



FACULTY OF HEALTH AND OCCUPATIONAL STUDIES  
Department of Social Work and Criminology

---

# Digital communication with children and youth in out-of-home care: social workers' perspective.

A qualitative study in Swedish Child Welfare Services

Yayneabeba Shumye Tessema: [yaynemisa@yahoo.com](mailto:yaynemisa@yahoo.com)  
Tina Aoust: [tia.ah.pro@gmail.com](mailto:tia.ah.pro@gmail.com)

2023

Bachelor of Social Work specialized in International Social Work  
Thesis 15 credits

Supervisor: Nessica Nässén  
Examiner: Mark Holter

---

## **Abstract**

The social work profession, which traditionally relied on face-to-face interactions with clients, has been increasingly using digital communication. Though research has directed its attention to this phenomenon in a post Covid-19 era, very little data is available from professionals' perspectives, particularly those working with children and families. Thus, this study aimed to explore how social workers from the Swedish Child Welfare Services have adapted to the new era of digital communication with children and youth placed in out-of-home care. We interviewed four social workers working in three different municipalities. A thematic analysis was used to interpret the results through the lens of Goffman's interaction order theory. The findings show that digital communication has become part of the social workers' daily routine. However, its application has both opportunities and challenges, and the participants' responses indicate that a hybrid and reflective practice tailored to the children's individual needs would be beneficial.

**Keywords:** Digitalization, digital communication, child welfare services, children and youth, out-of-home care

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, we would like to express our gratitude to the social workers who agreed to participate in this research. We have learned a lot from you, and you have been an immense source of inspiration. To our supervisor Nessica Nässen, thank you for your patience, you have been constantly challenging and encouraging us to explore more and work hard. This work wouldn't have been possible without you. We deeply appreciate the help and guidance from all the teachers and the University throughout the past three years, which has allowed us to grow tremendously. Although this final thesis is submitted as an individual assignment, it has truly been a collective effort that started long before the beginning of this course. The support from our classmates as well as from our families, friends, and colleagues who have given us the space and time to conduct this work has been invaluable.

*Yayne's special acknowledgment:*

I would like to thank God for his blessing and guidance. My deepest gratitude goes to my husband and my children for their constant support.

## Table of contents

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	- 5 -
1.1. Aim .....	- 7 -
1.2. Research questions.....	- 7 -
1.3. Definitions and concepts.....	- 7 -
1.4. Motivation.....	- 8 -
1.5. Disposition of the thesis.....	- 9 -
<b>2. BACKGROUND</b> .....	- 9 -
2.1. Child welfare unit and out-of-home placement in Sweden .....	- 10 -
2.2. Social workers' role with children and youth placed in out-of-home care.....	- 10 -
<b>3. LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	- 11 -
3.1. Digital technology in social work practice .....	- 11 -
3.2. Opportunities and challenges associated with digital communication .....	- 13 -
<b>4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b> .....	- 14 -
4.1. Goffman's interaction order theory .....	- 15 -
<b>5. METHODOLOGY</b> .....	- 16 -
5.1. Research design .....	- 17 -
5.2. Mode of procedure .....	- 17 -
5.2.1. Data Collection .....	- 17 -
5.2.2. Data Analysis .....	- 18 -
5.3. Credibility .....	- 19 -
5.3.1. Reliability.....	- 19 -
5.3.2. Validity .....	- 19 -
5.3.3. Generalizability.....	- 19 -
5.4. Ethical considerations .....	- 20 -
5.5. Limitations of the study .....	- 20 -
<b>6. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS</b> .....	- 16 -
6.1. Theme 1: Digital communication and the child/social worker relationship .....	- 21 -
6.1.1. Preferred digital communication tools.....	- 22 -
6.1.2. Adjusting to children's developmental stages and personality.....	- 24 -

6.2.	Theme 2: Opportunities in using digital communication .....	- 25 -
6.2.1.	Relational .....	- 25 -
6.2.2.	Practical.....	- 26 -
6.3.	Theme 3: Challenges in using digital communication.....	- 27 -
6.3.1.	Relational .....	- 27 -
6.3.2.	Practical.....	- 29 -
6.3.3.	Accessibility and digital divide.....	- 31 -
6.4.	Theme 4: Recommendations for future practice.....	- 32 -
6.4.1.	Training and updated devices .....	- 32 -
6.4.2.	Children’s agency and advocacy for a hybrid form of practice.....	- 33 -
7.	<b>DISCUSSION</b> .....	- 34 -
7.1.	Summary of results in relation to the aim .....	- 35 -
7.2.	Comparison with existing literature .....	- 36 -
7.3.	Discussion on theoretical framework.....	- 37 -
7.4.	Discussion on methodology .....	- 38 -
7.5.	Suggestions for future research and conclusion.....	- 39 -
	<b>Reference List</b> .....	- 34 -
	<b>Annex 1: Interview guide</b> .....	- 34 -
	<b>Annex 2: Consent form</b> .....	- 34 -

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In child welfare services, placing children into different types of out-of-home care is typically considered a last resort when it has become unsafe for them to stay with their birth family (Svensson & Höjer, 2016). Risk factors contributing to the children's removal from home include problematic family dynamics keeping their needs from being met, such as abuse or neglect, parental mental health problems, substance use, or criminal activities. It can also be due to the child's own dysfunctional behaviors endangering their well-being, like self-harming practices or juvenile delinquency (Lundström et al., 2021). In addition to such circumstances, new challenges can arise while in out-of-home care, from the difficulty of adapting to a new family environment to the multitude of temporary placements and lack of continuity in care (Lundström et al., 2021).

In this context, social workers play a pivotal role for children and youth placed in out-of-home care as they become their primary contact while working towards reunification with the birth family or stable and long-term placement (Fylkesnes et al., 2021). Developing a trusting relationship with the children by ensuring frequent interaction to help them navigate their new reality is critical to their healthy development. Indeed, many of the problems encountered by the children stem from prior insecure attachment patterns (New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2006). Similarly, secure attachment is significantly connected to the ability of carers to satisfy the child's needs for sensory stimulation throughout the various developmental stages (Daniel et al., 2010). This has, in turn, translated into a propensity for in-person encounters in social work practice with children and families. However, in today's digitalized world, digital communication tools have increasingly complemented traditional face-to-face contact, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic (Mishna et al., 2022).

The social work profession has come to embrace digital technology in direct interventions, and growing numbers of practitioners have converted all or segments of their practice to online and digital delivery (Aasback & Røkkum, 2021; Mishna et al., 2012). For this purpose, various digital tools have been adopted in service provision, including e-mails, texting, phone calls, video calls, online networking, or social media, either in addition to or in replacement of in-person encounters. If these new forms have revolutionized traditional practice and created tremendous opportunities for social workers, they have simultaneously generated new challenges and called for caution regarding their long-term consequences (Vdovina et al., 2021). On the one hand, digital communication enables reaching a larger

number of individuals compared to in-person meetings, as well as individuals who would otherwise not access services because of practical limitations (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022). The possibility for clients to interact with a professional from a familiar environment, such as their home, can facilitate the creation of a trusting bond and reduce the power imbalance by increasing their sense of control (Pink et al., 2022). Digital tools also offer tailored services, increase social workers' caseloads, and potentially reduce bureaucratic processes. They have also become indispensable in reaching young people considered 'digital natives' (López Peláez et al., 2020) due to their enhanced digital skills compared to the rest of the population. For instance, as they use technology for social interaction, education, entertainment or access to employment opportunities, many social programs have adopted digital communication as a primary medium for children and youth. Copson et al. (2022) further argue that technology-assisted practice with young people meets them in their reality and creates ample opportunities to engage them.

On the other hand, access to digital equipment and the necessary knowledge to use it can also create and increase inequality between clients (Kalenda & Kowaliková, 2020). Consequently, this unequal access contributes to the further marginalization of the most vulnerable populations, such as those living in rural areas, young children, or older people. Besides, digitalized written communication can lack the "warmth" of in-person interactions and participate in clients' disengagement. It can also be difficult for social workers to set clear boundaries between professional and personal life in a "connected" world, raising associated ethical issues (Mishna et al., 2012). From a professional standpoint, remote service delivery might also limit professionals' ability to assess specific risk factors that clients are exposed to, including domestic violence or poverty (Pascoe, 2022). The implications are even more considerable when clients' decision-making ability is limited due to personal circumstances, and a trusting relationship with a social worker can play a decisive role in their trajectory.

Previous research tends to focus on the practical opportunities offered by digitalization for social work practice in general, as well as its various creative forms adopted since the Covid-19 pandemic (Pascoe, 2022). However, limited data is available regarding direct interventions with children and the implications of such practices for the relationship between professionals and clients (Nordesjö et al., 2022). The information regarding social workers' perception of such evolution of practice and their adaptation to these new tools is also sparse, particularly in Scandinavian countries. In this context, this research focuses on Swedish social workers' experiences regarding the adoption of digital communication in case management

with children and youth in out-of-home care. We hope that the findings will contribute to the formation of a knowledge base on this recent phenomenon.

### **1.1. Aim**

The aim of this study is to explore how social workers in the Swedish Child Welfare Services (CWS) have adapted to the new era of digital communication with children and youth placed in out-of-home care.

### **1.2. Research questions**

- How do social workers from the Child Welfare Services utilize digital communication with children in out-of-home care?
- What are the perceived opportunities and challenges among social workers from the Child Welfare Services in using digital communication with children and youth placed in out-of-home care?

### **1.3. Definitions and concepts**

**Digitalization:** cultural transformation caused by the spread of digital technologies, including electronic infrastructures such as broadband internet, hardware or devices, and software such as applications

**Digital communication:** all forms of communication and interaction with a targeted audience that is mediated and supported by Information Communication Technologies (ICT), including the device, knowledge, and internet

**Digital divide:** the potential social impact of digital inequality or unequal access to digital technology

**Social Service Act - SoL (Socialtjänstenlag):** Official document providing regulations and guidelines for social services in Sweden

**National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen):** national authority for the provision of social services in Sweden. It has the power to make decisions regarding the placement of a child in out-of-home care based on the Social Service Act.



***Compulsory Care of Young Persons Act - LVU (Lagen om Vård av Unga)***: Regulation regarding the care of young people. It contains a special provision permitting the removal of the child by coercion if care cannot be provided appropriately by the birth family.

***HVB (Hem för vård och boende)***: Residential facility which, based on the LVU, provides special forms of support and integrated care, especially for children in need of health care intervention.

***Family home***: individual foster home which, on behalf of the social welfare committee, accepts children for permanent care and is not operated professionally. Family home includes emergency homes, relatives' homes, and network homes. Family home constitutes the principal form of placement by child welfare services in Sweden.

***Special supervisory homes***: Residential institutions where children between the age of 15-18 who are involved in harmful behaviours or legal proceedings are referred to for temporary custody.

#### **1.4. Motivation**

The Covid-19 pandemic and associated regulations that restricted movement all over the world changed the way people interact and engage in work. This remote work approach was transferred to social work service provision as well as education. The topic was initiated after one of the researchers suggested the idea, and the focus evolved during our long and frequent discussions about its implication and contribution to the social work profession. Our own three years of experience of digital education in a social work program has been a very unique road for most of us. For those not previously exposed to digital education and training, it was perceived as both an opportunity and a challenge. We enjoyed the benefits it offered, such as being able to attend lectures from the comfort of our home while simultaneously allowing us to attend to our work and social commitments. We learned how to use digital technology efficiently, thus developing yet another skill that was not on the program curriculum. Last but not least, thanks to this technological adaptation from the University allowed us to pursue this degree program from beginning to end at a time when the whole world seemed to have come to a halt. However, this all didn't come without challenges,

particularly training in a field that relies on in-person interaction to a high degree. For instance, this strongly limited our ability to contextualize and transfer our classroom experience to real-life settings. Besides, the fact that for three years, we interacted exclusively digitally with each other was experienced as difficult for many of us who were missing physical co-presence. All this contributed to our personal interest regarding this topic and made us wonder if our own experience as social work students would be similar or different from that of professional social workers.

### **1.5. Disposition of the thesis**

Part one of the thesis offers an introduction to the research topic, establishes the aim and research questions, and clarifies the concepts and definitions used throughout the paper. The second part presents background information regarding the way child welfare services are organized in Sweden and how the placement of children in out-of-home care is carried out. It also outlines the parties involved in child placement as well as the various regulations and further explains the role of social workers working with these children. The third part presents a detailed literature review on digital social work, and more specifically on children in out-of-home care, along with the challenges and opportunities presented by this new form of practice. The fourth part introduces the theoretical framework and identifies the specific concepts applied in this study, while the fifth section discusses the methodology used. The sixth and seventh parts present in detail the results obtained and their analysis, followed by a discussion on the various aspects of this research, including suggestions for future research. At the end of the study in the annex section, the interview guide and consent form that were used are attached.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

This section gives an overview of the context in which this study is conducted. It first explains how the Swedish Child Welfare system is organized and the types of procedures it follows for the placement of children in out-of-home care. The second part describes the role and dynamics of the social worker/child relationship in this specific framework.

## **2.1. Child welfare unit and out-of-home placement in Sweden**

Sweden is divided into 290 self-governing municipalities that vary in size but have nonetheless equal authority over their own economic, political, and social agenda. Each municipality is responsible for its child welfare system under the social service unit (Bergström et al., 2023) and provides various forms of support for children, youth and more generally families. When there is suspicion of a child or youth being at risk of harm, the process can be illustrated as a funnel approach. The wide top end of the funnel shows the child inflow through referrals for investigation, while the narrow-down end of the funnel shows children who receive different interventions from the unit (Östberg, 2010).

The referral system follows two major streams. It can be done through a direct report of concern regarding the child or based on an application for support to other social services departments. Reports of concern are mandatory for schools, health centers, or police using the Social Service Act for the required investigation and intervention. Applications for support are cases where children are referred by families when they approach social services seeking support such as financial assistance, housing-related problems, family violence, or substance use (Bergström et al., 2023). In all forms of referral, the primary task of the child welfare social worker is to help the family improve their situation to create a conducive environment for the child to stay in the family. However, if the family situation is not suitable for the child, the social welfare unit can resort to two removal options. First, by virtue of the Social Service Act and with the consent of the birth family, it can conduct a voluntary removal to temporarily place the child in foster care, either in family homes or in some cases, institutions. Secondly, if the family is not willing, but the child is at risk and needs removal for safety reasons, the child welfare unit can act based on the Compulsory Care of Young Persons Act (LVU) to place the child in temporary or permanent care (Khoo et al., 2012), either in a foster family or in institutional settings.

## **2.2. Social workers' role with children and youth placed in out-of-home care**

Social workers working with children placed in out-of-home care are responsible not only for care arrangements but also for conducting continuous follow-ups to determine future permanent placements, including reunification with their birth family (Khoo et al., 2012). They are then in regular communication with the children they are assigned to and aim at building a trusting relationship to compensate for the uncertainty of often chaotic family situations (New

South Wales Department of Community Services, 2006). Thus, one of their primary responsibilities is to offer the child a chance to develop secure attachments by becoming a reliable adult in their life (New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2006). Being the connecting link between children, foster families, and birth parents when applicable, social workers have a unique position that requires a great understanding of the needs of each party.

The relationship they develop with the child they are assigned to is critical to both the success of the placement and the healthiness of their development. Recent research by Fylknesnes et al. (2021) has emphasized the importance for social workers to be attuned to the needs of children placed in foster care for availability, reliability, good communication, sensitivity, and inclusion in the decision-making processes. Therefore, issues such as constant turnover within the social services, regular cancellations of meetings, failure to respond to the children's inquiries in a timely manner, and overall lack of communication constitute significant hindrances in the development of a trusting relationship (Fylkesnes et al., 2021).

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section discusses the existing research regarding digital social work. It first explores how digital technology, more specifically digital communication, is incorporated in social work practice. It then elaborates on the opportunities and challenges presented by this new form of practice. A literature review is a meaningful way of demonstrating the existing body of knowledge on the topic particularly related to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). It also allows identifying potential limitations and missing information, which further justifies the significance of this study.

#### **3.1. Digital technology in social work practice**

The social work profession fundamentally focuses on face-to-face interaction with clients (Pink et al., 2022), and the reliance on physical communication makes digital integration challenging and its expansion slow. It has been over three decades since the social work profession started integrating different forms of digital technology in various settings (Aasback & Røkkum, 2021; Mishna et al., 2012). This called for a standard code of ethics on using technology in social work practice that provides general guidelines on client consent, confidentiality, social work-client relationship boundaries, and other issues involving the service (National Association of Social Workers, 2017).

In Sweden, just like in the rest of the world, digital practices in social work were introduced in the 1980s (Svensson & Larsson, 2018). In 2006 the first national strategy for adopting and implementing digital technology was developed, but the main focus was on digital health services. When it was revised in 2010, more strategies concerning a few areas of social welfare, and specifically the digitalization of care adjacent to health care, were included (Socialstyrelsen, 2020). The report further discussed that the most widely used digital technologies in welfare were electronic aid applications and automatic decision-making, especially in elder care. However, using digital means facilitates direct communication and meetings between social workers and service users via tools such as video conference, phone, email and mobile apps really expanded after the 2010s in several municipalities.

More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated social distancing boosted technology dependency in social work practice (Mishna et al., 2022; Pascoe, 2022). In addition to the different digital tools utilized, such as blogs, emails, online groups, and social networking sites for advocacy purposes (Bullock & Colvin, 2015), other means are now employed for service provision. For instance, some professionals use digital technologies, including e-services, online chat applications, or e-applications in direct interventions with diverse clients (Scaramuzzino & Barfoed, 2021), while others resort to phone and video conference calls, emails, text messaging, and social media to monitor the status of service users (Pascoe, 2022). During the pandemic and the consequent physical restrictions, face-to-face interactions between social workers and service users became limited. This forced the adoption and expansion of different digital means into practice. Though some research discusses the benefits and problems associated with digital communication, there is a shortage of research on the types of digital tools preferred by social workers and the kind of services they are most appropriate for.

Furthermore, though digitalization in the specific context of child welfare services has been very little explored, the topic has raised some interest in a post-Covid-19 era, particularly regarding the relational aspects of these new forms of communication between social workers, placed children and birth families (MacDonald et al., 2023). Copson et al. (2022) showed that the age and developmental stage of a child is closely linked with the effectiveness of using digital tools to communicate. For instance, while digital communication appears to be inefficient and even counterproductive for younger children who rely on physical closeness and sensory stimulation to develop bonds (Copson et al., 2022), it can nonetheless be empowering and more comfortable for teenagers (Denby et al., 2016).

Finally, in a pioneering study realized in Denmark, Mackrill & Ebsen (2018) point out that digital practice with youth in the specific context of municipal social work in Nordic countries requires their own research. They warn against the potential danger of generalizing and decontextualizing findings and suggest that the assessment of digital practices should be observed from an ecological lens to understand their particular implications. Existing studies further invite to reflective practice from both social workers and youth regarding their own use of digital technology to communicate (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2018). They also point towards the adoption of a hybrid form of practice where virtual and in-person interactions would consciously and harmoniously complement each other.

### **3.2. Opportunities and challenges associated with digital communication**

Using different digital communication means instead of in-person service delivery in social work practice has multiple benefits (Cosner Berzin et al., 2015). Digital communication increases the accessibility of social services for those who have geographic limitations, such as individuals living in rural areas (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022), and for clients with disabilities or low economic means (Mishna et al., 2022). It also appears to be less stressful and the preferred medium for more introverted clients and those who refrain from face-to-face services, such as sexual minorities or young adult men (Berzin et al., 2015). In addition to accessibility, digital service enables social workers to provide tailored services adapted to clients' pace (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022), and this flexibility allows social workers to address clients' problems as they occur and provide solutions in a timely manner (Ferguson et al., 2022). This tends to positively impact the social worker-client relationship and optimize the time social workers invest in helping clients (Bullock & Colvin, 2015).

In child welfare services, reducing digital exclusion and facilitating digital communication by providing youth placed in out-of-home care with the necessary devices has shown a positive impact on the development of the relationship with their assigned social worker (Denby et al., 2016). Being able to communicate digitally with their workers can improve youth's engagement and participation in the process by giving them a certain sense of control, which in turn helps to develop a trusting bond (Breyette & Hill, 2015). However, the successful use of digital communication appears to depend on the history of the relationship and the extent to which social workers managed to build rapport via in-person meetings prior to virtual interaction (Copson et al., 2022).

On the other hand, one of the challenges induced by the use of digital communication in direct practice lies in the social workers' limited engagement with clients. For instance, the restricted ability to detect surrounding risk factors can contribute to inaccurate assessment and service delivery (Pascoe, 2022). Studies also report the concerns of social workers who find it difficult to establish meaningful working relationships with clients using digital means (Bullock & Colvin, 2015). From an inclusivity perspective, integrating digital technology can create a digital divide among service users, and those who don't have access to technological infrastructures and digital knowledge are excluded from receiving adequate services (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022), which further marginalizes at-risk groups. In addition, as mentioned earlier digital social work has considerable limitations and could become detrimental in certain cases depending on the client's age and mental health conditions (Copson et al., 2022). Another issue concerning digital service provision is the associated ethical considerations, including privacy, confidentiality, and professional boundaries (Pascoe, 2022). These ethical issues are exacerbated when organizations don't have clear procedures to guide digital practice (Scaramuzzino & Barfoed, 2021). Finally, technological malfunction and the potential lack of digital skills among social workers, combined with low access to up-to-date training, further contribute to professional stress (Scaramuzzino & Barfoed, 2021).

In conclusion, introducing digital communication instead of conventional face-to-face interaction with clients has advantages and limitations in social work practice. Bullock & Colvin (2015) discussed that digital technology revolutionized the profession and evolved the role of social workers and how they operate. Thus, social workers should learn to embrace the newly changing role (Patton, 2015) while at the same time keeping in mind the implications for practice and the necessary adaptations that it entails.

#### **4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

A theoretical framework enables researchers to identify the scope of the study and provides a perspective on how to analyze and interpret the data (Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2015). It also emphasizes the significance of the study in the field of social work research. Erving Goffman's interaction order theory was selected to explain the nature and processes of in-person social interactions that persist when using digital means. The following section elaborates on the specific concepts of the theory that were used in this research.

#### 4.1. Goffman's interaction order theory

Amid an ongoing debate around the relevance of Goffman's interaction order theory in a world now revolving around technology-assisted communication (Jacobsen, 2009), this research explores the applicability of some key concepts to contemporary social work and more specifically, with children and youth. Rooted in the symbolic interactionist perspective, Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman viewed social life as a continuous theatrical performance adhering to pre-established and socially accepted rules (Goffman, 1959). What he later defined as the *interaction order* (Jenkins, 2009) was initially based on face-to-face interactions where individuals in their everyday life are depicted as "actors" standing up on a "stage" and playing various roles when communicating with others, or the "audience". Through what Goffman calls impression management, the actor attempts to present the best or most appropriate version of her/himself by persuading and controlling the audience's impression of her/him. The actor uses two primary ways to interact with audiences: on the one hand, what she/he 'gives' is the verbal and non-verbal clues that are intentionally expressed to communicate specific meanings. On the other hand, what she/he 'gives off' are the signs and expressions that are unintentionally communicated but that the audience gathers from the performance and attributes meanings to (Goffman, 1959). According to the original theory, the audiences exist in the same physical space and time as the actor and rather than passive recipients, their role is to observe and react to the performance (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2016).

The concept of *impression management* refers to the "self-conscious monitoring" of the information given to someone during an interaction in order to appear a certain way (Jenkins, 2009, p.262). As Goffman initially discussed in a pre-digitalization era, in face-to-face communication individuals influence each other using emotions, moods, cognitive functions, body language, or facial expressions. Physical co-presence is therefore deemed critical to be able to read these psychological cues. The advancement of information and communication technology (ICT) has widened the original concept of impression management from solely face-to-face communication to technology-mediated ones such as video meetings, phone calls, emails, or social media (Kien, 2018). In this context, although they lack the components of physical presence and proximity (Kien, 2018), it has been argued that digital communications, including written forms such as texts or emails, have become deeply interactional with the possibility to reply immediately (Jenkins, 2009). Moreover, although performers and audiences are in different locations or times, they can still communicate physical and psychological features using digital communication, for instance by using textual abbreviations to express



mood or facial expressions (Kien, 2018; Jenkins, 2009). This aspect helps us to understand how social workers obtain the information they need about a child's needs and emotions when not physically present. Besides, owning a technological device such as a cell phone or laptop, possessing the necessary digital literacy and using it appropriately all participate in forming a certain impression of a person (Jenkins, 2009). This presents significant implications for social workers attempting to develop a bond with digitally educated youth as it offers an opportunity to appear "up to date" and, therefore, trustworthy.

The concepts of *frontstage*, which can be translated by setting and personal front, as opposed to *backstage* where the actor can withdraw, are also central to Goffman's theory (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2016). According to him, the setting in face-to-face interaction involves the physical background, including furniture and decoration, where the actor presents her/his performance. The personal front represents the performer's individual characteristics, appearance, and manners. Although both aspects are essential to assess the choice of appropriate interaction in digital communication, they are altered for many reasons. For example, during video calls the presentation is limited as much as the field of the camera allows, which causes certain features of the setting and personal front to be less visible. Similarly, mobile phone communication suppresses almost entirely these cues as it is hard to know where the other person answers from (Jenkins, 2009). This re-arrangement of the concepts of frontstage and backstage requires social workers to find alternative ways to assess the child's situation and remain attuned to her/his needs at any given moment.

The last concept applied in this research is the use of *interaction rituals* as part of the creation and maintenance of bonds between individuals (Ling, 2008). They refer to symbolic behavioral patterns used in everyday communication with others which reinforce the interaction order and are indispensable to social cohesion (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2016). They include such things as greetings or laughing at jokes, which in digital communications can be illustrated by the use of text messages to signal engagement in the relationship (Ling, 2009).

## **5. METHODOLOGY**

The following section details the different components of the qualitative method selected for this research and further explains its relevance in relation to the aim. It gives a precise analysis of the procedures followed when conducting the study and further examines the extent of its credibility. Finally, it critically acknowledges the ethical considerations and limitations of this study.

## **5.1. Research design**

The research used a qualitative method to analyze the issue of digital communication with children and youth placed in out-of-home care from the social workers' perspective. Social workers are de facto among the most impacted by this practice evolution and, as a result, their direct and hands-on knowledge is crucial to gain a better sense of the phenomenon. Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of both the externally observable experiences and internal states, such as the views and perceptions of individuals (Patton, 2015). Besides, this method is the most appropriate as the study is rather exploratory and aims at contributing to a currently limited knowledge base about the implications of digital communication for social work practice.

## **5.2. Mode of procedure**

### **5.2.1. Data Collection**

Through the existing network of one of the researchers and a thorough internet search, several Swedish municipalities were contacted via email and phone. They were selected according to the availability of the contact information for the Children and Youth department. In the initial email or phone call, general information about the researchers and the purpose of the study was offered. Since Swedish isn't the researchers' first language, we decided to broaden the search to several municipalities in order to increase the chances of finding participants willing to conduct the interviews in English. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants with good knowledge and experience about the issue (Grinnell & Unrau, 2018). Thus, the research participants are social workers working in children and families welfare units, more specifically with children who are in out-of-home care. A total of four social workers who directly work with children using digital communication were selected from three different municipalities. The sample consisted of three female and one male participants, with fieldwork experience ranging from 6 to 21 years. We used code names to identify the social worker respondents as R1, R2, R3, and R4 in the results and analysis section.

The research used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to understand the experiences of the social workers. Semi-structured interviews help describe participants' daily experiences from their own points of view (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It also allows

researchers to pose elaborative questions to explore and get insight into the interviewees' experiences. Before the meeting, the participants were offered the option of the medium, either face-to-face or digitally, and the researchers used an interview guide (Appendix I) to conduct the interview. Upon agreement with the participants and the signature of the informed consent form (Appendix II), an audio recording device was used to facilitate the subsequent interview transcription.

### **5.2.2. Data Analysis**

An inductive thematic analysis was chosen as the most relevant to interpret the data obtained through the interviews. The inductive method implies generating results by establishing patterns and themes directly from the transcripts rather than using predetermined ones (Patton, 2015). This method appeared to be appropriate for this research as the topic is relatively recent in the academic field and has thus limited conceptualization and framework so far. Besides, the explorative nature of the study around individual perceptions requires inductive processes to remain more "open" to the emergence of new concepts (Patton, 2015).

The interviews were first transcribed with the help of an automatic transcription tool, and the content was subsequently coded in several topics following an open coding system (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Open coding helps to organize the vast amount of raw data by breaking down the transcripts into concepts or labels according to noticeable recurrences and divergences (Patton, 2015), thus reducing the complexity of the original content. The coding and choice of themes were first conducted by each researcher separately to increase the results' reliability and reduce potential bias. The themes were identified by finding links among different codes and grouping identical codes into broader categories (Patton, 2015). They were then discussed, compared, and organized to form the final categories.

The interpretive phase followed with the theoretical framework as a point of departure, and each separate theme was directly linked to the aforementioned Goffman's interaction order theory. Throughout the data analysis process and particularly when interpreting the results, we used self-reflection to bear in mind the role of our pre-existing belief systems and values, as well as our own experience of using digital communication (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Critical thinking and acknowledgment of the subjective aspects of the research process is crucial not only to recognize potential limitations but also to maintain openness for debate and future research.

### **5.3. Credibility**

#### **5.3.1. Reliability**

Both interviews and transcriptions were realized by two researchers, which increases the reliability of the results as it reduces the possibility of error and bias (Patton, 2015). Additionally, the questions were provided to the respondents prior to the interviews to ensure their preparedness and allow them to ask for potential clarifications. The questions asked to the participants were the same, even though some of the follow-up questions differed as they varied according to the original answer. Neutrality in formulating the questions and analyzing the content (Rubin & Babbie, 2017) was also respected to the researchers' best ability. However, the very nature of interviewing and qualitative research process limits its reliability as obtaining the same answers and results over time can't be guaranteed (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

#### **5.3.2. Validity**

The study presented here followed a rigorous methodological process that is academically accepted for qualitative research. The empirical validity is confirmed by the fact that the results obtained have successfully answered the aim and research questions, which corroborates the choice of the qualitative method as the most relevant for this study (Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2015). However, it seems pertinent to point out that the researchers had minimal experience in conducting this type of study, which on the other hand, constitutes a limitation to its validity.

#### **5.3.3. Generalizability**

Generalizability constitutes an inherent issue of the qualitative research method as the themes studied, data collection, as well as data analysis are all infused with a certain level of subjectivity (Patton, 2015). The fact that the number of participants is relatively low and concentrates on a specific geographical location which limits the representativeness of the sample (Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2015) makes the results all the harder to generalize. Moreover, as explained earlier, the studied phenomenon being recent and somewhat unexplored, more data is needed at a broader level to confirm or rule out its potential generalizability.

#### **5.4. Ethical considerations**

Several ethical considerations were addressed throughout the process of this research, some common to scientific studies in general and others specific to our topic. The selected participants were informed prior to the interviews about the purpose and scope of the research. They were also required to sign an informed consent (Annex II) and were notified that their participation was voluntary so that they could withdraw from the study at any time without providing an explanation (Swedish Research Council, 2017). At the beginning of the interview, participants confirmed once more their consent for the study, and detailed ethical considerations were verbally repeated. To ensure confidentiality, we took necessary measures such as the use of pseudonyms on the transcripts and when discussing the results (respectively R1, R2, R3, and R4) or the non-disclosure of the municipalities which employ the participants. In addition, the recorded data was kept locked in a separate folder, and no one except the researchers had access to it. After the transcription and data analysis were finalized, the recordings of the interviews were discarded.

Additionally, though children weren't directly involved in this research, their experience with the social workers constitutes one of its central issues. According to Kendrick et al. (2008), all research involving children should follow the fundamental ethical consideration of respect, protection from harm and beneficence. Thus, the information acquired regarding the children's experience was discussed with respect, and we ensured confidentiality by not asking any questions to the interviewees that would reveal the children's identity.

#### **5.5. Limitations of the study**

The interviews were conducted in English, which is a second language for both the interviewers and the participants. During the interviews, participants sometimes needed to use Swedish words to express themselves or explain difficult terms. Even though one of the researchers spoke Swedish and could provide translation for certain words, we believe that using English as a medium limited the participants to express themselves fully. Besides, the fact that only social workers fluent in English were selected can question the results' legitimacy, as it is impossible to know if other Swedish social workers who don't speak English would have had the same experience.

Additionally, the study is limited by both the number of participants and by their specific position. Indeed, interviewing exclusively social workers and not other positions, such

as managers within the child welfare services or other interested parties like the children themselves and their families, doesn't allow us to get a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. Finally, as mentioned in the Motivation section, both researchers have a personal experience on the topic of digital communication. Although it is in connection with social work education rather than social work practice, it is worth wondering to what extent this has influenced the research process.

## **6. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

Using an inductive approach, the interviews conducted for this research and the subsequent thematic analysis enabled us to identify four major themes, respectively *1) the impact of digital communication on the child/social worker relationship*, *2) the opportunities of using digital communication*, *3) the challenges of using digital communication*, and finally *4) the professionals' recommendations for future practice*. Goffman's interaction order theory described previously, served as a base for the analysis. Additionally, the codes R1, R2, R3, and R4 refer to the participants of this study in the following section.

### **6.1. Theme 1: Digital communication and the child-social worker relationship**

The respondents mentioned that after the children are placed in care, social workers make initial contact within a few days and aim at assessing and understanding the child's reaction to their placement. Although the subsequent follow-up contacts, including their frequency, objective, and content, will be determined by the social worker depending on the circumstances of each child, the regulation requires one home visit every three months. However, all participants mentioned that they contact the child a lot more than the official guidelines, and the frequency varies from around twice a week to once or twice a month. R3 mentioned that the visitations and contact decrease once they ensure children are safe and comfortable in their placement. Otherwise, the children might feel uncomfortable with the imposed frequent contact, particularly for those who have been in the same placement home for a long time. She illustrates this discomfort by describing it as *"difficult emotions with meeting with me because she feels very different from her friends and she's constantly reminded how different she is when I come to home visit."* Though the social workers attempt to maintain regular contact and a strong working relationship with the children, they also want them to be

less dependent on social services for long-term placements. Thus, they slowly reduce the frequency of contact once positive integration with the families is established.

### **6.1.1. Preferred digital communication tools**

The participants mentioned using various digital tools to communicate with children in care, including phone calls, texting (phone messages, WhatsApp, Messenger), and video calls (Teams, Zoom, Viber, Skype). Phone calls and text messages are the most frequently used digital means, and according to the respondents, both social workers and children can initiate contact. Text messages are favorable means for young people, particularly those who own a cell phone and/or those who have difficulty verbally expressing themselves. R2:

*“Yeah, yeah, yeah, mostly phone. Otherwise, text absolutely, but not in...For example, we have many children there who hasn't their own phone. So, but yeah, mostly using the phone. And with the ones who is here we can text, of course. Yes, SMS yes.”*

Moreover, one of the participants pointed out the opportunity of using text message applications such as What's App to overcome the youth's financial limitations, as they are easily accessible through widely available WIFI networks and internet connections. This, in turn, highlights a consideration for the child's situation and age when it comes to selecting the different digital communication means. R4:

*“And we send messages, I have a WhatsApp in my phone work phone I can send the message. I have Viber. It's much easier. When they don't have money they can call me like that and send me like message. Much easier for them, you know, as a kid, as a youth, you don't have money. Sometimes you forget to buy a telephone card. And you forget to fill it and you have to use Internet free. WIFI is free if you at home or if you are in school, if you are, yeah... Other places.”*

In addition, text messages are more useful for those born outside Sweden and with lower language proficiency, like immigrant youth or unaccompanied minors. R1 stated that text messages help to ensure clear communication and avoid misunderstanding due to the language barrier: *“texting is more practical for the social workers and the children”*. These children could thus understand text messages more easily than phone calls since they can use a written translation tool. She further elaborated: *“Some people have hard to talk and say what they want, but... Every young people can text, I think so it's another form of communication I*

*think it's easier for young people to text and talk like that than talking*". Issues at hand also impact the preferred means of communication with children. For instance, one participant considered that for sensitive issues it is preferable to meet the child physically, but for practical questions or material requests, digital communication is more appropriate.

Finally, video calls have become the primary digital medium for meetings as an alternative to in-person encounters since the Covid-19 pandemic and has come to stay as part of the regular routine for all the research participants. It also appears to be the preferred digital tool for more important and formal meetings and those involving more than two persons. Indeed, the ability to see the body language and the environment can partially make up for the lack of physical proximity. R2:

*"But if we can't do that, because of time, that is the best to have some form of digital meeting, because then we can see each other and we can see the expression and... So, in every bigger meeting we use digital media absolutely. Preferably from just phone."*

However, the respondents acknowledged that establishing relationships through digital communication is difficult regardless of the medium. Thus, they recommend starting with a face-to-face meeting to establish a positive relationship with children prior to employing digital communication. This first step could enhance the quality and effectiveness of the following digital encounters. R3:

*"Once you've been building that relationship face to face, it's easier of course to have as a meeting through Teams because they know me and I know them, once you've been building that relationship face to face, it's easier of course to have a meeting through Teams because they know me and I know them."*

This illustrates the impression management concept as physical co-presence appears to be necessary to lay the foundations of any kind of interaction, particularly as the expression of oneself varies from one individual to another. In addition, they indicate choosing various digital tools according to the child's preference, personal circumstances (such as economic limitations, disability, language, placement location), or the type of issue to be communicated.



### 6.1.2. Adjusting to children's developmental stages and personality

The age group of children the interviewed social workers engage with varies between 0-21. The importance of considering both the age and individual preference of the child when choosing between digital communication and in-person meetings has been highlighted by the participants. Most participants attested to the challenges of using digital communication with younger children, particularly due to their need for physical contact and other sensory stimulations to develop an attachment with the adult figure. R3:

*“I would say when they're small, they sometimes feel it's weird to talk to a computer. When they haven't come to that age when they have phones yet. So it's a bit weird and they prefer doing other stuff and running around the room and playing. And so I would prefer to meet younger kids face to face because they like to play with me too and show me their room and we can talk in a better way than having them at the office when it's just sitting next to each other and talking.”*

R2 elaborated: *“It varies with age, yeah, that the smaller the kids or the younger the kids, the harder it is if you don't meet in person, I think.”* Another respondent confirmed this idea and underlined the practical limitations of digital meetings, including the use of physical props: *“Smaller children if you are going to talk to them, you can need just the paper and pen because they get more relaxed in the situation”.*

Although age seems to be a particularly relevant indicator for practical and generational reasons, the child's personality is considered even more important in most cases. R4:

*“Not all the youth is a fan of the digital meetings, they don't like... they like it more to see the physic and they want to see us. Some likes that they don't want to see us and they want to... They don't like physical meeting. We have to adapt how the kids feel and want it. Even it was Corona, we visited those kids who couldn't have...did not like yeah digital meeting”.*

One participant also discussed how the meetings vary from child to child and the necessity to consider the child's individual preferences over convenience: *“Maybe some other persons are better with it, but sometimes with some persons it's really hard because if they're*

*a bit locked up and don't want to talk much, so it's best to meet in person.*” Though participants recounted the importance of considering age and personality of children when choosing digital communication, they also emphasized the importance of favoring physical meetings for some.

## **6.2. Theme 2: Opportunities in using digital communication**

The participants confirmed that digital communication has both positive and negative impacts on the relationship between the child and social worker and that it represents “*a good complement*” to face-to-face communication. R3 summarized, “*I would not use it, just technical communication. Of course, it's not possible in my profession. But I wouldn't want to be without it.*” Digital interaction is found to be both beneficial for relational aspects and practical ones.

### **6.2.1. Relational**

According to the participants, digital communication impacts the social worker/client relationship both positively and negatively. Their experience of digital media to communicate, such as phone calls, video calls, and texting is that it increases the frequency and possibility to contact the children. It also allows for more meetings and more home visits in terms of quantity. This increased frequency of contact would facilitate the development and maintenance of a close relationship as the social worker appears to be more easily accessible and available for the child on a regular basis. This argument is in line with Goffman’s concept of interaction rituals by which a person attests to her/his engagement in the relationship, which reinforces the bond through regular signals that, in turn, create a shared experience. Furthermore, the respondents consider that these tools tend to particularly facilitate communication with young people. For instance, R3 elaborated:

*“The last time I met her face to face, she was ... Really, she was sad. She was angry and she was frustrated and the presence I felt in room was ... She really didn't want to be there ... And I feel that to some teenagers, it's easier to have a quick Teams meeting or text or phone call because she doesn't have to be in the room with me and me being in her home and in her room.”*

Another respondent added:

*“I get the feeling that teenagers are more at ease with digital communication because that's how they do it, mostly through Snapchat and Messenger and stuff. Face timing. And when we're done with the meeting, it's just to click the button and then they're back to doing their own stuff. I don't have to be there and... Invading their space, so to say.”*

Their description stresses the fact that digital communication allows children to contact the social workers on their own terms whenever they need support by using different digital media, which for some of them seems to be more relaxing and comfortable. This is congruent with the concept of impression management in that it gives the youth a certain sense of control over the setting and direction of an interaction, as well as the kind of information they want to share. Additionally, by responding adequately to the media chosen by the child and letting her/him initiate the interaction, social workers once again corroborate the value of interaction rituals to encourage the engagement in the relationship.

### **6.2.2. Practical**

The overcoming of spatio-temporal limitations was the most cited benefit of digital communication among the participants. This can be explained by the fact that often, children placed in out-of-home care are located in various parts of Sweden which requires extensive travel arrangements for in-person visits. Digital communication is experienced as the most innovative and useful solution to these limitations as it eliminates the distance and increases accessibility of services. For instance, as mentioned previously phone calls help social workers to contact children more frequently than in-person meetings would allow, thus facilitating continuous follow-ups. R1: *“I think it's...if the children are far away, then you can have a fast meeting. If it's necessary, or if it's some other problems, you can't go there, or it's short about time or something. That is the good.”*

Moreover, the participants mentioned that they are the social worker of reference for at least 10 children at a time and sometimes up to 35 children, in addition to which they assist and cooperate with their colleagues on other cases. Therefore, being able to use digital technology with children eases their workload while reaching all the children they are responsible for. R2:

*“And the big advantage is of course that that you can have a meeting and you can have it on short notice and you can get more meetings because you don't have to*

*travel, you don't have to go there. You don't have to call people to get here or something. So that's the best part of it I think."*

Interestingly, in relation to the possibility of overcoming geographical barriers, one participant indicated another positive outcome in the environmental long-term benefits of having digital encounters instead of face-to-face, as it reduces the use of transportation such as cars or trains to travel to meetings.

Another significant opportunity lies in the ability offered by digital means to gather several parties involved in the child's life in one place, which can sometimes be problematic for in-person meetings. This argument is particularly important as the work with children placed in out-of-home care is conceived from an ecological perspective, and the social worker's role is often to coordinate the different parties having an influence on the child's well-being such as schools, birth families, foster families, or counselors. R2: *"And you can have many people who is important for the child in the same room. It's harder to get them together in a physical realm group."*

Finally, one of the participants justly pointed out that the ability to participate in meetings or communicate remotely has also shifted mentalities and certain behaviors: *"And nowadays, no one is sick anymore (laugh). Everybody who is sick works at home so we can connect to parts of that too."* This could be somewhat considered as a double edge sword and open a moral and ethical debate on professional boundaries, as it is worth wondering if productivity and constant availability should be prioritized over the need for personal time.

### **6.3. Theme 3: Challenges in using digital communication**

#### **6.3.1. Relational**

The significant challenge related to digital interaction with children and mentioned by all the participants is the limited sensory perception, leading to a more difficult assessment of the child's feelings. As R1 explained, *"But we prefer face-to-face because then you can see more like body language and the face expressions and so on. You don't have their feeling in the room. It's different on Zoom."* To accurately read the mood and emotions of the child and other people involved in the meeting, physical co-presence appears to be the best way to avoid misinterpretation. R3:

*“If we are not in the same room it’s difficult to keep track of their emotions. Even in video meetings they chose to hide behind a computer, which makes it difficult to read their body language. I had Teams meeting with a girl and I felt during Teams meeting that everything was fine. But after that, I talked to the mom like a few days later, the foster mom and she gave me another picture... it was a shock to me”.*

Using digital communication also makes it difficult to build a trusting relationship without prior and regular in-person meetings. R2:

*“If I just had digital meeting or phone meeting with the specific child then it’s going to be hard, I think because then you don’t know the expressions in real life, so it’s a bit harder of course, when you don’t sit in the room and talk.”*

Another respondent further argued that digital communication makes it difficult to read the thoughts and anticipate the behaviors of youth at risk of juvenile delinquency or those who have already been convicted of crimes. This in turn jeopardizes the work of their social workers, who are expected to prevent them from further engaging in such actions.

In addition, the presence of adults during video meetings with children was mentioned as an overall challenge to relationship building. Indeed, it is viewed as limiting children’s openness to disclose what they feel and freely communicate with the social worker, while a physical meeting or home visit creates an opportunity to have some privacy: *“you can take the child aside and talk to them”*. To counteract this issue and be able to read between the lines, the relationship built over the course of months or years through previous in-person meetings is critical. This idea is coherent with Goffman’s theory of the importance of physical co-presence to facilitate interaction and, at a bigger scale, social cohesion. R3:

*“We usually prefer face-to-face meetings, but... I still feel like I can read room through Teams. But I feel like I’ve had enough meetings to say that I feel like I can read them, though the ones I know, the ones I’ve had a relationship with and met physically a few times during a year. I feel like I can read them through the phone or through Teams as well as I do during face-to-face meetings.”*

These arguments regarding the difficulty of getting an accurate impression of the situation and the child’s emotions confirm the difference in interaction order between face-to-

face interactions and digital communication. In Goffman's original theory, impression management is formed in the conscious action of the actor's self-presentation to influence the audience's perception of her/him. In this scenario, both actor and audience are assumed to be in a shared physical space, so they can easily read each other's psychological features, such as moods and emotions. However, in the case of digital interaction, the findings suggest that the audience's ability to observe and capture those psychological clues are restricted, and the impression is consequently distorted.

### **6.3.2. Practical**

Another challenge mentioned during the interviews was that digital communication fails to create an environment that elicits engagement and interaction for children. For instance, one respondent mentioned that during face-to-face meetings it was easy to find interactive activities with the child, such as walking around the house and discussing together the surroundings or going to their bedroom and letting the child present her/his belongings. Moreover, younger children can run around and play inside or outside while the social worker observes and asks questions. Home visits also include assessing safety and such indicators as with whom they share rooms, how they keep their room, sanitation, food accessibility, or how the family members interact with each other and the child. All this is difficult to observe using digital communication when in-person home visits are not possible. R3: *"It's hard to manipulate. Uh, you can...I mean, it's hard. I cannot just ask them 'Can you move the computer around so I can see how your room looks or how the house looks' or..."* However, in terms of operational preparation prior to the meeting, the respondents found no significant change between face-to-face and digital meetings, the principal difference being to ensure that all the technological devices are working and in place. According to the interaction order theory, the setting between face-to-face meetings and digitally assisted communication vary significantly, thus impacting the personal front which refers to the appearance and mannerism a person seeks to display. In real life encounters, the physical co-presence of the participants means that they share a common setting where they know how to act and interact accordingly, which is not the case in digital interaction where each person has their own separate surroundings. Allowing the children to interact in a familiar setting where they conduct their day-to-day activities, such as their bedroom or playground, encourages the presentation of their natural selves. It also gives them some control over the impression they want to give. Besides, the shared experience of this setting with the social worker during physical home visits facilitates their interaction.

Conversely, when the setting becomes restricted by digital communication, the children can't present their genuine personal front, which in turn distorts the perception of the social worker who can only rely on a limited and potentially unfamiliar setting.

The lack of experience and training available was mentioned by most participants as another non-negligible challenge in digital communication with children. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, most communication happened via face-to-face meetings, and the use of digital tools such as video meetings, texting, or phone calls was merely occasional. But the global pandemic with its associated restrictions changed the interaction forms and forced social workers to shift to a frequent and sometimes exclusive use of digital technology not only for meetings but also home visits in some cases. R1: “...*especially the few... the last years of the pandemic, we haven't had home visits every three months. We've only had Teams meetings....*” Without having been provided with appropriate training and with little time to accustom to this new form of practice, the interviewed social workers pointed out the necessity to rely on self-learning: “*we learn on the meeting*”. Besides, the kind of technical support provided by their agency was often inexistent and at best insufficient. R1:

*“[...] thrown into it during the pandemic and we've learned as we've gone ... learn as you go. Uh, I haven't gone to a specific, like what you call it.... It's building education...we don't receive any training except a quick online PowerPoint presentation from IT on how to use Microsoft Teams.”*

Moreover, this lack of guidelines combined with the unfamiliarity of certain social media platforms widely used by youth to communicate raise the question of professional boundaries. Indeed, if these new forms of digital practice allow social workers to be more available and respond quickly, some concerns were nonetheless expressed regarding their ability to set clear limits between personal and professional time. R4:

*“It's ethical or moral difficult for us to use as a social worker Snapchat. When should I answer? When can I switch off the phone? And I go home. What happened? And the kids want to talk to me. They need answer like that. [...] We cannot be here 24 hours. You have to be realistic.”*

Finally, the issue of security related to the use of digital communication was brought up by at least two of the participants, both regarding the children and the social workers themselves. Most of the respondents mentioned that the municipalities shifted at some point to the Microsoft Teams software for security reasons in replacement of other media such as Skype or Zoom, but they were not informed what the security issues entailed. In addition to this change, certain precautions are taken to respect confidentiality and protect the children's identity during communication. R2 said: “[...]we don't use like full name on digital media. So, it's secure, but not secure enough”, emphasizing his reservations on the extent to which their interaction remains private and confidential. This idea can be linked to Goffman's impression management concept, which underlines the importance of controlling the setting for the parties engaging in an interaction. In the case of digital communication, having limited control over the “stage” and its associated non-verbal clues causes uncertainty for the social workers about the appropriate way to respond, which could explain the discomfort expressed by the participants.

### **6.3.3. Accessibility and digital divide**

At least two participants pointed out the limitations of using digital communication when working with specific groups of children. The limited access to devices such as cell phones or computers was mentioned as a challenge by one of the participants working with young offenders and youth at risk of juvenile delinquency placed in special supervisory homes. R2:

*“Then we have some other persons in Swedish custody and we preferably go there, but sometimes we check out with...by phone. And then there's no possibility to have any video conference with the custody or person. Not prison, of course, because they are under 18, but in custody. Yeah.”*

Additionally, digital communication is mostly inadequate for children presenting developmental disorders or mental disabilities, while challenging upbringings can increase the risk factors for such conditions. R4:

*“Some children have a difficulty. You have to adapt. They have many kind of... sometimes they have a diagnosis they have other kind of not disease but...Yeah it can*



*be Autism Spectrum. They can have different kind of difficulty to communicate or they're afraid... psychological difficulty to talk to people they don't know[...]"*

Not all facilities attended by the child and requiring regular follow-ups with such as schools have equal access and adequate training about the use of digital communication tools, which can, in some cases, make the meetings less efficient. R2: *"Sometimes I had a school meeting here with the boy who is at a family home. And then school don't use any digital media in that school. And then we used like 5-part telephone conference. But that was really tricky."* The impossibility or inappropriateness of using digital tools to interact with certain groups limits the actor's performance, thus making it harder for the participants to know which role to adopt. This could partly explain the feeling of confusion and inadequacy of social workers having to use digital interaction in specific contexts where accessibility is inherently restricted. Besides, this observation reinforces one of the criticisms of Goffman's theory arguing that it only focuses on micro-level interactions and fails to consider macro-level power structures responsible for limiting circumstances, illustrated in this study by the notion of digital divide.

#### **6.4. Theme 4: Recommendations for future practice**

##### **6.4.1. Training and updated devices**

As mentioned earlier, the participants recognized the limited knowledge and experience of using digital tools among social workers, thus recommending further training and education to efficiently communicate with the target population. They further suggested extending the training opportunities beyond the professional scope to other individuals playing an important part in the life of the child, such as school teachers or foster families. R2:

*"We often have meeting with lots of persons except the child and training and experience for them too. Sometimes the meetings are a bit confused when you're not in the room at the digital meeting. So, experience and training."*

According to one participant, this would make digital communication easier and more enjoyable, particularly when interacting with children and youth who are more knowledgeable on the topic. R1: *"I think if we could understand the programs better, maybe it could be more fun to use them in some way. Tips and tricks."* Furthermore, additional training on how to create

interactive digital communication when working with younger children who use non-verbal clues to communicate was deemed necessary to improve this new form of practice. Moving forward, R3 hinted at the development of specific technological devices that would allow a closer alternative to in-person meetings “*[...] With maybe a sort of like place meeting for kids, that's easier so they can interact with me through the screen on their side and on my side. Maybe we can draw something together.*” Similarly, another respondent mentioned the need for updated devices and the incorporation of recording tools during digital meetings as an aid to make better assessments when face-to-face meetings are not possible. Looking for alternative ways to access non-verbal clues confirms the importance of correctly interpreting the other person’s behavior and choosing the adequate reaction, which is coherent with the concept of impression management.

Finally, regarding ethical considerations, one participant advocated for better cooperation between municipalities to exchange experiences regarding the use of digital tools, learn from each other and establish practice standards. In addition, from a prevention perspective, R2 mentioned: “*Because we work a lot with the protection clients too who’s on risk for being assaulted or being really criminal groups or something like that. So it’s the security of the media, is interested in that.*” This entails the importance of raising awareness on the security aspects of using digital communication, which was further suggested as a possible area of education and training for professionals.

#### **6.4.2. Children’s agency and advocacy for a hybrid form of practice**

If in-person meetings were generally favored by all the participants, the child’s agency regarding the place and time for the meeting was underlined. A call for moving away from traditional meetings at the social worker’s office was expressed by one respondent, as this form of practice was considered inappropriate to develop a good relationship with the child, regardless of their age. R4:

*“The children is fans of fika, what we call in Sweden. They like to go outside and eat cookies or drink something nice. And uh, we can do as a social worker here. And sit and talk about everything, yeah. The children, the youth don’t like when you are sitting and writing. You have to memorize. [...] They always like it when they get to choose where they want to see.”*

Indeed, the unfamiliarity of the environment, which could also be associated with negative emotions, is seen as counterproductive for the social worker/child relationship. In such circumstances and despite the aforementioned challenges, digital meetings were considered as potentially more beneficial so long as the child was able to attend from a familiar environment such as her/his home or a place of her/his choice. R3:

*“I sometimes always feel... I don't know how to say that, but I usually feel that meetings at the office isn't very good. Not for kids or teenagers because it's like going to the doctors or the dentist. It's a bit nerve, nerve wracking. It's... I can feel that they are uncomfortable. Right now we have nice rooms, of course, but it's easier to take them to a coffee shop or play in their rooms or go outside and jump on the trampoline [...].”*

In sum, all participants agree on the advantage of combining face-to-face encounters with digital communication. This includes adapting to each child's personal preferences and letting her/him actively participate in the decision-making process rather than arbitrarily imposing one way or the other. R2:

*“But yeah, sometimes I think you have to meet the person because you get the feeling for the person what they say. Some of our clients, some of our kids they function well with digital communication, but some don't do so well or we don't do so well, I don't know, but so it's like a good complement.”*

Through mindful and self-reflective practice, the complementarity of digital and in-person communication was seen as the future of social work with children and youth. Regardless, social workers are eventually responsible for finding the right balance between the two in order to provide individualized and sustainable support.

## **7. DISCUSSION**

This chapter starts with discussion on the results obtained in this study in relation to its aim and research questions. It then offers a critical comparison with the existing literature on the topic, and further explores the relevance and limitations of the selected methodology and theoretical

framework. Some suggestions for future research and closing remarks serve as a conclusion to both this section and the essay.

### 7.1. Summary of results in relation to the aim

**Table. 1. Results**

<p><b>Aim: To explore how social workers in the Swedish Child Welfare Services (CWS) have adapted to the new era of digital communication with children and youth placed in out-of-home care</b></p> <p><i>The results show that digital communication has become part of their daily routine. However, there are both opportunities and challenges in its application, and the participants' responses indicate that a hybrid and reflective practice tailored to the children's individual needs would be beneficial.</i></p>												
<p><b>Rq1: How do social workers from the CWS incorporate digital communication with children and youth placed in out-of-home care?</b></p> <p><i>Daily use of digital communication</i></p> <p><i>Identify children's personal circumstances to tailor the use of digital communication</i></p> <p><i>Video conferences, phone calls and text messages as preferred means</i></p> <p><i>Hybrid practice between digital and in-person</i></p>	<p><b>Rq2: What are the perceived opportunities and challenges among social workers from the CWS in using digital communication with children and youth placed in out-of-home care?</b></p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"><b>Opportunities:</b></td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"><b>Challenges:</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Facilitating communication with youth</i></td> <td><i>Limited access to non-verbal clues</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Overcoming spatio-temporal limitations</i></td> <td><i>Age of the children and digital divide</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Easier to gather several parties</i></td> <td><i>Security and confidentiality</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td><i>Lack of training</i></td> </tr> </table>		<b>Opportunities:</b>	<b>Challenges:</b>	<i>Facilitating communication with youth</i>	<i>Limited access to non-verbal clues</i>	<i>Overcoming spatio-temporal limitations</i>	<i>Age of the children and digital divide</i>	<i>Easier to gather several parties</i>	<i>Security and confidentiality</i>		<i>Lack of training</i>
<b>Opportunities:</b>	<b>Challenges:</b>											
<i>Facilitating communication with youth</i>	<i>Limited access to non-verbal clues</i>											
<i>Overcoming spatio-temporal limitations</i>	<i>Age of the children and digital divide</i>											
<i>Easier to gather several parties</i>	<i>Security and confidentiality</i>											
	<i>Lack of training</i>											

The aim was to explore how social workers in the Swedish Child Welfare Services (CWS) have adapted to the new era of digital communication with children and youth placed in out-of-home care. Our results clearly show that this new form of practice has become part of the social workers' routine especially since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Two research questions were formulated to answer the aim. The first one intended to gain further understanding of the ways social workers incorporate digital communication with children in out-of-home care. The results show that video conferences, phone calls and text messages are used on a daily basis and have replaced to some extent in-person meetings, even though these are still perceived as indispensable. The second research question explored the

social workers' perceived opportunities and challenges in using digital communication means with these children. Here it became clear that the main opportunities of using digital tools included easier communication with teenagers, the overcoming of spatio-temporal limitations, and the possibility of gathering several parties more easily and with less conflicting schedules. On the other hand, the main challenge was limited access to non-verbal communication, such as body language or facial expression. Other challenges included the age of the children and general accessibility, the issue of security and confidentiality, and the lack of training regarding the use of digital tools.

## **7.2. Comparison with existing literature**

The findings are overall consistent with most of the existing literature on the topic, although certain aspects would require further investigation to make accurate comparisons. As suggested by Mishna et al. (2022) and Pascoe (2022), the dependency on digital communication that peaked during the Covid-19 pandemic has largely come to stay in its aftermath. This is confirmed by our participants who recognize this shift in practice despite the lift of most physical restrictions. The type, frequency, and effectiveness of digital communication are closely linked to the age and developmental stage of the child, which is in line with the findings of Copson et al. (2022). Additionally, the use of video conferences, text messages and phone calls to remain in close contact with the client is coherent with some of the results obtained by Pascoe (2022). Besides, in line with Mishna et al. (2012), our findings also suggest that there is no standardized choice of digital tools with children, which instead varies according to circumstances such as age, maturity, accessibility to digital technology, the purpose of the meeting, or language. However, none of our participants mentioned emails or social media as a primary medium to communicate with their clients, unlike some observations made by Pascoe (2022). This could be due to several reasons, such as the agency's policy, personal preference, or simply the lack of questions specific to these media in our interview guide.

According to our results, the opportunities of using digital communication are mostly similar to those found in previous research. For instance, reducing geographical barriers, providing services tailored to each individual's needs (Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad, 2022) as well as allowing a quicker response from the social worker (Ferguson et al., 2022) were all mentioned during the interviews. Yet, if Denby et al. (2016) were able to show the positive impact of digital communication on the professional/client relationship, our findings don't

allow to confirm or refute this argument entirely. Indeed, our participants acknowledged the advantage of communicating more frequently with the child while also expressing mixed feelings about the depth of this new form of rapport, which is more in line with. Their responses seemed rather to corroborate the idea that the quality of the relationship via digital communication is highly dependent on prior in-person encounters, as argued by Copson et al. (2022). The findings suggest that digital communication should be complementary to face-to-face meetings as a follow-up tool rather than to create the initial bond, which is also in line with Pascoe (2022). Our results established that when the social worker can first meet the child in person and identify the child's way of expressing emotions, then subsequent digital communication would enable to have both frequent and intimate open discussions.

Finally, this study is consistent with previous literature regarding the challenges posed by digital communication. For instance, the difficulty of making assessments regarding the child's experience, which prevents social workers from providing appropriate services, confirms the results of Pascoe (2022). The digital divide mentioned by Conrad & Magsamen-Conrad (2022) and its associated implications for clients, such as practical accessibility, digital literacy, or developmental disabilities, were also brought up by this study's interviewees as one of the main challenges. Besides, the results show that ethical considerations such as security, confidentiality, and the lack of clear guidelines or adequate training, as reported by Pascoe (2022) and Scaramuzzino & Barfoed (2021), were experienced as problematic. To conclude, the recommendations by the participants of this study for the adoption of a hybrid and adaptive form of practice based on awareness and self-reflection point toward the same direction as Mackrill & Ebsen (2017).

### **7.3. Discussion on theoretical framework**

This study shows that the original Goffman's interaction order (Goffman, 1959) remains relevant to this day as many of its key concepts are applicable to digital interactions. However, this framework showed limitations in our study as it failed to explain certain aspects brought up by the participants, such as the notion of the digital divide. Indeed, the findings suggest that one of the shortcomings of this theory in relation to digital communication is that it doesn't allow a broader view of the individual in her/his environment. This could have been best explained using the ecological systems theory (Heslop & Meredith, 2021) rather than Goffman's interaction order, which merely focuses on the participants' behaviors and the immediate environment (Goffman, 1959). The lack of consideration for a more systemic

approach to explain human behaviors has been one of the major criticisms of symbolic interactionism, which include Goffman's dramaturgical model (Smith, 2011).

Though our findings allowed us to identify different digital tools that are age appropriate in the child/social worker relationship as well as the importance of considering the child's maturity, it doesn't allow us to explore the challenges hindering communication at the various developmental stages. Looking at the results from a child development perspective, such as Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental theory, could have been useful to further understand the implications of digital communication for children. Indeed, this theory identifies the different aspects of development according to different age categories, including motor, speech, language, or social interaction (Heslop & Meredith, 2021).

Lastly, the choice of Goffman's interaction order to interpret the data collected didn't allow us to explore deeper the nature and scope of the bond created between the child and the social worker. The attachment theory as developed by John Bowlby (Heslop & Meredith, 2021) could have provided valuable information on this matter and potentially showed what role digital communication plays in the evolution of attachment styles.

#### **7.4. Discussion on methodology**

The choice of the qualitative method proved to be the most appropriate to answer the aim and research questions of the study as it allowed us to gain deeper access to the participants' perceptions and worldviews (Patton, 2015). The interview guide was slightly modified and reorganized after the first interview to include more specific questions in relation to the aim. The use of open-ended questions turned out to be useful as the participants openly and comprehensively shared their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Besides, most of them agreed to do the interview through Zoom with their camera on, which gave us the opportunity to observe their body language and facial expressions while interacting with them. Only seeing of the respondents what the camera angle permitted and being unable to see one of them allowed us to empathize with the challenges they mentioned. Besides, though we didn't encounter any technical challenges, we realized how the conversation's flow and the participants' focus could easily be impacted if it were the case. The irony is not lost on us that while interviewing them on their perspective regarding the use of digital communication, we were simultaneously testing and reflecting on our own experience of it.

However, if the methodology itself was relevant, the difficulty in finding participants limited the number to four, which we realize is a strong limitation to the generalizability of the

findings. Besides, the fact that the interviews were conducted in the participants' second language (English) instead of their first language (Swedish) presents some limitations for the interpretation of the results. Though no translation tool was used since all the participants spoke English fluently, it is worth wondering to what extent the use of another language impacted their capacity to express what they wanted, as well as the researchers' ability to interpret the meaning accurately.

### **7.5. Suggestions for future research and conclusion**

Our study focuses entirely on the views of social workers and on how digital communication impact their interaction with children from their perspective. This doesn't consider the view of the children, families, other adults, and institutions surrounding the child after the placement (Heslop & Meredith, 2021). Thus, comprehensive research that would include these other perspectives is needed to provide a more holistic picture of digital communication in social work with children placed in out-of-home care. Furthermore, similar studies in other countries would allow cross-cultural comparisons about the use of digital communication in social work with children. This could provide interesting data on the extent to which a global tendency such as digitalization is adapted to local contexts (Healy, 2008), as well as on the situation of a digital divide between and within specific regions.

In conclusion, this research shed some light on the adaptation of social workers from Swedish child welfare services to a post-Covid-19 pandemic era characterized by an increased use of digital communication. It allowed us to gain further understanding of its implications for practice with children and youth placed in out-of-home care both in terms of advantages and inconveniences. Moreover, though the study is limited in scope, it nonetheless appears to corroborate some key findings from previous research conducted in both similar and different contexts. Along with the fact that social workers need to find the right balance between clients' individual characteristics and procedural considerations, it invites us to contemplate a mindful hybrid form of practice as the future of the profession.



## References

- Aasback, A. W., & Røkkum, N. H. A. (2021). Domesticating Technology in Pandemic Social Work. *Journal of Comparative Social Work, 16*(2), 172–196.  
<https://doi.org/10.31265/JCSW.V16I2.387>
- Bergström, M., Sundell, K., Olsson, T., Leander, L., & Åström, T. (2023). Interventions in child welfare: A Swedish inventory. *Child and Family Social Work, 28*(1), 117–124.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12946>
- Berzin, S. C., Singer, J., & Chan, C. (2015). Practice Innovation through Technology in the Digital Age: A Grand Challenge for Social Work. *American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, 12*, 3–12.
- Breyette, S.K. & Hill, K. (2015) The Impact of Electronic Communication and Social Media on Child Welfare Practice. *Journal of Technology in Human Services, 33*(4), 283-303, DOI: 10.1080/15228835.2015.1101408
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods* (4th ed.). Oxford university press.  
<http://journal.um-surabaya.ac.id/index.php/JKM/article/view/2203>
- Bullock, A. N., & Colvin, A. D. (2015). Communication Technology Integration into Social Work Practice. *Advances in Social Work, 16*(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.18060/18259>
- Conrad, J. B., & Magsamen-Conrad, K. (2022). Understanding the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on families involved in the child welfare system: Technological capital and pandemic practice. *Child and Family Social Work, 27*(1), 11–21.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12876>
- Copson, R., Murphy, A. M., Cook, L., Neil, E., & Sorensen, P. (2022). Relationship-based practice and digital technology in child and family social work: Learning from practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Developmental Child Welfare, 4*(1), 3–19.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/25161032221079325>
- Cosner Berzin, S., Singer, J., & Chan, C. (2015). Practice innovation through technology in the digital age: A grand challenge for social work. *American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare: Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiatives Working Paper 12*. <https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/WP12-with-cover.pdf>
- Daniel, B., Wassell, S., & Gilligan, R. (2010). *Child Development for Child Care and Protection Workers* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Denby, R.W., Gomez, E. & Alford, K.A. (2016) Promoting Well- Being Through Relationship Building: The Role of Smartphone Technology in Foster Care. *Journal of Technology in Human Services, 34*(2), 183-208. DOI: 10.1080/15228835.2016.1168761
- Ferguson, H., Kelly, L., & Pink, S. (2022). Social work and child protection for a post-pandemic world: the re-making of practice during COVID-19 and its renewal beyond it. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 36*(1), 5–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2021.1922368>

- Frankfort-Nachmias, D., Nachmias, C. & DeWaard, J. (2015) *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (8th ed.) Worth Publishers, New York.
- Fylkesnes, M., Larsen, M., Havnen, K., Christiansen, Ø., & Lehmann, S. (2021). Listening to Advice from Young People in Foster Care—From Participation to Belonging. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(6), 1983–2000. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab138>
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.
- Grinnell, R. M., & Unrau, Y. A. (2018). *Social Work Research and Evaluation: Foundations of Evidence-Based Practice* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Healy, L.M. (2008). *International social work: professional action in an interdependent world* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Heslop, P., & Meredith, C. (2021). *Social work theory in practice*. SAGE
- Jacobsen, M.H. (2009). Introduction: Goffman Through the Looking Glass: From ‘Classical’ to Contemporary Goffman. In Jacobsen, M.H. (Ed.), *The Contemporary Goffman* (1st ed., pp.1-48). Routledge.
- Jacobsen, M., & Kristiansen, S. (2016). *The Social Thought of Erving Goffman*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Jenkins, R. (2009). Chapter 10: The 21-st century interaction order. In Jacobsen, M.H. (Ed.), *The Contemporary Goffman* (1st ed., pp.257-274). Routledge.
- Kendrick, A., Steckley, L., & Lerpiniere, J. (2008). Ethical issues, research and vulnerability: Gaining the views of children and young people in residential care andrew kendrick. *Children’s Geographies*, 6(1), 79–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280701791967>
- Khoo, E., Skoog, V., & Dalin, R. (2012). In and out of care. A profile and analysis of children in the out-of-home care system in Sweden. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(5), 900–907. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.01.019>
- Kien, N. T. (2018). Contemporary social interaction: How communication technologies alter Goffman’s dramaturgical model? *Journal of Science*, 5(3), 72.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Ling, R. (2008). The mediation of ritual interaction via the mobile telephone. In J. E. Katz (Ed.), *Handbook of mobile communication studies* (pp. 317-344). MIT Press.
- López Peláez, A., Erro-Garcés, A., & Gómez-Ciriano, E. J. (2020). Young people, social workers and social work education: the role of digital skills. *Social Work Education*, 39(6), 825–842. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1795110>
- Lundström, T., Pålsson, D., Sallnäs, M. & Shanks, E. (2021). A Crisis in Swedish Child Welfare? On Risk, Control and Trust. *Social Work & Society*. 19(1). [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351836723\\_A\\_Crisis\\_in\\_Swedish\\_Child\\_Welfare\\_On\\_Risk\\_Control\\_and\\_Trust](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351836723_A_Crisis_in_Swedish_Child_Welfare_On_Risk_Control_and_Trust)

- MacDonald, M., Wright, A. C., Taylor-Beswick, A., Gillespie, K., & Collings, S. (2023). Digital Relationality, Rights, Resilience: Conceptualising a Digital Social Ecology for Children’s Birth Family Relationships When in Care or Adopted. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 53(1), 216–235. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac140>
- Mackrill, T. & Ebsen, F. (2018) Key misconceptions when assessing digital technology for municipal youth social work. *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(6), 942-953, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2017.1326878
- Mishna, F., Bogo, M., Root, J., Sawyer, J. L., & Khoury-Kassabri, M. (2012). “It just crept in”: The Digital Age and Implications for Social Work Practice. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 40(3), 277–286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-012-0383-4>
- Mishna, F., Milne, B., Sanders, J., & Greenblatt, A. (2022). Social Work Practice During COVID-19: Client Needs and Boundary Challenges. *Global Social Welfare*, 9(2), 113–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-021-00219-2>
- National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Technology in Social Work Practice*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/Practice/NASW-Practice-Standards-Guidelines/Standards-for-Technology-in-Social-Work-Practice>
- New South Wales Department of Community Services. (2006). Report: The importance of attachment in the lives of foster children: key messages from research.
- Nordesjö, K., Scaramuzzino, G. & Ulmestig, R. (2022) The social worker-client relationship in the digital era: a configurative literature review. *European Journal of Social Work*, 25(2), 303-315. DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2021.1964445
- Östberg, F. (2010). *Bedömningar och beslut Från anmälan till insats i den sociala barnvården* (Issue 134).
- Pascoe, K. M. (2022). *Remote service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic : Questioning the impact of technology on relationship- based social work practice*. 3268–3287.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Pink, S., Ferguson, H., & Kelly, L. (2022). Digital social work: Conceptualising a hybrid anticipatory practice. *Qualitative Social Work*, 21(2), 413–430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250211003647>
- Rubin A. & Babbie E. R. (2017). *Research methods for social work* (9th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Scaramuzzino, G., & Barfoed, E. M. (2021). Swedish social workers’ experiences of technostress. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 00(00), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857x.2021.1951335>
- Smith, R. J. (2011). Goffman’s Interaction Order at the Margins: Stigma, Role, and Normalization in the Outreach Encounter. *Symbolic Interaction*, 34(3), 357–376. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2011.34.3.357>
- Socialstyrelsen. (2020). *E-hälsa och välfärdsteknik i kommunerna 2020*.

- Svensson, G., & Höjer, S. (2016). Placing Children in State Care in Sweden: Decision-making Bodies, Laypersons, and Frameworks. In Burns, K. et al. (Eds). *Child Welfare Removals by the State: A Cross-Country Analysis of Decision-Making Systems* (pp. 65-88). Oxford University Press.
- Svensson, L., & Larsson, S. (2018). *Digitalisering av kommunal socialtjänst: En empirisk studie av en organisation och profession i förändring*.
- Swedish Research Council. (2017). Good research practice. Vetenskapsrådet.
- Vávrová, S. & Kowalikova, I. (2020). The Digital Exclusion of Vulnerable Children: Challenge for Sustainability Issues in Czech Social Work Practice. *Sustainability*, 12(23), 9961. DOI:10.3390/su12239961.
- Vdovina, M., Firsov, M., Karpunina, A., Sizikova, V. & Bogatov, D. (2021). The Impact of Digitalization on Social Work Development. *Revista Gestão Inovação e Tecnologias*. 11(4), 4366-4377. DOI:10.47059/revistageintec.v11i4.2466.

## **Interview Guide**

### **Background and role:**

- How long have you been working with children in out-of-home care?
- How many children/youth are you typically assigned to and what are their age range?

### **Professional perspective:**

- What type of digital communication tools do you use with the children you are working with?
- Do you feel that your agency is supporting your utilization of digital communication tools? In what ways?
- Have you received any kind of particular training related to the use of digital communication with children and youth?

### **Population:**

- How do you develop a trusting relationship with the children through digital communication?
- Do you use digital communication differently according to the age of the child and how?
- How do you assess the child mood/feelings through digital communication, particularly with calls or texts (without image)?
- How do you think your use of digital communication tools have influenced your relationship with the children you are working with?

### **Personal experience and perception:**

- What do you feel are the main opportunities in using digital communication tools with the children you are working with?
- What do you feel are the main challenges?
- What do you think could be improved to facilitate the use of digital communication tools for social workers working with children and youth?

## Appendix II

### CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Yayneabeba Shumye Tessema and Tina Aoust as part of the final thesis of our Bachelor program in Social Work specialized in International Social Work.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You should read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim is to understand how social workers in the Swedish Child Welfare Services (CWS) have adapted to the new era of digital communications with children and youth placed in out-of-home care, as well as their own perceptions of the opportunities and limitations of such practices.

#### PROCEDURES

Participation will involve an interview on a mutually agreed date and time. The interview will take place via Zoom, phone or What's App call and will be recorded. The recording of the interview will be destroyed once the analysis is complete.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. We will not use your name in any of the information we get from this study or in any of the research reports. Information that can identify you individually will not be released to anyone outside the study. The responses from the interviews will be used in writing and defending our Bachelor's thesis.

#### PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

#### COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not receive any payment or other compensation for participation in this study. There is also no cost to you for participation. (As this study is for students in their obtention of a required credit unit, it is to be noted that involvement is not remunerated).

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date