



Digitalization in Social Work: Opportunities and Challenges for Practitioners

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Doi : <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.0924.2704>

ABSTRACT

The digitalization of social work has introduced both significant opportunities and challenges for practitioners and clients. This article presents the results of a quantitative study involving 173 social workers, exploring their preparedness for digital tools, perceptions of the impact on work quality, concerns about data security, and workplace support for digitalization. The findings reveal that many social workers feel inadequately prepared to integrate digital technologies into their practice, despite recognizing the potential benefits, such as improved efficiency and expanded service accessibility. However, concerns about data security and uneven workplace support pose substantial barriers. Ethical considerations, particularly regarding client confidentiality, remain a critical issue. The article concludes with recommendations for addressing these challenges, including enhanced training programs, better workplace support, and the development of clear data protection protocols. These steps are essential to ensure that digital tools are effectively integrated into social work while maintaining the profession's core values of human connection and ethical practice.

Keywords: Case management, Data security, Digital literacy, Digitalization, Digital tools, Social Work, Technology, Professional development

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of society has dramatically altered various professional fields, including social work. As technology continues to evolve, social workers are increasingly expected to integrate digital tools into their practice, reshaping how they interact with clients, manage cases, and deliver services (Banks, 2020). While digital tools offer new opportunities for enhancing the quality and accessibility of social work services, they also present challenges such as issues of digital literacy, data security, and equitable access to technology (Chan & Holosko, 2018).

The integration of digital technologies into social work has been accelerated by external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a rapid shift to remote work and online service delivery (Hussein, 2021). This shift has prompted a broader reconsideration of the role of digital tools in enhancing the effectiveness of social work practice (Leung & Tsui, 2022). Yet, the readiness of social workers to adopt these tools and their confidence in the benefits of digitalization remain areas of concern (Reamer, 2021).

This article aims to explore the opportunities and challenges associated with the digitalization of social work, focusing on both clients and practitioners. Through a quantitative study involving 172 social workers, this research examines their preparedness for digital tools, concerns about data privacy, and their perception of how digitalization might shape the future of social work. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature that critically assesses the benefits and risks of digital technologies in human services (Granholt, 2019).

The central research questions addressed in this article include: (1) How prepared do social workers feel for the integration of digital tools in their practice? (2) What impact do they perceive digital technologies will have on their work with clients? and (3) What are their main concerns regarding the use of digital tools, particularly in relation to data security? By answering these questions, this article seeks to provide insights into the broader implications of digitalization for the social work profession.

2. Theoretical Background

Digitalization in social work refers to the use of digital tools, technologies, and platforms to support, enhance, and sometimes transform traditional social work practices (Mishna, Milne, Bogo, & Pereira, 2020). These tools range from communication technologies, such as teleconferencing and instant messaging, to more sophisticated systems like artificial intelligence (AI) for case management or predictive analytics for risk assessments (Barsky, 2021). The digitalization of social work encompasses both the back-end operations, such as data management and case tracking, and client-facing activities, such as remote counseling or online group therapy sessions (Taylor & McQuaid, 2022).

Despite its increasing prominence, the definition of digitalization in social work remains fluid, as new technologies continue to emerge and reshape professional practices. Scholars such as Chan and Holosko (2018) argue that digitalization should not only be seen as the adoption of technological tools but also as a shift in the social work paradigm, requiring a rethinking of ethical standards, professional competencies, and client relationships. Digital technologies, therefore, represent both a practical toolset and a conceptual challenge for the profession, inviting a critical re-examination of the core values of social work, including privacy, confidentiality, and equitable service delivery (Banks, 2020). The potential benefits of digitalization in social work are manifold. Digital tools can increase efficiency, improve access to services, and offer new ways to engage with clients (Granholt, 2019). For example, telehealth platforms enable social workers to reach clients in rural or underserved areas, overcoming geographical barriers that traditionally limited service delivery (Soska & Johnson, 2020). Similarly, digital case management systems can streamline administrative tasks, allowing social workers to spend more time on direct client engagement (Leung & Tsui, 2022). Moreover, digital tools provide opportunities for innovative interventions, particularly in areas like mental health. Online counseling and therapy apps have been shown to increase client engagement, particularly among younger populations who are more comfortable with digital communication (Mishna et al., 2020). Social workers can also leverage data analytics to better understand client needs, predict outcomes, and tailor interventions accordingly (Barsky, 2021). The use of AI in social work, while still in its infancy, holds promise for improving decision-making processes and resource allocation (Taylor & McQuaid, 2022). While digitalization offers many opportunities, it also presents significant challenges, particularly in relation to ethical and practical concerns. One of the primary challenges is data security and privacy. Social workers are entrusted with sensitive client information, and the increasing use of digital tools raises concerns about data breaches, unauthorized access, and compliance with legal regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Reamer, 2021). Practitioners often express concerns about their ability to safeguard client data in digital environments, particularly when using third-party platforms that may not meet the stringent confidentiality standards required in social work (Chan & Holosko, 2018). Another challenge is the digital divide, which refers to disparities in access to digital technologies among different client populations (Hussein, 2021). Clients from low-income backgrounds, older adults, and those living in rural areas may lack the necessary infrastructure or digital literacy to fully benefit from digital services (Mishna et al., 2020). This raises questions about equity and the risk of excluding vulnerable populations from essential services (Granholt, 2019). Furthermore, the rapid pace of technological change requires ongoing professional development for social workers, many of whom report feeling unprepared for the digitalization of their work (Leung & Tsui, 2022). The ethical implications of digitalization also demand careful consideration. The use of AI and data-driven tools in decision-making processes could potentially undermine the human-centered approach that is central to social work practice (Barsky, 2021). Critics argue that reliance on algorithms and automated systems may dehumanize client interactions and reduce the scope for individualized, context-sensitive interventions (Taylor & McQuaid, 2022). The discourse surrounding digitalization in social work is enriched by insights from various disciplines. Information technology offers frameworks for understanding the technical aspects of digital tools, while ethics provides guidance on maintaining professional standards in a rapidly changing environment (Banks, 2020). Public health perspectives emphasize the potential of digital tools to improve access to care, particularly in underserved communities (Soska & Johnson, 2020). Meanwhile, psychological research highlights the importance of digital literacy, both for practitioners and clients, in maximizing the benefits of these technologies (Mishna et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the perspectives of social workers on the digitalization of their field, particularly in terms of opportunities and challenges for both practitioners and clients. The data was collected through an online survey using a Likert scale to assess various aspects of digital tool usage in social work.

The sample consisted of 173 participants, primarily female (79.2%) and male (20.8%), who were professionals working in the field of social work. The majority of participants held a Bachelor's or Diploma degree in Social Work (84.4%), while 15.6% had completed a Master's degree. The average years of experience among participants was 5.0 years, with a median of 5 years. The participants were employed across various sectors, with 28.9% working in residential group settings, 30.1% in child and youth services, 31.2% in outpatient family support, and 9.8% in educational institutions such as kindergartens and schools. The survey was distributed electronically to social workers via professional networks and social work associations. The questionnaire included both demographic questions and a series of items related to digitalization in social work, measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The questions aimed to capture participants' preparedness for digital tools, perceived impact on service quality, concerns regarding data security, and the adequacy of workplace technical support. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, to understand the general trends in the data. In particular, the analysis focused on identifying patterns in participants' readiness to integrate digital tools into their practice and their views on the future impact of digitalization. The demographic and professional background of participants was also cross-referenced with their responses to investigate potential correlations between experience, sector, and attitudes toward digitalization.

This methodological approach provided a robust framework for assessing the diverse experiences of social workers across different fields and educational backgrounds.

4. Results

The following section presents the results of the quantitative study conducted on 173 social workers regarding their perceptions of the digitalization of social work. The study focused on key aspects such as preparedness for digital tools, the impact of technology on work quality, concerns about data

security, and the adequacy of technical support in the workplace. The analysis also explored the participants' perspectives on how digitalization might shape the future of social work in the next five years. The results of the survey, as summarized in the table provided, highlight several trends that offer insight into how social workers view the integration of digital technologies into their profession.

Question	Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Preparedness for digital	2.92	1.39	19.1	22.0	19.1	27.2	12.7
Digital technologies improve work quality	3.06	1.44	20.2	16.2	20.2	23.7	19.7
Concerns about data security	3.03	1.38	16.2	22.0	19.1	24.9	17.9
Workplace technical support	2.96	1.35	17.3	22.5	22.0	23.1	15.0
Digitalization will transform social work in 5 years	3.04	1.42	19.1	17.3	22.0	24.3	17.3

The question of how prepared social workers feel for the use of digital tools yielded a mean score of 2.92, with a standard deviation of 1.39. This relatively low score suggests that a substantial proportion of social workers do not feel adequately prepared for the digitalization of their work. Specifically, 19.1% of participants strongly disagreed with the statement, indicating a complete lack of confidence in their preparedness. Additionally, 22.0% disagreed, while only 27.2% agreed and 12.7% strongly agreed. These findings underscore a critical challenge in the adoption of digital tools: social workers require more training and professional development to feel competent in using new technologies. The high percentage of disagreement (41.1% in total) suggests that current educational and workplace training programs may not be adequately preparing social workers for the digital age. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have highlighted a gap in digital literacy among social workers (Mishna et al., 2020; Reamer, 2021). The question of whether digital technologies improve the quality of work with clients received a mean score of 3.06, with a standard deviation of 1.44. Although this score is slightly higher than the preparedness score, the responses indicate a divided perspective. A significant 20.2% of respondents strongly disagreed, and another 16.2% disagreed, reflecting skepticism about the benefits of digital tools. Conversely, 23.7% agreed, and 19.7% strongly agreed, demonstrating that many social workers do perceive positive impacts on their work quality. The mixed responses suggest that while some practitioners recognize the potential for digital tools to enhance their practice, others remain unconvinced. The qualitative feedback from previous research indicates that the effectiveness of digital tools may depend on factors such as the type of technology used, the specific client population served, and the context in which the tools are applied (Hussein, 2021). These findings are supported by Soska and Johnson (2020), who argue that while digital technologies can streamline processes, they may also create barriers in certain contexts, such as in-person interactions that require a high degree of empathy and human connection.

Concerns regarding the security of client data when using digital tools were prevalent among the participants, with a mean score of 3.06 and a standard deviation of 1.38. Nearly 24.9% of respondents agreed with the statement, while 17.9% strongly agreed, signaling that data security is a significant issue for many social workers. However, 16.2% strongly disagreed, suggesting that a minority of participants did not share these concerns.

The results align with existing literature, which highlights data security as one of the most critical challenges in the digitalization of social work (Reamer, 2021). The increasing reliance on digital platforms raises the risk of data breaches, unauthorized access, and misuse of sensitive client information, all of which can undermine trust between social workers and their clients. As the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and other data protection laws become more stringent, ensuring compliance and safeguarding client data are top priorities for the profession (Chan & Holosko, 2018).

The question regarding workplace support for digitalization resulted in a mean score of 2.96 and a standard deviation of 1.38. The distribution of responses indicated that 17.3% of participants strongly disagreed with the statement, while 22.5% disagreed, suggesting that a substantial proportion of social workers feel their workplaces do not provide adequate technical support. In contrast, 23.1% of respondents agreed, and 15.0% strongly agreed.

The discrepancy in responses reflects the varied levels of support offered by different organizations. Larger institutions may have the resources to invest in advanced technology and technical support, while smaller agencies might struggle to provide their staff with the necessary tools and training. The lack of uniform support across organizations poses a challenge for the widespread adoption of digital tools in social work (Leung & Tsui, 2022).

When asked whether digitalization would fundamentally transform social work in the next five years, participants provided a mean score of 3.04, with a standard deviation of 1.42. This score indicates cautious optimism about the future. A total of 24.3% of respondents agreed with the statement, while 17.3% strongly agreed. However, 19.1% strongly disagreed, and 17.3% disagreed, suggesting that a portion of the participants are skeptical about the extent of change digitalization will bring. These findings mirror broader discussions in the literature about the transformative potential of digitalization in human services. While some scholars emphasize the significant changes that digital tools can bring to social work, others argue that the core values and practices of the profession will remain intact (Banks, 2020). The potential for digitalization to enhance efficiency, improve access to services, and

reduce administrative burdens is widely acknowledged, but the profession must also address the ethical and practical challenges that come with these changes (Taylor & McQuaid, 2022).

The results of this study highlight several key themes in the digitalization of social work. First, there is a clear need for improved training and support to help social workers feel more prepared for the integration of digital tools. Second, while many practitioners see the potential for digital technologies to improve work quality, others remain cautious, particularly in areas like data security. Finally, workplace support for digitalization is uneven, and the future of social work in a digital world remains a subject of debate among practitioners.

These findings suggest that while digitalization offers promising opportunities, the profession must address several challenges to ensure that these tools are effectively integrated into practice.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal important insights into the current state of digitalization in social work, reflecting both opportunities and challenges faced by practitioners. This section will explore the broader implications of these results, drawing on various scholarly perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of the issues. The discussion will critically examine the reasons behind the identified trends and consider the potential consequences of continued digitalization in the profession. It will also address the ethical, practical, and systemic challenges that need to be considered to ensure a balanced and effective integration of digital tools into social work.

One of the most notable findings of this study is the low level of preparedness social workers feel regarding the use of digital tools. With a mean score of 2.92, the data suggests that a significant portion of social workers lack the confidence to effectively integrate digital technologies into their practice. This finding aligns with previous research that has identified a skills gap in the profession, particularly when it comes to digital literacy (Chan & Holosko, 2018). Many social workers have not received sufficient training during their formal education, and ongoing professional development opportunities may be limited depending on their organizational context (Mishna et al., 2020). One possible reason for this gap is the rapid pace at which technology evolves. New tools and platforms are frequently introduced, leaving many professionals struggling to keep up with the latest developments. For instance, the use of telehealth and virtual counseling has grown exponentially, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hussein, 2021). Yet, many social workers, particularly those working in traditional settings such as residential care or outpatient family support, may have had little exposure to these tools before the pandemic (Reamer, 2021). Additionally, organizations may not have the resources to provide adequate training on the use of digital tools. Smaller agencies, which often operate on limited budgets, may prioritize direct client services over technology investments, leaving social workers without the necessary support to develop their digital competencies (Taylor & McQuaid, 2022). This creates a risk of uneven access to digital tools and training, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities within the profession. Furthermore, critical perspectives highlight that the emphasis on digital tools may lead to an over-reliance on technology, which could diminish the relational aspect of social work. Banks (2020) argues that digitalization, while beneficial in some areas, must not replace the human-centered approach that is at the core of social work practice. Social workers may feel underprepared not only because they lack technical skills but also because the digital shift challenges the fundamental principles of their profession, which emphasizes personal interaction and empathy. The study reveals mixed opinions regarding the impact of digital technologies on the quality of social work, with a mean score of 3.06. While some practitioners view digital tools as beneficial, others remain skeptical about their ability to improve service delivery. This ambivalence can be attributed to several factors.

On the positive side, digital technologies offer potential efficiencies. For example, case management software can reduce administrative burdens, allowing social workers to focus more on direct client interactions (Granholt, 2019). Similarly, telehealth services enable practitioners to reach clients in remote areas, providing support that would otherwise be inaccessible (Soska & Johnson, 2020). These benefits are particularly relevant in rural or underserved areas, where access to social work services can be limited. However, the practical application of these tools is not without challenges. Many social workers report feeling that digital platforms can create barriers to effective communication, particularly when working with vulnerable populations such as older adults, individuals with disabilities, or those lacking digital literacy (Mishna et al., 2020). For instance, a client who is unfamiliar with video conferencing may find it difficult to engage in virtual counseling sessions, potentially undermining the therapeutic process. This raises concerns about the inclusivity of digital services and the risk of leaving certain client groups behind. Moreover, there is the issue of "technological determinism," where digital tools are viewed as inherently positive or neutral, without fully considering their broader social implications (Chan & Holosko, 2018). Critics argue that the introduction of technology into social work should not be viewed as a simple upgrade, but rather as a shift that alters the nature of practice in profound ways. For example, the use of AI-driven decision-making tools may streamline processes, but it also raises questions about accountability and professional autonomy (Barsky, 2021). If social workers begin to rely heavily on algorithmic assessments, they may be less inclined to use their professional judgment, potentially leading to outcomes that are less tailored to individual client needs. The study's findings regarding concerns about data security are particularly striking, with a mean score of 3.06 indicating that data protection remains a significant issue for social workers. This aligns with a growing body of literature that highlights the ethical dilemmas posed by digital tools, particularly in relation to client confidentiality and data protection (Reamer, 2021).

Social workers are entrusted with highly sensitive information, and the digitalization of client records, communication, and service delivery introduces new risks. For example, data breaches could expose vulnerable clients to exploitation or harm, undermining the trust that is central to the social worker-client relationship (Chan & Holosko, 2018). Additionally, the use of third-party platforms for telehealth or case management raises questions about who owns and controls client data. Many social workers express concern that they may not have sufficient knowledge of these platforms' privacy policies, leaving them uncertain about whether they can fully protect their clients' confidentiality. Reamer (2021) suggests that while digitalization offers many

practical benefits, it also requires a rethinking of traditional ethical frameworks. Social workers must balance the potential advantages of digital tools with the need to maintain high ethical standards, particularly regarding consent, confidentiality, and data protection. This may involve implementing new protocols and safeguards, such as encryption, secure servers, and clear client consent processes, to ensure that digital practices align with the ethical principles of the profession. Another key finding of the study is the uneven distribution of workplace support for digitalization, as indicated by the mean score of 2.96. While some social workers feel that their organizations provide adequate technical support, many do not, reflecting significant disparities in access to resources. This uneven support is often linked to organizational size and funding. Larger institutions, particularly in urban areas, may have the resources to invest in cutting-edge technologies and ongoing training for their staff. In contrast, smaller agencies, particularly those in rural or underfunded areas, may struggle to provide even the most basic digital infrastructure (Leung & Tsui, 2022). This creates a two-tiered system where some social workers are well-equipped to navigate the digital landscape, while others are left behind, further contributing to professional inequalities. Moreover, the lack of support is not just a matter of technology but also of time and training. Social workers often report that they are expected to adopt new tools without sufficient time to learn how to use them effectively (Granholm, 2019). This can lead to frustration and burnout, as practitioners are left to figure out complex systems on their own, often while managing heavy caseloads. In addition, the quality of digital tools themselves is a factor. Not all technologies are user-friendly or designed with social work in mind. Tools that are cumbersome or not intuitive can hinder rather than help practitioners in their work, contributing to the sense of unpreparedness identified earlier in the study.

The final key finding of the study concerns the future of digitalization in social work, with a mean score of 3.04 indicating that social workers are cautiously optimistic about the potential for transformation. While many recognize that digital tools will play an increasingly important role in the profession, there is less consensus about how profound these changes will be.

Proponents of digitalization argue that technology will fundamentally reshape social work, making it more efficient, data-driven, and client-centered (Hussein, 2021). For instance, AI-driven analytics could provide insights into client needs that are beyond the scope of traditional methods, allowing for more targeted and effective interventions (Taylor & McQuaid, 2022). Similarly, digital platforms could make social work services more accessible, particularly for marginalized groups who may struggle to engage with traditional face-to-face services.

However, critical perspectives caution against viewing digitalization as a panacea. Banks (2020) warns that the push towards digitalization must be accompanied by a critical examination of its potential downsides, including the risk of dehumanizing client relationships and reducing social work to a set of technical tasks. Social work is, at its core, a relational practice, and while digital tools can enhance certain aspects of service delivery, they cannot replace the empathy, understanding, and human connection that define the profession.

Moreover, the future of digitalization will depend on broader systemic factors, such as government policies, funding priorities, and technological advancements. Without sustained investment in digital infrastructure and professional development, the potential benefits of digitalization may not be fully realized (Leung & Tsui, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial that the profession remains vigilant about the ethical, practical, and social implications of these changes, ensuring that digitalization serves as a tool to enhance, rather than undermine, the core values of social work.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight both the potential benefits and significant challenges associated with the digitalization of social work. Social workers recognize the opportunities that digital tools offer in improving service delivery, such as enhancing efficiency, expanding access to services, and enabling more data-driven decision-making. However, the study also uncovers several barriers to effective digital integration, particularly in terms of preparedness, data security concerns, and unequal workplace support. One of the most critical insights from the study is the widespread feeling of unpreparedness among social workers, with many reporting that they lack the necessary skills and training to effectively implement digital tools. Additionally, while some practitioners view digital technologies as beneficial to their work quality, others remain skeptical, particularly when it comes to the inclusivity and relational aspects of social work. Data security and privacy concerns also emerged as significant issues, reflecting the ethical complexities introduced by digitalization.

The future of digitalization in social work appears both promising and challenging. For digital tools to be fully integrated into social work practice, a concerted effort will be required to address the current gaps in training, workplace support, and ethical considerations. As technology continues to evolve, social work practitioners and institutions must be proactive in preparing for these changes by adapting both their skill sets and organizational structures.

In particular, educational institutions must play a pivotal role in preparing future social workers for the digital landscape by incorporating digital literacy into their curricula. Similarly, organizations should prioritize ongoing professional development opportunities that enable current practitioners to stay up-to-date with technological advancements. Furthermore, as digitalization continues to reshape social work, there will be a need for continued critical reflection on its broader implications for practice, particularly regarding the human-centered values of the profession. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to better prepare social workers for the digital future:

Comprehensive Training Programs: Social work curricula should include mandatory courses on digital tools and technologies, focusing on practical applications in case management, telehealth, and data security. For current practitioners, regular workshops and online training sessions should be offered to ensure continuous skill development.

Enhanced Workplace Support: Organizations must provide sufficient technical support and resources to ensure that social workers can integrate digital tools effectively. This includes not only providing the necessary hardware and software but also allocating time for staff to familiarize themselves with these tools without compromising their client workload.

Data Security and Ethical Guidelines: Given the ethical concerns raised by data security, it is essential for social work organizations to establish clear policies and protocols for protecting client information. Social workers should be trained on data protection regulations such as the GDPR and best practices for maintaining confidentiality in a digital environment.

Addressing the Digital Divide: To ensure equitable access to digital services, social work organizations should develop strategies for supporting clients who may lack the technological literacy or resources to engage with digital platforms. This could involve providing digital literacy training for clients or offering alternative non-digital services when necessary.

By addressing these areas, the social work profession can better navigate the challenges of digitalization while maximizing its potential to improve the quality and accessibility of services.

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