How children's navigation on digital platforms challenges child welfare assessments

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Abstract

When a child is placed in public care, digital platforms create an arena for the child and parents to stay updated on each other's lives while living apart. However, contact through digital platforms can be unpredictable for some children, resulting in unintended adverse consequences and undermining the placement's stability. In this context, it is not uncommon for children and parents to have contact through social media or other digital platforms, also known as 'virtual visitation'. To ensure that restrictions on contact will provide the child with the necessary protection, knowing the child's navigation and access to digital platforms may provide an understanding of potential contact forms and the need for protection. Based on an online questionnaire addressed to Child Welfare Services in Norway, this study reports on 196 child welfare workers' views as to what extent children's navigation on digital platforms is included as part of the professional assessment of the regulation of visitation rights between a child and his or her parents after a care order is issued. The findings indicate a minimal consideration of the child's access to digital media and their navigation on social media when assessing the regulation of contact rights. The findings from this study highlight the need for a new understanding of the possible connection between virtual and physical visitations after a care order is issued. Protecting children involves professionals understanding and assessing new communication and socialization patterns in which children participate. It is not merely a question of learning how to use digital platforms; it is also a question of professional development and new ways of working with children in public care when meetings between people increasingly take place digitally.

Keywords
Digital platforms, visitation regulation, Contact rights, public care, out-of-home placement, professional assessment

Introduction

This article explores how children's navigation on digital platforms challenges child welfare work after a care order is issued. The primary question to be answered is to what extent children's navigation on digital platforms is (or should be) an element of the professional assessment when justifying the extent of contact regulation. In this study, digital platforms refer to the use of phones, smartphones, and social media, as well as other electronic communication devices and platforms, such as Snapchat and WhatsApp.

When a child is placed in public care, contact with their birth family is generally considered to benefit them in several ways (Macdonald et al., 2017), with the contact between

the child and his or her birth family enabling them to maintain emotional ties when not living at home (Mullan et al., 2007; Neil et al., 2003). Using, for example, text messages and social media, children can maintain contact and stay up to date on what family, friends, and acquaintances are doing, or are interested in, or both (Frønes, 2018). Digital contact can, however, be unpredictable for some children, resulting in unintended adverse consequences (Beek & Schofield, 2004; Wilson et al., 2004), thereby undermining the stability of the placement (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014) and making it necessary to reduce or prohibit contact from minimizing the disruption to placement stability (Moyers et al., 2006).

In Norway, the Personal Data Act (of 15 June 2018) incorporated the European Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) into Norwegian law in 2018, which affected the privacy rules and regulation of age limits on social media. The change in the law means that most social media now have a 13-year age limit as a condition to create a profile. Social media, apps, and games also have separate age recommendations regarding the content or who the service is suitable for. This means that before the age of 13, creating accounts on digital platforms is only allowed through the consent of a legal guardian. Despite the age limit, nine out of ten children aged 9–18 use digital platforms for communication. In the 9–12 age group, 79 percent of all girls and 69 percent of all boys use digital platforms. Snapchat is the most used, but Instagram is also popular. Mobile phones have changed markedly in recent years, and children today use mobile phones for far more than calling and sending text messages. Mobile phones also function as game consoles, cameras, information sources, and music players. Among children aged 9–16, 71 percent state that they use their mobile phones for social media access (Norwegian Media Authority, 2018). For most children across Europe, smartphones are now the preferred means of going online. This often means they have 'anywhere, anytime' connectivity, with most children reporting using their smartphones 'daily or almost all the time' (Smahel et al., 2020). In addition, many children under the age of 13 provide incorrect information regarding both name and age when creating accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, or other digital platforms (Larkei et al., 2017) and create such without caregivers' knowledge. A child's access to various communication platforms through digital platforms challenges conventional child welfare interventions (Hansen, Björktomta, & Svalastog, 2017) and calls for new requirements, e.g., in assessments related to the child's contact with biological parents when placed in public care. Child welfare services (CWS) assessments bear many of the characteristics of street-level bureaucrats, as described by Lipsky (1980). For example, street-level bureaucrats must fulfil various political expectations and legal regulations within limited resources, which are often both vague and contradictory. Furthermore, they differ from other bureaucrats in that they carry out their work in direct face-to-face contact with those whom the work concerns. They are in a position where they represent the authorities vis-à-vis individuals while also representing individuals vis-à-vis the authorities. Child welfare workers, as street-level bureaucrats, also hold considerable power in that their tasks, even if they are subject to regulations, their assessments always include the exercise of professional and individual discretion (Kvakic et al., 2021).

Regulation of contact rights

A child's right to family life and contact rights with his or her parents after a care order is issued is founded both within Norwegian law and international rights. According to Article 9 (3) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), children who are separated from one or both parents have the right 'to maintain personal contact and direct contact regularly, unless this is contrary to the child's best interest. Only in 'very exceptional

circumstances' can it be said to be in a child's best interests that the biological bond is broken (Abdi Ibrahim v. Norway, 2019; Gerdts-Andresen & Hansen, 2021). Regulation of contact rights includes regulation of visitation rights and the possibility of regulating other contact forms, such as contact through digital platforms. In Norway, this is regulated by sections 4–19 of the Child Welfare Act. This section allows for the regulation of contact between the child and parents. Contact between the child and other contacts, such as siblings, friends, or other relatives, is for the new guardian to regulate in collaboration with the CWS and is outside this study's scope. Any regulation of contact rights is a limitation of the child's and his or her parents' rights to family life (cf. European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) Article 8). For such regulation of contact rights to be in line with Norwegian and international laws, any regulation requires transparency regarding the professional assessment of the 'necessity' of the regulation (ECtHR, 2020). The necessity of such regulation will depend on various independent case factors, such as the child's age and maturity, and the child's view, assessed based on the nature of the case. To ensure that the restrictions will provide the child with the necessary protection, knowing the child's navigation and access to digital platforms may provide an understanding of potential contact forms.

Previous research on virtual visitation

Numerous authors have raised the potential impact of digital technologies on contact (e.g., Fursland, 2011; Simpson, 2013), but there is limited research on how the CWS includes the child's access to digital platforms when assessing and justifying the necessity of regulating contact between a child and his or her parents after a care order is issued. Earlier studies have examined children's use of the internet and social media (e.g., Gasser et al., 2010; Pew, 2013), with a significant focus on associated risks (Livingstone & Smith, 2014) or implications pertinent to any contemporary social work setting (Macdonald et al., 2017).

Adams (2012) focused on how social media can change the conditions for contact when a child is living in public care and how social workers address those challenges. This study highlights how this unregulated contact can create significant challenges, as the contact is often kept hidden, making it difficult for the social worker to support the child. The more strictly the contact limitation is enforced, the harder it is for the children to be open about it (Björktomta & Hansen, 2021). Research also shows that parents with limited contact more often communicate through social media (Schofield, Ward & Young, 2009). Such unregulated contact can impact the child's well-being and may influence the stability of his or her placement (Fursland, 2011).

According to Simpson (2013), there are several reasons why children engage in digital contact with their parents after being placed in public care. The contact may be about the child feeling pressured to have such contact, the need for excitement, or lack of impulse control. Another reason is that contact through social media or a mobile phone makes it easier for the child to keep in touch with his or her parents when placed in public care. Children may also be worried about their parents, in which case such digital contact will provide a potential reassurance for the child. Björktomta & Hansen's (2021) study indicates a contrast between the professional assessment focusing on face-to-face contact and children's access to their parents through social media. However, because the use of social media is not included in the assessment, the necessity of a care order may be negated. Even though Norwegian CWS (recent years) has seen an increase in the use of digital media, there are no guidelines or common understandings of how this work should be carried out related to the safe use of digital platforms and documentation of digital correspondence. Instead, private practices are developed based on individual discretion (Kvakic et al., 2021).

Method

Respondents and data collection

Data was collected through an online questionnaire addressed to child welfare workers in Norway from February to May 2020. The initial mailing included a cover letter describing the study's risks and benefits directed to the administration of the CWS across the country (N = 235). There is no statistical number of how many child welfare workers work within the area of this study. As the online questionnaire was forwarded by the CWS administration, and the participation was anonymous, it is unknown how many child welfare workers received our invitation via their administrative office. A total of 277 child welfare workers responded to the online questionnaire. All counties in Norway are represented among the respondents. Of the 277 respondents, 235 stated that 'working with children who are in public care' was part of their daily work. All others were excluded (N = 42). Questionnaires less than 95 percent complete (N = 39) were excluded from further analysis. A total of 196 completed questionnaires from respondents, 'working with children who are in public care' as part of their daily work, were included for further analysis.

Questionnaire development and measures

The online questionnaire was developed by Dillmann et al. (2008; 2014), focusing on the CWS' view on children's navigation on digital platforms about contact regulation assessments. Based on the research question and previous research (e.g., Kvakic et al., 2021; Aamodt & Mossige, 2018), the questionnaire was developed with 14 items grouped into three domains: (1) The child welfare workers' personal experience and knowledge of the use of digital media as communication platforms, (2) digital media as a working tool when communicating with children in public care, and (3) assessment of the child's access to digital media when regulating physical contact between a child and his or her parents. The general instruction emphasized that the questions cover neither limitations nor the desirability of choice of action. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice questions with a 4-point Likert scale ranging from '1' (never) to '4' (always) followed by an open-ended question for elaboration or supplementation of the answer or statements combined. All open-ended questions were similarly designed, encouraging the respondents to elaborate on their responses to each question.

Analysis

Quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012) is presented through frequency analysis and descriptive statistics. The questionnaires' open-ended questions gathered a large amount of text data. Both descriptive data and text answers from open-ended questions were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke describe the thematic analysis process through six phases, where the first five phases deal with processing the data material. The analysis process started with the completed questionnaires being carefully reviewed through repeated reading on searches for content understanding and patterns. This led to the second phase, where the initial codes were generated. Then all the coded material was collected and sorted based on potential thematic affiliations, followed by a re-evaluation of the material's thematic affiliation based on the coded excerpts from the questionnaires and the overall data. This work led to the overarching themes that form the basis for the presentation of the findings that follow below.

Ethical considerations

This study was performed by the National Research Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities (NESH) guidelines. The process of receiving and completing the questionnaire was anonymous, and participants gave their consent to their answers being part of the research material by answering the online questionnaire.

Results

Demographics

Descriptive statistics were used to visualize the respondents' county affiliation, seniority, and educational background. The respondents have varying county affiliations. However, all 11 Norwegian counties are represented, although to varying degrees (3%–19%). The respondents had an average work experience of 10 years, varying from new employees to 30 years of work experience, with a median of seven years. All respondents reported an educational background of, at minimum, a bachelor's degree. Half of the respondents (50%) stated that they had completed continuing education in addition to their bachelor's degree, while 13% stated that they had a master's degree.

All respondents (N = 196) stated that they use digital platforms in their everyday lives, indicating knowledge of the use of such. While all use mobile phones and text messages, the respondents show more significant variation in using other digital platforms. A linear section shows that all respondents occasionally use one or more different digital media. In addition to the media mentioned in the questionnaire (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Messenger, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and text messages), the respondents also reported using Viber, Skype, e-mail, Tumblr, TikTok, Hangouts, Yodel, and Pinterest. In the analytical approach to better understanding how employees in the CWS emphasize children's access to virtual visitations with biological parents, when assessing contact regulations, it is assumed that the child welfare workers know the variety of different digital platforms.

Assessing children's navigation on digital platforms when justifying contact regulation

Thematic analysis of both descriptive data and text answers from open-ended questions identified three main themes on how child welfare workers relate to children's navigation on digital platforms when determining and justifying the necessity of contact regulation after a care order is issued:

- Reasons for not including the child's navigation on digital platforms
- Reasons for including the child's navigation on digital platforms
- The tension between control and protection

Reasons for not including the child's navigation on digital platforms

Of 196 respondents, 186 (95%) answered questions about including children's navigation on digital platforms as part of the assessment of visitation regulation.

Table 1 presents the extent to which children's access to digital platforms is explored as part of the assessment. While 17% of the respondents (N = 32) stated that they 'never' talk to children about digital platforms before preparing recommended visitation regulations, 48% (N = 89) answered that they 'occasionally' talk to children about this. Only 8% (N = 15) stated that children's access to digital platforms was a topic that was 'always discussed' with the child prior to the recommendation of visitation regulation between children and parents.

Table 1. Exploring the child's access to digital platforms
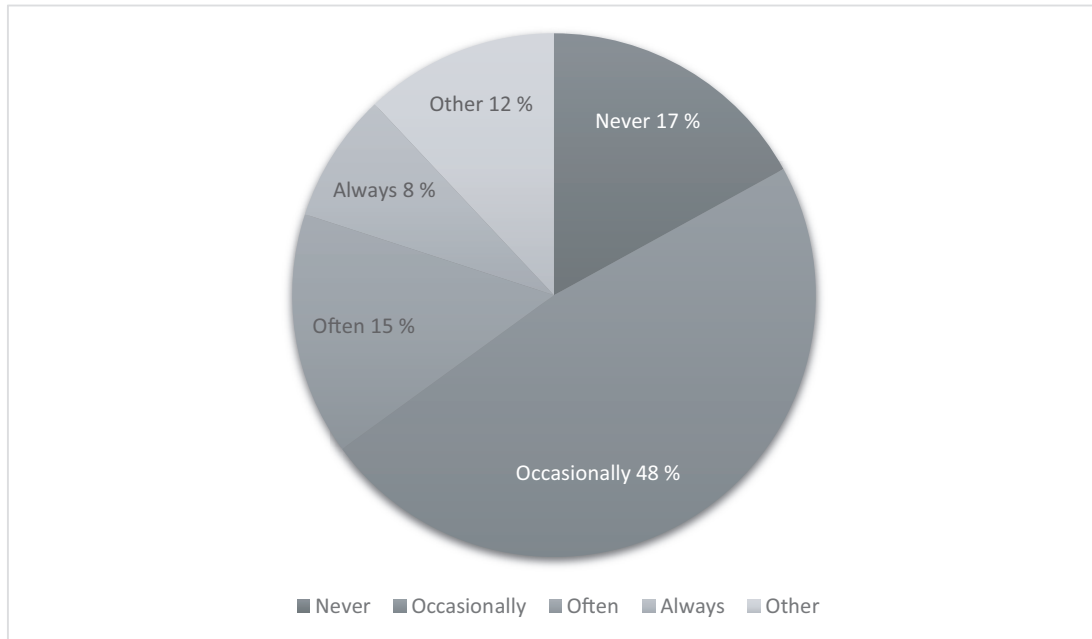
Of 186 respondents, 22 elaborated on their thoughts through open-ended text fields. While nine of the respondents stated:

> 'Not to have been aware of this subject within the context of contact regulation (R:142),'

… three of the respondents' stated:

> 'Not to have experience with assessments that include the child's navigation on digital platforms (R:248).'

Three respondents address the theme as 'of interest within future assessments,' stating:

> 'Can probably be more attentive on this (R:117).'

> 'It should be considered (R:34).'

As the quotes exemplify, children's navigation on digital platforms appears to be a theme that is not necessarily addressed in the context of CWS assessments when justifying restrictions on contact between a child and his or her parents. The statements indicate that children's virtual contact with biological parents only to a limited degree influences the restrictions on contact rights between a child and his or her parents after a care order is issued. Further, it questions whether the contact regulation is disproportionately strict in cases where the CWS argues for strong regulation of contact rights while virtual parent contact is frequent. The statements can be interpreted and related to the gap between children's competence to navigate digital platforms, especially social media, and the professionals' understanding of the value of this form of contact. Within the digital society, addressing a child's navigation on digital platforms is a theme that appears highly relevant for the regulation to be proportional and thereby 'necessary' to ensure the protection intended by the care order.

The elaboration strengthens this understanding from the respondents that answered that they 'never' thought about including information on children's navigation on digital platforms when assessing contact rights (cf. Table 1, 17%; N = 32). The 32 respondents who answered that they 'never' talk to children about digital platforms when assessing visitation regulations stated various reasons for this. As Table 2 shows, nine respondents state that:

'They have never considered talking to the child in this manner.'

Three respondents claim that:

'The child is too young for this theme.'

The child's age was also a theme that was presented through open-ended text fields by another six participants. While three participants highlight the theme as relevant depending on the child's age, two state that they have not assessed contact regulation in light of the child's navigation on digital platforms due to the child's age. The age of the children referred to is unknown. What appears of interest, however, is the reference to the child's age and not the child's maturity. A child's level of understanding is not uniformly linked to their biological age. The age at which a child starts navigating digital platforms will depend on the child's capacities and access to digital implements rather than the child's age alone. As it appears, child welfare workers have an opinion on what age actualizes children's navigation on digital platforms. However, despite age limits for digital communication platforms, previous research indicates that children navigate on such platforms before the age limit. It is, therefore, reasonable to question whether the child's maturity, rather than age alone, influences to what extent and at what time the child accesses digital platforms to interact with their biological parents through virtual visitations. By not including this theme in their conversations with the child due to the child's age, the attitude displayed aligns with earlier research that suggests that the child's involvement in care order cases appears to be indistinct. It is difficult to consider whether children have had a real contribution to the decision-making process (Lurie et al., 2015; Strandbu & Vis, 2016; Andresen & Hansen, 2021).

One participant argues that there has been no need for such assessment as the participant:

'(…) only has case responsibility for children already placed in public care, and where all assessments regarding contact regulations are done prior to placement (R:110).'

In relation to the respondents who argue that they did not address the subject of navigation on digital media due to the child's age at the time of placement, it appears unclear whether the CWS has assessment routines that ensure a broad understanding of the child's need for protection, and thereby the necessity of strong contact regulation. One respondent elaborated on their assessment routines:

'It is addressed with the children who have access to digital platforms, and where we know that it has been challenging to protect the child, but it probably does not affect the visitation regulation to any great extent (R:108).'

Based on the knowledge that children, at the latest, access digital platforms when starting primary school, the respondent's statement actualizes the need to talk to children about their use of digital platforms and virtual contact not later than the year they start school. In

Norway, this is the year of their sixth birthday. However, children have numerous opportunities to assess virtual contact before age six, e.g., through gaming platforms such as Movistar Planet and Momio, which both represent gaming, allowed from an earlier age (Movistar Planet, age 3; Momio, age 4). However, given internet access, they both operate as a communication platform.

Six of the respondents that answered that they 'never' talk to children about digital platforms when assessing visitation regulations answered that they:

> 'distinguish between physical and digital contact, and where the digital contact is not part of the assessment,'

… while fourteen respondents:

> 'do not believe that the CWS has the authority to regulate digital contact.'

Uncertainty about what authority lies within the CWS challenges their ability to ensure the child's best interests when being obligated to balance children's right to protection and contact restrictions. Their lack of knowledge regarding their authority makes it uncertain whether the contact regulation between the child and his or her parents is too strict about their virtual contact. However, their lack of knowledge also impacts assessments related to protection from virtual contact through digital platforms. There is a legal dilemma in balancing children's need for protection, provision, and participation and an ethical dilemma in the tension between information and secrecy. While a too strict regulation might lead to virtual contact in secrecy, lack of such regulation might disrupt the intention of the placement.

Table 2. Main reasons for not talking to the child about use of digital media
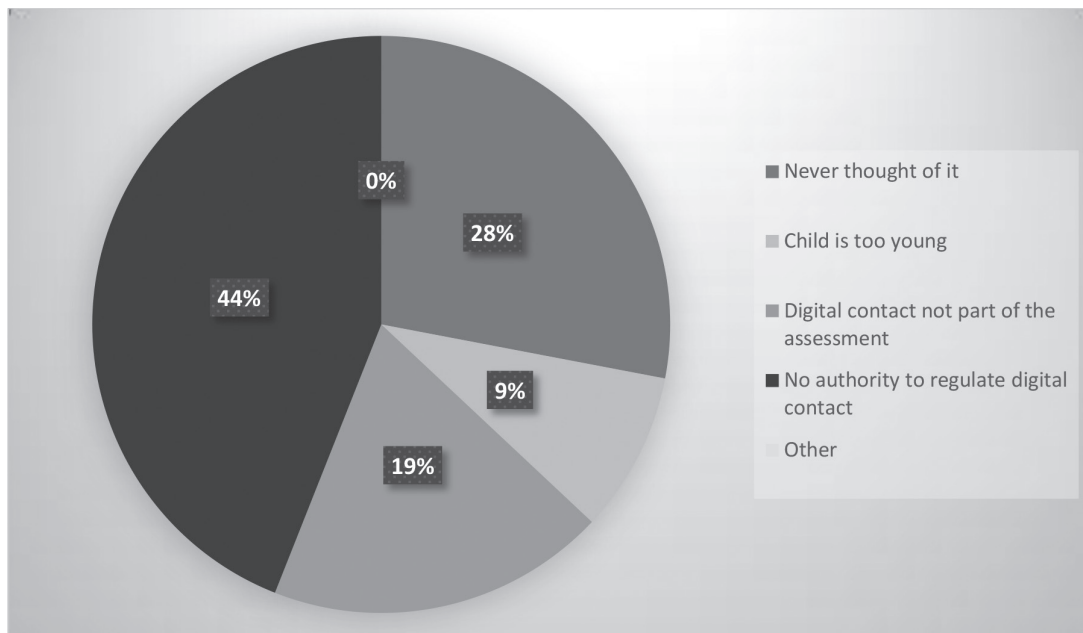

Reasons for including the child's navigation on digital platforms
Of 186 participants that answered questions related to the inclusion of children's navigation on digital platforms as part of the assessment of visitation regulation, 104 participants (56%)

responded that they 'occasionally' (48%) or 'always' (8%) invite the child to express their view prior to the recommendation of visitation regulation between children and parents. Table 3 presents the participants' justification for exploring children's navigation on digital platforms when assessing visitation regulation. While 5% of the respondents (N = 7) state that the theme is part of their 'mapping of the child's navigation on digital platforms in general', 33% of the participants (N = 48) invited the child to talk about virtual contact as part of the child's participation in the assessment. About 9.5% of the participants (N=14) stated that they spoke to the child about the child's navigation on digital platforms 'to increase the child's awareness of the use of such platforms.' In comparison, about 7.5% (N = 11) stated that the conversation was about 'guiding the child in its use of digital platforms in general.' Only 33% of the participants (N = 48) stated that they initiated a conversation about the child's access to digital platforms as part of an open conversation about the child's virtual contact with his or her parents or extended biological family.

Table 3. Reasons for including the child's navigation on digital platforms
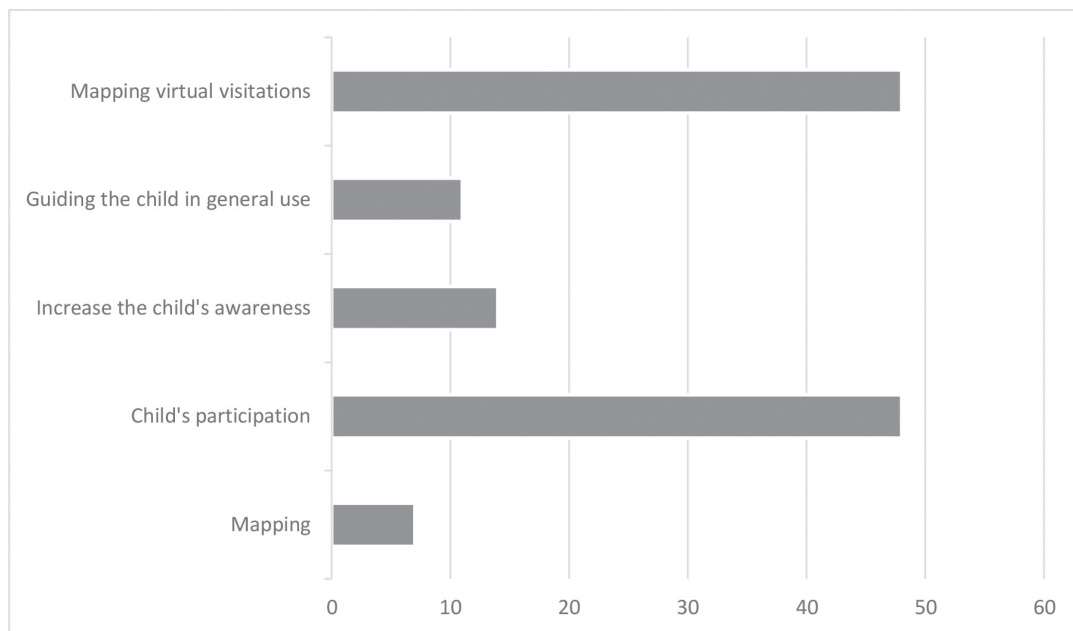
Of 104 respondents, 18 (12%) elaborated on why they explore children's navigation on digital platforms when assessing visitation regulation through open-ended text fields. While four of the respondents state that such conversations about the child's navigation on digital platforms are not of interest when assessing contact regulation, one of the participants states that participation in this online questionnaire has brought awareness of a theme that will be taken into account in future child welfare work. Eight participants highlighted what is described as 'the complexity of such assessments. Depending on the case, they state that the reason for initiating such a conversation with the child will vary, e.g.:

> 'Mapping the child's navigation on digital platforms increases the child's awareness when using such platforms, but also invites the child to a conversation regarding virtual contact as part of the child's participation in the assessment (R:131).'

> 'Mapping the child's navigation on digital platforms increases the child's awareness of how and where to be in contact with his or her biological parents, and on digital platforms (R:260).'

Based on the statements, it appears that their reason for initiating such conversations with the child contains both a controlling element and a protective or educational element, in combination with the child's right to participate in the decision-making processes.

Three of the participants state the need for such a conversation so that the child may protect themselves from unwanted contact with biological parents:

> 'It is often a question of how the child can shield himself or herself from virtual contact initiated by the parents (R:126).'

> 'One can also experience that the parents are very persistent towards the child through digital platforms (R:5).'

> 'It is widespread for children to contact biological parents or others in their biological network without telling anyone (R:44).'

As the quotes exemplify, these three child welfare workers believe the child needs protection from the parents' potential approach through digital platforms. By approaching the child with an understanding of the contact as negative and with the need for protection, it is reasonable to question whether the child will continue contact through digital contact without informing anyone. This potentially increases the child's risk not only of becoming a carrier of difficult experiences or thoughts, but also of the child refusing to talk about it with the new caregivers or the CWS.

In contrast to other participants within this study, one participant reflects on how digital contact could contribute positively, especially in situations where the child is placed far away from their biological network:

> 'It is not unlikely that the placement allocation is possibly several hours away from family, which increases the legitimacy of using digital platforms to maintain contact (R:133).'

Using digital platforms to maintain contact between the child and parents after a care order is issued may be positive for both parent and child. However, virtual contact or virtual visitations are not to be understood as replacing physical visitation rights, but as an addition in cases where this is in the child's best interest.

The tension between control and protection
The tension between protection and control is a theme that was actualized through the thematic analysis and is of central importance within all child welfare work. On the one hand, it is about helping the child to adapt to the new situation. On the other hand, there is always a controlling aspect in ensuring that the intervention is legitimate and in the child's best interests. Within this work, there is a delicate balance between the child's right to privacy and the necessity of control.

Out of the 196 respondents, 163 (83%) elaborated on their thoughts about the necessity of talking to children about the child's navigation on digital platforms before assessing contact regulations, through open-ended text fields, with reflections that actualize the tension between protection and control of the child. While 33% of the respondents (N = 54) answered that the primary need for such a conversation is to 'assess the need for the legal regulation of the relationship,' 45% (N = 73) responded that the main reason would be 'to map' the possible form and frequency of digital contact between the child and parents.

The open-ended answers elaborated on the question, visualizing that their mapping also includes approaching the new caregivers, asking them to report observations on the child's use of digital platforms, e.g.:

> 'We talk regularly with the foster parents about how much contact the child has with biological parents (R:180).'

The practice exemplified through the quote raises the question of a controlling aspect when living in public care, which challenges the child's right to privacy. What is of particular interest is that the control appears to be towards the frequency of virtual contact between the child and parents. None of the participants highlighted the distinction between the frequency of virtual contact and how this may affect the child's well-being when contacting the caregivers. Some of the participants do, however, raise this aspect in their contact with the child, e.g.:

> 'In conversations with children/young people, we ask if they have had contact lately and if this made them happy or sad. We rarely ask what arena it is (Facebook, tweets, etc.) (R:108).'

As the two quotes above exemplify, the CWS uses caregivers and the child as *informants* when mapping the child's use of digital media about contact with biological parents. This aspect supplements previous research actively searching for children and parents on digital platforms, primarily through social media, which is widespread among child welfare workers. Searching for information on the child and parents via Google is also not uncommon (Sage & Sage, 2016; Cooner et al., 2020; Kvakic, Fineide & Hansen, 2021). One question that arises is the necessity of such controlling actions. When such actions appear to be routine behaviour within the CWS rather than actions due to concern for the child's present situation, this actualizes the tension between control, the child's and family's right to privacy, and the right to family life.

This study also reveals a critical control aspect to check what children and biological parents post on their profiles:

> '(…) It is a dilemma how much the foster parents should check the telephone and that type of thing, but it certainly happens – to get an overview of the extent of contact and whether this is good for the child (R:117).'

> '(…) Checks whether something has been posted on the youth's profile (R:270).'

> '(…) Control of outlays on the side to biological parents and children (R:159).'

The quotes above describe a professional practice in which social control is exercised on children and biological parents. Social control is another example that raises the tension between control and the right to privacy. However, as the responsibility for performing the control is asked of the new caregivers, this also raises ethical dilemmas related to the content of the care assignment. Findings indicate that child welfare workers have different attitudes as to whether this practice is to be regarded as justifiable or not. Some described this practice as 'snooping' or 'stalking', and others perceived it as 'illegal'. Others describe the practice as being 'within the provisions of the law, but still ethically difficult' and were afraid it could affect the CWS' trust and credibility (Kvakic, Fineide & Hansen 2021).

This controlling practice may, however, also be related to the children's need for protection. The need for protection may occur abruptly, or actions may be intended as a preventive interaction. What will be decisive for safeguarding the child's rights if the intent is 'preventive', however, is that the child experiences absolute freedom of choice. In practice, the child must receive sufficient control information to choose how to approach digital platforms, knowing the practice of control.

Several of the respondents address the issue of 'protection of the child from the parents' approach,' e.g.:

> '(…). It is often also to talk about how one (the child) can protect oneself from one's parents' contact. This is due to the experience that the parents are very active in their approach to the child (R:162).'

As the quotation indicates, it appears difficult for biological parents to refrain from making virtual approaches toward their children. It is, however, unknown whether and to what extent attempts to reach an agreement with the parents have been made. However, the quote exemplifies what appears to be a preconceived notion of 'how parents act on digital platforms' within the CWS.

Another argument that is highlighted by the participants as to why they believe it is essential to control children's access to digital media is related to the CWS' assessment of the child's behaviour or emotional distress after, or in, what appears to be related to virtual contact with their parents, e.g.:

> 'Digital contact with parents often creates great unrest in children. The decisive factor is whether the parents support the placement and cooperate for the child's benefit. Often, they do not manage this and are negative in contact with the child (R:206).'

As the quote implies, changes in the child's behaviour or emotions are interpreted about the child's virtual contact with the parents. Earlier research has identified this as one of several outcomes (Beek & Schofield, 2004; Wilson et al., 2004), thereby possibly undermining the stability of the placement. However, other research has identified children's behaviour or emotions about strong contact regulations and suggests the changes should be interpreted as grief and longing for biological family (Simpson, 2013). Depending on the case factors, preconceived notions about how to understand changes within the child may lead to disproportional control and regulations, which, on the other hand, may increase the risk of maladjustment for the child.

Discussion

Based on an online questionnaire addressed to child welfare workers in Norway, this study reports on 196 child welfare workers' views regarding a child's engagement with digital platforms while placed in public care. The primary question to be answered was to what extent the child's navigation of digital platforms is (or should be) an element of the professional assessment when justifying the extent of contact regulation. Findings indicate a minimal consideration of the child's navigation on digital platforms when assessing the regulation of visitation rights between a child and his or her parents. This is the case even though the workers are users of digital platforms and thus have knowledge of their availability. Findings in this study highlight the need to address the potential effect of virtual visitations, as several of the respondents across different counties expresses an unfamiliarity with using

knowledge of virtual contact when assessing the necessity to regulate visitation rights when a care order is issued:

First, based on the Norwegian practice, where it is not unusual to decide on strong regulation of visitation rights between a child and his or her parents after a care order is issued (e.g., three to six meetings a year: Gerdts-Andresen & Hansen, 2021), it is essential to address potential conditions that may affect the virtual contact. How children and parents (or other persons from their original network) interact through digital platforms is potentially important information when assessing the necessity to regulate visitation rights. Previous research has found that parents with limited contact more often communicate through social media (Schofield, Ward & Young, 2009). Understanding virtual and physical visitations about each other will possibly strengthen the understanding of the child's need to be in contact with his or her parents (or network) after a care order is issued, allowing the CWS to establish context for positive interaction and an overview of the situation.

Second, an understanding of children's navigation on digital platforms may be essential to include the child's view in the decision-making processes. As presented in this study, the child's active participation in the decision-making process appears random. It indicates a low degree of involvement when the conversation is not initiated with the child. Understanding children as active participants in their development might impact how the CWS emphasizes and relates to the child when assessing what is in the child's best interest. The digitalization of the CWS changes the premises for communication between children and child welfare workers. In this landscape, digital platforms have enabled children to become active subjects in a new way, and digital society thereby challenges the present discourse of child welfare work.

Third, using caregivers to control the child's navigation on digital platforms raises ethical and juridical questions regarding the child's right to private life and family. Public caregivers must provide daily care for children placed in public care. The caregivers' responsibility is formally specified by the CWS, which may challenge the boundaries between privacy and public accessibility. While it is the caregivers' responsibility to provide day-to-day protection in the place of the parents, the CWS is responsible for assessing whether the child needs more robust protection, which may also involve regulation of virtual contact. Protecting children from their online life involves professionals' understanding of new communication patterns. Although digital platforms enable children to share experiences and feelings, the child's need for care and protection is essential in developing an excellent psychosocial environment and health. However, there is also the risk of overestimating the child's competence. Comprehending the child as an active subject does not exclude his or her need for protection and support in difficult situations.

Fourth, children's navigation on digital platforms seems to be a landscape that child welfare workers relate to only to a limited extent. According to Kvakic, Fineide & Hansen (2021), several Norwegian child welfare workers called for guidelines and a common understanding of how this work should be carried out related to the safe use of digital platforms and documentation of digital correspondence. In all areas of life, both online and offline, children must be protected from violence, abuse, negligence, and mistreatment. Along with guidelines and laws that protect children, appropriate technical provisions must be implemented while empowering children for self-protection in the digital society.

In summary, findings from this study highlight the need for a new understanding of the possible connection between virtual and physical visitations after a care order is issued. Protecting children involves professionals' understanding and assessments of new communication and socialization patterns in which children participate. It is not merely a question

of learning how to use digital platforms; it is also a question of professional development and new ways of working with children in public care as meetings between people increasingly take place digitally.

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The authors report no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

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