

# Professional Interventions for Digital Social Work: Reality and Challenges -Analytical Study

Dhafallah Maghem Alotaibi<sup>1</sup>, Mostafa Mohamed Ahmed Elfeky<sup>2</sup>, Walid Atef Mansour Elsayad<sup>3</sup>, Hussein Abdelfattah M. Abdelkhalek<sup>4</sup>, Yasmin Alaa El-din Ali Youssef<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, College of Education, Jouf University, Sakaka, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Work, College of Arts, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

<sup>3</sup>Professor, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

<sup>4</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Geography & GIS, College of Arts, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

<sup>5</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Work, College of Arts, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

---

## Abstract

With a view to developing a vision for the development and activation of digital professional interventions for social work, the research paper will analyze the reality of professional intervention for digital social service at both minor and major practice levels, along with its most significant challenges. This is necessary given the rapid digital transformation that has permeated all spheres of life and necessitates that the humanitarian assistance professions, including the social work profession, keep up with it in order to provide higher-quality and more effective services.

**Keywords:** professional intervention, digital social work, electronic social work, digitization, challenges, Population.

## 1. Introduction

The digital age and electronic communication have spread their tools and effects to every part of the world, ingrained in the daily lives of millions of people who are too busy to post on social media, text, send emails, upload videos to YouTube, buy or sell goods online, play games with people all over the world, or connect with online professional networks. Electronic communication is appealing because it breaks through barriers of space and time in a way never seen before. (kirwan,2019).

The use of technology in the practice of social work is increasing with the rapid technological progress and artificial intelligence in the twenty-first century, which pushes social workers to develop their technological capabilities and skills with the increase in evidence-based practices, as studies have indicated that there are successful experiences that promise great progress in this field while adhering to ethical principles and values and taking into account the issues of the digital divide, the competence of practitioners, and the laws regulating digital practice (Chan, Holosko, 2019).

Research and experiments confirm the existence of realistic social work practices based on electronic technology and social media at all levels, small, medium, and major, but they face a number of obstacles and challenges, and The present paper attempts to answer the following questions: What is the reality of the practice of digital professional intervention in social work, and what are its most important challenges? How can those challenges be overcome?

#### Research Objectives:

- Analysis of the reality of professional intervention in digital social work.
- Identify the most important challenges of professional intervention in digital social work.
- Reaching a set of proposals to overcome the challenges of professional intervention in digital social work.

#### The Importance of Research:

- The rapid development of the uses of technology in all fields was reflected in the emergence and development of digital social work and even the adoption of the most important international social work education and practice organizations for it.
- The non-introduction of digital technology in the professional practice of social work is no longer an option but has become a necessity in light of contemporary technical changes, including artificial intelligence.
- This research may be useful in providing proposals that will reduce the obstacles and challenges facing the effective practice of digital social work.
- This research may lead to the development of an ethical charter for the practice of social work in the Arab environment.

## 2. Concepts:

#### Digital Social Work:

Digital social work can be defined as "the professional practice that uses ICT in this social technical field" (Peláez & Díaz, 2015). Digital social work can be understood as a field of social work where individuals, communities, and groups need to satisfy their needs, and it is feasible to use ICT to create intervention plans, carry out research projects, and create public policies to address them. Numerous public administrations use ICTs to manage social work, in addition to

non-profit groups that offer online support; digital social work also encompasses Internet research and treatment.

(individual dynamics). Education and training of social workers and monitoring social work programs. Digital social work has become the modern trend in professional practice (José & Servós, 2018).

• Digital social work is defined as: <https://www.aswb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015>)."means the use of computers (including the Internet, social media, online chat, text, and email) and other electronic means (such as smartphones, landlines, and video technology) to:

- provide information to the public.
- providing social work services to clients.
- communication with customers.
- management of confidential information and case records.
- store and access information about customers.
- Arrange payment for professional services.

Digital social work can be defined as a practice based on electronic informational means, tools, and technologies such as computers, mobile phones, electronic accounts, electronic social networking programs, all the means and technological tools produced by the Internet, and professional techno-practices used by social workers in their professional work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

Professional intervention in digital social work:

In the discourse of technology for social work interventions, “intervention” generally refers to any activity designed to produce changes, and “technology” is an evolving construct that mainly refers to information and communications technology (ICT). (Chan, Holosko, 2019)

Social work interventions are the long- and short-term actions that social workers take to provide resources, advocacy, and services to people who need them. These interventions can involve arranging for housing, healthcare, health insurance and other social safety net benefits, child welfare services, family therapy, psychotherapy, academic support, and other human services that can help individuals or communities improve their education, health, and well-being (<https://resources.noodle.com/articles/social-work-interventions/2024>).

The short- and long-term steps social workers take to help those in need of resources, advocacy, and services are known as social work interventions. In order to help people or communities improve their education, health, and well-being, these interventions may entail making arrangements for housing, healthcare, health insurance, and other social safety net benefits; child welfare services; family therapy; psychotherapy; academic support; and other human services. (<https://socialwork.pk/what-is-an-intervention-in-social-work/2024>).

Professional intervention in digital social work (electronic treatment via the Internet):

Digital advances have forced practitioners to include new technologies in the professional practice of social work, and social workers need to continuously improve their digital knowledge and skills to:

- Responding to contemporary technological changes and their effects on all formats related to the social work profession.
- Developing and improving the quality of social welfare services.
- Meeting the expectations of beneficiaries of social welfare services in all areas of professional practice.
- Protect children and adults from abuse and risks associated with the Internet and digital.

Our social interactions have been altered by digital technologies, which has led to the emergence of new fields of expertise, including online therapies and diagnoses derived from social network user behavior analysis. One of the most important challenges facing the social work profession is the ability to use ICTs to access, adapt, and develop new information and social intervention methods. By enabling content creation, Web 2.0 promotes user participation and modifies the conventional communication model, all the while rethinking the social worker's hierarchical role in professional practice. A new window of opportunity is opened by the Internet of Things, Big Data, games, and mobile phones, which allow us to develop social interventions using more sources of knowledge acquired from technology linkages and data analysis. (Peláez & Servós, 2018).

The editor of the *Journal of Technology in Human Services* noted that there were uses of technology in professional practice at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, those periods that were affected by the emergence of computers, the Internet, and information systems. In the second decade of the current century, interest in the use of information and communication technology in the practice of social work developed, and digital technologies, social networks, and information exchange occupied a distinguished position in this field and are still in continuous development (Chan, Holosko, 2019).

With the rapid technological changes in the twenty-first century, social workers found themselves obliged to use digital technology in the practice of social work online through mental health services programs and psychological treatment for individuals and their families without going to organizations, which was known as electronic therapy, cyber therapy, and online counseling. Whatever the term, social workers have benefited from digital technologies in helping clients and their families remotely, which opened new horizons for digital professional practice without the sole reliance on face-to-face practice. (NASW Massachusetts Chapter, 2020).

Online therapy has many advantages, including:

- Clients who hesitate to request face-to-face service are given the opportunity to provide free anonymity.

- It can detect sensitive issues and remove the sense of stigma associated with the service request.
- Enables clients to get the service at any time during the day.
- It may be an inexpensive way to go compared to the expenses associated with going to the organization.
- Not only is it useful in assessment and intervention, but also in periodic follow-up.

As for the negatives, they can be considered a challenge for digital professional intervention and will be presented within the challenges of professional intervention for digital social work in a future part.

The reality of digital therapy via the Internet at the micro level:

E-therapy benefits both the client and the social worker. If going to the institution is not available to the client, there is an opportunity to do the treatment over the phone or via email. Social workers can improve their knowledge and skills through online courses in a way that makes their professional interventions easier and more impactful.

Most of the literature has referred to the recognition of the effective use of digital professional intervention, and global organizations responsible for teaching and practicing social work considered it a form of effective treatment that is low-cost and quick-changing time faster in reaching targets, especially in rural and remote areas, drug addicts, mental disorders, the elderly, people with disabilities, and people with sensitive problems. All of this will benefit institutions, social workers, and clients. (Ishizuka & Cotter, 2009)

If digital professional intervention may be an option for customers who do not bear the cost of travel and access to institutions or do not have the financial ability to obtain self-help online at a moderate cost or without, many websites provide e-care services. Electronic therapy can be an option for clients who usually cannot afford treatment, as programs such as internet-based self-help can be offered at a moderate cost or no cost to the client. This is especially useful for customers who have not received any assistance. Many websites provide free assistance that teaches customers how to implement therapeutic interventions in their daily lives. It also provides self-directed interactive therapy, which is another intervention created through a website and allows individuals to interact with a structured self-directed program. Also, online support groups, blogs, and psychological educational sites all provide online support, consider the privacy of customers' homes, and allow them to get support from similar people. Blogging is another useful aspect of the internet, allowing customers to experiment with venting and get feedback from their peers. Researchers are discovering the increasing use of the Internet as a source of information. As technology continues to advance, social workers need to consider more applications for webcams, smartphone videos, instant text messaging, and smartphone apps. (Wodraska & Frimpong, 2013).

Among the problems addressed through digital interventions are mental and mental health problems such as anxiety disorders, the effects of depression, and problems related to drug and

alcohol abuse, as e-therapy provided tools, methods, and strategies that proved effective in dealing with these problems.

Professional interventions for digital social work at the macro level:

At the micro level, many organizations are using digital technologies to provide their services to beneficiaries efficiently and effectively; the Spanish Red Cross has integrated ICT into its daily work to improve the quality of life of its users and is a pioneer in implementing a "remote assistance service without abandoning its original practices of contacting people. ICTs contribute in a positive way to enhancing user engagement by involving them in identifying their needs and problems and removing obstacles such as time and distance.

José & Servos (2018) explained that the use of digital technology in the professional practice of social work with organizations contributes to:

In terms of charities, e-social work is creating a new way of framing everyday practices. It has direct implications for the management of entities, programs, and projects. It facilitates operations and is a means of control. It allows effective control of performance, funds, processes, and possibly the control of professionals and changes in their roles, and extends to volunteers and other agents in the technical staff. It allows the exploration of new forms of intervention and care.

ICT is part of social work by applying it to projects. They contribute to the promotion of personal autonomy, and ICTs allow the management of information and resources by social work professionals not only for use in social networks, blogs, databases, websites, etc., but in direct applications of intervention by means of technologies.

This technological framework requires the creation of multidisciplinary teams, and social workers need to carry out their training in electronic social work. Traditional methods and tools must be integrated with the possibilities offered by ICTs and other technologies, as they pave the way for new solutions to social challenges.

E-social work changes the nature of intervention by focusing on better individual attention, although the social work team should be in the background.

ICTs today can allow for rational resource management and cost-effectiveness, which should be appreciated by those responsible for managing social services. Actions do not require huge budgets and lead to agility in services through the application of existing ICTs at the level of ICTs and interactions. In this way, we are building electronic social work.

Online social media platforms have been used in the advocacy process through non-profit social organizations carrying out core tasks: (1) collecting and providing information about activities and events; (2) interacting with stakeholders in ways that ultimately facilitate the creation of an online community; and (3) online communication aimed at getting followers and stakeholders to do something. Such as participating and volunteering in the initiative or communicating with official authorities. Sitter & Curnew, 2016

Online processes were used through communication platforms that ensured the integration of social media across platforms, identifying and diversifying ways of sharing, empowerment,

choosing the right platforms, tracking, messaging, building a user base, providing sufficient safe spaces for sharing, and providing digital resources.

It is important when using social advocacy through social media to take into account the principles and ethics of the professional practice of social work and to take into account the regulations and laws in the country of practice, so that there are no illegal attempts to exploit social media to combat immoral or harmful to the safety and security of society, hence the importance of the level of awareness and awareness of social workers working in these non-profit social institutions.

Challenges of professional intervention in digital social work:

There has been an issue in recent years that social work professionals need to address. The idea of online social work places emphasis on the necessity of creating suitable social networks for professional intervention and on how to process the processes of social exclusion and inclusion (Lavié & Fernandez, 2018).

The anxiety experienced by experts regarding the departure from established and accustomed practices and the emergence of novel and disruptive technologies.

Some people may show some reluctance towards the application of new technologies in social work due to their ethical values and the identification of a higher level of technologization as another form of bureaucratization, which can end up leaving social intervention without actual content.

The need to renew community social work, as social networks allow being linked to social purposes,.

The gap existing between the individuals who use new technologies in their daily lives and those who do not have any access to them or do not know how to use them can be understood as an inequality of opportunities, which can decisively affect the degree of social inclusion or exclusion, depending on the individuals and users.

The idea of the "digital divide" alludes to the issue of inequality, which includes a new component in its current form but essentially addresses issues of social exclusion and inequality. The difference between people (cities, states, and nations) who regularly utilize information and communication technologies (ICT) in their daily lives and others who either do not have access to them or, if they do, do not know how to use them is known as the "digital divide." (Diez,2018).

The social work concepts of client-informed consent, client privacy and confidentiality, boundaries and dual relationships, conflicts of interest, practitioner competence, records and documentation, and collegial connections have all become more difficult to navigate ethically as a result of the use of digital tools. ships (Nordesjo, Scaramuzzino, Ulmestig,2022)

NASW identified some of the negatives that pose a challenge to social work digital professional intervention (NASW Massachusetts Chapter, 2020):

- It does not guarantee the complete confidentiality of the possibility of hackers hacking firewalls, disclosing, or trafficking information.

- It increases the possibility of misunderstanding the information contained in written messages, which negatively affects the efficiency of professional intervention processes.
- The identity of customers cannot be guaranteed.
- Through which information and feelings can be hidden, making the intervention difficult to accomplish.
- Nonverbal expressions, physical characteristics, language, or a tone of voice can't be viewed.
- Limited to patients who can write online expressively.
- Applicants cannot be guaranteed the right credentials.
- Excluded customers who do not have the resources to use the Internet.
- Services may be delayed or disrupted if the computer is unavailable or Internet services are interrupted.

But in fact, most of these negatives have been overcome recently. For example, with regard to the absence of non-verbal signals, technology associated with live visual electronic communication has enabled physical interaction, as it is easy to see facial expressions, emotions, etc., also in relation to the requirement that the client is able to write explicitly. Technology has created ways to convert voice speech to written, as well as audio and video chat programs, which facilitate interaction through electronic means of communication between the client and the social worker, and in relation to By ensuring the identity of patients, there are methods of electronic identification in more than one way, including receiving a phone call, giving a secret code, or other codified and guaranteed means. With regard to breaches, there are now protection programs that address this matter in a high-quality manner.

Proposals to overcome the challenges of professional intervention in digital social work:

1- Closing the digital divide by encouraging the individuals, communities, and groups most at risk of marginalization to have access to new technology. This idea encompasses many programs and efforts that use a variety of instructional strategies to increase digital literacy and encourage access to ICTs. (Diez,2018).

2- Social workers possess fundamental ethical principles and values related to human rights, social justice, integrity, competence, and respect that can guide professional intervention using digital social work; however, this is not enough, and the following are needed (Boddy, Dominelli, 2017):

- The social worker should be familiar with complex online interactions as well as the latest research in this field.
- Social workers should help clients. On digital learning, the most important ethical issues, benefits, and risks of leveraging online services and promoting the rights of underserved people both face-to-face and online.
- Social workers should act in a privacy-sensitive manner in online communications, be consistent with professional values, and use social media strategically.



- When deciding whether to accept contact requests from past clients, specialists should be mindful of the blurring barriers between the public and private spheres, proceed with caution, and consult their professional association's standards.

3- commitment to responsibility towards caring for the vulnerable and needy, whether online or not.

4- Clinical social workers who decide to provide online intervention services should consider the following (NASW Massachusetts Chapter, 2020):

- Discussions about the professional responsibility of online professional intervention with the organization where they work.
- Compliance with the laws of providing electronic services in the country of employment.
- Obtain informed consent from the client before intervening.
- Setting limits for the client and its uses while intervening and working online.
- Mastering all computer functions and programs
- The need to acquire the following skills in working with individual cases using digital social services:

- Awareness of electronic technologies, means, methods, and skills for employing them in professional practice

- Optimal employment of social media in social work education

- Use of ICT tools and means and social media such as e-mail, communication programs (Zoom, Skype), Messenger, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.

receiving individual cases through the techniques specified by the institution and opening an electronic file in case of acceptance.

preparing, implementing, and evaluating the electronic interview of all kinds, individual, joint, and group.

- Careful observation of aspects of personality through electronic audio and video conversations.

- Use basic skills such as listening, communicating, responding to questions, inquiries, comments, and silence.

use of influential skills such as interpretation, clarification, self-expression, confrontation, contradictions, and direct counseling.

collecting information about the problem and its related formats from various sources through electronic means

- Citing similar cases in educational and applied institutions available online.

- Develop practice based on evidence.

- Communicate and discuss cases with skilled specialists with experience in local counterpart institutions or in developed countries in the professional practice of social work in general and electronic work in particular.

applying scientific standards electronically, processing them, and employing them in the processes and stages of professional intervention.

- Apply professional intervention techniques to therapeutic models according to the nature and quality of clients' problems.

evaluation of professional intervention processes using appropriate professional methods and computer statistics.

electronic registration that takes into account professional technical and ethical standards

- Apply ethical standards for the practice of digital social work.

## WORKS CITED

---

- José, Antonio Mateo, and Servios, Poyato Chaime (2018). e-Social work in practice: a case study, *Journal European Journal of Social Work*, Volume 21, Issue 6, pp. 804–823.
- Wodarski, John, and Frimpong, Jaime (2013) Application of E-Therapy Programs to Social Work Practice, *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, V 23, Issue 1, pp. 1–10, <https://doi-org.library.iau.edu.sa/10.1080/10911359.2013.737290>.
- NASW Massachusetts Chapter (2020) Online Therapy and the Clinical Social Worker, <https://www.naswma.org/page/351/Online-Therapy-and-the-Clinical-Social-or-ker.htm>.
- Sitter, Kathleen, and Curnew, Ashley (2016). The application of social media in social work community practice, *Journal of Social Work Education, The International Journal*, Volume 35, Issue 3, pp. 271–283.
- Pelaez, A., Lopez, López. & Díaz, L. (2015). Social work challenges in the 21st century: citizenship, technology, and e-social work. In A. López Peláez (Ed.), *Social Work Challenges in the XXI Century: Perspectives from the USA* (pp. 29–55), Pamplona: Thomson-Reuters Aranzadi.
- Pelaez, A. López, and Servos, Chaime Marcuello. (2018), e-Social work and digital society: re-conceptualizing approaches, practices, and technologies, *EUROPEAN Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 21, No. 6, 801–803. <https://www.aswb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ASWB-Model-Regulatory-Standards-for-Technology-and-Social-Work-Practice.pdf>.
- Kirwan Gloria (2019), Editorial: Networked relationships in the digital age: messages for social work, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, Vol. 33, Issue 2, p. 123.
- Chan Chitat & Holosko Michael (2018) Technology for Social Work Interventions, *Oxford Bibliographies*, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780195389678-0263.
- Laviea Alfredo Hidalgo and Fernandez Ana. Lima (2018). New social intervention technologies as a challenge in social work: IFSW Europe perspective, *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK*, VOL. 21, NO. 6, 824–835 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1423553>.
- Diez, Esther Raya (2018) e-Inclusion and e-Social Work: New Technologies at the Work of Social Intervention, *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK*, VOL. 21, NO. 6, 916–929 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1469472>.
- Nordesjo, Kettil. Scaramuzzino, and Gabriella, Ulmestig. Rickard (2022). The social worker-client relationship in the digital era: configurative literature review, *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK*, VOL. 25, NO. 2, 303–315 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.1964445>.
- Boddy, Jennifer, and Dominelli, Lena (2017) Social Media and Social Work: The Challenges of a New Ethical Space, *AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK*, VOL. 70, NO. 2, 172–184 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2016.1224907>.