EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL WORKERS AND YOUNG ADULTS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract:

This study investigates the impact of digital communication technology on the relationship between social workers and young adults in social work practice. The objective of this study is to analyse how the use of digital communication has impacted the social workers' and young adults' relationship in social work practice and to explore whether the social workers faced any challenges, and the possibilities of the use of digital communication technology in social work practice with young adults from the social workers' perspectives. In this study, the qualitative research method has been used to gather in-depth information from the participants. The findings of this study showed that the use of digital communication technology has impacted the relationship between social workers and the young adults both positively and negatively. Social workers emphasized the advantages of using digital communication technology in social work practice, which is easier, faster, and more accessible and easy builds up relationship with young adults, specifically with those the social workers had difficulties reaching out to and providing services to in person and with disabilities. However, working with young adults requires a high degree of trust and interaction, and it was difficult for the social workers to develop that trust and interaction without physical presence. Social workers expressed the need to have both options alternatively in social work practice: the use of digital communication technology and in-person meetings, considering the benefits and drawbacks of both in-person meetings and using digital communication technology, to maintain and build relationships with young adults.

Keywords: digital communication technology, social work practice, digital age

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies have grown significantly in the previous decade, with people increasingly relying on the internet and mobile devices for communication, entertainment, knowledge, and practical chores (Pascoe, 2023). Technology has entered social work as well, frequently without conscious decisions or critical evaluation (Pascoe, 2023), and has been used in social work practice over the past few decades (Bullock & Colvin, 2015). Also, digital communication technology is playing a part in giving practitioners access to colleagues and their clients through emails, cell phones, chat rooms, and online messaging (Bullock & Colvin, 2015). Using technologies to meet the requirements of donors, organizations, and clients has become essential and technology that enables the use of real-time data in social work can be advantageous (Newcomb & Venning, 2022), Human connections in the twenty-first century are increasingly mediated by internet-based communication devices (Simpson, 2017) and with the emergence of digital communication technology, modern social workers deliver services to service users via phone calls, video counselling, email, social media networks, text messages, email, and so forth (Reamer, 2013). In addition, social workers employ various communication techniques to establish good working relationships with the service users (Simpson, 2017).

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented changes in the provision of social work and home services that need to be given greater thought before becoming implicit practice (Newcomb & Venning, 2022). Due to COVID-19, changes to the digital delivery of social services started rapidly, and social workers were compelled to adopt digital communication technologies to replace face-to-face services (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). However, many questions remained unanswered, such as how social service providers could effectively use technology to bridge the gap caused by COVID-19, but social service providers have demonstrated a high level of inventiveness in the use of digital communication technology to provide services and maintain relationships with service users (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). By looking at the benefits of using digital communication technology in terms of the relationship between social workers and service users, the use of digital communication technologies can enhance interaction through multiple forms of exchange (Randolph *et al.*, 2023). For social workers to stay in touch with service users during the pandemic, the use of digital communication technology options was expanded, and communication tools, such as the use of personal cell phones for phone calls or texting, video conferencing, and formal usage of email, were quickly adopted by social workers (Mishna *et al.*, 2020). Some service users who previously had anxiety about going out to meet the social workers discovered that staying at home and talking about what is going on via digital means actually helped the service users to reduce their anxiety (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the use of digital communication technology helped more effectively to access service users from remote locations, as well as the service users who faced hurdles to get services (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, the shift to digital services provided greater access for service users, particularly for young

people who rely on others to attend therapy, such as their parents or guardians (Mishna *et al.*, 2021).

On the contrary, most social workers experienced difficulties with contacting service users due to asymmetry of service users' resources, such as a lack of internet or smartphone access (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). The introduction of e-counselling was also a barrier in social work practice; for instance, conducting therapy over video conferencing, via e-mail, or through chat rooms has created both ethical and legal concerns (Bullock & Colvin, 2015). Meanwhile, some social workers faced difficulties interacting with some service users because of the service users' lack of computer literacy abilities or comfort level using digital communication technology (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). There were difficulties in reaching out to some service users due to their lack of privacy, particularly those living with abusers or family members who do not support service users' therapy (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). While face-to-face meetings may decline and ethical challenges may develop, these issues could be manageable through education and ethical reflection in a reflexive practice (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022).

There has been a lack of research conducted focusing on how digital communication technology has impacted the relationship between young adults and social workers, specifically from different countries working with young adults. To address this knowledge gap, this study will analyze how the use of digital communication has impacted the social workers' and young adults' relationship in social work practice and explore whether the social workers faced any challenges while using digital communication technology in social work practice. Additionally, to explore the possibilities of using digital communication technology in social work practice with young adults from the social workers' perspectives in the upcoming decades.

1.1. Research Question
- How has the use of digital communication technology impacted the relationship between young adults and social workers from the perspective of social workers?

2. Literature Review

Long before COVID-19, information and communication technologies (e.g., smartphones and tablets), computer hardware/software, and other communication media (e.g., social media and text messaging) permeated direct social work practice (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). As a supplement to face-to-face practice, social workers were increasingly using digital communication tools informally with clients to interact between the sessions (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). Technology is used by social workers in a variety of ways in their daily jobs, from telephones to email to video conferencing tools and instant messaging (Newcomb & Venning, 2022). However, because of COVID-19, there was a sudden shift in the pattern of work in social work practice, which required the social workers to work from home using digital communication technology (Newcomb & Venning, 2022). The pandemic has forced both service users and practitioners to build skills and resources (Newcomb &

Venning, 2022). As the world grapples with a 'new normal' in the post-COVID-19 era, social workers must consider the paradigm shift in practice and its implications (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). In online interactions, social presence can help to increase the sense of social connection (Randolph *et al.*, 2023). There is evidence to support the idea that social presence, or the feeling of connection, through electronic communication, can improve relationships between social workers and their service users (Randolph *et al.*, 2023). Some service users could favour or demand electronic communication over traditional methods (Mishna *et al.*, 2012); therefore, social workers have to respond effectively; for instance, a lot of young people prefer electronic communication (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). In this process, the selection of digital communication technology plays an important role (Mishna *et al.*, 2021), since young adults of today rely increasingly on digital communication technologies for personal assistance and guidance as well as for entertainment, information, and social connections (Mishna *et al.*, 2021).

Online or phone-based technologies may be beneficial for some service user groups, particularly young people, as they are more engaging, which lowers feelings of stigma or judgment (Newcomb & Venning, 2022). But in terms of confidentiality, while having e-counselling between young people and social workers, they can look into each other's private residences, and there may be a breach of privacy for both parties (Newcomb & Venning, 2022). Using digital communication technology, the social workers and young people should be aware that personal information may be retained by a third-party carrier or simply overheard by neighbours or family members (Newcomb & Venning, 2022). Furthermore, depending on the geographic location, not every young person may have the literacy, aptitude, information, or financial means to employ a variety of technologies (Newcomb & Venning, 2022).

Digital communication and media infrastructures are increasingly manifesting as digital tools that support, or replace, social work practice in areas such as case management (e.g., automation), outcome measurement (e.g., standardized assessment), interventions (e.g., online counselling), and communication (e.g., video meetings) (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022). The relationship between social workers and service users can be seen not just as a fundamental component of social workers' professional identity and purpose (Rollins, 2020, p. 395), but also as the very foundation of an intervention or as a service in and of itself (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022). Transparency, mutual trust, respect, and an interest in the service users are all values that can help the social worker-service user relationship (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022). Nonetheless, the relationship is not 'neutral' but can be filled with power based on context and asymmetrical positions (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022). Looking into the benefits of using digital communication technology in terms of the relationship between the social workers and young adults, in Denmark, an app called "MySocialworker" assisted the young users in gaining perspective on their lives and in seeing themselves realistically (Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). For instance, the young adults mentioned that the app is used to define and remember personal goals, and the young adults used the app to evaluate their overall performance throughout the week prior (Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). However, there are concerns that the social workers and

young people might get too close, and some of their goals and information will be considered too personal to share with their social worker (Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019). The usage of digital communication and social media increases young people's perception of the accessibility of social workers, as there are no geographical/physical/time constraints, like in offline settings, which helps young people be more likely to see social workers as being more accessible (Nordesjö *et al.*, 2022).

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Approach

A qualitative research method has been used in this study, and the reason to employ the qualitative research approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, in this project is that this study is based on getting the perspective of social workers' experience of using digital communication technology and how the relationship has been affected in social work practice between social workers and young adults using digital communication technology. The semi-structured interview method offers the best of both worlds: comparable, trustworthy data and the freedom to ask follow-up questions (George, 2022). Furthermore, it was helpful to avoid interruptions while promoting two-way communication, which will give more open-ended character and additional depth and rich data (George, 2022). In this research, social workers' experiences have been investigated in using digital communication technology with young adults in social work practice. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, divided into two main sections consisting of 18 questions: the relationship between social workers and young adults and the use of digital communication technologies; each section has nine questions to collect data from the social workers. To carry out the semi-structured interviews with the social workers, both in-person and remote interviews were conducted.

3.2 Participants' Recruitment

Three social workers from three different nationalities who specifically had the experience of working with young adults were approached. As an international student, I asked one of the colleagues from a different master's program to get connected with other foreign students studying social work, and after contacting a few students, three social workers showed their interest in participating in the study and sharing their experiences of using digital communication technology with the young adults. The reason for only interviewing three social workers was the lack of accessibility to participants because, as an international student in Denmark, it was difficult to recruit a substantial number of social workers who worked with young adults using digital communication technology. The issue could arise from biases about selecting a small sample size. Though it has been argued that qualitative samples should be larger and there could be biases in deploying purposeful sampling in this study because the sample units are chosen based on the researcher's subjective evaluation, the results may likely be affected, particularly by observer bias (Mpofu, 2021). However, other scholars argue that

selecting a larger sample in qualitative research is unnecessary because a small sample size allows a more in-depth perspective of the phenomenon that is studied (Mpofu, 2021). In qualitative research, the major goal of sampling is to achieve a balance between the necessity to collect rich data from participants without losing the fair representation of experiences across the population of possible participants (Mpofu, 2021).

The pseudonyms have been used for the social workers to keep their anonymity while writing the results and discussion of this study. I asked the social workers what pseudonym they preferred to use in this study. The social worker from Austria suggested a pseudonym for her to use in this study, and the social workers from Brazil and Iran did not have any preference for using any of the pseudonyms. Therefore, I tried to come up with pseudonyms for the social workers from Brazil and Iran, which can be culturally relevant.

Table 1: Demographic information of social workers

Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Years of work experience	Specialization	Nationality
Magda	Female	5 years	Young minors- specifically young refugees without family members	Austria
Jasmine	Female	8 years	Young people at risk of child labor in Iran.	Iran
Gabriela	Non-Binary	3 years	Public health and international social work (Ongoing) health facility for LGBT people in Porto, Alegre/ RS-Brazil	Brazil

3.3 Ethical Consideration

To respect the rights and privacy of the participants, any identifying information, such as the participants' real names or any other personal information that can be identifiable, has not been used in this research. Before the start of the interview, the participants were informed about the research, the aim of the research, and the reasons for doing this research study. Also, they have been informed that, if they were not comfortable with any question, they could skip any question without any explanation, and they can withdraw at any point during the interview. The pseudonyms have been used for the social workers to keep their anonymity while writing the results and discussion of this study. I asked the social workers what pseudonym they preferred to use in this study. The social worker from Austria suggested a pseudonym for her to use in this study, and the social workers from Brazil and Iran did not have any preference for using any of the pseudonyms. Therefore, I tried to come up with pseudonyms for the social workers from Brazil and Iran, which can be culturally relevant.

3.4 Data Analysis Approach

To analyze the qualitative data, a thematic analysis approach has been deployed because, in this study, the researcher's aim is to explore the social workers' views, their experiences using digital communication technology with young adults, and how the use of digital

communication technology has impacted the relationship between the social workers and the young adults. Thematic analysis is a technique for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting meaningful patterns (or "themes") within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The usefulness of the thematic analysis is that there is flexibility in terms of the study topic, sample size, data-gathering methodology, and methods for generating meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Thematic analysis can be useful to find patterns in data that relate to participants' ideas and lived experiences, perspectives, behavior, and practices (Clarke & Braun, 2016). To identify the themes in this study, a deductive approach has been used because the deductive approach is helpful for focusing on a particular feature of the data or a particular finding that might be better clarified or understood in the context of an already established theory or frame (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The inductive approach has not been considered to apply in this study because the inductive approach typically offers a more thorough review of all the available data and is not always indicative of the researcher's personal viewpoints or interests (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Also, along with the advantages of applying thematic analysis, there are some limitations as well. Sometimes it is difficult to decide which parts of the data to focus on or which theoretical or epistemological frameworks to employ in the analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

4. Results and Discussion

My interest was inspired by how social work practice thrived in the advent of COVID-19 and how digitalization has come in handy to help the situation. To be more precise, the interest grew in how a phenomenon like Covid-19 has impacted social work practice, especially how or whether the relationship between social workers and young adults has been impacted by not having in-person meetings during the pandemic. Connecting to that, I was keen on investigating social workers' perspectives from different countries that experienced the use of digital communication technology with young adults.

Along with the impact of digital communication technology on the relationship between social workers and young adults, other aspects such as confidentiality, data protection, and a lack of private space at home for young adults, as well as similarities and differences of caseloads of social workers in-person meetings and digital meetings with young adults, and so forth, were investigated, because it was necessary to point out those issues to explore if or whether those aspects have impacted the relationship between social workers and young adults using digital communication technology. The results have shown that these aspects have an influence and impact on the relationship between the social workers and young adults.

The social workers defined the role of relationships in social work practice as crucial. While discussing the concept of relationship, social workers define the relationship as the trust, interaction, and connection that exists between service users and social workers and mention that relationships between the young adults and the social workers can be both friendly and professional.

As stated by Magda, there is no need to set limits in a professional relationship. According to Magda, it is a two-way communication in which the social worker and the young adults can discuss and share honestly without feeling like it is an interview setting. Magda believes that it should be more like getting to know the individual the social worker is working with, figuring out a shared goal, and collaborating to achieve it.

"I think that sometimes happens when you work with young people; they do not really know why they are here, what they are doing, or why they are here to get service, and it can be easy to tell them what they should do, and if you have a good relationship with them, then you can talk about and find out together what the person across from you actually wants." (Magda)

Jasmine worked with vulnerable young people who had been traumatized at workplace and family violence, and it was critical for her to build trust with the young adults to engage with them. Jasmine desired to establish a friendly relationship to provide them with a sense of security, as well as a professional relationship to avoid crossing the line.

"We are social workers; we are not caregivers. I got through a situation where young people think we are caregivers, not social workers. At the same time, it is also important to have friendly relationships when you work with young vulnerable people to build trust, but you should also try to balance between them and try to build up more effective and friendlier relationships with the young people who can continue and communicate." (Jasmine)

Gabriela sees the relationship in social work practice as every connection that she has with service users, colleagues, and other professionals. She also mentioned the social movement as a key component of their connection and practice. Because the relationship empowers the young people, the social worker and the young people must be very trusting and respectful of one another.

"Like, I am a social worker; this is what I do; this is the service that I can provide. We are here; we are in a safe environment, making sure that they feel they can express themselves. Also, in my case, I always make sure that you do not judge the young adults because sometimes they can feel very judged." (Gabriela)

The social workers had to come up with different strategies to get in touch with young adults, as the findings of this study showed that there was a lack of accessibility to digital devices for some young adults due to a lack of financial resources. All the social workers described working with young adults requires a high level of trust, interaction, and kindness. On the issue of the impact of the use of digital communication on the relationship, the social workers expressed having both options: alternatively, the usage of digital communication technology and in-person meetings, considering the benefits

and drawbacks of in-person meetings and the usage of digital communication tools to maintain and build relationships with the young adults. The social workers described the benefits of utilizing digital communication technology, which was easier, faster, and more accessible to young adults and helped build up relationships.

> *"When the pandemic hit in Austria in March 2020, that's when we started to work remotely. Before that time, I had some online meetings from time to time, but it was very rare. It was only when it was requested, and that was when we started to use it, and when we built some knowledge about it as an organization and as a social worker. Like how to do it in the right way or what is considered the best possible way. It felt a little bit locked up, and it was also a feeling of not knowing what was going on with the people we are working with."* (Magda)

On the other hand, the social workers experienced difficulties ensuring young adults' privacy due to a lack of private space in their homes, since the young people could not freely talk and share their problems with the social workers during digital meetings. Nonetheless, social workers were concerned about data protection because they were unsure about the security of the information that young people were sharing through various digital platforms and video conferencing tools and how the information could be processed by a third party, which affected the relationship between the social workers and young adults in some way. Moreover, the social workers expressed different experiences of the workloads in their countries while working remotely. For Magda, there was not that much difference between working from home and at the office with the caseloads. However, Magda stated that the effectiveness of digital meetings with young adults was not the same as in-person meetings. Meanwhile, rather than caseloads, Gabriela experienced a mental workload when working from home, and somehow it affected building up the relationship between Gabriela and the young adults.

> *"If you feel like you're not safe, at some point, you take your safety first, and then we can deal with that later. But we didn't have much trouble with that. Like, nobody complained about it. But we did have times when they (young adults) would tell me, "Look, I cannot talk about this right now because my sister is in the room, and she doesn't know about this." So, this part was quite hard because that would never happen in the office."* (Gabriela)

> *"I think it was one of the biggest challenges because many of the young adults we talked to did not have their own rooms, and they did not have space to talk in a way that they could open up and take the time and have a calm place where they can be themselves. That is one of the things. And being face-to-face, there is more place for humour, and there is also a place for laughing and feeling with the other person what they are feeling and grasping the whole situation and seeing how they are moving and to see what they are doing with their gestures and with their face."* (Magda)

Furthermore, this study showed that because of the socioeconomic structure in Austria, Brazil, and Iran, the young adults faced barriers in getting access to digital devices. As a result, the social workers in their home countries took initiatives to provide digital devices to young adults. Besides, the internet connection was a serious issue in Brazil and Iran, causing disruptions multiple times during online meetings with young people, as mentioned by Jasmine and Gabriela. Gabriela stated that sometimes during online meetings, when the young people are opening up or they are telling her something important or Gabriela and the young adults are finishing or making some agreements, suddenly they disconnect.

"I mostly found the biggest difference in the socio-economic background of the family. I was working with one young adult who had one phone in the whole family. So, sometimes I couldn't reach her for weeks. So, it was mostly structural and economic differences in the society, which are very visible." (Magda)

"It was really terrible. Yeah! When you work digitally, Even if someone is disconnected, you cannot tell if it was on purpose or like if it was the internet connection. You cannot guess." (Gabriela)

"So, somehow most of the social resources are city-centered in Iran, and you know the metropolitan city or capital city. So, some of the people who live in the poor situation, or in a village, do not have a lot of social development. If I compare it to two or three years ago, now it is better. But yeah, of course, there is a poor internet connection. Yeah, it is true; the big cities and metropolitan areas are more developed. Of course, they have more access to social resources compared to the people who live in remote places. (Jasmine)

5. Interpretation and Implications

The data of this study contribute to a better understanding of the impact of digital communication technology on the relationship between social workers and young adults and the importance of relationships in social work practice between the young adults and social workers from the perspective of social workers from three different countries. As the finding of the study shows, most of the young adults preferred to use digital communication technology to meet with the social workers. Some young adults were not confident talking over the phone or meeting face-to-face. In addition, some young adults preferred the texting option, and to some extent, it helped the social workers to build a relationship digitally with the young adults because it was difficult for the social workers to reach out to some young adults to meet in person. But due to several challenges, the social workers would like to have a hybrid option using digital communication technology and an in-person meeting in social work practice. However, to build a relationship with young adults, the social workers prefer face-to-face meetings since it is more effective for them to build trust with young adults. Moreover, the social workers

faced challenges using digital communication technology, which impaired the relationship due to data protection and confidentiality; as the young adults could not open up, and the social workers did not have the power to protect the information that the young adults shared through digital communication technology, whereas in face-to-face meetings, the social workers had the capability to know what to write and what not to.

The findings of this study explored the perspective of social workers who are from three different nations (Austria, Brazil, and Iran), which provides an outlook from an international perspective on the impact of using digital communication technology on the relationship with young adults in social work practice. Following that, the findings of this study could be considered when deciding how to move ahead with the use of digital communication technology in social work practice, considering a more secure way to protect the confidentiality and data protection of young adults with the use of digital communication technology, which will help the social workers to build a strong and effective relationship with the young adults. These findings can be useful for social workers and other stakeholders to come up with a standalone digital platform to implement in social work practice globally.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study has prospective limitations. The results of this study were only demonstrated from the social worker's perspective, since it was not possible to recruit young adults in this study due to a lack of accessibility. After discussing with the social workers who participated in this study, there is any possibility to involve the young adults that the social workers worked with using digital communication technology, but due to the code of ethics, it was not feasible for the social workers to recommend that I reach out to the young adults.

7. Conclusion and Future Research

The findings of this study revealed that the use of digital communication technology has impacted the relationship between the social workers and the young adults both positively and negatively. The social workers experienced some benefits of using digital communication technology that helped the social workers to build relationships with the young adults, which was difficult to some extent, face-to-face, to get access to young adults who had confidence issues to talk face-to-face and lived in rural areas. Moreover, there were challenges as well that were faced by the social workers using digital communication technology with young adults; for instance, building relationships, ensuring data protection, observing young adults' gestures and postures, not being able to provide emotional support without physical presence, and struggling to access young adults that did not have personal digital devices such as computers or cell phones due to financial issues. Further research could be done on how digital communication

technology has impacted the relationship between social workers and other age groups in social work practice, or how new technologies can be more inclusive for young people with disabilities or young people living in rural areas.

Acknowledgements

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Montasir Fahad has received his Joint Master's Degree in Nordic Master in Social work and Welfare from University of Stavanger, Norway and Aalborg University, Denmark and completed his Bachelor's Degree in Sociology from East West University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. His research focus includes; climate change, sustainability, local and urban sustainability, pro environmental behavior, community development, and digital communication technology.

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