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Strategic Information: A Qualitative Study on the Use of Digital Curriculum Vitae for Social Work with Vulnerable Clients

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of the digital curriculum vitae (CV), a digital information system, in social work with vulnerable clients. The investigation takes the constructionist grounded theory approach to examine twenty-one open-ended qualitative interviews with social workers in Danish job centres. Social workers use digital CVs in three ways. First, they collect detailed information about their clients through a digital CV, which tests their vulnerable positions. Second, social workers can use the information collected in the digital CV to reveal skills and resources that clients do not value and rework the attitudes of clients towards the labour market. Third, social workers who work with the most vulnerable clients avoid and adapt digital CV usage to benefit their clients and thus resist prescribed procedures. Overall, the use of digital CVs depends on the perceived vulnerability of the clients. The current study shows that social workers collect and strategically employ digitally stored information to help their clients. Hence, they may risk overlooking the complexity of social issues or compromising the transparency of social work. The study demonstrates that the digitalisation of public service makes social work strategic in response to socially and technologically constraining welfare situations.

Keywords: digitalisation, information, social work, strategic, vulnerable clients

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Introduction

Digitalisation is now ubiquitous in society; thus, it also permeates the public sector (Schou and Pors, 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich *et al.*, 2021). Public services are increasingly digitalising to support and govern social work through features such as case recordings, automation, risk assessments, information systems, online counselling, video meetings and decision-making systems (Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Gillingham, 2015, 2021; Eubanks, 2018; Plesner *et al.*, 2018). New conceptualisations of social work include 'e-social work' (Eito Mateo *et al.*, 2018; López Peláez *et al.*, 2018), the 'electronic turn' of social work (Parton, 2008) or 'digital social work' (Løberg and Egeland, 2023; Zhu and Andersen, 2021). These alternatives emerge from the adaptation of varied digital tools and information and communication technology (ICT) structures.

Digital technologies are not passive tools: they must be understood as an aspect of the encounter between social workers and clients and should be apprehended within organisational and societal contexts (Gillingham, 2013; Plesner *et al.*, 2018; Steiner, 2021). Varied investigations have probed changes in social work because of new technological developments, such as the coping responses and strategies of frontline workers (Breit *et al.*, 2021; Ylvisaker and Rugkåsa, 2022), sanctioning practices (Wright *et al.*, 2020; Vilhena, 2021; Torsvik *et al.*, 2022), emotional labour induced by digital technology (Løberg and Egeland, 2023), the interactions and responses of social workers *vis-à-vis* the implementation of new technologies (Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Gillingham, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2021) and social worker–client relationships (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022).

The effects of digitalisation generate new challenges for socially disadvantaged clients of welfare services (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014; Schou and Pors, 2019). Research has demonstrated that socially disadvantaged individuals find it difficult to engage with digital technology and ICT structures due to, e.g. lack of knowledge, access, skills and resources to navigate digital technology, which leads to digital exclusion and exacerbation of existing inequalities (Watling and Crawford, 2010; Helsper and Reisdorf, 2017; Schou and Pors, 2019; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2019; Ragnedda *et al.*, 2020). This article supplements the literature on the digitalisation of social work with a focus on vulnerable clients. The study empirically investigates the perspectives of social workers on their use of digital CV, a digital information system, in their work with vulnerable unemployed clients in Danish job centres. The analysis that follows is theoretically inspired by Goffman's (1969) framework on strategic interaction as it explores the interplay between social work, digital technology and information. The article addresses the following research question: How do social workers use the digital CV, a digital information system, in their interactions with vulnerable clients?

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Digitalising information in social work

Digital technologies make it easy to collect data in interactions (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022; Trittin-Ulbrich *et al.*, 2021). Although, the storing and recording of information are not new to social work, the level of documentation and the types of information stored in systems are novel developments (Parton, 2008). Such developments spark scholarly tensions about whether social work is shaped by or is shaping relevant digital technologies (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022). Research reveals a change in information collected through technologies in social work. A key argument in this literature is that information technology requires social workers to document detailed accounts of clients, producing informational descriptions that follow the logic of a database rather than social and narrative information (Parton, 2008; Steyaert and Gould, 2009; Gillingham, 2013). Depth of social explanations is replaced by surface information that results in social workers attending more to what clients do and less to why they do it (Gillingham, 2015). Working with surface information introduces the risk of neglecting the complexity of the clients' problems (Parton, 2008; Gillingham, 2015, 2021; Lagsten and Andersson, 2018; de Witte *et al.*, 2016). Huuskonen and Vakkari (2015) found that the information stored in client information systems depended on intentional and unintentional selections by social workers. Clients can co-author their records through silence, controlling the offered information and withholding specific details (Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015). Research highlights the importance of critically examining social workers' selection, recording and use of information for digital client information systems (Gillingham, 2015; Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015).

Investigating talk surrounding the process of documentation, Matarese and Caswell (2018) demonstrated that talk directed strictly towards standardised forms did not substantially allow client participation but granted much transparency and accountability (Matarese and Caswell, 2018). However, talk that did not directly adhere to forms allowed greater client participation but less transparency and accountability (Matarese and Caswell, 2018). Recent research initiatives have pinpointed the inextricable nature of the problems and potentials of digitalisation in social work (Steiner, 2021). Researchers must thus consider both the beneficial effects of digitalisation (de Witte *et al.*, 2016; Eito Mateo *et al.*, 2018; Løberg and Egeland, 2023) and the problematic consequences of digitalising public services (Trittin-Ulbrich *et al.*, 2021; Plesner and Justesen, 2022).

Resisting structural constraints of welfare situations

Welfare institutions provide asymmetric and structurally constrained conditions for the encounters between social workers and clients

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(Mäkitalo, 2006; Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014; Mik-Meyer and Silverman, 2019). Digital technologies take part in these structural constraints and can change, strengthen and challenge social worker–client relationships (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022). In welfare institutions, such as unemployment services, professionals are assumed to take a neutral stance as institutional representatives to accomplish institutionally defined results (Mäkitalo, 2006). In this context, social workers might find ways of collaborating with clients to solve clients' problems and reach organisational goals (Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2021). One such approach can be engaging in acts of resistance. The notion of 'resistance' describes everyday professional acts that counter coercive practices and pertains to aspects such as restrictive working conditions or imposed structures and regulations that affect the quality of work and influence welfare delivery (Carey and Foster, 2011; Strier and Breshtling, 2016; Feldman, 2022).

Professionals engaging in acts of resistance can be characterised as rogue social workers (Weinberg and Banks, 2019, p. 372). Conceptually, rogue social work follows the principles of social justice and ethics, and the term describes acts of bending the rules to manage demands and contradictions arising from policies and practices (Weinberg and Banks, 2019).

Deviant social work (Carey and Foster, 2011, p. 578) is another way of defining resistance in social work, and this term describes small acts of resistance, deception or sabotage. These acts can include spending more time on clients than assigned, exaggerating client needs, confronting management or using punitive interventions reluctantly (Carey and Foster, 2011). Deviant social work can be valued as positive when social workers engage in acts of lying and reshaping practices to benefit their clients (Carey and Foster, 2011, p. 587).

Resistance can also take the form of disruptive social work (Feldman, 2022, p. 760), which describes collective acts of resistance against authorities to support marginalised clients or oppose the worsening of one's working conditions. Resistance is, however, a contested concept in social work literature (Strier and Breshtling, 2016) and needs further empirical and theoretical examination (Carey and Foster, 2011; Strier and Breshtling, 2016).

Overall, the existing research on the digitalisation of public services encourages further investigation and mandates the application of novel theoretical perspectives to digitalisation of public services and its implications for social work (de Witte *et al.*, 2016; Lagsten and Andersson, 2018; Plesner *et al.*, 2018; Steiner, 2021). The interactions of social workers with digital technology and the collected information as well as resistance in social work should be subjected to further scrutiny (Carey and Foster, 2011; Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015; López Peláez *et al.*, 2018; Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022). This examination constitutes a focal point for the present study, which is grounded in Goffman's (1969) framework of strategic interaction.

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Expression games and identity tags

Goffman (1990, p. 75) contemplates that the continued development of technological devices will create easier access to personal information for professionals of the state. This study employs the concept of 'expression games' (Goffman, 1969) in strategic interaction to investigate how the digital CV is utilised as an information system in interactions between social workers and clients. As all interaction is embedded in social structures, strategic interaction and expression games comprise general situations of reactions towards socially impinged welfare situations (Goffman, 1969; Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2021). The notion of expression games emanates from game-theory ideas and concerns the fundamental moves that occur between two parties in the pursuit of obtaining information (Goffman, 1969). In such instances, '[i]nformation becomes strategic' (Goffman, 1969, p. 10). Such situations depict mutual attempts to convince the other party of one's self-representation: people make moves in conversations to persuade the other party about one's appearance and thus effort to construct biographical coherence (Goffman, 1969; Brensinger and Eyal, 2021). Self-representations are tested for misrepresentation if one party detects that all relevant information has not been revealed (Goffman, 1969; Brensinger and Eyal, 2021).

Expression games comprise moves and countermoves (Goffman, 1969, p. 14). The 'control move' denotes one such tactic (Goffman, 1969, p. 12). The control move attempts to improve or control what is expressed about oneself to present a certain appearance to the observer (Goffman, 1969). Such efforts can involve repairs, accounts and justifications of expressed information (Goffman, 1969, p. 12f). The 'uncovering move' (Goffman, 1969, p. 18) represents another action of expression games. It is based on the observer's suspicion that the other party is attempting to control and conceal information (Goffman, 1969, p. 17f). The observer then engages in an uncovering move by conducting an examination (Goffman, 1969, p. 17f). Finally, the 'counter-uncovering move' (Goffman, 1969, p. 19f) reflects the attempts of the concealing party to thwart attempts to unmask the information sought to be controlled.

'Identity tags' represent a pivotal concept for the counter-uncovering move of expression games (Goffman, 1969, p. 23). Identity tags could denote formal documents such as institutionalised qualifications as well as informal material such as mental records of biographical events (Goffman, 1969, p. 24). Such documents can either confirm the veracity of expressed information or reveal the game being played. Identity tags can be used as a move in reaction to the revelation of social events. The action of using identity tags in expression games amounts to the admittance that a game is being played and that a challenge must be overcome (Goffman, 1969). The challenge could entail an attempt to uphold the

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desired self-representation even though an identity tag disclosure has exposed the game (Goffman, 1969).

Methodology

Research setting

There are ninety-four job centres in Denmark tasked with helping unemployed individuals into jobs, education or job training (Sølvsteen, 2018). Job centres issue digital demands on clients receiving public benefits, who are expected to be able to navigate digital services such as 'Jobnet', the official job centre site, which requires them to meet stipulated conditions. Differing digital requirements apply to clients depending on their received public benefits. This study focuses empirically on vulnerable clients aged above thirty years and receiving the lowest rates of public benefits. The study attends to the digital CV as the digital demand to be satisfied. Formally, the digital CV is defined as a sales tool aimed at potential employers and forms the basis for the search for potential jobs by social workers (Danish Agency for Labor Market, 2020). These structural and technological circumstances condition the welfare situation in which the usage of the digital CV tool transpires.

Data collection

This study examined twenty-one qualitative interviews with social workers collected in 2021 from three Danish job centres. All twenty-one social workers engage in regular meetings and case proceedings with clients who receive the lowest welfare allowances, including unemployment and sickness grants and who experience mental, physical and social problems which make them unable to take on ordinary employment. Of the interviewed social workers, fifteen were formally trained; the rest were schooled in more specific domains such as job training consultancy, mentoring and mental health issues. Additionally, eighteen of the interviewed social workers were female. The interviews were conducted online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also included interviews with clients. However, only the interviews with social workers have been considered for the present analysis given the chosen focus of this article.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 102 min, averaging 90 min. The questions probed previous and current experiences of the social workers in using digital technologies and systems for their work; for instance, the use of client record systems.

Informed consent was obtained and recorded before the interviews were initiated. The introductory information emphasised that the

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interviewees could decline to answer questions they deemed uncomfortable during the interview. The participants were assured that they could contact the researcher after their interviews if they had any questions or considerations regarding their participation. All interviewees were accorded pseudonyms, and a process of anonymisation was devised for factors such as client-related details or case proceedings, names and other identifiable statements.

All interviews were recorded and stored in secure folders in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation. The study was approved by the Ethics Council of the researcher's home institution. The study procedures followed the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014) and the BSA Statement of Ethical Practice (BSA, 2017).

Data analysis

Data were analysed using the constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). All interviews were transcribed for analysis using the NVivo 12 software and were subsequently coded. Pauses were noted during transcription through three dots and loud exclamations were inscribed in bold type; both aspects of paralanguage were retained in the quotes selected for the analysis.

The study used open-ended initial codes in accordance with the constructionist grounded theory approach and focused on coding for actions (Charmaz, 2014, p. 116f). Thus, an initial open reading of the interviews led to the discovery of multiple ideas. It was decided to further research the category of 'using the CV'. This process resulted in a new open-ended coding of this category throughout the interviews which revealed twelve new codes and several sub-codes. These codes were grouped into general codes. Finally, the codes 'building chronology', 'interacting with the CV' and 'adapting and avoiding' were selected as the starting point for the analysis.

Findings

In Denmark, all unemployed citizens must upload a digital CV on the job centre site, when registering their case at the job centre (The Ministry of Employment, 2019). A digital CV comprises a person's previous job experiences and existing competencies (Danish Agency for Labor Market, 2020). For social workers, the CV is a dialogue tool which can direct the conversation towards the labour market and enhance clients' opportunities of becoming employed (Danish Agency for Labor Market, 2020). Pivotally, the interview data revealed that the digital CV

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represented 'almost a social case rather than a CV' (Martha) and denoted a 'social evaluation' (Kim) through the detailed notation of the occupational biographies of clients. The following analysis presents three ways in which social workers use digital CVs in their interactions with clients.

'Let's be real': Testing the vulnerable identity

The social workers asserted that their clients found the process of creating a CV difficult. One social worker explained: '[. . .] for them, the CV does not contain success; it contains events, in which they have failed and felt like they weren't enough' (Bea). Another social worker indicated: 'Some of them have never been on the labour market and then it is difficult to write anything really' (Karen). A third social worker, Ella, supported this point: 'A lot of clients have not been working for a long time and it is hard for them to be confronted with that when they complete the CV'. A social worker pointed out that: 'for some, it is painful to fill in such a CV because they see that, okay I'm 45 and what have I been doing, 9th grade and that's it' (Rita). The social workers explained that the CV collected informational descriptions about some educational progressions and many educational and occupational failures. Thus, the CV contained statements such as 'no real occupation to state' (Alice), 'no job-related experience at all' (Ann), 'hav[ing] been on cash benefit the last 17 years' (Jack), 'worked in a bakery when one was 17–18 and that's it' (Bea) and 'an early debut on cash benefit when she became a grown-up' (Zoe). A social worker, Martha, explained how she used CVs in her work:

> [The CV] is a good tool to create an overview. Some of my clients tell me: I can't anymore! I have been on the labour market my whole life and because of that, I drink, and my back is all screwed up. And then, when we work on the CV, then we see that it has been 15 years since you were on the labour market. And it is not to tease them, it is to say: Let's be real. What do we really have to work with. So, we don't peek around the bush all the time and can get a realistic picture and collaborate on the CV. So, I use it as an active tool (Martha).

The CV creates an overview of the client and tests the clients' self-representation. When Martha paraphrases her client's words on why the client cannot work anymore, the client's desired appearance is revealed as a working identity prohibited from achieving fulfilment because of a back injury that causes the client to drink. The client attempts to save face in the interaction by employing the verbal technique of an account or explanation (Goffman, 1969, p. 16). The extract quoted above illuminates that the client controls personal information seeking to ameliorate the present situation. However, the social worker treats this presentation

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as a 'peek around the bush' (Martha) or as something that must be uncovered by the construction of the CV: 'Let's be real' (Martha). The client's explanation is largely overlooked in favour of informational digitalised descriptions, which are valued as the 'realistic picture' (Martha). Another social worker stated: 'Well, it has sometimes been said: We are not a social office—we are a job centre' (Alice). This assertion emphasised the value accorded to formalised information as more suited to the job centre than social explanations. Therefore, the CV is a document comprised of digitalised informational descriptions collected by the social workers to test the vulnerable identity of the client.

'Mental reworking': the strategic use of information

The social workers noted that some clients can benefit from digital CVs, which can uncover labour market-related skills, resources or possibilities that the client does not value. A social worker commented that some clients are more skilled than they acknowledge: 'some of them may have more resources than they let on the first time around' (Nick). Another social worker observed that 'technically, they could maybe work with the CV if they were really forced to it, but it is very distant for them' (Zoe). A third social worker said: 'some forget about it and can't really see why they should do it and it is so much inherent in their behaviour that "I can do it tomorrow"' (Rita). A social worker, Martha, elucidated that a digital CV can reveal useful information such as competencies acquired from internships and: 'Maybe it wasn't so silly that you were here and there because you accomplished something, you can do something now'. Clients who can benefit from their digital CVs are often referred to as less vulnerable, younger and own more resources.

The social workers explained how a digital CV functions as a 'process-oriented tool' (Martha) in which clients were considered 'work-in-progress' (Nick). The digital CV can direct the clients' focus towards jobs through a 'mental reworking' (Zoe) of their attitudes towards work because 'it [the CV] can change their attitude on getting back to the labour market' (Jack). Social workers used the digitally collected information in the CV to rework client attitudes towards the labour market. A social worker, Zoe, explained:

> Zoe: I think the intention is that clients begin to relate to this [the CV] more and don't just go about thinking: 'That CV thing does not have anything to do with me and it will never have'. But they get to work on themselves mentally towards thinking more about it. I think a part of the intention is a mental reworking towards thinking 'my case is about jobs' when we work with people on their CVs.
> Interviewer: Is that something you have experienced?

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> Zoe: In some situations. I think some people are just very estranged towards the labour market if it has been a long time since you've been out working. So in some cases I think it will take longer. But I still think there is a mental reworking somehow. I think this focus in casework is alright, because it is also easy to let the conversation be controlled by what occupies them right now. [...] So I think it is alright that I can say: 'Nice to hear about this and this' or 'that is too bad to hear, but let us also talk about the CV'. I think for me it is a tool that can pull back the conversation towards work, **which is what I have to do**. I am the job centre (Zoe).

Over time, a digital CV can accomplish a 'mental reworking' (Zoe) of a client's attitude towards the labour market. Clients may attempt to 'uncover' (Goffman, 1969, p. 18) and reject the technology's mental reworking by articulating social issues occupying their minds that may not correlate to the work-related focus of the CV. The social worker may, in turn, reject the relevance of the social facts and focus on information related to work: 'I am the job centre' (Zoe). Using the digital CV in welfare encounters, social workers can accomplish a mental reworking through the strategic use of information provided by the client; conversely, this type of interaction does not allow much space for social explanations.

'Oops, I forgot': Resisting technology

> Well, we do follow an excel sheet. Things could not exist if we did not have sheets. So everything amounts to how many case meetings we have had. Then, we are measured on whether we talked about the CV and the labour market. And what we have to deal with are sick people and people struggling with cancer or addiction, but we must talk about those [the CV and the labour market] things because otherwise it does not count. It is this new public management. We are measured all the time. But you cannot measure social work like that! You never could! (Rita).

Rita highlights the impossibility of measuring social work through excel sheets and digital information systems. She points to the risks of overlooking the complexities of clients' social problems (Parton, 2008) in following the logic of an excel sheet. The interview data revealed that social workers bend and reshape the digital technology's procedures in favour of the most socially, mentally and physically vulnerable clients.

Social workers adapt the meaning of digital CVs working with the most vulnerable clients. CV adaptations diverge from the 'classical CV all of us use' (Martha), as 'normally the CV is something you write for employers and they [the clients] feel like they are miles away from the labour market' (Mia). The CV comprises information not intended for employers; it is used to 'compile an overview' (Ella) and functions as an

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internal document for case proceedings to 'give an insight for the rehabilitation team' (Mia). A social worker, Ann, explains:

> Ann: They are very short, well, they must be presentational CVs, primarily [. . .] they [the CVs] are thin some of them.
> I: How do you use a CV like that in your work with clients?
> Ann: [makes a small giggle and hesitates] Well that is it. I don't do that a lot because I think, well . . . Damn, when there are a lot of them who are so far away from the labour market. [. . .] I do not understand how it should make sense in a case meeting to talk about jobs and the CV, when I know they are in a very different position and can barely have a functioning everyday (Ann).

According to Ann, the CV is 'presentational' and 'thin' and does not make sense for people who can 'barely have a functioning everyday'. Asked about her utilisation of the digital CV, she giggled a bit and hesitated, explicating her evasive use of the CV through engaging explanations of her clients' vulnerability. Social workers reject the pre-set procedures of the technology when they avoid using the CV. In so doing, they adapt the meaning and use of digital CVs and attempt to 'control' (Goffman, 1969, p. 12) stored information about their clients.

Social workers working with clients engaged in an assessment of their working abilities and the likelihood of early retirement, avoid using digital CVs as much as possible. A social worker noted that she 'does not use it [the CV] much' (Karen) and another explained that: 'those who are furthest from the labour market, they cannot engage with the CV at all' (Ella). A third social worker mentioned that she abstained from creating CVs for some clients when she deemed that the details necessary to create the CV would 'rip up in traumas' and be 're-traumatising' (Liz). Social worker, Karen, expressed:

> Karen: [. . .] having my group of clients in mind I am struggling to see the point, because it [the CV] is made for those who are ready for the labour market. If you create a CV and apply for jobs, well, then it makes tremendous sense because the companies can view your CV. But poor John, who sat on a bench for 20 years drinking beer and some vodka and what not. He is illiterate and what can he do? So we have to create a CV, but he cannot use it for anything. Well, not in the way it is meant to be used. And then it becomes a bit tricky for me how I should bring the client further. So I feel that I face an obstacle course sometimes with some of these tasks, which seem a bit foolish because they stand in the way of me getting the client further.
> I: [. . .] these things that you must do that do not necessarily make sense for getting people closer to the labour market, as you say, well, how do you handle that, what do you do?
> Karen: I have to say . . . well . . . Ehm. . . Oops, I forgot that I should do that [the CV] (Karen).

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Forgetting requirements throughout the 'obstacle course' (Karen) of fitting policy to practice represented a widespread tactic of social workers involved with the most vulnerable clients. This tendency indicates that the technology is not apt for such groups of clients and fosters statements such as 'Oops, I forgot' (Karen). A social worker elucidated that fulfilling the digital CV requirement 'is for the sake of jurisdiction, it is not for the client' (Nora). A second social worker expressed the opinion that fulfilling structural requirements such as the CV 'steals attention away from the clients' (Louisa). Louisa elaborated that other tasks take priority in her work; therefore, 'I am not very good at working on the CV. And the clients, they cannot do it by themselves. And if they can, then it is a little irrelevant because it is not a CV we have to share with employers' (Louisa). According to the interviewed social workers, the CV was unsuitable and irrelevant for the most vulnerable groups, which is why they attempted to adapt or avoid using the digital CV. However, the CV also represents a documentation process and thus denotes an investigation into the social workers because the digital documentation of information ensures the transparency of their work. Social workers justify contradicting the structurally prescribed procedures of digital documentation by asserting that they have more important tasks to perform and citing the vulnerability of their clients and the irrelevance of the CV for their work outcomes. Social workers thus find ways of resisting the structural demand of the CV 'excel sheet' (Rita) in favour of their clients at the expense of documentation-related transparency.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis revealed three ways in which social workers use the digital CV. First, social workers use digital CVs to gather information about their clients and test the expressed vulnerable identity of their clients. Second, social workers strategically utilise the information collected in digital CVs to reveal relevant but undervalued resources, skills and opportunities in their clients. Social workers may act in this manner with their more resourceful and less vulnerable clients to rework their clients' attitudes towards the labour market. Third, social workers engaged with the most vulnerable clients bend and reshape the procedures for the use of the digital CV. Hence, social workers can resist the structural constraints of a digitalised welfare system and strategically control the information that is recorded to favour their most vulnerable clients.

The findings of this article resonate with the key literature reporting the increased use of surface information in social work and the decreased focus on social narratives due to utilisation of digital information systems (Parton, 2008; Steyaert and Gould, 2009; Gillingham, 2013, 2015). This study revealed that social workers attend to surface or social information

depending on the perceived vulnerability of their clients. In some cases, social workers attend more to informational descriptions than social issues asserted by clients. However, social workers reject the technology's emphasis on informational descriptions when working with the most vulnerable clients. In so doing, they resist the digital and structural constraints of the welfare encounter by bending, reshaping and avoiding usage of the digital information technology. This study's conceptual use of identity tags and moves in expression games (Goffman, 1969, p. 11f) contributes to the understanding of the digital CV as a detailed informational document that tests vulnerabilities *vis-à-vis* the occupational identity of clients. The focus on social workers' interactions with technology shows that digital CVs are applied to assess the vulnerability of clients and the information revealed in this assessment. It also reveals that the digital CV comprises an important aspect of the welfare encounter that directs the social worker–client interaction and the collected information.

The existing literature emphasises the selective and controlled information offered by clients and selective usage and recording of information by social workers (Gillingham, 2015; Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015). This study found that social workers selectively use the information provided by their clients by testing the expressed facts, using information strategically to rework clients' attitudes and bending or reshaping the given technology to favour their most vulnerable clients. Social work shapes and is shaped by digital technology (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022). The digital CV shapes social work because it directs and constraints the interaction between social workers and clients within digitalised structures. Social work, in turn, shapes digital CV technology through the strategic adaptation of its structurally prescribed rules, uses and procedures. The extant scholarship also shows how talk around the process of documentation mandates a balancing act between client participation and strict adherence to forms to ensure transparency and accountability (Matarese and Caswell, 2018). Employing the framework of strategic interaction (Goffman, 1969, p. 10), this study contributes to the current understanding by showing that interaction unfolds strategically around digital technology as exemplified by the digital CV, depending on the perceived vulnerability of the client. Strict adherence to the digital CV format ensures the transparency of social work, tests client self-representations and reveals vulnerabilities or hidden resources that can be strategically deployed to rework client attitudes towards the labour market and further help the client as well as attain organisational goals. However, this focus implies the risk of neglecting the social difficulties and complexities that make clients vulnerable. Conversely, the divergence of social workers from the prescribed rules and procedures could benefit their clients but could also compromise the organisationally required digital documentation and transparency of social work.

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The current body of research describes acts of resistance through which social workers bend and reshape established social work procedures to benefit their clients. Resistance is described through notions such as rogue social workers (Weinberg and Banks, 2019, p. 372), positive deviant social work (Carey and Foster, 2011, p. 578) and disruptive social work (Feldman, 2022, p. 760). This article contributes to the literature as an empirical analysis of the practices of bending and reshaping established social work procedures in the context of using digital information technology within structurally impinged welfare encounters. It evinces that social workers engaged with the most vulnerable clients may attempt to avoid, adapt or bend established procedures for use of the digital technology to perform positive deviant social work (Carey and Foster, 2011, p. 587). The present study indicates a dilemma of the technology's suitability: It is apt for clients who are less vulnerable and whose attitudes towards the labour market can be reworked, but it is inapt for the most vulnerable clients, for whom the digital documentation of their vulnerable identity does not yield results. The present paper used the concept of expression games (Goffman, 1969, p. 10) to elucidate that social workers strategically select information to be recorded and used depending on the vulnerability of their clients. In such acts, social workers choose when to test the self-representation of the clients and when to control documented information. The digital CV is not a passive tool and must be regarded as both a constraining and enabling aspect of the welfare encounter. Hence, social workers interact with the digital tool strategically through, e.g. resistance or mental reworking of clients' attitudes.

This study acknowledges the inextricability of the problems and potentials of digitalisation and endeavours to transcend positive and negative assessments of technology (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022; Steiner, 2021). Employing the framework of expression games in strategic interaction, this article contributes to the literature on the digitalisation of social work through a novel conceptualisation and apprehension of how social workers use digital information technologies in their work. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its focus on interactions being strategic, which could create a bias towards the opinion that welfare encounters and social workers are overly strategic. However, this study's focus on strategic interaction highlights manners, in which digitalisation in social work impels social workers to act strategically in response to constraining factors of the welfare context. Therefore, the focus on strategic interactions represents a limitation of the study but also reflects the current, digitalisation-driven change in social work and welfare services at large. Digital tools are not passive and should be regarded as part of the constraining and defining structures of welfare encounters and social work. Prospective research initiatives could use this framework to examine

other ways in which digitalisation instigates strategic interactions in social work.

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