



The Use of Communication Channels in the Administrative and Professional Activities of Social Service Centers

O uso de canais de comunicação nas atividades administrativas e profissionais dos Centros de Assistência Social

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Resumo

A transformação digital na esfera social exige uma revisão das práticas de comunicação nos centros de serviços sociais, particularmente no contexto da descentralização e das crescentes necessidades de acessibilidade aos serviços. Este estudo examina os canais digitais no trabalho administrativo dos centros de serviços sociais comunitários territoriais, com base numa pesquisa online com especialistas e na análise de conteúdo das respostas. Os resultados mostram que o e-mail domina a comunicação em todas as comunidades, enquanto aplicativos móveis e chatbots são raros em áreas rurais ou em pequenos povoados. As grandes comunidades urbanas são mais avançadas digitalmente do que as áreas com menos recursos. As barreiras incluem formação insuficiente do pessoal, desigualdade técnica e fraco apoio da gestão. A exclusão digital dificulta a interação com idosos, pessoas com deficiência e populações rurais. Os resultados podem orientar estratégias adaptativas para a transformação digital em diversos contextos comunitários.

Palavras-chave: digitalização da esfera social, centros de serviços sociais, canais de comunicação digital, atividades administrativas, exclusão digital

Abstract

Digital transformation in the social sphere demands a revision of communication practices in social service centers, particularly under decentralization and growing service accessibility needs. This study examines digital channels in the administrative work of territorial community social service centers, based on an online survey of specialists and content analysis of responses. Findings show email dominates communication across all communities, while mobile apps and chatbots are rarely used in rural or small settlements. Large urban communities are more digitally advanced than less-resourced areas. Barriers include insufficient staff training, technical inequality, and weak management support. The digital divide hampers interaction with elderly, disabled, and rural populations. Results can guide adaptive strategies for digital transformation in diverse community contexts.

Keywords: digitalization of the social sphere, centers of social services, digital communication channels, administrative activities, digital divide

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Introduction

In the era of rapid digital transformation, communication in the social protection field involves not only technical but also social, ethical, and managerial aspects. The role of community-level social service centers is to serve as a bridge between the government and vulnerable populations. It is important that everyone has access to services, as there must be flexible, inclusive communication, particularly in crises, war, or social transformation. Nonetheless, going digital remains an uneven process that does not always entail the use of a unified methodological framework or sufficient resources, resulting in new forms of inequality, such as the digital divide between clients and social workers. The literature proposes that digital solutions can reduce administrative load. However, it indicates the barriers to implementing them, including the emotional detachment, decreased trust, and inability to engage groups with low digital access (Madsen et al., 2022; Afrouz & Lucas, 2023; Banks et al., 2025; Henze-Pedersen & Kirkegaard, 2025). In addition, the sphere of professional interaction is altered by digital channels and demands the development of new ethical norms, management methods, and assessment criteria (Kozica & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2025). The peculiarities of digital channels implementation are less considered in decentralized local governments, with community resources and types still being important determinants, despite the many studies. This paper is thus aimed at investigating the application of digital communication channels in the administrative processes at social service centers, the obstacles to the change, and the means of further adaptation.

Despite a significant number of empirical studies, the peculiarities of implementing digital channels in the context of decentralization and local government transformation remain largely unexplored. Differences in the use of digital tools across communities of different types (urban, settlement, rural) and in their resources and human resources are also insufficiently studied. The lack of a typologized view of the barriers to digitalization in social service centers, as well as limited access to practical data from communities, limits the ability to develop effective national and local strategies in this area.

In this regard, the purpose of this paper is to explore the peculiarities of using digital communication channels in the administrative activities of social service centers in communities of different types, to identify key barriers to digital transformation, and to outline potential areas for further adaptation of the organizational model of social interaction to the conditions of digitalization.

Literature Review

In the current scientific literature, considerable attention is paid to the transformation of social services amid digitalization. Studies focus on the impact of digital tools on administrative workload and interaction between professionals and clients (Madsen et al., 2022; Afzal and Panagiotopoulos, 2024; Jeyasingham & Devlin, 2024; Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023). The digital environment is seen as a factor not only in efficiency but also in new challenges for the ethics, communication, and professional autonomy of social workers (Banks et al., 2025; Pascoe, 2022; Pink et al., 2021). Some studies have examined the role of intermediaries in digital administrative practices and the experience of clients with digital services (Toro-Maureira et al., 2025; Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2024; Oude Geerdink et al., 2023; Salovaara & Ylönen, 2022). It has been shown that the introduction of digital platforms elicits ambivalent reactions,

ranging from increased efficiency to the exacerbation of social distancing (Schmidt, 2024; Løberg, 2021; Kozica & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2025; Afrouz & Lucas, 2023).

Other studies have emphasized the importance of communication skills, particularly in hybrid and remote interactions, which have become especially relevant during the pandemic (Reith-Hall, 2022; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Kaihlanen et al., 2023; Haug et al., 2023). In this context, the consequences of the digital divide, difficulties in adapting to new interaction formats, and the issue of involving vulnerable groups in digital services are studied (Balogun et al., 2025; Henze-Pedersen & Kirkegaard, 2024; Aasback, 2022; Marković, 2024). Some publications analyze in detail the practices of children's digital participation in the social protection system and highlight the potential and threats of digital communication in working with families (Henze-Pedersen & Kirkegaard, 2025; Jeyasingham & Devlin, 2024; Schmidt, 2024; Pink et al., 2021). At the same time, the issue of digitalization is examined in terms of organizational management, coordination, and innovation strategies for public services (Scholte et al., 2025; Haug et al., 2023; Afzal & Panagiotopoulos, 2024; Banks et al., 2025).

Equally important are the results of Ukrainian authors who study the digital environment in the context of the acquisition of professional competencies in higher education institutions, which are of indirect importance to the training of social workers (Batsurovska et al., 2021). In general, the scientific discourse demonstrates a deep interest in the digital transformation of social services, while highlighting the need for a systematic approach to integrating digital communication channels into daily practice. At the same time, some authors address the specifics of telephone mediation as a means of maintaining communication between social workers and vulnerable groups (Schmidt, 2024; Henze-Pedersen & Kirkegaard, 2025), and analyze new approaches to digital participation of vulnerable categories of citizens, including children and people with limited access to resources (Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2024; Marković, 2024). Institutional features of the implementation of digital services in federal states are also being studied, where coordination issues are of particular importance (Scholte et al., 2025). Researchers emphasize that electronic communication can not only simplify interaction but also increase the need for additional services due to the availability of channels (Løberg, 2021; Aasback, 2022).

Some publications highlight the perspective of user adaptation to digital transformation in other public service sectors, such as the police, allowing for cross-sectoral comparisons (Afzal & Panagiotopoulos, 2024). Other authors consider communication as a key component of government strategies in times of crisis, focusing on transparency, credibility of information, and public engagement strategies (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Kaihlanen et al., 2023). Also important are the results of systematic reviews that demonstrate the need for further study of the ethical, technological, and organizational aspects of digital social work (Afrouz & Lucas, 2023; Kozica & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2025). Mikheeva (2018) emphasizes the importance of specialized approaches in working with military families, highlighting their unique social needs and the role of targeted social services. In her lecture course, Mikheeva (2021) further develops the conceptual framework of social pedagogy, integrating both theoretical foundations and practical dimensions of professional training.

The review shows that, despite numerous empirical studies, there are still open questions about developing universal approaches to evaluating the effectiveness of digital channels in social work. In particular, the impact of digital tools on the quality of personalized support and ways to overcome digital exclusion among different

categories of clients need to be clarified. The following problems remain unresolved: lack of systemic mechanisms for adapting digital tools to the conditions of different territorial communities; insufficient study of the long-term effects of digital interaction on the emotional state of clients of social services.

Materials and Methods

The analysis in the study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, with the primary data collection technique an online survey. The questionnaire (Appendix A) had three sections: (1) the general peculiarities of territorial communities, (2) the evaluation of taking advantage of the digital communication channels, and (3) the detailing of the digital transformation barriers in social service centers. The survey was carried out in April-May 2025 with managers and chiefs of leading specialists at social service centers working in the local governments of communities created under the decentralization reform. In the sample, 24 respondents presented four different types of communities, namely, (big city n=8 the-n-1-8-big-urban), (small city n=6 the-n-1-6-small-urban), (settlement n=5 the-n-1-5-settlement), and (rural n=5 the-n-1-5-rural). Entry criteria were as follows: (a) the center needed to be a formally registered structural unit or municipal institution of the local council, (b) respondents needed to be in managerial or key professional positions, and, therefore, be able to attach credibility to the administrative practices they described. This ensured that the sample, although small, captured the diversity of communities and resource levels in Ukraine.

To supplement the survey results, a comparative analysis of open digital resources was conducted across five territorial communities, selected by type (urban, settlement, rural) and representation in the region. The analysis encompassed the presence of the community's official websites, the individual websites of social service centers, activity on social networks, the use of chatbots, mobile applications, and other digital communication channels (e.g., messenger groups). Information was acquired in June 2025 by analysing freely available sites. Such a comparative strategy enabled evaluation of the strength and variety of digital tools across communities with diverse resource potential. The results herein summarised are set out in Appendix C. The author conducted all aspects of the study, including administering surveys, processing data, and conducting comparative analyses, on his own. A descriptive statistic was used to assess the frequency of channel use and the design of barriers, whereas the relevant international scholarly literature supported the contextual explanation.

Results

In the context of the digital transformation of the social sphere, scientific discourse shows a profound evolution in the use of both digital and traditional communication channels. This transformation is not homogeneous - it has both structural and procedural dimensions that manifest themselves in different ways in the administrative and professional activities of social services. Current research shows that digital communication channels, such as email, video communication platforms, mobile applications, messengers, and CRM systems, are increasingly being integrated into social work practice. Digitalization opens new horizons for service accessibility, especially for clients in remote or less mobile settings. For example, video communication has enabled stable communication with vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite physical limitations (Kaihlanen et al., 2023; Jeyasingham & Devlin, 2024).

At the same time, there is still a need for traditional channels, such as phone calls, face-to-face meetings, official correspondence, or even home visits. In many cases, conventional forms of communication provide the critical trust, empathy, and interpersonal depth necessary for effective social support. Some researchers see telephone mediation as an intermediate form that combines the accessibility of the digital environment with the emotional engagement of a live conversation (Schmidt, 2024). This form, although it does not provide visual contact, maintains a high level of personalization in client communication. This is especially important when working with the elderly or families with limited digital access (Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2024).

Modern scientific approaches also focus on hybrid communication models that combine digital and traditional means. This combination enables adaptation to clients' individual needs, ensuring both administrative efficiency and the humanistic dimension of professional interaction. At the same time, researchers highlight new challenges: electronic communication can increase social distancing, fragment relationships, and complicate the interpretation of emotions (Afrouz & Lucas, 2023; Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023). This is especially true when working with children, where nonverbal cues play an important role in communication (Henze-Pedersen & Kirkegaard, 2025).

It is worth noting that digital tools are not neutral - they form a new logic of social interaction, change the rhythm, nature, and even the essence of the communication process. For example, studies point to an increase in the administrative burden on social workers due to the need for constant digital accessibility, electronic documentation, and data entry, among other tasks (Madsen et al., 2022; Pascoe, 2022). This situation often leads to digital burnout, a decline in the quality of interpersonal communication, and a need for professional reflection and new ethical standards (Banks et al., 2025). In this context, the concept of «slow ethics» becomes especially relevant, which calls for the meaningful integration of digital tools into social practice (Banks et al., 2025).

Another important aspect is the digital divide – unequal access to digital technologies among clients of social services. It can be caused by both technical and cognitive factors, such as age, disability, and socioeconomic status. This gap leads to the risk of alienating the most vulnerable groups from access to social services (Balogun et al., 2025; Aasback, 2022). Therefore, researchers emphasize the need for multi-level strategies to support digital inclusion, including user training, accessible interfaces, platform adaptation for special needs, etc.

Thus, modern scientific approaches emphasize that effective communication in social work in the context of digital transformation requires a balance between technological capabilities and the human factor. It should consider not only instrumental aspects, but also deep socio-psychological, ethical, and organizational conditions. The reorientation of communication practices should be based on the principles of flexibility, inclusiveness, and value sensitivity to the context of each individual case.

In the context of digital transformation, the professional interaction between social workers and clients is undergoing significant changes, which creates both new opportunities and threats. Digital communication tools are becoming indispensable, especially in crisis situations when physical presence is impossible or limited. However, their use requires awareness of both functional benefits and potential risks that may affect service quality and clients' well-being. Table 1 systematizes the main advantages,

risks, and limitations of digital communication channels in social work, taking into account the current scientific discourse.

Table 1

Advantages, risks and limitations of digital communication tools in the professional interaction of social workers with clients

Aspect	Advantages	Risks	Limitations
Accessibility	Providing communication in remote or hard-to-reach regions; convenience for customers with limited mobility (Balogun et al., 2025).	In the absence of the Internet or devices, the client remains cut off from the service (Aasback, 2022).	Unequal digital access due to socioeconomic inequality or technical illiteracy (Marković, 2024).
Efficiency	Speed of information exchange, ability to document contacts; time savings (Afzal & Panagiotopoulos, 2024)	Overload of digital messages; risk of missed or inaccurate messages (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023)	Dependence on platform stability, technical vulnerability to failures or hacker attacks (Salovaara & Ylönen, 2022)
Emotional aspect	Some form of support even in a remote format; reduced anxiety during video communication (Kaihlanen et al., 2023)	Loss of non-verbal cues, reduced empathic interaction (Pascoe, 2022; Pink et al., 2021)	Limited opportunities to establish trust with new clients without face-to-face contact (Schmidt, 2024)
Work organization	Flexibility of schedules, the possibility of asynchronous interaction; convenience for workers (Banks et al., 2025)	Requirements for constant availability of a social worker; risk of burnout (Afrouz & Lucas, 2023)	Lack of regulatory standards for digital communication; legal uncertainty in a number of jurisdictions (Scholte et al., 2025)

Source: created by the author based on (Afrouz & Lucas, 2023; Afzal & Panagiotopoulos, 2024; Aasback, 2022; Balogun et al., 2025; Kaihlanen et al., 2023; Marković, 2024; Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023; Pascoe, 2022; Pink et al., 2021; Salovaara & Ylönen, 2022; Schmidt, 2024; Scholte et al., 2025)

To summarize, digital communication tools have become a functional tool in social workers' hands, capable of maintaining professional interaction even in times of crisis or emergency. However, the effective use of these tools requires a clear understanding of the risks and limitations, adaptation to the specifics of client groups, and the creation of a regulatory and ethical framework to govern digital interactions in the field of social protection. Only then can digital communication be not only a means but also a full-fledged resource for improving the quality of social services.

The introduction of digital channels into the daily administrative activities of social service centers is a key factor in modernizing the social security system amid decentralization. Territorial communities, having become full-fledged entities providing social services, face both opportunities for digitalization and barriers to its implementation. The level of use of digital tools, such as email, official websites, electronic document management systems, chatbots, or mobile applications, varies depending on the institutional capacity of communities, staffing, availability of technical infrastructure, and support from local authorities (Haug et al., 2023; Scholte et al., 2025; Løberg, 2021). In this context, there is a need to empirically study the specifics of digital communications implementation in communities of different types – urban, rural, and urban – to identify gaps and potentials for digital transformation. A detailed comparative analysis of the five communities regarding the availability of official digital channels is presented in Appendix B.

The analysis covers large urban, small urban, and rural communities with different intensities of digital tools implementation. The comparison examines the availability of the community's official website, the social service centers' digital resources, social network activity, and the use of chatbots and messengers. Significant differences have been identified: while some communities have a developed multi-channel digital infrastructure, others are limited to basic means of communication. The findings not only record the existence of digital channels but also assess the overall accessibility of digital services for residents.

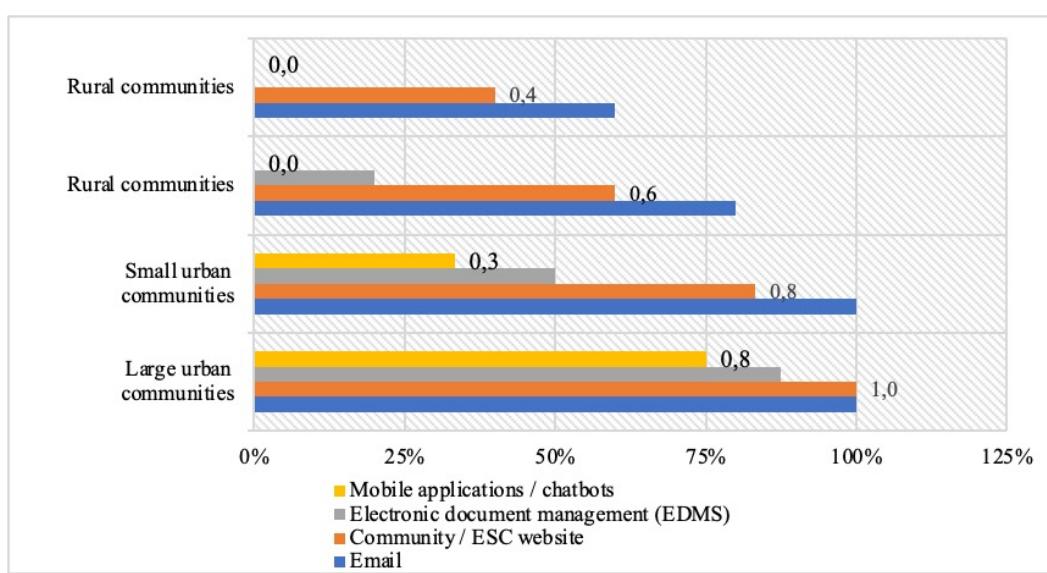
The study is based on an author's online survey designed to assess the level of digitalization of social service centers operating as separate structural units or municipal institutions within local governments of territorial communities. The questionnaire included three main blocks: (1) general information on the type of community, population, and respondent's position; (2) a list of digital communication channels used in the centers' daily administrative work; (3) the main barriers to the implementation of digital solutions, as well as expected digital tools of the future.

The survey was conducted in April-May 2025 among the heads and leading specialists of the centers of social services of territorial communities established after the decentralization reform in 2020-2021 in accordance with the new administrative and territorial structure of Ukraine. The sample included 24 respondents from four community types: large urban (n=8), small urban (n=6), settlement (n=5), and rural (n=5). All respondents represented officially registered centers of social services (separate legal entities or separate units under the executive bodies of village, township, or city councils) that provide social work at the community level.

As can be seen from Fig. 1, the most widespread channel is e-mail - it is used in all urban communities and in most of the settlements and rural communities. Mobile applications or chatbots are much less widespread and are not used at all in rural and settlement communities. Electronic document management systems are also developed mainly in large urban amalgamated territorial communities.

Figure 1

*The level of use of digital communication channels in the administrative work of social service centers
 (% of communities that use the channel on a regular basis)*



Source: created by the author

The findings confirm the hypothesis that there are significant differences in the level of digitalization of social services' administrative activities by territorial community type. In large urban communities, digital channels have become integral to daily administration, especially e-mail, web resources, and EDMS. At the same time, partial or sporadic use of digital tools dominates in settlement and rural communities, complicating interactions with regional structures and limiting the ability to respond quickly to the needs of the population. It is important to note that the majority of respondents pointed to barriers related to a lack of staff training, limited technical support, and weak support from local authorities. These factors should be considered when developing a strategy for the digital transformation of the social sector in Ukraine.

The digital divide remains a key barrier to equitable access to social services in the digital age. Despite the active implementation of digital communication channels in the social protection sector, vulnerable categories of the population – children, people with disabilities, the elderly, and residents of rural areas – often do not have equal access to such services. The reasons for this are varied: from lack of technical means and skills to psychological distrust or low levels of digital literacy (Aasback, 2022; Balogun et al., 2025; Henze-Pedersen & Kirkegaard, 2024). Many social services face difficulties in organizing inclusive digital interactions, leading to the fragmentation of support and increased social exclusion (Marković, 2024; Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2024). Table 2 summarizes the main manifestations of the digital divide in access to social services for different categories of vulnerable populations.

Table 2

The impact of the digital divide on access to social services for vulnerable groups

Population category	Manifestations of the digital divide	Implications for access to services
Older people	Lack of digital skills; limited access to smartphones/internet	Inability to apply online, low use of state e-services (Aasback, 2022)
Children from low-income families	Lack of devices in the family; dependence on adults to communicate with social services	Limited participation in support programs; poor coverage of digital protective mechanisms (Henze-Pedersen & Kirkegaard, 2025)
Persons with disabilities	Inaccessibility of digital platforms (lack of adaptation for vision/hearing, cognitive impairment)	Loss of contact with a social worker; barriers to receiving urgent help (Balogun et al., 2025)
Residents of rural communities	Lack of internet; technical illiteracy; isolation from digital infrastructure	Inability to use online services; increased social exclusion (Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2024)
Single mothers / large families	Overwhelmed with worries; lack of time and knowledge for digital interaction	Partial or complete refusal to participate in digital support programs (Marković, 2024)

Source: created by the author based on (Aasback, 2022; Balogun et al., 2025; Henze-Pedersen & Kirkegaard, 2025; Marković, 2024; Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2024)

The analyzed data show that the digital divide significantly reduces the effectiveness of state social policy, deepening inequality in access to assistance for those groups that need it most. The most vulnerable are the elderly and residents of

rural communities, who are often completely excluded from digital interaction. People with disabilities face technological discrimination due to the lack of inclusive design of digital platforms. Children who depend on adults cannot fully take advantage of electronic services without appropriate support from families and social workers. These findings demonstrate the need for targeted digital inclusion policies that include accessible technologies, specialized training programs, support for digital intermediaries, and expanded offline alternatives for critical social services.

In the current digital transformation context, the social sector is increasingly facing the need to adopt hybrid communication formats, i.e., a combination of traditional (face-to-face, telephone) and digital (online platforms, video, chatbots) channels. Adapting organizational structures to such conditions requires flexible management decisions, staff mobility, revisions to regulations, and digital literacy among all participants in the communication process. The hybrid model allows for the consideration of both the advantages of digital technologies (speed, convenience, scalability) and the need for personal contact for groups that do not accept remote formats or have limited access to them (Pascoe, 2022; Kaihlanen et al., 2023; Pink et al., 2021).

As part of the study of the digital transformation of communication practices in the activities of centers of social services of territorial communities, the factors that determine the organizational structure's ability to adapt to the hybrid model of interaction were identified. The author identifies two key blocks of influence: internal factors related to the organization's resources, competencies, and managerial culture, and external factors determined by the regulatory, infrastructural, and social context of the community. To deepen the analytical conclusion, a systematic matrix was created covering 10 specific factors, with brief descriptions of their content, the nature of their impact, and digital data based on the author's empirical survey.

Quantitative data were obtained from an online survey conducted in April-May 2025 (Questionnaire A) among managers and leading specialists at social service centers operating within local governments. The sample includes 24 respondents from communities of different types (large urban – 8, small urban - 6, settlement - 5, rural - 5). The questionnaire covered the level of use of digital channels, existing barriers, technical support, human resources, and organizational conditions, as well as an assessment of prospects for digital transformation. Additionally, open-ended responses from respondents were taken into account, allowing us to detail problem areas qualitatively. Percentages were calculated from the total number of respondents (n=24) or from individual subgroups (e.g., n=5 for rural communities). The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Internal and external factors influencing the adaptation of the organizational structure of the social sphere to the hybrid model of communication

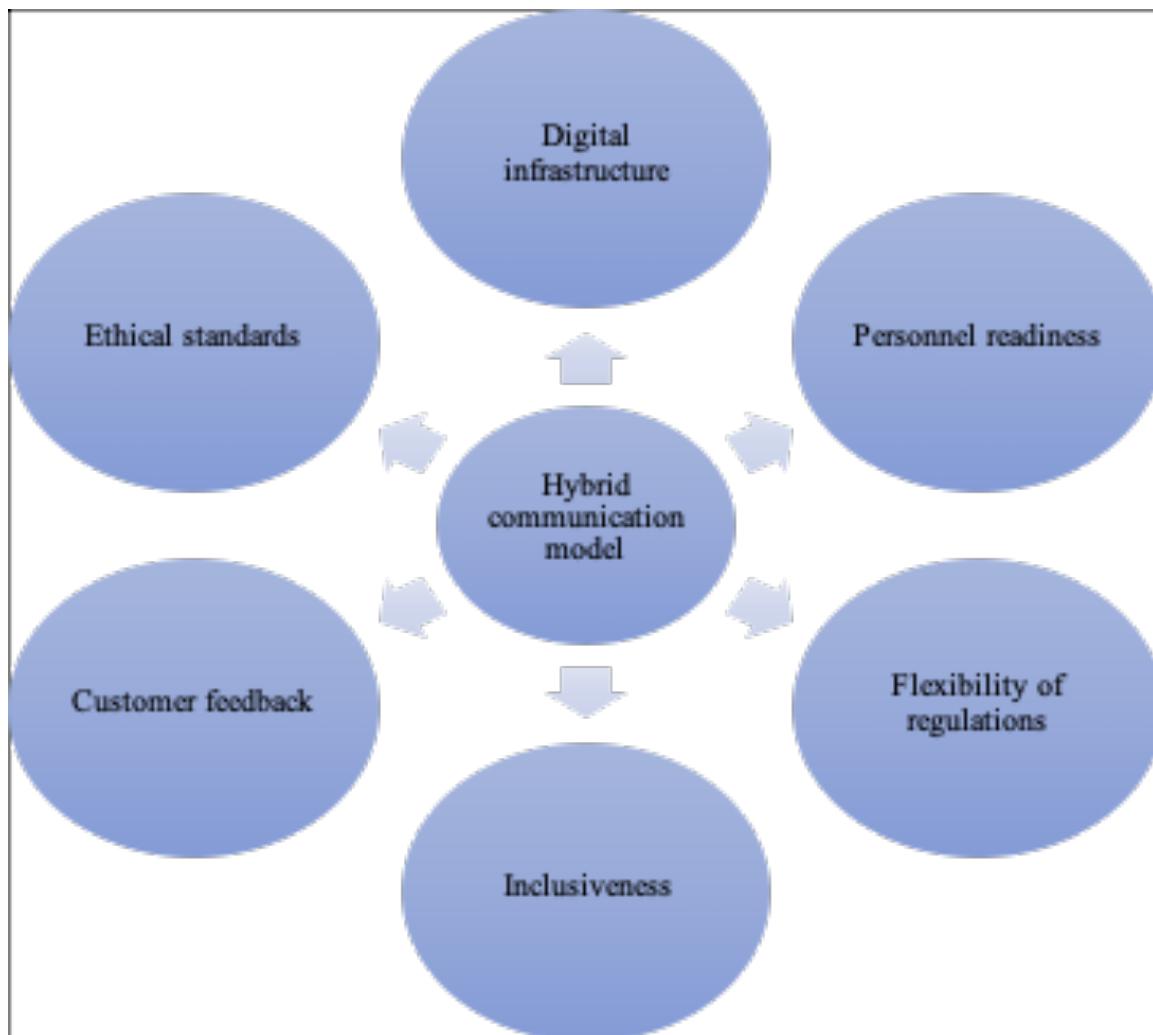
Type of factor	Name of the factor	Description of the impact	Digital data/confirmation
Internal	Level of digital competence of staff	Determines the ability of employees to use email, video communication, mobile applications, electronic document management systems, social networks, and chatbots	17 out of 24 respondents (70.8%) pointed to a lack of digital skills among staff as a barrier to digitalization. The worst situation is in rural communities (5 out of 5 respondents)
	Availability of technical infrastructure	Availability of office equipment, stable internet, licensed software, and technical support	15 out of 24 respondents (62.5%) indicated the lack of modern technical equipment. 100% of rural and settlement communities do not have mobile applications or chatbots
	Organizational flexibility	Readiness for flexible schedules, remote interaction, delegation of authority, and adaptive management	Only 8 out of 24 (33.3%) respondents reported having regulated procedures for remote work. In urban communities, this figure is 62.5%, in rural communities – 0%
	Readiness of managers to innovate	Managerial attitude to digital change: strategic support, investment in training, openness to new formats	13 respondents (54.2%) said that management does not actively support digital initiatives. The highest number of such responses was recorded in rural communities (4 out of 5)
	Motivation of employees to use digital tools	Psychological readiness, availability of incentives, sense of benefit and professional growth	9 out of 24 respondents (37.5%) reported a low level of motivation, in particular due to the lack of additional payments or incentives for the development of digital platforms
External	Regulatory and legal framework	Existence of legislative and regulatory documents governing digital communication, remote service delivery, and privacy.	14 respondents (58.3%) indicated the absence of clear regulations for electronic document management and video communication with clients.
	Internet access within the community	Network coverage, connection stability, technical capabilities in remote regions.	In rural communities, 4 out of 5 respondents (80%) said that residents do not have access to a stable Internet connection for online interaction.
	Digital culture of the population	Readiness of the population for electronic interaction, level of trust, digital literacy, and psychological readiness for new formats.	In 18 out of 24 communities (75%), there is a low level of use of even basic electronic services. The lowest is among older people.
	Support from government and international partners	Funding, training, technical equipment, access to pilot programs.	Only 6 respondents (25%) reported participating in digital support projects from the state or donors. Most of them are large urban communities.
	Political will of local authorities	Prioritization of digitalization in local policy, funding decisions, personnel policy, and initiative.	In 10 out of 24 communities (41.7%), it is stated that local authorities do not consider digital transformation as a priority. In rural communities – 80%

Source: summarized by the author based on the results of an online survey and analysis of current literature (Afrouz & Lucas, 2023; Banks et al., 2025; Scholte et al., 2025; Kaihlanen et al., 2023; Madsen et al., 2022; Haug et al., 2023)

Figure 1 shows the key areas of transformation of the social interaction system within the «traditional – hybrid – digital model», with an emphasis on the necessary conditions for effective adaptation. The diagram illustrates the relationship between the level of development of the organizational capacity of social service centers and the stages of transition to digital communication, which allows visualizing the dynamics of change and identifying critical points of intervention. This approach enables strategic planning of digital transformation, considering the real resources and challenges specific to different types of territorial communities.

Figure 2

Key areas of adaptation of social sector organizational structures to hybrid communication formats



Source: created by the author based on (Kaihlanen et al., 2023; Pascoe, 2022; Pink et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2025; Afrouz & Lucas, 2023)

Adaptation of the social sphere's organizational structures to the hybrid model is not only a technical modernization but, above all, a process of managerial and cultural transformation. It requires a systematic approach: building staff digital competence, providing a resource base, offering regulatory flexibility, and supporting ethical principles in new forms of interaction. Of particular importance is the ability to build

inclusive communication that excludes no category of service recipients. Effective hybrid interaction is possible only if digital tools are integrated not «instead of» but «together with» traditional channels – based on complementarity, not competition.

Discussion

The results of the study confirm the hypothesis of uneven implementation of digital communication channels in the activities of social service centers, depending on the type of territorial community, the level of technical support, and management support. These findings are in line with previous observations by international researchers who have also emphasized the importance of the institutional context for the digital transformation of the social sector (Haug et al., 2023; Scholte et al., 2025). It is important to note that, in the context of decentralization, urban communities demonstrate a higher level of integration of digital tools. In contrast, rural and settlement communities remain vulnerable to digital exclusion. A similar trend has been found in studies from other countries, where digitalization deepens the gap between the center and the periphery (Aasback, 2022; Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2024). In this context, the results of our survey are representative of such systemic problems in Ukrainian realities.

Special attention should be paid to the digital divide, which affects not only clients but also social workers themselves. As noted by Afrouz and Lucas (2023), without adequate digital competence, professionals risk losing the ability to engage effectively with vulnerable populations. Our data confirms that the main barriers to implementing digital solutions are a lack of staff training and technical infrastructure, which were identified as key factors in most rural communities. Thus, in the context of Ukrainian centers of social services, it is important to consider digital transformation not only as a technical innovation but as a process that requires a holistic support policy.

The benefits of a hybrid interaction model that combines traditional and digital channels are debatable. Some authors consider it an effective form of adaptation to new realities (Pink et al., 2021; Kaihlanen et al., 2023), while others highlight the risk of increased social distancing and a loss of empathy in communication (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023; Pascoe, 2022). In our study, we found that phone calls still play an essential role, even in the digital environment, which aligns with Schmidt (2024), who defines the phone as an intermediate form that enables personalized support in the absence of visual contact.

Some contradictions are also evident when assessing the impact of digitalization on customers' emotional state. On the one hand, video communication tools enable communication during crises (Kaihlanen et al., 2023); on the other hand, studies by Pascoe (2022) and Pink et al. (2021) emphasize the risks of emotional alienation, especially when working with children. This contradiction suggests that the effectiveness of digital interactions depends on the context and needs of a particular client group and thus requires flexible interpretation rather than unification. The findings are also in line with the concept of «slow ethics» proposed by Banks et al. (2025), which emphasizes the need for the meaningful implementation of digital tools, considering ethical implications and social context. In this context, it is essential to

develop a regulatory framework that not only governs digital interactions but also preserves the humanistic nature of social work.

Thus, the results of the study demonstrate both coherence and discrepancies with previous research, which indicates the complexity and multilayered nature of the problem. The study confirms the hypothesis of uneven digital integration in the social sector, while also pointing to the need for further empirical research on the impact of digital channels on service quality, client trust, and professional autonomy of social workers. It is also advisable to further study the experience of adapting social services across different types of communities to develop a typology of effective digital interaction models.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that the introduction of digital communication channels into the activities of social service centers is not a unified process but is primarily determined by the context of a particular territorial community. The analysis showed a deep unevenness of digitalization, from high integration of electronic solutions in large urban communities to limited or fragmented use of digital channels in rural and urban areas. The empirical survey data and comparative analysis of the five communities (Appendix B) confirmed that, even when communities have official websites or social media pages, not all social service centers have separate digital platforms or chatbots to enable systematic online interaction with clients. The most functional is the Kyiv city community, while the Cherkasy local territorial community lacks key digital communication tools. This shows not only technical but also strategic inequality in approaches to digital transformation. A typology of barriers has been identified, which includes institutional, technical, human resources, and regulatory components. The key factors hindering digital transformation are the lack of staff training, limited technical infrastructure, weak management support, and a low level of digital culture among the population – especially in rural communities. The political factor is also essential: only a fraction of communities declare digitalization as a local policy priority. Empirical evidence confirms the promise of a hybrid model of interaction that combines digital and traditional communication channels. This approach allows us to take into account the needs of vulnerable groups that remain outside of full-fledged digital interaction due to age, social or technical barriers. That is why the effectiveness of digital solutions in social protection requires constant adaptation and support from human resources.

The practical significance of the study is to provide a basis for developing adaptive strategies for digital transformation at the community level, taking into account real barriers and local characteristics. The novelty of the work lies in the first systematic comparison of the levels of digitalization of social services across communities of different types, based on quantitative and qualitative data.

Limitations of the study include a small sample size (24 respondents) and the lack of a separate analysis of interactions with specific client categories. Promising areas for further research include examining the impact of digital channels on clients' emotional well-being, evaluating the effectiveness of different communication formats under crisis conditions, developing indicators of digital inclusion, and analyzing

management models that ensure the sustainability of digital transformation in the social sphere. It is also advisable to expand the comparative analysis to a larger number of communities with varying resource capacities, thereby enabling a deeper typology of digital strategies in social policy.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire for managers and employees of social service centers used in the study of digital transformation of communication interaction (April-May 2025)

1. Type of community in which your center of social services operates:

- Large urban
- Small urban
- Rural
- Rural

2. Assess the level of digital competence of your center's staff:

- High (the vast majority of employees are fluent in digital tools)
- Medium (some employees have a sufficient level, others need training)
- Low (most employees need basic digital training)

3. Does your center have access to the following technical resources? (Multiple options are available)

- Computers/laptops for each employee
- Stable internet connection in the center
- Video communication software (Zoom, Google Meet, etc.)

- Electronic document management system
- Mobile application or chatbot for communication with customers
- None of the above

4. Does your center regulate the possibility of remote or hybrid work?

- Yes
- Partially (there are occasional cases, but without clear regulations)
- No

5. How would you characterize the management's attitude to digital innovations at your center?

- Actively supportive and encouraging
- Rather neutral, no active actions
- Do not support or resist

6. Does your center staff have additional motivation to implement digital tools?

- Yes, there are incentives (bonuses, recognition, advanced training)
- No, the implementation of digital solutions is not accompanied by any incentives

7. What factors do you consider to be barriers to digital transformation in your hromada? (select up to three)

- Lack of technical equipment
- Low level of digital literacy among the population
- Lack of stable internet connection within the community
- Lack of legal and regulatory framework
- Lack of political will on the part of local authorities
- Lack of trust in digital services among residents
- Lack of support from the state or international partners

8. Has your center received support from government or international agencies for digital development (grants, training, equipment)?

- Yes
- No

Appendix B

Questionnaire for managers and employees of social service centers

BLOCK 1. General information

1. Type of your community:

- Large urban
- Small urban
- Rural
- Rural

2. Number of people in the community:
 Up to 10 thousand
 10-50 thousand
 50-100 thousand
 over 100 thousand
3. What position do you hold in the structure of the center of social services?
 Head of the center
 Administrative worker
 Specialist of social work
 Other (please specify): _____

Box 2: Use of digital channels

4. Which of the following digital channels are constantly used in your center for administrative communication? (multiple options are available)
 E-mail
 Own website
 Social community platform
 Electronic document management system (EDMS)
 Chatbot or mobile application
 Social networks (Facebook, Viber, etc.)
 Video communication (Zoom, Google Meet, etc.)
 Other (please specify): _____
5. Please rate the frequency of use of the specified digital channels (1 - never, 5 - constantly):

Communication channel	1	2	3	4	5
E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Community website or ESC	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Electronic document management system	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Mobile applications / chatbots	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Social networks as an administrative tool	<input type="checkbox"/>				

BLOCK 3. Barriers and needs

6. What do you consider to be the most significant barriers to the introduction of digital technologies in your community? (you can choose up to three options)
 Insufficient funding

- Lack of staff training
- Low digital literacy of the population
- Lack of technical infrastructure
- Lack of trust in digital services
- Lack of political will/management support
- Other (please specify): _____

7. Which digital tools do you consider most promising for improving the work of the EECC in the next 2 years?

8. What digital learning topics do you consider most relevant for your colleagues?

- Digital ethics and privacy
- Working with electronic documentation
- Use of chatbots and mobile applications
- Organization of video meetings
- Basics of digital literacy
- Other topics: _____

Appendix C

Comparative analysis of communication tools of the SLC in five communities

No	Name of the community (city)	Availability of an official community website	Existence of a separate website of the SLC	The CSC page in social networks (Facebook, Instagram, etc.)	Availability of a chatbot	Other digital channels (Viber groups, Telegram, etc.)	Overall assessment of accessibility (low/medium/high)
1	Kyiv city community	✓ available	✓ available	✓ Facebook, Instagram	✓ yes (in Telegram)	✓ Viber, Email newsletter	High
2	Lviv MTG	✓ available	✗ not available	✓ Facebook	✗ not available	✓ Viber	Average
3	Dniprovska MTG	✓ available	✓ available	✓ Facebook	✗ not available	✗ not available	Average
4	Cherkasy MTG	✓ available	✗ not available	✗ not available	✗ not available	✗ not available	Low
5	Poltava Municipal Medical Group	✓ available	✓ available	✓ Facebook	✓ yes (Viber-bot)	✓ Telegram	High