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THE USE OF DIGITAL DEVICES AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN SOCIAL WORK: RISKS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT:

Social work developed using ICTs within a techno-social sphere has been defined as “e-social work”. It is a social work field that includes, among others, the use of digital devices and digital platforms in the professional relationship (with individuals, groups, and communities), in the social services programs’ monitoring, in the social work education. Through a literature review, the chapter will explore some parts of the international debate on e-social work. It seems to especially emphasize the positive aspects of digitization in social work; at the same time, questions, and ethical issues are proposed, especially about the social work clients' digital gaps and the need to protect vulnerable people. Digitalization influences clients’ behaviour and affects processes of social exclusion and inclusion. With reference to the elders, for example, the impact of digital divides is very significant; hence, social workers need to promote every tool at their disposal to reduce it to the bare minimum. At the same time, social workers face some risks of using digital devices and digital platforms in the professional one-to-one relationship, which especially during the Covid 19 pandemic have been increased in the welfare system.

KEYWORDS:

1. e-social work
2. innovation
3. digitalization
4. professional practice
5. social work education
6. digital divides
7. discriminations
8. ethics

Introduction

Digitalization, defined as the set of relationships, structures, and elements involved in the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in any aspect of life (López Peláez et al., 2018), has a significant impact on social work and influences not only social work practices in the professional relationship with clients but also, from a broader perspective, processes of social exclusion and inclusion. For example, in the case of elderly people, the impact of the digital divide is very significant; therefore, social work must promote tools to minimize it (De la Fuente Robles, 2019). At the same time, social workers face some risks in using the digital devices and platforms in individual professional relationships; risks that have increased in the welfare system since the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, as will be better explained later, in dealing with children and families there may be some critical aspects, such as those related to virtual home visits, which present risks in terms of privacy and security (Cook et al., 2020).

Moreover, digitalization in social services must be contextualized within the panorama of digitalization in the welfare services system, in which the social worker operates with specific skills, in a plurality of intervention areas. In this panorama, digitalization represents a transformation process that directly influences policy implementation processes, organizational dynamics, and culture in social welfare and health services. Although critical analyses on the matter have highlighted how the introduction and development of ICT have acted to institutionalize a highly managerialist and proceduralist culture (Parton, 2009), new technology platforms have emerged to improve the functioning of welfare and health care organizations, deliver social services, and facilitate referrals to community social services organizations (López Peláez et al., 2018; Cartier et al., 2020).

The pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated the processes of digitalization in the welfare system; and at the same time, it has led to unprecedented public investments. Regarding the European context, mention should be made of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) program agreed upon by the European Union in response to the pandemic. This is a €750 billion package, about half of which consists of grants, agreed upon by the European Union in response to the pandemic crisis (European Commission, 2021). The main component of the NGEU program is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which has a duration of six years, from 2021 to 2026, and a total size of 672.5 billion euros (312.5 consisting of grants, the remaining 360 billion of low-interest loans). For instance, in Italy, one of the countries most affected by the pandemic, an increase in digital assistance to vulnerable population groups is expected thanks to the RRF. Investments in the modernization of home care and telemedicine, for example, reveal this trend and represent a challenge to increase the quantity and quality of interventions (Pesaresi, 2022). In this context, organizations and service providers are called upon to face processes of change based on field experiences and therefore on social work practice. In an innovative context, social workers are required to deal with the issues of 'usability' and 'acceptability' of digitalization by playing a dual role, that of both users and mediators. Professionals, in fact, transfer both the basic digital information and the skills necessary for correct interaction, as well as strengthening compliance, because their user experience conditions that of the user (Toccafondi et al., 2022).

The acceleration of digitalization during the pandemic is widely recognized and is of great importance for the welfare system and social professions. The pandemic, in fact, has acted as a catalyst (Di Rosa et al., 2022) of the digitalization in social services. This trend corresponds to an increase in studies and analyses on the use of ICT in the social work profession, and mainly in two areas: the digitalization of professional practices in welfare services, and the experimentation of new tools in the training of students and in the continuous training of social workers. Regarding professional practices, a growing number of research studies address current issues, such as the

opportunities and risks of using digital tools in communication with clients, or the processes of digitalization in the organizations where social workers operate. Regarding social work education and the supervision of social workers, several studies have focused on the innovative and creative use of ICT tools.

However, we must not forget the digitalization efforts made, and the challenges that existed, before the Covid-19 pandemic. Digitalization in social work represented a significant transformation even before the pandemic, with a direct influence on the practices of social workers, and it was already a subject of interest in the international scientific literature.

This chapter proposes a literature review conducted with the aim of providing a summary of research carried out on digitalization in social work, indicating the most current aspects of, and perspectives on, the state of the literature.

Literature review and research questions

Considering that the task of a literature review is to build an argument, not a library (Rudestam et al., 2014), an exploratory methodological approach was chosen in order to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge on various aspects of digitalization in the international scenario of social work, and to highlight critical challenges and associated risks. Data collection was carried out through a literature review focused on the organization and implementation of digital social work. The objective of this process was to gather detailed and updated information, establishing a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Through the literature review, I aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the definitions of digitalization in social work?
- What are the applications of digitalization in different contexts of professional practice and in social work education?
- What are the advantages and challenges of digitalization in social work?
- What are the ethical implications?

I chose to focus on these research questions because studies on digitalization in social work, particularly those with a critical approach, remain relatively unknown and underrepresented in the international scientific discourse. The systematic collection of scientific contributions is necessary to gain thorough understanding of the implications of digitalization in social work. In order to contribute to the ongoing scientific debate, the article focuses on the opportunities and critical issues of digitalization in social work as a crucial aspect of professional practice.

The following sources were used for the literature review: academic databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science), scientific journals specializing in the field of social work, books and book chapters, websites of international professional organizations, conference proceedings.

The analysis has some limitations. The literature mostly focuses on Western countries, which are economically stronger and therefore more developed in digitalization. Consequently, macro themes concerning problematic issues arising from global inequalities in access to technology are less highlighted. It should also be considered that enriching the scientific debate on digitalization in social work should be based primarily on empirical research rather than literature-based analyses, especially in the current historical phase characterized by increasingly rapid technological innovation in society, which has direct consequences on social work practice.

Results

Defining digitalization in social work

It is possible to affirm, following Campanini (2022), that the two expressions digital social work and e-social work both denote the use of digital technologies in the technical-social domain of social work. E-social work (López Peláez et al., 2018) is a field of social work that encompasses the use of digital devices and platforms not only in the relationship between social worker and clients but also in the organizational and communitarian dimensions of social work. From this perspective, Goldkin et al. (2018) highlights the trifocal dimension of digital social work, which concerns the professional relationship with individuals, the involvement of social workers within welfare system organizations, and community work.

Internationally, the scientific debate on the use of technology in professional practice has been ongoing for several years. In clinical social work, for example, it has focused on the therapeutic value of digitalization in the helping relationship. Especially in North America, research shows that the use of cyber communication in clinical social work is practical, efficient, and good practice (Mishna et al., 2012). Moreover, it highlights the potential to reach clients in geographically remote and underserved communities, thereby enhancing and extending the therapeutic relationship and improving treatment outcomes (Mattison, 2012). The potential of digital social work has been discussed, but also the risks (Ibid.) and, as will be seen later, so too have the ethical problems and challenges (Reamer, 2013; 2015; 2024).

Digital social work is an expanding sector that utilizes digital technology to enhance social work practice (Waitling et al., 2012). It can include the use of online tools for assessment, intervention, and communication, as well as the use of social media to connect with clients and communities. There are various definitions of digital social work, but most agree that it is an approach to social work practice that uses digital technology to improve access to services, and their effectiveness and equity. In this regard, there are various possible benefits of providing social work services by electronic means: enhancing access to social work services that are unavailable in person because of geographical distance, clients' disabilities, or illnesses; real-time monitoring of clients' status, when appropriate being able to respond to clients rapidly; providing more cost-effective delivery of social work services; ease of communication; reducing the frequency of clients' travel to obtain social work services. Moreover, the use of digital technologies and social media can enhance not only social work practice but also research, education, and policy (NASW, 2017).

The pandemic has accelerated the debate and study of digitalization in social work, but it would be incorrect to assert that the concept of digital social work is a new one that has developed from the Covid-19 health emergency. Even before, in fact, several scientific studies had been devoted to digital social work. In addition to Goldkin et al. (2018), one can mention Rafferty et al. (2006), who explored the potentialities of virtual social work practice, and Watling et al. (2012), who analyzed the transforming social work practice in a digital society. Moreover, Rafferty et al. (2009) focused on social work in the 'digital age', analyzing several issues: information systems supporting practice, professional learning, the use of ICTs to provide people with resources for independent living, the relationship among ICT, social inclusion, social exclusion, and the digital divide. Also to be mentioned is the research by Di Rosa et al. (2018), conducted before the outbreak of Covid-19, which addressed very relevant issues, including the presence of social work on the internet, particularly on websites and social media. Di Rosa and colleagues focused on the Italian context and, among various themes, analyzed the resources derived from digital innovation, such as accessibility and greater fluidity in communication with clients and colleagues. Furthermore, they discussed various issues concerning the use of ICT, especially in professional relationships and direct interaction with individuals. They

emphasized the need to strengthen social workers' skills in using digital tools. Moreover, the use of technology and its innovations in social work training was further explored. Among the recent studies that have analyzed how social work has utilized digital tools during the pandemic, the analysis by Pink et al. (2022) is particularly relevant. The authors examine in detail the practices adopted during the pandemic, the related policy responses, and the implications for the profession. Furthermore, they introduce new concepts, such as 'digital materiality' and 'digital intimacy', to explain the experiences of social workers in this unprecedented context. The central thesis is that the pandemic has led to a transformation of social work, giving rise to a hybrid practice that synergistically integrates digital interventions (video calls, instant messaging, emails) and face-to-face interactions. Although the article focuses on child protection, the authors advocate a concrete and flexible hybrid digital social work practice applicable to all intervention sectors. Despite initial resistance by institutions, which tended to relegate digital practices to a marginal or last-resort role, reality demonstrates that digitalization has become an indispensable and irreplaceable element of social work. It is essential, therefore, to rethink the profession as a hybrid practice that harmoniously integrates different modes of interaction, both digital and in person. Looking to the future, hybrid digital social work emerges as an essential reference framework in which to address the challenges and uncertainties that lie ahead. This model must be designed so that it can flexibly adapt to new needs, enhancing the improvised and adaptive approach that has always characterized the figure of the social worker.

The applications of digitalization in social work

To provide a comprehensive interpretation of the possible use of information technologies in social work, it may be useful to mention Riquelme (2019). This author provides an overview of the various potential applications, identifying a series of digital tools in order to understand the global scenario of social work, to facilitate successful integration (individually and collectively), and to disseminate (academically and socially) intervention on the Web. A first aspect considered is that of digitalization for knowledge and research, which are fundamental for social work as a discipline and profession. Digital scientific publications, access to statistical data, digital tools for data collection and analysis, the world of big data, are essential resources for research activities aimed at understanding the needs of the population, motivating, and legitimizing social work action, and evaluating the impact of interventions. Virtual archives of scientific studies and technological tools to use them give easy and immediate access to research on innovations, enabling the gathering of information useful not only for academic study but also for the professional practice of social workers. A second aspect considered concerns databases and the computerization of professional activity, for example through computerized records, which allow data extraction on user characteristics, interventions, and their effectiveness. Another application of digitalization concerns social workers' actions through technology aimed at helping people in conditions or at risk of social exclusion and integrate them into society. There are also examples of applications for specific needs. Technologies, for example, can improve communication and relationships for people with visual, auditory, or intellectual impairments; they can improve mobility and accessibility for elderly and disabled people; they can help women at risk of violence. Other technology applications can facilitate the matching of labor supply and demand or socio-occupational guidance for users of social services – an important tool in the field of social intervention as a support system for social integration initiatives. Finally, Riquelme analyzes the area of dissemination through the Web, in which, for example, digital platforms allow for collective petitions, make problems visible, promote reform initiatives or normative changes and social policies, and, more generally, use technology for policy practice

interventions. It is precisely the use of platforms that has a significant place in the social service literature that refers to the 'platform society' (Van Dyck et al., 2018), a term used to describe contemporary society, which is characterized by the pervasive use of digital platforms that mediate interactions among individuals, organizations, and institutions.

There are many fields of application for digital social work, and compiling a comprehensive analysis is an extremely challenging task. Therefore, for an updated overview that considers the latest developments in e-social work, I refer the reader to the handbook edited by López Peláez et al. (2023), where one finds many contributions on specific areas. Among these I cite: assistive technologies, robotics and gerontological social work practice (Kaodate et al., 2023); digital technology in statutory children's services (Mackrill, 2023); digital social work and disability services (de la Fuente Robles et al., 2023); tele-social work as a complementary intervention formula that includes teleworking, remote assistance and online home visiting (Castillo de Mesa, 2023); the use of Facebook in social work practice with families (Beddoe et al., 2023).

Separate mention should be made of the application of ICT in digital social advocacy (DSA), to which I shall return later, in the section on ethical implications. Among others, the study by Bilotti (2023) highlights that DSA is a potential resource for 'engaging' hard-to-reach individuals, such as young people, among whom the use of digital tools is particularly widespread and familiar. Alternatively, it can be used to reach a larger number of people; an example of this is provided by distance childbirth preparation courses, which have allowed for the formation of groups larger than those that could be accommodated in the limited physical spaces of services, and which have enabled the participation of women unable, for health reasons, to attend in person.

One of the crucial applications of digitization concerns social work education. On this issue it is interesting to cite Berzin et al. (2015). This paper is part of the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative, promoted by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, which sought to support social progress through science, calling for collaborative action by educators, professionals, and national organizations to address the most urgent social challenges, particularly in the USA. The report highlights the capacity of information and communication technology to significantly improve social work practice. The integration of technology into intervention methods and practical innovation through information and communication technologies can give rise to transformative social change. It is essential to recognize the important role that social work can play not only in adopting technologies to improve practice but also in ensuring that such technologies are developed ethically and in compliance with the principles of social work. However, it is important to note that technological innovation does not automatically guarantee progress towards social justice values. Social work has the ethical duty to ensure that technological evolution is inclusive and does not amplify existing inequalities (Goldkind et al., 2015). The American document also identifies some limitations in the USA, which, however, are also apparent in Europe. These include limited education and training of social workers in effectively incorporating technology, limited exposure to innovative technology applications in social work, lack of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of technologies in social intervention, and a shortage of financial resources that hinders the adoption and experimentation of technologies in the field. The invitation is therefore to reflect and act, in both basic and continuing education, to enable a more widespread and targeted use of these technologies. Moreover, the CSWE, the accrediting body for social work courses in America, has established a specific group called the Technology Advisory Group (TAG) to assist schools in developing teaching pathways that integrate technology, and in using technology in social work practice.

The body of research on social work education has undoubtedly expanded since the pandemic, which triggered innovative processes, although it should be borne in mind that, even before Covid-

19, research in this field was already present in the international scientific literature (Waldman et al., 2008; Taylor, 2017; Di Rosa et al., 2018, Taylor-Beswick, 2023¹).

Among the most recent studies, that by Barberis et al. (2023), carried out in Italy, reports some interesting findings. Among them are: the need to permanently establish activities and courses, in multiple disciplinary areas, that promote digital skills; the need to expand digital relational skills with in-depth exploration of how to organize online, for example, interviews and group meetings especially with individuals in particular conditions of need (for example, people with disabilities); the need for critical reflection on the use of technological tools in social work, with particular regard to the dimensions of ethics and professional ethics, the purpose being to identify risks and advantages associated with the digitalization of work with individuals. The study highlights that the educational curriculum of a degree program (whether undergraduate or graduate) cannot be expected to provide all the digital knowledge and skills necessary for a social worker or for those in managerial coordination roles within social services. Rather, such knowledge and these skills are enriched and consolidated through experiential learning in the field. However, the authors emphasize that in addition to learning by doing, it is essential to acquire the ability to interact with so-called 'technical' professions. Hence, the social worker is not required to master the programming and architecture of information systems, but rather to critically reflect on the limitations and opportunities of the tools and – depending on the position held – share them with colleagues, managers, and political-administrative decision-makers, to identify procedures functional to their work. One can find similar results in the study carried out by Hooker Jones et al. (2021) on preparing students for remote social work practice (RSWP) in the USA, and in the study by Lischer et al. (2021) on the changes that took place in distance education during the pandemic in Switzerland.

Critical aspects of digitalization in social work

While the pandemic has highlighted the positive aspects of digitalization in social work, there is a growing need to critically examine the social consequences of ICT and digital platforms in this field. Inequalities in technology use and client exclusion are only some of the challenges the profession must face.

The transformations resulting from digitalization concern social work at both micro and macro levels. Digitalization processes have transformed interactions with clients, their demands and needs, and the organizations where social workers carry out their professional activities. At the same time, the creation of a digital environment has redefined exclusion processes (Watling, 2012), giving rise to new forms of inequality and discrimination, such as towards the elderly and young people. Mathiyazhagan (2022) points out how structural disparities, historical injustices, prejudice, exclusion, authority, and advantage represent key human rights concerns that social workers confront in their daily work. These issues have not only persisted in traditional offline communities; they have recently become manifest in online settings as well. The digital gap and online divisions perpetuate power imbalances and privileges both within and beyond the realm of social work. Social work methodologies are evolving to encompass emerging technologies across education, research, and practice. Drawing on a decade of international social work experience and fieldwork supervision, Mathiyazhagan highlights the growing necessity to integrate technology into social work practices across various domains. He examines the obstacles against and advantages of employing technology in social work, and he proposes a potential model for tech-driven social work practice aimed at fostering safe and inclusive communities, both online and offline, to advance human rights. Among

¹ Although this study was published in 2023, it was concluded in mid-2019, i.e. before the pandemic.

the critical researchers that have examined how remote delivery and technology affect relationship-based practice, Pascoe (2022) underscored their negative effects on relationship building and the self-care of social workers. Moreover, there are concerns that efficiency may be prioritized over future face-to-face interactions with service users. During the pandemic, the adoption of alternative communication methods via technology disrupted and challenged the fundamental principles of relationship-based practice (Mishna et al., 2021).

There follows a review of several studies that have highlighted some critical aspects of digitization in social work with reference to specific population groups.

De la Fuente Robles et al. (2019) focused on the elderly in Spain and noted that this group of the population may feel outdated, lack knowledge, or find it difficult to use technology because of its complexity and high cost. Social work is called upon to facilitate an intimate and accessible pedagogical approach to enable the elderly to become active agents in the field of technology. Considering the socio-demographic and technological landscape, new challenges need to be addressed. Specifically focusing on the elderly, e-social work underscores the potential for developing new skills and capabilities through ICTs, which are seen as powerful tools with which to ensure equal access to an enhanced quality of life. Despite progress in narrowing the digital divide, its impact on individuals aged 75 and over remains notable, emphasizing the importance of utilizing all available means to minimize it. Social work contributes to empowering the elderly population through the technological adaptation of interfaces for easier interaction, while also promoting the use of alternative technologies in online interventions. Technology has fundamentally transformed society, prompting a new perspective on aging, vulnerability, and chronic conditions. ICTs in social intervention should serve as genuine opportunities to promote social cohesion.

Focusing on social work with young people, it is apparent that social inclusion is closely linked to digital inclusion. Policy design in social welfare must ensure the digital well-being of children and adolescents, safeguarding their increasingly assertive rights in the digital sphere (Picornell-Lucas et al., 2022). As institutions and services become digitized, both social workers and children need to acquire the digital skills necessary to 'navigate' these systems. Moreover, due to the pandemic, social workers have had to devise ways to conduct interviews, home visits, diagnoses, and interventions based on the internet and technology, and particularly for children in vulnerable situations. Virtual home visits present some advantages but also risks in terms of privacy and security, especially in cases of domestic violence. According to Cook et al. (2020), transitioning to virtual home visits amid the pandemic enabled social workers to be more agile in their support for children and their families. Previously, social workers had typically travelled to conduct home visits. However, with the shift to online practice, they found themselves responding swiftly to parents' text messages by initiating brief video calls. This adaptation to a 'little and often' approach brought unexpected advantages. Many social workers reported gaining deeper insights into families' daily lives despite the physical distance. Before lockdown measures, considerable time was spent on commuting to home visits. Eliminating the need for travel made some social workers feel more invigorated and focused during their interactions with families, enabling them to be available to a larger number of families throughout the workday. Social work with children and families inherently involves mobility and physical presence. Consequently, as expressed by one social worker, there was a risk of personal and professional stagnation when operating virtually. However, virtual home visits also entailed risks regarding confidentiality and safety. In cases of domestic violence, for example, social workers were uncertain whether calls were being monitored, potentially placing callers at further risk. Moreover, social workers acknowledged that certain topics were unsuitable for discussion online.

Ethical implications

Digital social work represents a significant change in the profession. It offers new opportunities but also raises ethical challenges, which have been subject to attention in the literature. With reference to clinical social work, Reamer (2013) highlighted that the most prominent ethical challenges concern six core, traditional social work ethical concepts that pertain to the delivery of clinical services using digital technology: informed consent; privacy and confidentiality; boundaries, dual relationships, and conflicts of interest; records and documentation; collegial relationships.

In a broader view, beyond the clinical approach, Banks et al. (2024) analyze the ethical challenges during the pandemic and the rethinking of ethics in social work practice in relation to digital working. According to these authors, consideration needs to be given to improving social workers' digital competence and widening citizens' access to virtual platforms in order to avoid creating a digital divide or increasing social inequalities. Moreover, even if social work can be developed as a hybrid system of communication with users (in-person and digital), its core values of promoting social justice and inclusion should guide these developments.

In this regard, to be stressed is the importance of the digital social advocacy (DSA) approach, according to which platforms and social media can be useful in reaching certain target populations of service users more easily by facilitating access to the welfare system (Hill et al., 2014). DSA campaigns can be useful in engaging more people, especially hard-to-reach individuals, and families in a situation of social vulnerability if not social exclusion. Particularly, it is effective in engaging young people, who make increasing use of digital platforms. Furthermore, DSA emerges as a crucial resource to overcome existing digital divides. Specifically, it can be used as a tool to bridge disparities involving the elderly and other population segments that may have limited access to broadband or digital technologies (Sanders et al., 2021). This form of advocacy not only makes it possible to reach these groups, but it also contributes to facilitating digital inclusion, promoting access to, and participation in, services and opportunities that might otherwise be difficult to access. The need to promote DSA requires that especial attention be paid to social work education, specifically teaching in the digital age (Sanfelici et al., 2022).

Finally, considering the international perspective of e-professionalism and the ethical use of technology in social work (McAuliffe, 2017), it seems essential for the scientific debate to reflect on the global social work statement of ethical principles which declares that "social workers must recognize that the use of digital technology and social media may pose threats to the practice of many ethical standards including but not limited to privacy and confidentiality, conflicts of interest, competence, and documentation and must obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to guard against unethical practice when using technology" (IFSW, 2018).

Discussion and conclusions

Digital social work offers a range of potential benefits that can revolutionize social workers' professional practice. Among these advantages, improved access to services stands out, because it enables people living in rural or remote areas, or with difficulties in accessing traditional offices, to receive support and assistance. Moreover, e-social work offers the opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of social work by enabling professionals to automate some tasks and use collected data to make more informed decisions. This technology can also contribute to improving equity in access to services, offering equal opportunities to all, regardless of their background or geographical location.

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The practical applications of digitalization in social work are varied and evolving. They include the use of digital technology for client assessment, data collection, and the development of personalized intervention plans. Furthermore, digital social work can be employed to provide online therapy, virtual support groups, and other types of psychosocial intervention. Communication with clients, their families, and healthcare providers can be facilitated by using digital technology. Finally, digitalization can also be useful for social work education by enabling professionals in the field to acquire the digital skills necessary to fully exploit the potential of technology in their work. However, along with these benefits, digital social work also raises a range of practical and ethical challenges that must be addressed with caution. One of the main challenges is the digital divide because not everyone has access to digital technology or the skills necessary to use it. In addition, it is critical to address one of the most important ethical issues for social work, which is ensuring the privacy and security of client data when using digital technology. Moreover, social work professionals must commit to developing the digital skills necessary to use technology effectively and responsibly in accordance with the ethical principles of the profession.

Critical reflection, therefore, is crucial for expanding knowledge and skills in the field of digitalization. Both in the everyday practices of social work and in academic studies on social work, there are positive assessments of the potential of digitalization but, at the same time, attention to the risks that must necessarily be addressed. This concerns various issues highlighted by Casalini (2022): the risk of losing the emotional and bodily dimension of the helping relationship; the widening of the digital divide; increased discrimination against vulnerable individuals who do not receive necessary in-person interventions; and the risk of neglecting the importance of ensuring an adequate number of social workers in the field, in direct contact with the community, within the welfare system. It is at the same time necessary to reflect on issues of a strictly political nature, and particularly on the possible inclusion of so-called 'tele-assistance' within neoliberal policies, whose main objective is not the use of digitalization for collective well-being but rather the reduction of social spending.

I believe it is crucial to continue a constant and constructive debate on digitalization in social services and in the social work profession. This debate could draw benefits from the contributions of both professionals and scholars, with a focus on the international dimension of the phenomenon. It could be a debate that increasingly adopts a post-pandemic perspective, recognizing the 'legacy' of the pandemic and focusing primarily on innovations that can promote improved quality of professional action. In this regard, training in digitalization becomes highly important, not only for students (university education) and social workers (continuing education, supervision), but also for trainers. The acquisition and enhancement of digital skills, in fact, are essential even in university teaching and for those who are called upon to carry out continuing education activities aimed at the acquisition of professional skills.

The role of the digital social worker requires specific skills to utilize digital technologies effectively and safely. Training in digital social work should encompass various crucial areas to ensure adequate professional practice. Firstly, ethics in digital social work is of fundamental importance. Digital social workers must be able to navigate the complex ethical issues arising in the digital environment. They must understand, and apply, ethical principles to ensure the protection and respect of users' rights. Cybersecurity is another key area of training. Digital social workers need to be aware of cybersecurity risks and of techniques for protecting users' sensitive data. This includes knowledge of cybersecurity threats and phishing techniques, as well as the adoption of appropriate measures to safeguard themselves and users against potential security breaches. Moreover, it is essential for digital social workers to develop strong digital skills so that they can effectively utilize digital technologies in social work. This includes the ability to use digital tools for online assessment and intervention, as well as the promotion of digital literacy and inclusion among users. Dual

relationships, where the digital social worker assumes two or more roles with the same user, can be particularly complex in the realm of digital social work. It is crucial for professionals to be transparent with users regarding such dual relationships, manage such relationships professionally and responsibly, and avoid conflicts of interest. Moreover, digital social workers must be aware of digital disparities that may limit access to digital social work for some users. Therefore, it is necessary to develop digital social work by promoting digital education and inclusion, also working with communities, in order to overcome the digital disparities. Furthermore, new challenges are now arising regarding the conscious use of artificial intelligence (Ibrahim et al., 2023) in social work, and they require the further development of skills and experimentation in the field.

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