

The Digital Turn in Social Work: Navigating Relationships, Boundaries, and Ethics

Beatrice Cacopardo

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy

CORRESPONDENCE:

Beatrice Cacopardo

e-mail: beatricemarina.cacopardo@unicatt.it

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers in Lombardy, Italy, were confronted with an abrupt shift to digitally mediated practices that reshaped the core of the helping relationship. This qualitative study draws on 29 interviews and two focus groups conducted between 2021 and 2022 to explore how professionals experienced and responded to this transformation.

The findings reveal both relational and ethical tensions, linked to distance, loss of non-verbal cues, and blurred boundaries, and a range of adaptive strategies aimed at maintaining empathy and trust. Concepts such as social presence and digital intimacy provide a lens to interpret these micro-practices of negotiation. While rooted in a specific historical context, the reflections emerging from the study remain highly relevant in the current phase of hybrid practice, as social services continue to grapple with the long-term integration of digital tools.

The study argues that digitalization in social work is neither inherently empowering nor detrimental, but context-dependent, and must be critically accompanied by institutional guidance, training, and ethical reflection.

Keywords

Digital social work, Helping relationship, Hybrid practices, Social presence, COVID-19, Ethics.

Digital Social Work: From Crisis Response to Hybrid Practice

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a significant digital transformation in social work practices (López Peláez & Kirwan, 2023), with professionals rapidly adopting technology-mediated interactions to ensure continuity of care (Mishna et al., 2021). This transition reshaped the environmental, relational, instrumental, and organizational dimensions of social services, much like responses to natural disasters (Sanfelici et al., 2020). The relational aspect was particularly affected, prompting social workers to rethink their modes of engagement and coping strategies (Folgheraiter, 2024).

Erickson

Relational Social Work

Vol. 9, n. 1, April 2025

(pp. 46-64)

doi: 10.14605/RSW912503

ISSN: 2532-3814

As of 2025, while in-person practices have resumed, many digital strategies developed during the emergency have persisted, especially in enhancing accessibility and flexibility (Mishna et al., 2021). Hybrid service models have emerged (Pink et al., 2021), combining face-to-face and remote interactions to meet user needs. Digital tools such as video calls are now routinely employed for maintaining contact in non-critical situations, establishing initial contact with geographically distant users, and facilitating interprofessional collaboration.

However, the shift to digital has also highlighted persistent challenges (Zenarolla, 2024). These include the risk of digital exclusion, difficulties in maintaining relational depth, and privacy concerns. Despite the development of digital competencies among some practitioners, there has been a lack of systematic training and guidelines, resulting in uneven integration across services (Männistö et al., 2020; Konttila et al., 2018; Tzvetanova, 2023).

This unevenness reflects broader systemic gaps, such as the absence of unified protocols for digital engagement (Reamer, 2013), the variability in institutional support (Nadav et al., 2021), and the inadequacy of existing professional development opportunities (Afrouz & Lucas, 2023). Furthermore, the ethical implications of rapid digitalization, such as maintaining confidentiality (Millstein, 2000; Reamer, 2013), managing digital fatigue, and ensuring informed consent in virtual contexts (Khangpiboon et al., 2023), have yet to be fully addressed in many organizational settings.

Ultimately, the pandemic functioned both as a catalyst and a stress test, revealing the potential and limits of technology in social work (López Peláez & Kirwan, 2023). Moving forward, it seems essential to adopt a critical, relational, and inclusive stance to digital practices (Peláez et al., 2020), ensuring they reinforce the core values of the helping relationship, including presence, empathy, inclusion, and empowerment (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019).

Conceptualizing Digital Relationships in Social Work

Understanding technology-mediated relationships requires grounding in appropriate conceptual frameworks.

A key theoretical contribution to the understanding of digital relationships in social work comes from La Mendola (2010), who defines «social presence» as the capacity to be perceived as emotionally and relationally available, even when communication occurs at a distance. This perspective is especially relevant to digital practice, as it underscores that presence is not exclusively tied to physical proximity but can also be expressed through communicative and affective cues.

The integration of digital tools into social work practice therefore challenges professionals to develop strategies for sustaining presence and engagement in the absence of shared physical space.

Building on this, Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) posits that the perceived sense of being «present» and emotionally connected in mediated communication sig-

nificantly shapes the quality of interpersonal relationships (Nguyen et al., 2021). Higher levels of social presence, facilitated by rich media such as video calls that convey visual and auditory cues, can enhance trust, empathy, and collaborative engagement. In the context of social work, cultivating this presence is critical for building rapport and conveying care. Even in digital settings, it can be intentionally supported through tone of voice, eye contact, personalized language, and responsiveness.

The concept of digital intimacy, as introduced by Pink et al. (2021), further expands this discussion by emphasizing the emotional resonance and immediacy that can emerge in online interactions, despite the lack of physical co-presence. These dynamics are shaped by the affordances of specific technologies, which enable relational exchanges that can feel authentic and emotionally significant. For instance, the use of familiar and informal platforms such as WhatsApp or voice notes may facilitate a sense of closeness (Mateo et al., 2021), particularly with younger service users accustomed to such tools. While this may raise concerns around blurred boundaries, it also suggests that digital relationships can sustain emotional depth when approached with intentionality and ethical awareness.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives illustrate how digitally mediated relationships can support empathetic, effective, and ethically grounded social work practice. They also highlight the importance of selecting and adapting technologies in ways that reinforce the profession's core values, such as trust, presence, respect, and user empowerment (Biffi & Pasini, 2018), particularly when supported by organizational policies, training, and reflective supervision.

Technology-Mediated Helping Relationships: Opportunities and Risks

The adoption of digital tools in social work raises crucial questions about how technology reshapes practitioner-service user relationships (Achmad, 2023; Lintner & Zadra, 2024). Online helping relationships are qualitatively different from traditional, in-person interactions and require a nuanced understanding of both benefits and risks (Nordesjö et al., 2022; Reamer, 2013; van de Luitgaarden & van der Tier, 2018).

In physical settings, social workers are able to manage the environment and draw on nonverbal cues, such as posture, gestures, and facial expressions, to support communication and establish relational depth (Reamer, 2013; Nordesjö et al., 2022). These elements often help build trust and emotional connection, especially when addressing sensitive topics. Online settings, however, lack this embodied presence and environmental control, which can compromise the richness of interaction and the professional's capacity to read subtle emotional signals (Richards & Viganó, 2013; Mishna et al., 2021). At the same time, digital interactions are not confined to video interviews but include a broad range of ICT-based modalities, such as messaging, email, chat applications, and social media

platforms (Mishna et al., 2012; Chan & Ngai, 2019). These tools offer increased immediacy and responsiveness, allowing for more continuous and informal engagement. However, they also blur the boundaries of professional communication and may risk overexposure, emotional fatigue, or role confusion (Reamer, 2015; Boddy & Dominelli, 2017).

Reamer (2015) warns of blurred boundaries between professional and personal spheres, such as through social media interactions or out-of-hours communication. The risk is not only about overstepping ethical norms but also about undermining the integrity and authority of the social worker's role. Conversely, Mackrill and Ørnbøll (2019) suggest that technology can foster positive and meaningful relationships, creating new opportunities for relational engagement — particularly with youth or tech-savvy populations. However, this benefit hinges on the capacity of practitioners to manage digital proximity without compromising professional boundaries.

Accessibility is another key issue. Digital tools can reach underserved populations, including youth or individuals in remote areas (Chan & Ngai, 2019). They also allow for flexibility in scheduling and participation, which can be beneficial for service users with demanding family or work responsibilities. However, these advantages must be balanced against the risk of exacerbating the digital divide, particularly in contexts where digital literacy or infrastructure is lacking (Chan & Ngai, 2019; Nordesjö et al., 2022). Some clients may not have access to appropriate devices, stable internet connections, or private spaces for digital communication, while others may be unfamiliar with the platforms used by social services (La Mendola, 2010; López Peláez & Kirwan, 2023). In such cases, rather than enhancing access, technology can act as a barrier, further marginalizing individuals already at risk of exclusion.

While digital tools have opened up new channels for interaction and engagement, their integration into social work practice requires new technical and relational competencies, as well as constant ethical vigilance. Ensuring that these tools support rather than hinder the helping relationship demands clear policy frameworks, critical reflection, and targeted investments in both practitioner training and user support (Mishna et al., 2021; Byrne & Kirwan, 2019; Konttila et al., 2018).

The Use of Video Calls in Practice: Connection or Distance?

Analysing in detail a specific modality of remote interaction, video calls have emerged as a defining modality in post-pandemic social work, yet their implementation remains insufficiently explored within the discipline. Much of the current understanding is informed by research in online psychotherapy (Baker & Ray, 2011; Richards & Viganó, 2013), where video-mediated interactions are associated with increased anonymity, convenience, and the potential for disinhibition. In social work, these characteristics may influence client engagement in diverse and context-specific ways.

The «online disinhibition effect» (Cook & Doyle, 2002) suggests that digital communication can reduce social inhibitions, thereby fostering greater openness. This dynamic may help clients overcome barriers such as stigma or anxiety, particularly when interacting from familiar settings. However, disinhibition can also compromise professional boundaries and create excessive intimacy if not moderated through ethical frameworks and reflective practice (Reamer, 2013).

Remote platforms have also enhanced service accessibility for individuals facing mobility challenges or living in geographically isolated areas (Chester & Glass, 2006). Logistical advantages such as reduced travel time and flexible scheduling further support their appeal. Yet, these benefits are accompanied by challenges, including environmental distractions, limited privacy, and technological disruptions, which can diminish the emotional depth and effectiveness of communication, especially in complex or sensitive situations.

Digitalization has reshaped the interpersonal dynamics of social work, particularly in terms of power and trust. As Nordesjö and colleagues (2021) observe, virtual interaction introduces ethical complexities and redefines the practitioner-client relationship. The lack of physical co-presence may hinder rapport and emotional attunement. Similarly, Derks and colleagues (2008) emphasize that reduced access to nonverbal cues increases the risk of miscommunication and emotional misinterpretation.

The psychosocial impact of prolonged digital work on practitioners also warrants attention. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers in Northern Ireland reported heightened feelings of detachment and blurred professional boundaries due to extended virtual engagement (Pascoe, 2022). These issues are compounded when clients lack access to private, distraction-free environments.

Given these multifaceted challenges, context-sensitive and ethically grounded adaptations are essential. As Reamer (2015) notes, practitioners must tailor their approaches to the distinct demands of digital service delivery.

In line with the NASW Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice (2017), such adaptations may include assessing clients' home environments, enhancing technological competence, and establishing clear interaction protocols to ensure comfort and confidentiality.

Though still developing within the discipline, video-mediated practice has gained significant traction. Research in digital mental health highlights key benefits such as improved accessibility and reduced social inhibition (Richards & Viganó, 2013), which can shape outcomes across populations and service contexts. However, these affordances must be balanced against risks of boundary diffusion and emotional overexposure (Reamer, 2015). Familiar environments may encourage self-disclosure, but without clear ethical safeguards, they may undermine professional integrity.

Ultimately, while digital communication expands the possibilities for client engagement, it transforms relational dynamics in ways that require intentional, ethically informed strategies. The absence of physical co-presence challenges traditional models of trust-building and interaction. As social work continues to evolve within digital ecosystems,

attentiveness to these complexities is crucial to uphold the profession's core values and effectiveness.

Research Methodology

The findings presented in this article derive from a broader research project examining the impact of digital technologies on social work during the COVID-19 pandemic. This contribution specifically addresses one of the central research questions concerning helping relationship: how is it influenced by the use of digital tools, and in what ways is it reshaped when mediated by technology? The data point to a series of recurring tensions and adaptive responses that emerged as professionals sought to preserve empathy, trust, and continuity within digitally mediated contexts. Particular attention was devoted to the practice of remote interviewing via online platforms, which emerged as a focal point for reflecting on both the challenges and opportunities posed by digitalisation in relational work.

The first phase, carried out in the summer of 2021, consisted of 29 semi-structured interviews designed to gather individual experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to the sudden adoption of ICTs. The second phase, conducted in June 2022, involved two focus groups that built on the themes identified in the interviews. These group discussions enabled a deeper and more collective reflection on persistent challenges, adaptive responses, and emerging ethical dilemmas.

This two-phase structure allowed for a balance between depth and breadth. While interviews provided rich, personal insights into professional dilemmas and individual practices, the focus groups served to deepen the exploration of how remote interaction had reshaped the helping relationship. They offered a space for collective reflection on the emotional, ethical, and practical complexities of maintaining presence, empathy, and trust at a distance.

Although the study was not intended to track changes over time, it remained sensitive to shifts in practices and attitudes, offering a layered and nuanced understanding of the digital transition in social work.

A distinctive feature of the second phase was the use of the vignette technique (Jenkins et al., 2010; Bloor & Wood, 2006), a method that proved particularly effective in fostering ethical reflection within professional contexts. Participants were presented with two realistic, hypothetical scenarios designed to stimulate reflection and discussion without referring to specific individuals or cases.

The first vignette involved a social worker conducting a video interview via WhatsApp with a family engaged in child protection proceedings, raising questions about privacy, professionalism, and emotional limitations of digital interaction. The second focused on the use of social media to assess parenting competence, touching on boundary management, professional conduct, and the ethics of digital observation in institutional settings.

Both scenarios aimed to generate critical dialogue about the limits and possibilities of remote interaction, especially in sensitive or high-risk situations.

The study involved a diverse sample of 29 social workers employed in various sectors across Lombardy (Table 1), including Addiction Services (N = 5), Hospital Services (N = 1), Child Protection (N = 6), Professional Social Services (N = 5), Mental Health Services (N = 4), Non-Profit Social Inclusion (N = 1), Home Care for the Elderly (N = 1), Poverty Reduction (N = 3), Palliative Care (N = 1), Family Counseling (N = 2), and the Probation Office (UEPE) (N = 1). Reflecting the broader gender distribution of the profession, 26 participants were women and 3 were men. They worked in both public institutions (N = 17) and private organizations (N = 12), with the vast majority (N = 25) employed full-time.

No.	Gender	Year of Birth	Service
1	F	1983	Addiction Service
2	F	1990	Hospital
3	F	1993	Child protection
4	F	1985	Addiction Service
5	F	1960	Professional Social Services
6	F	1990	Mental Health Services
7	M	1989	Mental Health Services
8	F	1988	Child protection
9	F	1974	Addiction Service
10	F	1993	Professional Social Services
11	F	1991	Non-Profit for Social Inclusion
12	F	1990	Professional Social Services
13	F	1993	Child protection
14	M	1994	Child protection
15	F	1960	Mental Health Services
16	F	1992	Home Care for the Elderly
17	F	1992	Mental Health Services
18	F	1995	Poverty Reduction Services
19	F	1979	Professional Social Services
20	F	1987	Child protection

21	F	1992	Professional Social Services
22	M	1985	Addiction Service
23	F	1985	Palliative Care Services
24	F	1994	Poverty Reduction Services
25	F	1993	Addiction Service
26	F	1988	Family Counseling Centers
27	F	1988	Family Counseling Centers
28	F	1991	Probation Office (UEPE)
29	F	1995	Poverty Reduction Services

Table 1 Interviews Participant Characteristics

The first focus group included six social workers from diverse service contexts: child protection and family services (N = 2), mental health (N = 1), elderly care (N = 1), palliative care (N = 1), and poverty reduction (N = 1). The second focus group involved four members of the Ethical and Deontological Commission of the Regional Council of Social Workers in Lombardy, including both active and retired professionals with substantial field experience (Table 2).

Focus Group	No.	Gender	Year of Birth	Service/Role
FG1	1	F	1993	Child Protection
FG1	2	F	1990	Mental Health Center
FG1	3	M	1994	Child Protection
FG1	4	F	1992	Home Care for the Elderly
FG1	5	F	1985	Palliative Care Services
FG1	6	F	1995	Poverty Reduction Services
FG2	1	F	1969	Head of Social Services Planning Office
FG2	2	M	1987	Coordinator of Social Services Planning Office
FG2	3	M	1952	Retired
FG2	4	F	1959	Retired

Table 2 Focus Group Participant Characteristics

Data from both phases were collected with informed consent, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The material was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with MAXQDA 2021 software. This approach facilitated the identification of key themes and sub-themes across the two phases, with attention to both convergences and divergences in perspectives. The integration of interview and focus group data enabled a comprehensive interpretation of how social workers experienced, interpreted, and navigated the use of digital tools in the helping relationship during a time of institutional and relational transformation.

Results

The findings illustrate how the shift to a digitally mediated environment during the COVID-19 pandemic generated a set of recurring tensions within the helping relationship, alongside a variety of adaptive responses. Social workers described the complex balance between the limitations imposed by remote interaction — particularly the loss of non-verbal cues and shared physical space — and the emergence of creative, pragmatic strategies aimed at preserving empathy, trust, and continuity in care. Their reflections focused primarily on the practice of conducting interviews via digital platforms, which became a central and symbolic element of this transformation.

Remote Interviews: A Disrupted Setting for Relational Work

Several participants described the transition to remote interviewing as a profound disruption of their established relational routines. What had previously been a structured and embodied interaction, anchored in time, space, and non-verbal cues, was suddenly replaced by a more fluid and dislocated mode of engagement. One social worker noted the shift in intentionality and relational preparation that this entailed:

Even for an in-person interview, you prepare — it's scheduled, you know the time, and there's a physical setting with nonverbal communication... While you can schedule an online interview, it doesn't involve the same level of reflection or preparation (Int. 2).

This shift was often associated with a perceived loss of emotional connection. Professionals reported difficulty in interpreting clients' affective states and felt that something essential was missing from the interaction:

I couldn't perceive certain things that an in-person interview allows you to pick up on... it's quicker, more immediate, but at the same time, being faster and more immediate makes you miss out on many important details (Int. 2).

Initial assessments were identified as particularly problematic, especially in child protection services. Interviewees expressed discomfort with conducting such evaluations remotely, citing concerns about privacy, complex family dynamics, and the difficulty of fostering a safe and trusting environment:

Meeting a person for the first time through a screen is definitely different... We didn't feel comfortable asking families to give us a virtual tour of their homes via a camera (Int. 3).

In work with children, the limitations of the digital format were especially evident. The inability to use interactive or play-based methods often hindered rapport-building and emotional attunement:

With young children, I typically use drawing or games... but this approach is impossible online. In some cases, these relationships were rebuilt once in-person meetings resumed (Int. 3).

Nonetheless, participants also recognized that remote interviews offered certain advantages. In some cases, they enabled contact with individuals who were otherwise difficult to reach due to physical distance or irregular availability:

Certainly, yes, the online interview is useful, it's a good strategy to reach or communicate with people who have always been somewhat unavailable or are physically very distant (Int. 16).

While not ideal for all situations, video calls were acknowledged as a practical tool for ensuring continuity, particularly in routine follow-ups or when logistical constraints made in-person meetings impractical. In this sense, the digital medium was not only a substitute but occasionally an enabler of access and consistency.

Navigating Distance and Closeness

Participants reflected extensively on how digital formats reshaped the experience of proximity in the helping relationship. Several noted that remote tools created a sense of excessive detachment, undermining the professional distance typically maintained in face-to-face encounters:

It created a distance that was no longer the useful professional distance... some very strong topics were paused and only resumed after the possibility of in-person meetings (Int. 22).

This perceived emotional gap led to discomfort for some professionals, who felt that screen-mediated interactions limited affective presence and constrained the depth of engagement. However, others described situations in which the digital setting unexpectedly supported intimacy and human connection.

For some helping relationships... it was a way to connect more... the dog would pass by, and that gave us a reason to talk informally about something difficult (Int. 3).

In these cases, clients' home environments became a site for spontaneous relational cues and shared attention:

Sometimes, clients would show me their homes, inviting me into their reality... I'd often engage by commenting on something in the background, like «What a beautiful plant» (Int. 3).

This duality between detachment and connection illustrates how the digital environment necessitated a continuous renegotiation of proximity. On one hand, it risked flattening emotional presence; on the other, it opened up new relational possibilities, particularly when professionals engaged users with flexibility, empathy, and attention to context.

Interviewees described a variety of adaptive behaviours that emerged in response to these constraints, practices that may be understood as «situated digital strategies». These included intentionally using humour, referencing elements in the client's environment, or adjusting the timing and tone of interactions. Such approaches helped recreate moments of closeness and supported continuity in the helping relationship, even in the absence of physical co-presence.

Ethical Dilemmas and Professional Boundaries

The reconfiguration of the helping relationship in digital contexts brought ethical considerations to the forefront, particularly around the management of professional distance and confidentiality. Social workers expressed concern about the potential blurring of boundaries, highlighting how the absence of a shared physical setting and the use of informal communication tools can complicate the delineation between personal and professional roles.

There is a risk that we forget that our job is based on people... and we end up settling for a quick phone call or a short email (Int. 28).

You lose everything. Sure, you see their face, but you miss everything else — their body language... so much of the relationship, so much of just being in relation (Int. 26).

Use of informal tools also raised concern:

I was never satisfied with the use of online interviews... it was hard for us to maintain... a proper distance (Int. 5).

Remote communication offers a shield for both the operator and the person... moments when you need to remove that distance and connect more empathically (Int. 8).

A recurring theme was the challenge of maintaining professional boundaries in a digital space. Participants shared examples of being contacted outside working hours, or of clients behaving informally during video calls, such as attending from noisy environments or multitasking during the session. Some described discomfort with the use

of platforms like WhatsApp, which blurred the line between personal and professional communication.

While many professionals improvised strategies to manage boundaries, such as limiting communication to work hours or setting expectations during the first session, the lack of shared standards contributed to uncertainty and unease.

And I clearly remember the difficulty my colleague was facing, also in terms of guidelines — she felt really disoriented and had to rely solely on her own personal and professional identity, referring to the code of ethics. But she wasn't supported by anything that could help her approach or analyze the situation differently or offer an alternative perspective. (FG1INT6)

Digital Exclusion and Unequal Access

Another key issue that emerged was the uneven access to technology among service users, a challenge that directly impacted the ability to initiate, sustain, or deepen the helping relationship in digital contexts. Social workers reported difficulties in engaging with elderly clients, individuals with disabilities, or families lacking digital literacy or adequate devices. In such cases, the digital medium itself became a barrier to relational connection, leading professionals to revert to phone calls or in-person visits when users were unable to participate meaningfully in remote formats.

You see, our users are people who make do as best they can... Introducing technology to such complex individuals is always somewhat of a gamble (Int. 11).

So for all those people who struggle with digital technologies, they definitely need to be set aside (Int. 25).

Interviewees clearly acknowledged the risk of digital exclusion affecting individuals who, for a variety of reasons, including age-related difficulties, disability, or the inability to afford devices, may face significant barriers in accessing technology.

Yes, I observed a certain fragility, particularly in terms of the ability to connect. There were people who simply couldn't do it, who didn't have the necessary devices (Int. 23).

For some people, I think it's a bit more burdensome. Accessing the service is already difficult — asking for help, going through that whole process. And if the relationship is also mediated by a technological tool, I think it becomes even more exhausting. I mean, let's think of people who come from different cultural backgrounds, who have migrated from other countries, and who are already severely marginalized. So yes, there's an added difficulty in even conceptualizing the use of technology (Int. 11).

Elderly users were particularly affected:

Video calls — especially when mediated by a family member — limit interaction with the elderly person... By contrast, during a home visit... they open up much more (Int. 16).

At the same time, some interviewees suggested that these limitations could be partially addressed through user education and institutional support. Proposals such as integrating digital literacy training into social services or offering support with access to devices were mentioned as possible strategies to reduce exclusion.

Relational Opportunities and Constraints in Digital Formats

While much of the discussion around digitalization in social work has focused on its risks and limitations, the findings from this study also underscore how digital tools have enabled new forms of connection, particularly with service users who are not easily reached through in-person modalities.

Social workers reported that remote formats helped maintain contact with clients facing logistical, personal, or geographical barriers, allowing for more consistent and flexible engagement.

Certainly, yes, the online interview is useful, it's a good strategy to reach or communicate with people who have always been somewhat unavailable or are physically very distant (Int. 16).

Some participants noted that remote formats could contribute to greater ease and openness in certain relational dynamics, particularly when service users felt more comfortable in their home environments:

Then there were people who felt more comfortable using the remote format, partly because of organizational aspects; you don't always know what commitments the parents have... and they were at home, they felt more at ease (Int. 23).

Although establishing trust remotely may require more time and effort, some professionals affirmed that meaningful relationships could still be developed:

I wouldn't say there was no relationship, that a trust relationship didn't form... certainly the timeline was much longer compared to a relationship that could have been built in person (Int. 3).

Digital technologies were especially valued in settings such as the justice system or when working with users whose lives were characterized by complexity, overlapping responsibilities, or fragile access to services. As one professional shared:

I have two people who do remote interviews with me, one because they've just started working and don't want to ask for time off, the other is a special case... he's a father with a device from the Juvenile Court, works, receives home care assistance... we said, «let's prioritize in-person meetings with the psychologist» and once a week we do a video call (Int. 9).

This was particularly evident in work with young people in the juvenile justice system, where remote formats aligned with the digital habits of users and reduced potential discomfort:

These young people have more experience with technology... Sometimes talking through a screen seemed to facilitate communication and their openness... some were shy about coming to the office, so continuing remote interviews for them could be useful (Int. 3).

In such cases, relational proximity was often maintained through the intentional use of familiar tools, such as WhatsApp and voice notes:

In the Juvenile Social Service Office, I had my own service phone... With the kids, I used mainly WhatsApp, voice notes... it's the only mode they know. It's an essential tool (Int. 4).

However, social workers also recognized the ambivalence of these formats. While remote access could reveal new contextual cues (such as glimpses into users' living environments), it could also promote superficiality or emotional distancing:

We also work with minors... they might use [technology] as an excuse to distance themselves, not delve deeply... or abruptly end the conversation. Sometimes it's an advantage, sometimes a disadvantage (Int. 8).

Despite this, digital formats were widely acknowledged as useful in monitoring stable or low-complexity situations:

There are interviews like those for monitoring... a home care service that's going well can be done online... it's a big help (Int. 2).

Similarly, brief feedback or routine check-ins were often considered appropriate for remote delivery:

Sometimes I do feedback on custody cases where everything is going well... We can talk calmly in a video call, and it takes less time. If we can simplify our lives, I think this helps in many ways (Int. 20).

Ultimately, the choice between remote and in-person formats was often guided by the nature of the issue at hand:

Clearly, the choice depends on the goal of the interview. If it's an interview where sensitive issues need to be addressed and there's a need for a tangible sense of the relationship, it is requested to be in person (Int. 8).

Discussion

Building on the existing literature on technology-mediated social work, the findings of this study resonate with previous analyses that have highlighted the relational, ethical, and structural challenges brought about by digitalization (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019; López

Peláez & Kirwan, 2023). While some of these issues had already emerged during the initial phases of the pandemic, this research adds new depth by illustrating how practitioners continued to negotiate and adapt their practices well beyond the emergency.

Although the data were collected between 2021 and 2022, and the broader context has since evolved, the insights offered remain relevant in light of the continuing hybridization of social services in Italy. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that certain dynamics may now have partially shifted or been addressed through subsequent organizational changes.

The results reaffirm the centrality of the relational dimension in social work and show how its reconfiguration in digital contexts is marked by a tension between limitations and possibilities. Many practitioners reported that screen-mediated communication undermined their capacity to create connection, echoing La Mendola's (2010) idea of *social presence* as the ability to be emotionally available even at a distance. The perceived loss of non-verbal cues, reduced control over setting, and difficulties in reading subtle emotional signals all contributed to a sense of relational weakening.

Yet, the findings also highlight how remote practices generated new forms of engagement, especially in contexts of limited accessibility. Digital tools offered continuity during disruption and, in some cases, fostered more informal and authentic exchanges, particularly with younger users or those who experienced barriers to in-person interaction. These moments of unexpected emotional resonance align with the concept of *digital intimacy* (Pink et al., 2021), which emphasizes the capacity to cultivate closeness and trust through mediated communication. Practitioners described how they adapted their tone, timing, and communication style to maintain connection, sometimes leveraging informal cues or personal references to sustain engagement.

These adaptive strategies can be read as intentional efforts to rebuild a sense of presence in digital settings, supporting the idea that *social presence* is not confined to physical proximity but can be actively cultivated through communicative choices (Nguyen et al., 2021). Practices such as commenting on elements in the client's environment or using humor to ease tension served not only to personalize the exchange but also to restore a degree of affective closeness.

Moreover, several accounts reflect phenomena associated with the *online disinhibition effect* (Cook & Doyle, 2002), whereby digital environments lower psychological barriers, enabling greater openness and self-disclosure. For some professionals, this effect was seen as an opportunity: clients felt more at ease discussing sensitive issues from the familiarity of their home. However, it also posed challenges: in the absence of clear boundaries and structured settings, these moments risked leading to inappropriate intimacy or undermining professional distance (Reamer, 2013). This ambivalence underscores the need for critical reflection and ethical grounding in the use of digital tools.

In addition, the data point to a continuing problem of digital exclusion, particularly among the most vulnerable populations. Barriers related to access, digital literacy, or

private spaces limited the effectiveness of remote interventions. While some participants proposed solutions, such as offering digital literacy support or devices, these responses appeared sporadic and dependent on individual initiative, rather than structured policy.

Despite the prevalence of critical reflections, some participants highlighted how technology enabled certain categories of users, such as youth, people with reduced mobility, or families living in remote areas, to stay connected with social services. This suggests that digital practices, while not universally applicable, can play a valuable integrative role in a flexible and diversified service system.

The study also reveals persistent gaps in training, guidelines, and institutional support for ethically sound digital practice. As noted by Reamer (2015), ethical risks in online environments, such as breaches of confidentiality, role confusion, and emotional fatigue, require clear normative frameworks and ongoing supervision. Participants' accounts confirm the presence of these challenges, yet they also shed light on the creativity and reflexivity with which practitioners responded. Rather than relying on formal protocols, many developed «situated practices» to navigate complex relational and ethical dilemmas. These included modulating tone and timing, referencing elements in the client's environment, or using humor to ease tension — micro-practices that helped sustain connection and relational depth in the absence of physical presence. Though often improvised and context-dependent, such strategies reflect a form of situated professionalism grounded in empathy, responsiveness, and ethical awareness. As a collective repertoire, they constitute an experiential knowledge base that merits institutional recognition and could serve as a foundation for future training, reflective supervision, and policy development.

The progressive fading of the emergency offers a valuable opportunity to critically assess which aspects of digitalization should be retained, adapted, or discarded. The findings suggest that hybrid practices have persisted in certain areas, especially where they improve efficiency without compromising relational quality, but overall, the adoption of digital tools remains uneven and often improvised.

These findings point to the emergence of hybrid and personalized approaches (Pink et al., 2021; Fiorentino et al., 2023) that, while not yet codified, provide a practical foundation for future development. Taken together, the findings reflect the ambivalence of digitalization in social work: remote practices have undoubtedly introduced limitations in terms of relational depth and equity of access, but they have also fostered new forms of connection, flexibility, and creative problem-solving. The voices of practitioners capture this ongoing negotiation between technological mediation and the ethical-relational core of social work.

In light of these reflections, there is a need to move beyond a descriptive mapping of challenges and toward a deeper exploration of the micro-practices, competencies, and organizational conditions that enable technology to support meaningful and ethically grounded helping relationships.

Conclusion

The study confirms that digitalization is not a neutral process: it requires constant negotiation of the conditions under which technology supports or undermines the principles of relational care. Recognizing the value of everyday improvisation and practitioner reflexivity is essential to building future frameworks that center the helping relationship, even in digital form. Further research should examine the long-term impacts of hybrid practices, with particular attention to how digital tools are integrated, resisted, or re-defined by professionals and service users alike. This sustained critical engagement is essential not only to ensure that digital innovation reinforces, rather than undermines, the foundational values of social work, but also to support the development of shared models and vocabularies capable of integrating technology without compromising the ethical and relational core of the profession.

Bibliography

- Afrouz, R., & Lucas, J. (2023). A systematic review of technology-mediated social work practice: Benefits, uncertainties, and future directions. *Journal of Social Work*, 23(5), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173231165926>
- Achmad, W. (2023). Social Work Technology: Utilization of E-Counseling for Assessment Services. *Journal Info Sains: Informatika dan Sains*, 13(02), 61-68.
- Baker, K. D., & Ray, M. (2011). Online counseling: The good, the bad, and the possibilities. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 24(4), 341-346.
- Biffi, F., & Pasini, A. (2018). *Principi e fondamenti del servizio sociale*. Erickson.
- Bloor, M., & Wood, F. (2006). *Keywords In Qualitative Methods: A Vocabulary of Research Concepts*. Sage.
- Boddy, J., & Dominelli, L. (2017). Social Media and Social Work: The Challenges of a New Ethical Space. *Australian Social Work*, 70(2), 172-184.
- Braun V. e Clarke V. (2006), Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77-101.
- Byrne, J., & Kirwan, G. (2019). Relationship-based social work and electronic communication technologies: Anticipation, adaptation and achievement. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 33(2), 217-232.
- Cabiati, E. (2021). Social workers helping each other during the COVID-19 pandemic: Online mutual support groups. *International Social Work*, 64(5), 676-688.
- Cardano, M. (2011). *La ricerca qualitativa*. il Mulino.
- Chan, C. (2018). ICT-supported social work interventions with youth: A critical review. *Journal of Social Work*, 18(4), 468-488.
- Chan, C., & Ngai, S. S.-Y. (2019). Utilising Social Media for Social Work: Insights from Clients in Online Youth Services. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 33(2), 157-172.
- Chester, A., & Glass, C. A. (2006). Online Counselling: A Descriptive Analysis of Therapy Services on The Internet. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 34(2), 145-160.
- Cook, J. E., & Doyle, C. (2002). Working Alliance in Online Therapy as Compared to Face-To-Face Therapy: Preliminary Results. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 5(2), 95-105.
- Corbetta, P. (2014). *Metodologia e tecniche della ricerca sociale*. il Mulino.
- Derks, D., Fischer, A. H., & Bos, A. E. R. (2008). The role of emotion in computer-mediated communication: A review. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(3), 766-785. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2007.04.004>

- Diener, E., & Dineen, J. (2021). The Double-Edged Sword of Digital Connection: A Psychological Perspective on Remote Work. *Journal of Social Work Theory and Practice*, 46(3), 63-76.
- Dominelli, L. (2004). *Social work: Theory and practice for a changing profession*. Polity Press.
- Dominelli, L. (2021). A green social work perspective on social work during the time of COVID-19. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 30(1), 7-16.
- Fiorentino, V., Romakkaniemi, M., Harrikari, T., Saraniemi, S., & Tiitinen, L. (2023). Towards digitally mediated social work — The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on encountering clients in social work. *Qualitative Social Work*, 22(3), 448-464.
- Folgheraiter, F. (2024). *Relational Theory in Social Work*. Phenomenological Foundations.
- Gergen, K. J. (2018). *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*. Oxford University Press.
- Green, L., & Moran, L. (2021). Covid-19, social distancing and the «scientization» of touch: Exploring the changing social and emotional contexts of touch and their implications for social work. *Qualitative Social Work*, 20(1-2), 171-178.
- Healy, K. (2019). *Social Work Theories in Context: Mapping Intensive Interaction*. Routledge.
- Huang, X., Ruiz-Segura, A., Tan, C., Wang, T., Sharma, R., & Lajoie, S. P. (2023). Social presence in technology-rich learning environments: How real we are feeling connected and how does it matter for learning? *Information and Learning Sciences*, 124 (11-12), 396-424.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press.
- Jenkins, N., Bloor, M., Fischer, J., Berney, L., & Neale, J. (2010). Putting it in context: The use of vignettes in qualitative interviewing. *Qualitative Research*, 10(2), 175-198.
- Johnson, S. (2022). Navigating the Therapeutic Landscape: Strategies for Effective Remote Social Work. *Social Work Journal*, 38(2), 15-30.
- Khangpiboon, K., Nimalueng, P., & Jundai, R. (2023). Ethics responsibility: Using social media of social work practice in Thailand. *ASEAN Social Work Journal*, 2(1), 54-68.
- Konttila, J., Siira, H., Kyngäs, H., Lahtinen, M., Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., & Mikkonen, K. (2018). Healthcare professionals' competence in digitalisation: A systematic review. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 28(5-6), 745-761.
- Kutz, D. (2020). The Limits of the Online Therapeutic Relationship: Understanding Barriers in Digital Interventions. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 38(2), 139-154.
- La Mendola, S. (2010). Social Work and Social Presence in an Online World. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 28(1-2), 108-119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228831003759562>
- Lintner, C., & Zadra, F. (2024). Outreaching Digitally. Digital Social Work Experiences in Low Threshold Social Services. *Autonomie locali e servizi sociali*, 47(1), 183-200.
- López Peláez, A., & Kirwan, G. (Eds.). (2023). *The Routledge International Handbook of Digital Social Work*. Routledge.
- Lucidi, F., Alivernini, F., & Pedon, A. (2008). *Metodologia Della Ricerca Qualitativa*. il Mulino.
- Mackrill, T., Ørnbøll, J. K. (2019). The Mysocialworker App System: A Pilot Interview Study. *European Journal of Social Work*, 22(1), 134-144.
- Männistö, M., Mikkonen, K., Kuivila, H. M., Virtanen, M., Kyngäs, H., & Kääriäinen, M. (2020). Digital collaborative learning in nursing education: A systematic review. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 34(2), 280-292.
- Mateo, A. E., Poyato, M. J. G., & Solanilla, A. M. (2021). Could WhatsApp be an intervention tool for digital social work? A case study. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 48, 29.
- Mcauliffe, D., & Nipperess, S. (2017). E-Professionalism and the Ethical Use of Technology in Social Work. *Australian Social Work*, 70(2), 131-134.
- Millstein, K. (2000). Confidentiality in direct social-work practice: Inevitable challenges and ethical dilemmas. *Families in Society*, 81(3), 270-282.
- Mirri, A. (2018). *Emergenze, Urgenze e Servizio Sociale. Teoria Metodologia e Tecniche*. Carocci.
- Mishna, F., Bogo, M., Root, J., Sawyer, J. And Khoury-Kassabri, M., (2012). «It Just Crept In»: The Digital Age and Implications For Social Work Practice. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 40(3), 277-286.
- Mishna, F., Milne, E., Bogo, M., & Pereira, L. F. (2021). Responding To Covid-19: New Trends in Social Workers' Use of Information and Communication Technology. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 1, 1-11.

- Nadav, J., Kaihlanen, A.-M., Kujala, S., Laukka, E., Hilama, P., Koivisto, J., Keskimäki, I., & Heponiemi, T. (2021). How to implement digital services in a way that they integrate into routine work: Qualitative interview study among health and social care professionals. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 23(12), e31668. <https://doi.org/10.2196/31668>
- National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, & Clinical Social Work Association. (2017). Standards for technology in social work practice. <https://www.socialworkers.org/Practice/NASW-Practice-Standards-Guidelines/Standards-for-Technology-in-Social-Work-Practice>
- Nguyen, M. H., Gruber, J., Marler, W., Hunsaker, A., Fuchs, J., & Hargittai, E. (2021). Staying connected while physically apart: Digital communication when face-to-face interactions are limited. *New Media & Society*, 24(9), 2046-2067.
- Nordesjö, K., Scaramuzzino, G., & Ulmestig, R. (2022). The Social Worker-Client Relationship in the Digital Era: A Configurative Literature Review. *European Journal of Social Work*, 25(2), 303-315.
- Pascoe, K. M. (2022). Remote service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic: Questioning the impact of technology on relationship-based social work practice. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 52(6), 3268-3287.
- Peláez, A., Servós, C., Mesa, J., & Almaguer-Kalixto, P. (2020). The more you know, the less you fear: Reflexive social work practices in times of covid-19. *International Social Work*, 63(6), 746-752. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820959365>
- Pink, S., Ferguson, H., & Kelly, L. (2021). Digital Social Work: Conceptualising A Hybrid Anticipatory Practice. *Qualitative Social Work*, 21(2), 413-430.
- Reamer, F. G. (2013). Social Work in A Digital Age: Ethical and Risk Management Challenges. *Social Work*, 58(2), 163-172.
- Reamer, F. G. (2015). Clinical Social Work in a Digital Environment: Ethical and Risk-Management Challenges. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 43(2), 120-132.
- Richards, D., & Viganó, N. (2013). Online Counseling: A Narrative and Critical Review of The Literature. *Journal Of Clinical Psychology*, 69(9), 994-1011.
- Sanfelici, M. (2020). I servizi sociali ai tempi del coronavirus: le condizioni di lavoro degli assistenti sociali nella prima fase dell'emergenza. *La Rivista di servizio sociale*, 2, 4-21.
- Sanfelici, M., Gui, L., & Mordegli, S. (2020). *Il Servizio Sociale Nell'emergenza Covid-19*. FrancoAngeli.
- Short, J., Williams, E., & Christie, B. (1976). *The social psychology of telecommunications*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Taylor-Beswick, A. M. L. (2023). Digitalizing social work education: Preparing students to engage with twenty-first century practice need. *Social Work Education*, 42(1), 44-64.
- Tzvetanova, Y. V. (2023). The Digital Competence of Future Social Workers: Self-Assessment. *International Journal*, 60(1), 83-87.
- van de Luitgaarden, G., & van der Tier, M. (2018). Establishing working relationships in online social work. *Journal of Social Work*, 18(3), 307-325.
- Zenarolla, A. (2024). From resistance to acceptance. How the digitalisation imposed by COVID-19 is changing the relationship between the social service and digital technologies. *Relational Social Work*, 8(1), 62-79.

Cacopardo, B. (2025). The Digital Turn in Social Work: Navigating Relationships, Boundaries, and Ethics. *Relational Social Work*, 9(1), 46-64, doi: 10.14605/RSW912503.



Relational Social Work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License