



Social Work in the Context of Societal Change: Between Tradition and Innovation

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Abstract: Present-day social work is carried out in the environment of a quickly changing society influenced by the phenomena of globalization, modernization, demographic changes, immigration, and economic crisis. These structural transformations pose an inherent conflict between traditional ethical principles of the profession, which are most insulated in relational practice, human dignity, and social justice, and the new approaches of innovation, which are based on managerial governance and information-oriented systems and algorithmic decision-making. The current research will look at the dynamics of transitions between the tradition and innovation of social work in the conditions of digitalized societal change. Through the qualitative research design grounded on secondary analysis of academic literature, policy frameworks, and professional documents, the study builds an interpretive synthesis of long-term professional transformation. The results indicate that social work develops in a cyclical and not a linear way. Rather than being replaced by new paradigms, traditional paradigms have been revised as part of the ongoing waves of reform, such as institutional expansion, rationalization of management, and digital innovation. The digitalization is introduced as the disruptive force that is both more efficient and accessible, and creates moral threats of depersonalization and algorithmic bias. The paper presents a metaphorical-analytical model, which is based on the relationships of the musical catalogue and the piano cycle with a view to conceptualizing the cumulative and differentiated change in professional knowledge over historical periods. This framework has added to theoretical discussions of professional identity and transformation of governance and provides a practical path to finding a way of interlacing technological innovation with long-term ethical engagements.

Keywords: cyclical thinking, digitalization, musical catalogue, professional identity, societal change, social work

Introduction

Background and Problem Statement

Population aging and decreasing birth rates in most areas are demographic changes that complicate the welfare systems and require new types of intergenerational assistance [1]. In such a setting of a faster change, social work as a profession is placed in a central position. Historically, the ethics of social work were based on humanism, and they focused on dignity, social justice, and respect for human inherent value [2]. It was developed as the community-based intervention and settlement movements where empowerment and common responsibility were their focus [3, 4]. The epistemological and methodological heart of the profession has traditionally been relational practice; one of trust, empathy, and face-to-face contact [5-7].

Yet, the modern changes in society create conflicts between these initial rules and the new forms of governance. Bureaucratization and managerialism have brought with them performance measurements, audit cultures, and the application of standard procedures in the welfare provision [8, 9]. Governance is becoming increasingly data-driven

and increasingly based on quantifiable metrics to determine risk, eligibility, and efficiency, at times transforming the complex human experience into administrative categories [10]. Predictive analytics is further institutionalized in social service delivery through algorithmic decision-making systems, which are used in child protection and benefits administration [11].

Digitalization as a Structural Turning Point

Digitalization is one of the forces of change that acts as a structural shift in the transformation of social work. E-governance and digital welfare systems restructure the citizen-public relationships, moving physical offices to online applications [12]. Tele-social work and remote counselling, which were greatly extended during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, show how technology can improve the accessibility and continued provision of care [13]. At the same time, risk assessment tools that are supported by artificial intelligence are potentially predictive in determining populations under threat and resource allocation [11].

Conceptual Innovation: Musical Metaphor

In order to interpret all these transformations, a conceptual framework, based on musical metaphors, is introduced to this study. The idea of a musical catalogue represents the accumulating body of professional knowledge, ethical obligation, and methodical repertoires established over the course of social work history. As a catalogue of the composer maintains the thematic variety, though mirrors the development of style, social work has a heritage of theory and practice that invests in practice today.

Cyclical thinking conceptualises the cyclic patterns of reforms in the welfare systems, with eras of humanistic to periods of bureaucratic rationalisation and technological growth [6]. Cyclical thinking does not see professional development in linear terms of progress, but oscillation between care and control, autonomy and regulation.

Last but not least, a piano cycle metaphor serves as a cycle of professional change. Musical cycles preserve the identity of separate pieces in order to form a greater subjective integrity. Equally, a successive stage of social work development takes place: one of humanistic grounding, institutional growth and standardization, managerial rationalization, digital advancement, repeating original themes in new packaging. These metaphors can be applied as instruments of interpretation analysis, through which continuity and change in the profession can be understood in a subtle manner.

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine how social work evolves between tradition and innovation in the context of societal change, with particular attention to digitalization.

The objectives are:

1. To identify key traditional paradigms shaping social work practice.
2. To examine structural drivers of professional innovation.
3. To analyze the impact of digital transformation on service delivery and professional identity.
4. To develop a cyclical interpretive model of professional evolution.
5. To discuss implications for ethical and professional self-understanding.

Research Question

This study addresses the following research question: How does social work navigate the tension between traditional foundations and innovative transformations under conditions of digitalized societal change?

Literature Review

Traditional Foundations of Social Work

Intellectual and pragmatic roots of social work were in the reaction to industrialization, urban poverty, and dislocation in the cities of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The charity organization movement aimed at standardizing the giving of charitable help by organizing it systematically and providing moral principles and systematic assessment to establish the foundation of personalized intervention [4]. Although it has been criticized due to paternalism, this model aided the development of professional practices in the field of helping through the introduction of case documentation and the rationale of diagnostic procedures.

In tandem with this movement, the settlement movement focused on group empowerment and social change. Social intervention was theorized by the likes of Jane Addams as a mutual understanding between practitioners and

communities based on the foundations of democratic participation and social solidarity [3]. Settlement houses were primarily service centers, but also civic and advocacy spaces, connecting the micro-level helping with macro-level structuring criticism [14, 15].

With the rise of the casework model in the early twentieth century, professional identity was established even further. The Social Diagnosis by Mary Richmond established methodological precepts of assessment and intervention, making the scientific orientation institutionalized in practice [4]. Relational practice, which is rooted in empathy, dialogue, and trust, became the focus of professional identity development [5]. Professionalization became, therefore, not only technical specialisation, but a normative endeavour to combine moral commitments and empirical skills [6]. This repertoire-based form forms what can be conceptualized as a professional archive of knowledge and values, which determine future changes.

Societal Change and Professional Transformation

The second half of the twentieth century was a period of deep-rooted social changes that changed the essence of welfare institutions and professional practice. Late modern theorists focus on aspects of reflexivity, globalization, and reorganization of social institutions in conditions of a high rate of change [16, 17]. The concept of the risk society introduced by Ulrich Beck draws attention to the way the modern state is turning into a society of the management of the produced dangers, and redistribution is replaced by prevention and monitoring [18]. On the same note, the liquid modernity as advanced by Bauman has highlighted the depletion of structured social systems and the escalation of the responsibility of individuals in unstable conditions [19].

These theoretical views shed more light on wider changes in social policy. The emergence of neoliberal governance re-constituted the welfare provision in market-oriented rationales with an oriented focus on efficiency, competition, and cost-effectiveness [20]. Managerialism brought in performance measurement and standard procedures, accompanied by accountability structures, into the realm of the public service, redefining professional autonomy [8]. This change in social work has taken the form of audit cultures and risk assessment regimes, which have focused more on documentation and measurable outcomes [9].

Evidence-based practice institutionalized an even greater scientific rationality that is focused on quantifiable effectiveness [21]. Though it increased the methodological rigor, these practices at times further restricted the breadth of professional judgment in favor of standardized intervention over contextualized relational interaction. According to the scholars, bureaucratic rationalization can result in the de-personalization of social work as a relational profession into a compliance-deprivation administrative role [6].

Digitalization and Social Work

Online portals, automated eligibility, and built-in data orchestras reorganize service delivery from digital welfare states [12]. The change in social interactions into numeric digital data, known as datafication, has become a key focus of modern governance [22]. Social work is becoming progressively more dependent in this regard on electronic case management and predictive analytics, as well as algorithmic tools used in the making of decisions [10].

Platformization also transforms the welfare interactions by mediating access, communications, and assessment by means of digital platforms [22]. Remote interventions and telehealth, which are being accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, show the possibilities of digital tools to provide greater access and continuity of care [13]. Online counselling spaces enable practitioners to remain connected with their clients regardless of the geographical location, whereas digital communication systems increase the potential reach.

Nonetheless, the digitalization poses serious ethical and structural issues. The question of privacy and data protection is given more focus because sensitive personal data is kept and processed under rather complicated technological systems [10]. Predictive analytics, in the form of surveillance practices, can over-monitor marginalized groups of people, strengthening the systemic disparities. The concept of digital exclusion is highly topical as access to online services assumes access to technological resources and digital literacy. Discriminatory results might arise from algorithmic bias caused by underlying assumptions in the data model, which can be found in risk assessment and resource allocation [11].

Cyclical Thinking in Professional Development

Social policy scholars have long traced reform waves in which there is a shift between institutionalization and humanization focus [23]. Frequent cycles of growth and professional freedom are usually succeeded by cycles of

bureaucracy and managerial control. Such a pendulum relationship between care and control is also indicative of larger societal negotiation on responsibility, accountability, and risk [6].

Professional development may therefore be considered as cyclical as opposed to linear. The move towards institutionalization can be replaced by humanistic reform, later influenced by managerial rationalization and, more recently, by digital innovation. The values of each phase rebrand under new structural circumstances.

In order to provide a conceptualization of this process, the metaphor of a musical catalogue would be used as the analytic tool that would symbolize the cumulative repository of professional knowledge and ethical commitments. Similarly to how a catalogue of a composer keeps thematic motifs in their various compositions, social work has retained core values in spite of all the changes in the context. The piano cycle is another metaphorical example of the variation of a theme: different stages of professional change are movements in a greater composition, which revisits and redefines major motifs of the theme. Digitizing analog thinking can be contextualized, not as an eventuality, but as a change, as a variation in what is becoming the changing repertoire of social work.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The research design of the study is a qualitative research design that was based on an interpretive paradigm. In line with the qualitative tradition of social sciences, the aim is not to test hypotheses that are related to causation but to develop conceptual knowledge and theoretical synthesis in relation to the change of social work in the conditions of a changing society [24]. The study is grounded on the secondary data analysis of the available scholarly literature, policy documents, and professional reports. Secondary qualitative analysis also enables the systematic reinterpretation of the published knowledge so as to discover cross-contextual patterns and conceptual gaps [25]. Since the research will deal with lasting changes, which include management-related changes, digitalization changes, and changes in professional identity, a qualitative synthesis will be most suitable to record theoretical changes and periods when reforms occurred [6].

The literature review adopted a narrative synthesis approach to combine the results of various sources. A narrative synthesis is appropriate in circumstances in which the research questions demand the conceptualization of ideas instead of statistical aggregation [26]. It is intended to build an analytical story of how historical backgrounds, institutional change, and digital innovations are related in a consistent interpretation. The qualitative method is explained by the intellectual aspect of the research, which is aimed at the investigation of the concept of professional identity, ethical conflicts, and epistemological changes, instead of quantifiable results.

Data Sources

The corpus of data is peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, policy documents, digital welfare reports, and professional codes of ethics published between 2000 and 2025. The chosen time period represents the speeding up of the digital transformation and governance change in the twenty-first century [12]. Databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were used to find relevant literature in the areas of social work, social policy, digital governance, and welfare state transformation.

The inclusion criteria were specified to provide relevance and coherence. First, references were limited to those that dealt directly with social work transformation, professional identity, or the restructuring of welfare. Secondly, the priority was given to the publications covering digitalization, datafication, or algorithmic governance in social services [10, 11]. Third, included were theoretical and empirical contributions, as long as they provided analytical information on the structural change or professional adaptation. The exclusion criteria included only abstract descriptions with no philosophical reflection and those studies that were not connected to social work or welfare governance.

A total of 35 sources were included in the final qualitative synthesis after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Of these, 30 documents were published in the defined target period of 2000–2025, and 5 fundamental works (Addams, 1910; Richmond, 1917; Power, 1997; Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992) were included for historical and theoretical context, as they laid the basic paradigms of the profession. The sample included peer-reviewed journal articles ($n = 15$), monographs ($n = 12$), analytical reports and policy reports ($n = 4$), professional codes of ethics ($n = 1$), and other documents ($n = 3$). This volume and diversity of sources provided sufficient information richness for conceptual modeling, while maintaining the depth necessary for interpretive qualitative synthesis.

Mitigating Internal Biases of Collected Data

As the study relies solely on secondary analysis of published sources, there is a risk of reproducing internal biases inherent in these sources, including publication bias, the dominance of Western-centric perspectives, and the theoretical preferences of individual authors. A number of strategies were employed to mitigate this risk. First, a literature search was conducted in several international databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) using clear inclusion/exclusion criteria, ensuring geographical and disciplinary diversity, from social work and social policy to digital governance. Second, we deliberately juxtaposed different types of sources: empirical studies, theoretical works, policy reports, and ethical codes, which allowed us to identify both convergent findings and contradictions. Third, deviant case analysis was conducted during thematic coding, a purposeful search for statements that contradicted the dominant narrative to avoid one-sided interpretation. Finally, research reflexivity was supported through the keeping of analytical notes, which recorded the authors' assumptions about tradition, innovation, and digitalization, which helped to separate their own interpretations from the positions embedded in the texts. This multi-step approach reduces the likelihood of uncritically reproducing shifts present in individual sources and increases the validity of the synthesis.

Analytical Strategy

The analytical process combined thematic analysis with iterative coding and conceptual abstraction. A thematic analysis was conducted to determine some recurring issues found through the literature, that is, managerialism, digital governance, relational practice, and ethical dilemmas [27]. Coding was done in three steps.

The initial step involved the use of open codification; this codification identified descriptive themes that touched upon the business and institution reforms and digital transformation aspects. Second, the relationships between categories were made with the help of axial coding, especially the tension between tradition and innovation. Third, through selective coding, it was possible to construct a more complex interpretive model to connect these themes in a cycle.

Pattern recognition was aimed at pinpointing such recurrent reform movements and professional discourse changes like the shift toward community-based practice to bureaucratic rationalization, and then to the digital form of integration [6]. The analysis done by tool of analysis called musical metaphor model, which includes the concept of a musical catalogue and a piano cycle. These metaphors were developed inductively in the synthesis of the narratives, and they were progressively elaborated after repeated consultations of the theoretical literature of institutional transformation and professional identity.

Limitations

This research has a number of shortcomings. To start with, when using published literature, one is bound to be dependent on existing interpretations and might recreate the current academic standpoints [25]. Second, the number of reviewed sources with the Western context is high and, consequently, sparks a possible regional bias and may be generalized relatively to other non-Western welfare systems. Third, digital technologies change quickly; thus, analysis might become somewhat obsolete, with numerous new instruments and models of governance appearing [10].

Results

Persistence of Traditional Values

The evidence provided in the literature shows that despite the current demands on institutional change and technological advancement, the old values of social work are ingrained in the professional practice. The empathetic, trust, respect-based, and human-centered interaction with clients that is further defined as relational ethics remains important to professional identity [28]. Social workers underline the necessity to develop therapeutic relationships in the field of crisis and vulnerability and oppose those purely bureaucratic approaches that overlook the interpersonal facets of practice [28].

This continuation of the ethics of relations became especially evident amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Many welfare systems also rapidly went online and focused on remote service provision, but many social workers continued to provide care directly and in embodied forms. Indicatively, in some European nations, professionals hesitated to switch to online systems and delivered food packages and necessities to elderly and incapacitated customers who physically could not reach the online systems [13]. Moreover, the regular phone check-ins with isolated older adults were implemented to address the loss of face-to-face communication, which proves that even in digitally mediated environments, relational continuity was taken seriously. These hybrid relational models were merging online case

management with a continued human contact that demonstrated that technology did not as much replace relational practice as it added to it.

The discourse of human rights is another pillar of social work that remains a pillar of the ethical codes, as well as the discourse of scholars. The Global Definition of Social Work predicts the values of dignity, human rights, social justice, and collective responsibility as main principles of the ethical practice in research and policy analysis, and these principles are repeatedly quoted as core values in the ethical work [2]. In the context of digital service delivery, researchers also warn that technological implementation should not subvert these rights nor emphasize efficiency, even in the case of a study on the topic [29].

Human rights orientation also persisted in the European refugee crisis (2015–2018), when social workers were subjected to an ever more digitized asylum registration system and biometric border control. Regardless of these digitalized governance mechanisms, the community-based interventions were still being central. In Germany, Sweden, and Greece, practitioners used local advocacy circles, language integration initiatives, and psychosocial support initiatives in which dignity and social inclusion took precedence over administrative processing [14, 23]. This explains how the migration government became technically organized, but the professional identity was grounded in solidarity and rights-based interaction.

The issue of community orientation is a stabilising factor in social work, especially in studies that relate practice to structural alteration. Although digital technology could bring in remote ways of interaction, social work normative commitments are still supported by community building and collective advocacy. To give one example, there is research on digital social work stressing the importance of maintaining community voice in the co-designed technological intervention to ensure that innovation does not alienate practitioners by forcing them to operate on the ground [30, 31].

Additionally, Nordesjö and Scaramuzzino [28] declare that social workers felt emotional pressure and experienced professional discomfort when the need to maintain remote-only communication diminished the possibilities of embodied empathy. Numerous practitioners actively opposed depersonalization through the scheduling of more video meetings, informal means of communication, and the encouragement of in-person meetings as safely as possible. These frequently manifested practices show that it is not that digitalization reduced relational ethics passively, but that relational ethics were actively defended and redefined in new technological contexts. The tradition is, hence, not lost; it changes without losing its normative essence.

Table 1: Persistence of Traditional Values in Contemporary Social Work

Core Dimension	Theoretical Foundation	Empirical Illustrations (2000–2025)	Professional Response	Implications for Professional Identity	Key Sources
Relational Ethics	Humanistic tradition; face-to-face engagement; therapeutic alliance	During COVID-19, social workers maintained phone check-ins with isolated elderly clients and delivered food packages despite digital case systems (Europe, 2020–2022)	Hybrid relational models combining digital case notes with embodied contact	Relational competence remains central despite digital infrastructure	Banks et al. (2020), Nordesjö and Scaramuzzino (2023)
Human Rights Orientation	Rights-based professional codes; dignity and justice principles	Social workers advocating for asylum seekers during EU refugee crisis despite biometric registration systems	Advocacy beyond administrative digital processing	Ethical legitimacy grounded in universal rights discourse	IFSW (2014), Dominelli (2010)

Community Orientation	Settlement tradition; collective empowerment	Community-led refugee integration programs in Germany & Sweden; digital platforms used but community networks prioritized	Co-design of digital interventions with migrant communities	Identity linked to structural advocacy, not only service delivery	Ferguson, (2008), Jacob and Souissi (2024)
Ethical Reflexivity	Professional moral agency; critical practice	Practitioners resisting remote-only contact by requesting safe in-person meetings during pandemic	Active defense of relational depth	Preservation of moral judgment in technological settings	Webb (2001), Nordesjö and Scaramuzzino (2023)
Embodied Care Continuity	Caring profession framework	Home visits maintained for high-risk families despite digital monitoring tools	Blended risk management with relational engagement	Digital tools supplement but do not replace human presence	Munro (2011), Banks et al. (2020)
Professional Solidarity	Collective professional ethos	National social work associations issuing ethical guidelines for digital practice during COVID-19	Development of human-centered digital protocols	Ethical standards evolve without abandoning core values	Pascoe (2023)

Innovation Pressures

Social work is exposed to various pressures of innovation due to the wider changes in governance and accountability regimes. Among the most popular, the introduction of accountability measures and performance measurement tools can be noted. The tools are intended to measure the quality of services, standardise the results, and enhance transparency. Nevertheless, studies indicate that excessive attention to the quantifiable signs and symptoms can help alter the priorities of the professions towards the work of a subtle relationship and focus on measurable achievements [29].

The social work organisations have been transformed by managerial structures presented by the new public management-inspired reforms. Synthesising literature that summarises the experiences of social workers in bureaucracy describes standardised procedures, risk assessment plans, and documentation requirements as sources of managerial control that may limit the discretion of the professional [28, 29]. These two opposing forces can be seen in more profound changes in governance, with efficiency, auditable, and traceable practice being the primary points of concern regarding performance.

Such forces of innovation are not just theoretical but have had concrete expression in scandals of high-profile governance. The United Kingdom has introduced predictive risk model tools in child protection screening processes to assist in the early detection of high-risk cases. Although they are designed to enhance the effectiveness of safeguarding, it has been noted that, due to their tendency to introduce biases in the ranking, algorithmic scoring systems can contribute to the over-observation of already disadvantaged groups [11]. In these situations, social workers claim that professional judgment is under pressure to comply with algorithmic output, which overlaps with the discretionary space.

Equally, algorithmic profiling was also involved with the Dutch welfare fraud detection programme, SyRI (System Risk Indication), which was implemented in 2014–2020 to detect potential benefit fraud. Low-income and migrant neighborhoods were disproportionately targeted in the system, and in 2020, the Hague District Court declared the

system illegal because it breached privacy and human rights [10, 22]. The case demonstrates the discriminatory results of accountability measures and predictive analytics, as well as the lack of transparency in decision-making practice.

Closely related is the example of the Robodebt program in Australia (2016–2019), where income-averaging algorithms, which auto-generated debt notifications to recipients of welfare, were used. Incorrect demands for repayment were made to thousands of people, and massive distress followed the governmental reconsideration. Social workers working in this system named the limitations in the system, correcting automated errors, emphasising how the efficiency-motivated automation forgot about professional discretion [10, 32].

These examples prove that pressure of innovation may have unintended outcomes, such as mistaken decisions, ethical dilemmas, and undermined professional autonomy. Instead of making the systems more neutral, the algorithmic systems can introduce structural bias and bureaucratic control. Managerial rationalization and digital governance, therefore, transform professional practice in tangible and controversial ways.

Table 2: Innovation Pressures Reshaping Social Work Practice

Innovation Pressure	Governance Mechanism	Real-World Example	Documented Consequences	Impact on Professional Discretion	Key Sources
Accountability Metrics	Performance indicators; measurable outcomes; audit culture	UK predictive child protection risk tools integrated into screening processes	Increased reliance on scoring systems; risk of over-surveillance in deprived areas	Discretion constrained by algorithmic scoring frameworks	Kedell (2019), Munro (2011)
Algorithmic Risk Profiling	Data-driven welfare fraud detection	Netherlands SyRI system (2014–2020); ruled unlawful in 2020	Discriminatory targeting of migrant communities; privacy violations	Social workers pressured to rely on opaque risk flags	Eubanks (2018), van Dijk (2014)
Automated Debt Recovery	Income averaging algorithms	Australia's Robodebt program (2016–2019)	Thousands of incorrect debt notices; public inquiry and legal review	Reduced capacity for manual correction; distress among clients	Eubanks (2018)
Managerial Standardization	Protocol-driven case management; compliance documentation	Mandatory risk assessment templates in UK and Nordic welfare systems	Increased administrative workload; reduced relational time	Shift from relational discretion to procedural adherence	Parton (2008), Power (1997)
Efficiency Imperatives	Cost-containment reforms; throughput targets	Digital welfare portals replacing in-person applications	Faster processing but exclusion of digitally illiterate clients	Tension between efficiency and equity	Harvey (2005)
Hybrid Digital Roles	Integration of IT responsibilities into social work roles	Social workers managing case software, online counselling, and compliance reporting simultaneously	Role expansion; professional strain; skill diversification	Professional identity shifts toward techno-social expertise	Jacob and Souissi (2024)
Public–Private Platformization	Partnerships with technology firms	AI-based screening tools developed with private tech providers	New accountability layers; blurred responsibility	Increased institutional complexity; reduced transparency	Ahearn et al. (2025)

Digitalization as Transformative Driver

Digitalization becomes a groundbreaking cause of change in various aspects of the social work practice. A major aspect of the change is the transition to electronic case management systems. Case management software is becoming

more centralized on the information of clients, optimizing workflow, and improving the accessibility of records so that multiple disciplines can coordinate their work [33]. Such systems are allowing real-time tracking, evidence-based intervention, and less administrative overhead, which is still believed to be part of paper-based workflows.

Another change is the data-based eligibility systems. Agencies organize the services as they combine analytics and automated decision-support features into their eligibility and resource allocation procedures. The literature, however, raises ethical issues of transparency and algorithm bias and suggests that governance structures are needed to safeguard the client's rights and provide equitable results [30, 34]. With the proliferation of automated systems, social workers tend to have to interpret algorithmic outputs more and more in ethical and rights-based practice scenarios.

An outstanding empirical example of these tensions is the Dutch SyRI (System Risk Indication) welfare fraud detection system, which was launched in the period of 2014–2020. SyRI utilized predictive risk modeling to determine the risks of catching those citizens who were suspected of offenses related to insulting the benefit by combining information found in housing, employment, tax, and social security databases. Nevertheless, research found the system had been disproportionate in low-income and migrant areas. In 2020, the Hague District Court decided that the Hague Convention on human rights held that Syria was illegal because it infringed the right to privacy. This example demonstrates that algorithmic governance may produce the effects of surveillance and discriminatory profiling, thus exacerbating the conflict between the efficacy-based digitalization and the human rights protection [10, 22]. To social workers who work with such systems, professional discretion can be limited by non-transparent algorithmic warning signals, preventing the chances of a contextual judgment.

Conversely, the Allegheny Family Screening Tool (AFST) in Pennsylvania, the United States, is a more transparent child protection screening system that uses AI assistance. The tool was presented to facilitate intake decision-making and provides risk scores on the basis of historical administrative data to help a caseworker prioritize investigations. The AFST, despite its controversial nature, was developed publicly and was constantly assessed. The same question is discussed in research on whether these systems can enhance consistency and resource distribution or strengthen structural bias in historic data [10, 11]. Notably, the ultimate choice in the Allegheny model belongs to human professionals, which is a representation of the hybrid model, where AI operates on the principles of decision-support instead of decision-replacement. As shown in this case, digital tools may be used as augmentative resources, even though human control and transparency procedures must be kept in the middle of the picture.

Tele-social work and remote counselling have increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic as social work organisations transitioned to video conferencing and other digital communication platforms as a way of continuing services [28, 31]. Telehealth platforms provide greater access to and convenience, especially to clients in underserved or geographically remote areas, and minimize potential barriers due to transportation/mobility.

Empirical research in the pandemic suggests increased coverage and work pressure. According to Banks et al. [13], practitioners managed to stay in touch with vulnerable populations during lockdown conditions, which frequently enhanced the frequency of short check-in conversations. Nevertheless, Nordesjö and Scaramuzzino [28] report high-level emotional burnout in social workers caused by prolonged screen-based communication, lack of work-life demarcation, and inability to evaluate non-verbal communication. Remote counselling also created the problem of boundary ambiguity, where practitioners virtually entered clients' domestic spaces at the same time, revealing aspects of their home environments. These results explain that digitalization improves accessibility to services and, at the same time, deepens the emotional work and makes professional lines difficult.

Another dimension of professional change, which attracts attention, is the emergence of digital competencies. The literature reviews spearhead the ways in which social workers should be digitally literate, proficient in communication technologies, and have a sensitive grasp of digital ethics to operate in modern-day set-ups [30]. These skills are the protection of client information, handling online limits, and critical analysis of online tools.

Digitalization influences the practice in both ways. On the one hand, it is empowering social workers through improved access to the services, efficiency, and responsiveness. One of the ways in which digital tools can assist in streamlining operations is by effectively utilizing data to make appropriate interventions and develop practices in a collaborative manner. Conversely, the dependence on technology is a leading factor in the risks of depersonalization, with an excessive focus on distance communication and digitalization generating fragilities in social work relationships [29]. The issues of privacy, online sidelining, and any biases that may be embedded in the algorithm systems also have ethical implications, and the need to have a human-focused approach to the integration of the innovations in technology.

Table 3: Digitalization as a Transformative Driver in Social Work

Digital Domain	Technological Development	Real-World Example	Documented Outcomes	Dual Effect	Key Sources
Digital Case Management	Integrated electronic case systems; centralized databases	Nordic welfare agencies adopting real-time case tracking systems	Improved coordination; faster documentation; increased data dependency	+ Efficiency / – Risk of standardization bias	Hämäläinen and Lindh (2025)
Algorithmic Welfare Monitoring	Predictive fraud detection using cross-sector databases	Netherlands SyRI (2014–2020)	Court ruling (2020); privacy violations; disproportionate migrant targeting	+ Fraud detection / – Human rights tension & surveillance	van Dijck (2014), Eubanks (2018)
AI-Assisted Child Protection	Risk scoring tools using administrative data	Allegheny Family Screening Tool (USA)	Improved screening consistency; public transparency debates	+ Decision-support / – Embedded structural bias risk	Keddell (2019)
Tele-Social Work	Video counselling; digital communication platforms	COVID-19 global shift to remote counselling	Increased reach; emotional exhaustion; blurred boundaries	+ Accessibility / – Emotional strain	Banks et al. (2020), Nordesjö and Scaramuzzino (2023)
Datafication of Practice	Conversion of social interactions into quantifiable metrics	Performance dashboards in welfare agencies	Enhanced monitoring; reduced qualitative nuance	+ Policy evaluation / – Over-reliance on metrics	van Dijck (2014)
Digital Competency Expansion	Online ethics training; algorithm literacy	Social work curriculum revisions (2020–2025)	Expanded skill set; identity transformation	+ Professional adaptability / – Role ambiguity	Jacob and Souissi (2024)

Discussion

The presented results prove that social work cannot be imagined as a society-altering discontinuity between past and present, and only develops through the mechanism of reinterpreting the values that will be supported, and the institutional and technological contexts will transform. These findings are placed in the context of larger scholarly debates in this section, and the theoretical implications of the proposed cyclical model are identified.

Between Preservation and Innovation

The interview proves that tradition in social work is not overthrown by innovation but rather redefined by the latter. Professional self-understanding is also influenced by relational ethics, human rights commitments, and community orientation, despite the growth of bureaucratic and digital infrastructures. This follows the academic evidence that proposes the idea that professional identity in social work is normatively rooted as opposed to a functional definition

[2, 7]. The continuity of the institutional change can be achieved through the ethical commitments to dignity and social justice.

Simultaneously, it has long been observed by scholars that the nature of professional roles is historically contingent and sensitive to the governance models [6]. Managerialism's emergence and audit culture entailed the creation of a tension between professional discretion and accountability by institutions [8, 9]. However, instead of undermining ethical foundations, these pressures have, in most cases, increased reflexivity in the profession. Ferguson [23] insists that these periods of bureaucratic solidarity often provoke a critical discussion and re-evaluation of values at a more local level in the social work circles.

The present results support this connotation. The digitalization of processes and managerial reforms does not do away with relational practice; rather, they shift it to force those engaged in these practices to redefine ethical commitments in new operational setups.

Digitalization as Both Risk and Resource

The findings emphasize the equivocal nature of digitalization, which reflects a more general critique of technological determinism. Technological determinism presupposes that technology independently transforms the social structures, reacting in a linear and unavoidable way [35]. But, a body of research on digital governance underlines that there are socially committed technological systems that are mediated through institutional decisions and professional agency [22].

Social work has considerable resources available with the help of digital tools. Tele-social work enhances the reach to the marginalized groups, digital platforms enable the coordination of inter-agency, and data analytics can inform evidence-based intervention [12, 13]. Such developments can help enhance service responsiveness and make better allocation of the limited resources.

At the same time, digitalization also poses the threats of depersonalization, surveillance, and algorithmic bias. Eubanks [10] shows how automated decision-making in the welfare scenario can replicate structural disparities. Equally, Kedell [11] expresses her reservations about predictive risk modeling in child protection services. These and other results warn about the blind implementation of technological solutions and the critical importance of human-centered digital practice.

Theoretical Contribution

The contribution of this study to theory has been developed in the form of a metaphoric-analytical model that incorporates digitalization into the long-term development of the profession. The musical catalogue conceptualizes social work as a repertoire that builds up knowledge, ethics, and techniques. Once again, this metaphor emphasizes continuity and stratified development, as opposed to replacement.

The metaphor of the piano cycle is a continuation of this approach, explaining that phases of professional life rediscover underlying themes in new forms. Variations do not eliminate preceding motifs but rethink them in different tonalities, like in a musical cycle. This conceptual framework fills the difference between institutional theory and the professional identity literature by showing that digital innovation may be perceived as a theme variation in an evolving repertoire.

Conclusions

This study has indicated that there is a dynamic tension between continuity and change in social work. Instead of a society being changed as a breakthrough, the profession will be working through a continual re-interpretation of foundational values in changing institutional and technological contexts. The modes of practice are transformed through digitalization, managerial governance, and accountability regimes, which do not skip the ethical architecture that defined social work in the past. Even in a situation where the delivery of services becomes more and more dependent on digitalised platforms and information-driven systems, the normative factors of human dignity, connection, and social justice stand.

This cyclical change framework will be a valuable point of view through which professional development can be understood. The model does not simplify developments into the mechanisms of linear progress since, by theorizing reform processes as repetitive cycles, humanistic basis, institutional growth, managerial rationalization, digital innovation, and reflexive integration, it unavoidably strives to avoid simplistic narratives of linear progress. Rather, it brings to light the manner in which professional paradigms acquire a thematic variation. The musical catalogue metaphor describes the cumulative character of professional knowledge in which a new innovation is based and does

not supplant previous ethical and methodological repertoires. The piano cycle metaphor is another way of expressing the fact that each stage is a re-exploration of fundamental themes in new shapes, i.e., adaptation does not mean losing touch.

There are three linked capacities that must be maintained in the digital age to promote professional sustainability. One, it should be ethically grounded, and, in this aspect, the deployment of technology tools should be oriented toward humanism. Second, to be competent with data systems and remote communication platforms, as well as times when algorithms must make decisions, digital literacy is mandatory. Third, reflexive adaptability allows practitioners to deeply involve a critical integration of innovation without releasing relational depth and professional knowledge. Since this study is based on a secondary analysis of published texts that already contain certain epistemological, cultural and institutional positions, there was a risk of uncritically reproducing these biases in the final generalizations. To prevent this, a set of procedures was applied that increase the trust in the qualitative synthesis. First, a diversity of sources in terms of type (theoretical works, empirical studies, policy reports, ethical codes) and geographical origin was ensured, which made it impossible for a single national or disciplinary lens to dominate. Second, an outlier analysis was systematically applied during thematic coding: statements that contradicted the main line of argument were specifically sought out and carefully considered so as not to miss alternative interpretations. Third, research reflexivity was maintained through the keeping of analytical notes, which recorded the authors' own assumptions about tradition, innovation and digitalization; This allowed us to separate our interpretation from the meanings embedded in the sources. Thus, the formulation of conclusions became a recursive process of constant juxtaposition of corroborating patterns, contradictory evidence, and reflective questions, rather than a linear confirmation of initial hypotheses. Thanks to this approach, the proposed cyclical model and musical metaphors are not imposed constructs but reasoned abstractions that take into account both the coincidences and tensions within the analyzed literature, while recognizing the limitations of secondary data.

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