth and their social worker and provides youth specialists a mechanism for sending electronic 'learning points' in relation to sessions the children attend. Finally, one study describes an approach to digital communication called 'Teledialogue', aimed at supporting the dialogue and relationship between children in care and their social worker (Andersen et al., 2018). These studies show that only a few of the technologies used in social work have been developed to specifically support this type of work; instead, social workers rely mostly on existing technologies and the potentials and limitations they entail.

Digital communication requires the use and development of digital skills among clients and social workers. Children are often articulated as a group of clients that are accustomed to and prefer using digital communication (Andersen et al., 2018; Breyette & Hill, 2015; Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). Some children describe how they can use the technical mediation to express themselves, for example, they turn off their webcam or think of it as an 'invisible wall' that makes it more comfortable to talk to the social worker (Andersen et al., 2018, pp. 51–52). The social workers also express that digital communication can benefit their work. For example, they can reach 'hard-to-reach' populations via social media and reduce the number of clients that fail to show to face-to-face meetings by sending reminders via text messages and because they find digital communication (e.g. text massages) convenient and efficient (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Byrne et al., 2019). A virtual meeting can give both families and social workers more control over the situation, by making it easier to leave or reschedule the meeting (Pink et al., 2022). However, engaging in digital communication requires access to technologies and digital skills. Some vulnerable families might not be able to afford technologies or may lack access to the internet, and some clients (e.g. older foster parents) and social workers may lack 'technological capital', which can lead to limited co-corporation with child welfare services and inadequate case-management (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022). Therefore, a study highlights the importance of training in the use of digital technology (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018). This emphasises the need to support the development of digital skills as well as a need for discussing and adjusting the use of digital communication in collaboration with the client.

Employing digital communication in social work is not without challenges. There can be technical issues, such as an app crashing (Gomez et al., 2021) and the need for technical maintenance and updates (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018). Furthermore, when digital communication is compared to face-to-face meetings, social workers describe challenges such as assessing safety and risk via virtual meetings (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022; Ferguson et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2022), sensing the wellbeing of clients on video calls (Gross et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2022), picking up on non-verbal information via text messages (Ryan & Garrett, 2018) and the risk of misunderstandings (e.g. text messages) (Jeyasingham, 2020). A study on how child welfare agencies adjusted their practices during the COVID-19 pandemic finds that social workers determined whether to investigate a concern about child safety via a virtual meeting or an in-person meeting based on the nature of the concern (Seay & McRell, 2021). In addition, while digital communication can be effective with some clients and in some situations, it cannot stand alone or substitute face-to-face meetings. Several studies suggest that digital communication is useful for 'light' and brief communication and that text-messaging especially is mostly useful for close-ended questions (e.g. scheduling or brief check-ins) (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Byrne et al., 2019). Another challenge is that digital communication can be more easily disrupted or dropped compared to in-person meetings. A study finds that both children and social workers were more inclined to cancel virtual meetings compared to in-person meetings (Andersen et al., 2018). The age of the child can also influence the effectiveness of digital communication. For example, some social workers experience that younger children might end a video call abruptly if they lose interest and that this form of communication works better with older children (Pink et al., 2022). This suggests that digital communication is not possible or suitable in all situations and that this form of communication is vulnerable – either because of technical issues or because it is experienced as less formal and binding.

The relationship between client and professional

The client-professional relationship is often emphasised as an important aspect of social work practices (Nordesjö et al., 2022). Digital communication gives this relationship a new dimension, as the relationship is not only practiced in a physical sphere but also in a digital sphere. This entails new possibilities to establish and maintain contact as well as new forms of control. In this section, we describe digital contact between clients and social workers, as well as how they experience the relationship with one another in a digital context.

Digital communication has created new forms of contact between children and their social worker. For many children, digital communication (e.g. an app or emails) has made it easier to contact their social worker independently, because it gives them a direct line of contact to their social worker (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018; Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019; Simpson, 2017), and because they do not have to involve others (e.g. their foster parents) to facilitate the contact (Andersen et al., 2018). In a study on communication via a smartphone, children also experienced increased accessibility of their social worker, which in turn strengthened their relationship because the children could reach the social worker at any time (Denby et al., 2016). Furthermore, digital communication, such as text messages and social media, can create a sense of 'social presence' – a way of feeling connected despite being physically apart. Such social presence can help build a meaningful relationship between children and social worker; however, it requires that social workers use a range of communication forms, such as texting and status updates (Simpson, 2017, pp. 93–94). In this way, in addition to increasing the presence of the social worker in the child's life, digital communication facilitates new ways of staying in touch as well as establishing and maintaining relationships.

From the children's perspective, digital communication can influence the client-social worker relationship both positively and negatively. A study on children and their carers shows that they expect social workers to use different forms of communication (e.g. mobile devices and social media). When these expectations are not met, it can cause frustration, disappointment and a feeling of lack of care (Simpson, 2017). Furthermore, digital communication provides a new territory for building relationships that can provide new roles. Because children are often more experienced in using digital communication than their social worker, they become the 'expert' (Andersen et al., 2018). Moreover, using an app to develop and stay updated on goals can support the relationship because it can strength the professional alliance between child and social worker. Not only does using an app enable children to report on how they are doing at their convenience, these reports can also form the basis of conversations with the social worker (Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). Digital communication can also help build relationships because it can make the social worker more relatable to children, for example, if the social worker is on video call from home and the child can see the social worker's hobbies or pets (Andersen et al., 2018). Finally, digital communication, such as an app, can enable children to communicate openly with their social worker (e.g. express emotions), which in turn can strengthen the bond between them (Denby et al., 2016). However, if digital communication is used to monitor risk behaviour (e.g. registering school attendance in an app), there is a risk that the child will stop using the technology (Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). Thus, for many children, digital communication is an integrated and expected form of communication that provides a new space for building relationships.

From the perspective of the social workers, digital communication can support the client-professional relationship; however, it can also entail the risk of overstepping professional boundaries. According to social workers, communication via smartphones can help establish and strengthen relationships because it enables children in care to initiate contact and creates the potential for consistent communication, which helps maintain the relationship (Gomez et al., 2021). Similar to the children, some social workers highlight that digital communication provides a new arena for building relationships. These social workers experience that digital communication brings them closer to the everyday lives of children in care. Some of the social workers feel that digital communication (e.g. video calls) facilitates a more intimate dialogue and places them in a better position to assess the

wellbeing of children. However, when the social worker comes closer to the children, this sometimes means that other professionals involved in the children's lives feel that professional boundaries are overstepped, as the daily support of most children in care is the responsibility of other professionals (e.g. pedagogues or foster parents) (Andersen et al., 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many social work practices moved from a physical space to a digital space. In this context, some social workers experienced that digital communication enabled them to maintain or establish trust to families in that it enabled them to ensure that the families were safe (Pink et al., 2022). Thus, digital communication can support continuous communication that also brings social workers closer to the everyday lives of children. However, the increased closeness can entail the risk that the social worker becomes too involved in the child's everyday life and thereby step into the role of other professionals.

Ethical and juridical dilemmas

The use of digital communication in social work practices has introduced a range of ethical and juridical dilemmas (Nordesjö et al., 2022; Reamer, 2013). Social workers have always been concerned with developing ethical standards, but digital communication has added a new layer to these ethical considerations (Reamer, 2013; Steiner, 2021). In this section, we describe ethical and juridical dilemmas concerning privacy, confidentiality, surveillance and boundaries.

The use of digital communication can make it difficult to ensure clients' privacy and confidentiality. For example, social workers do not always know whether an unauthorised party has overheard a telephone conversation, or whether someone is present outside the field of vision on video calls (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022). In addition, families who rely on public internet access may lack privacy if they have to participate in digital meetings from a public space (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022). Furthermore, some social workers have experienced that, in an attempt to influence their case, parents have shared information from their child's social media profile without the child's consent (Byrne et al., 2019) or that other people (e.g. family members) have sent them screenshots from social media profiles (Cooner et al., 2020). In continuation of this, one study emphasises the need to focus on the legal requirements of storing and responding to digital communication, such as text messages (e.g. how and when social workers should respond) (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018). Another study notes that using digital communication (e.g. social media) can entail that confidential information is shared via platforms that are not encrypted (Simpson, 2017). In this way, digital communication can make it difficult to ensure that information does not reach unintended audiences and that information is not accessed or shared without consent.

Digital communication – and social media especially – can provide access to and information on the lives of clients with or without their knowledge. This entails ethical and juridical dilemmas related to monitoring clients' activities. The studies on social media do not specify the type of client (e.g. children or parents), but employ the broad term 'clients'. Several social workers express uncertainty regarding where the ethical and juridical boundaries are with regard to using information from social media versus a client's rights to privacy (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Byrne et al., 2019; Ryan & Garrett, 2018; Sage et al., 2017). Social media profiles are used by some social workers to gain information on clients' activities and behaviour (Cooner et al., 2020). The social workers provide different justifications for monitoring clients' activities online, for example, that social media profiles are 'public', that it can give insight into a client's risk factors, or that it can help ensure that a client (e.g. a child) is safe (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Byrne et al., 2019; Cooner et al., 2020; Ryan & Garrett, 2018; Sage et al., 2017). Furthermore, a couple of studies describe how a small number of social workers have created fake social media profiles to monitor clients' activities (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Cooner et al., 2020). While in some instances information found online can affect decisions or services (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Cooner et al., 2020), other social workers question the validity and factual nature of information found online (Cooner et al., 2020; Ryan & Garrett, 2018). Some studies highlight that agencies and institutions often do not have guidelines on how to use existing

technologies in social work practices – especially social media – leaving it up to the individual social worker to determine this (Cooner et al., 2020; Ryan & Garrett, 2018; Sage et al., 2017; Stott et al., 2017). Thus, digital communication has made it possible to access information without the client's knowledge. Even though most social workers express concerns related to these practices, the lack of clear guidelines entails an ethical and juridical grey zone regarding the client's right to privacy.

Due to its very nature, digital communication can transcend boundaries, for example, the boundary between professional and personal relationships, which entails ethical dilemmas related to keeping a professional distance. While digital communication is purposefully employed to minimise the distance between children in care and their social worker in one study, some of the social workers in this study express that they have to avoid becoming 'too' close (e.g. friend-like relationship) (Andersen et al., 2018). A specific dilemma mentioned in several studies is whether to accept friend requests from clients (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Sage et al., 2017), and some social workers find that it can cause problems in their relationship to the client if they ignore a friend request (Ryan & Garrett, 2018). Other social workers have experienced that clients have accessed personal information about them on social media (Ryan & Garrett, 2018). On the other hand, some children find that the use of digital communication can bring them closer to their social worker, and some express that they experience regular updates as genuine interest on the part of the social worker (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018; Simpson, 2017). However, some children feel that the social worker comes too close and intrudes on their private lives (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018). For example, children who used an app to communicate with their social worker discussed whether the information they shared was too personal or private (Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). Another boundary is between work and leisure. Several social workers express that digital communication can break down the boundaries between work and leisure. Even though some of them try to set boundaries that separate their work life and private life (e.g. by not answering the phone in the evening), it can be difficult to uphold this boundary if a child in urgent need of support contacts them (Andersen et al., 2018; Breyette & Hill, 2015). Finally, some social workers have experienced harassment from clients, such as threats or insults (e.g. emails or on social media) (Breyette & Hill, 2015). Thus, digital communication can break down both professional and work-related boundaries entailing relational grey zones and blurring of roles, which can make it difficult to uphold a professional distance.

Discussion

Digital technologies and communication modes are an integral part of society today and have highly impacted interactions. This is also true of social work where digitalisation has transformed professional practices, presenting new potentials as well as new challenges (Lagsten & Andersson, 2018). Digitalisation of social work requires adjustment of existing practices and adaptation of new practices but also enables the emergence of innovative ways of performing social work that can empower clients (Craig & Lorenzo, 2014, p. 847). Digital communication holds the potential to support children's contact with the child welfare system (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). Engaging children in child welfare services is central, as these services intervene in and affect their lives (Skauge et al., 2021). Yet, how to best ensure child participation continues to be a challenge for social work researchers and practitioners (Skauge et al., 2021; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Supporting children's opportunities to participate in their child welfare case requires continuous and trusting interactions between children and their social worker to exchange information on processes and services as well as the wellbeing of the child. Such communication and interactions are a prerequisite for ensuring that children understand and can influence their child welfare case (Henze-Pedersen & Bengtsson, 2024). How digital communication can support child participation is explored below.

Digital communication can make the social worker more accessible to children and facilitate sharing of information. Research on child participation has shown that many children lack access in the casework process, such as access to meetings and access to their social worker (Dillon,

2018; Husby et al., 2018). Children who have positive experiences with child participation highlight that access to the social worker is a key aspect of participation (Falch-Eriksen et al., 2021). In this regard, digital communication can increase children's access to their social worker as it gives them new ways of communicating with the social worker, for example, through an app or texts (Andersen et al., 2018; Denby et al., 2016; Simpson, 2017). Another issue is that many children lack (age-appropriate) information throughout the casework process (Balsells et al., 2017; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Pastor et al., 2022). Digital communication enables brief check-ins and status updates (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Byrne et al., 2019; Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019) and can thus serve as a way to exchange information continuously – both on the casework process and the child's wellbeing. However, not all children have access to digital technologies due to unequal access to technologies such as internet and smartphones (e.g. among low-income groups) (Fond-Harmant et al., 2023), which means that some children cannot participate in child welfare services on the same terms as other children, entailing the risk of (further) marginalising children who are already in a vulnerable position. Furthermore, some children are in such a position of risk that they avoid digital contact (Andersen et al., 2018; Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019), illustrating that certain groups of social work clients can be difficult to reach with digital communication (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023). Therefore, for these children digital communication can potentially hinder their participation in the casework process.

The use of digital technologies and communication can strengthen children's control and influence in the casework process. Digital communication gives children increased control over the child welfare encounter because it enables children to communicate with their social worker on their own terms and in their own time (Andersen et al., 2018; Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018; Simpson, 2017). Digital technologies provide a new medium through which children can express themselves (Andersen et al., 2018), which in turn can support child participation. Digital technologies (e.g. apps) can also work as a collaborative tool, helping children express their views and influencing the focus of services (e.g. goals) (Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). In this way, digital technologies can create a platform for children to share their needs and wishes. Furthermore, the use of digital communication can push to the asymmetrical relationship of power between children and social workers. Previous research has identified this asymmetry as a potential barrier for child participation (Falch-Eriksen et al., 2021), because it can become a barrier for children to express their views and to be heard (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Dillon et al., 2016). While many present-day social workers did not grow up with digital technologies, for many children it is an integral part of their lives and they are accustomed to using these technologies (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Megele & Malik, 2020); this can place children in an expert role in the child welfare services encounter.

The incorporation of digital technologies into social work practices has created a new space for the client-social worker relationship, entailing new possibilities for navigating the child welfare encounter through closeness and distance. A trusting relationship to the social worker is a central part of child participation, because such a relationship can help ensure co-operation (Sæbjørnsen & Willumsen, 2017) and support open communication (Cossar et al., 2016). Digital communication can increase the social presence of the social worker in children's lives (Simpson, 2017) and make the social worker more relatable (e.g. on video calls) (Andersen et al., 2018) and ultimately support the building of relationships (Denby et al., 2016). However, the increased presence of the social worker can be experienced as an intrusion, and regular updates and information entail the risk that children experience such contact as monitoring or surveillance (Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). Furthermore, digital technologies have made it possible to access and share information without the child's knowledge, which can compromise their privacy. If digital communication is experienced as a breach of privacy or as surveillance, this may negatively affect the child's trust in the social worker and thus negatively affect the client-social worker relationship. Furthermore, because digital communication also contains distance, it can be experienced as less formal, leading to disruptions and cancelled meetings. The physical distance to the lives of children and families can also make it difficult for social workers to get close to and discover child or family issues (Andersen

et al., 2018; Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022; Gross et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2022; Seay & McRell, 2021). When the client-social worker relationship becomes dematerialised, this may affect the quality of services (Sibilla & Gorgoni, 2023). Other research describes that social workers emphasise the importance of face-to-face meetings with clients in regard to developing a meaningful relationship (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023). Thus, if the client-social worker relationship is only practiced in the digital sphere and not in the physical sphere, this may prevent the building of a meaningful relationship and therefore negatively affect the building of a trusting client-social worker relationship, which is a key aspect of child participation.

Conclusion

Existing digital technologies and new digital developments have in the last three decades been incorporated into social work, transforming the way clients and professionals communicate and interact (Peláez & Marcuello-Servós, 2018). Digital communication holds the potential to support child participation by enhancing children's access to their social worker and enable the sharing of information as well as continuous contact on children's terms. Furthermore, the use of digital communication can create a collaborative platform and place children in an expert role, giving children control and influence in the asymmetrical relationship between children and social workers. Digital communication can also strengthen the relationship between child and social worker as this form of communication can make the social worker more present in children's lives and more relatable. However, moving social work practices to a digital sphere is not without challenges. The constant possibility of communicating and accessing information can be experienced as intrusive or as surveillance with the risk of compromising the privacy of clients and negatively affecting the building of trust in the client-social worker relationship. Finally, while digital communication can create a sense of closeness, it can also entail distance as the remote and informal nature of digital communication can make it vulnerable to cancellations and make it difficult to assess safety and risk. Therefore, digital communication should be seen as a supplement to other social work practices.

This study is limited by its relatively brief timespan looking at studies published from 2015 to 2022. Digitalisation of society and the innovative practices developed during the COVID-19 pandemic are rapidly changing the way social work is conducted. Thus, studies might already have been published with new findings that are relevant to the current topic. Furthermore, the studies have been generated in diverse contexts and are based on various methods. Even though our goal is not to generalise, this still makes it difficult to draw conclusions across the different studies as the results are exclusive to a specific context. Finally, only few studies were identified that address children's experiences of digital communication. Children's wellbeing is the focal point of child welfare services, and therefore children's experiences of interacting in a digital sphere are important to examine to ensure that children's needs are met in a way that is meaningful to them. For example, even though research describes that social workers emphasise the importance of face-to-face meetings in developing meaningful client-social worker relationships (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023), how do young clients who are accustomed to using digital communication view this? As the digitalisation of social work will continue in the coming years, it is essential that future research focuses on the perspectives of young clients and how digital communication can support or challenge their engagement with child welfare services.

Note

1. The 18 studies that are part of the scoping review are marked with an asterisk (*) in the reference list.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Danish Foundation TrygFonden.

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