



## 'You get a completely different feeling' – an empirical exploration of emotions and their functions in digital frontline work

'Du får en helt annen feeling' – en empirisk undersøkelse av følelser og deres funksjon i digitalt førstelinjearbeid

Ida Bring Løberg & Cathrine Egeland

To cite this article: Ida Bring Løberg & Cathrine Egeland (2021): 'You get a completely different feeling' – an empirical exploration of emotions and their functions in digital frontline work, European Journal of Social Work, DOI: [10.1080/13691457.2021.2016650](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.2016650)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2021.2016650>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 19 Dec 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# 'You get a completely different feeling' – an empirical exploration of emotions and their functions in digital frontline work

## 'Du får en helt annen feeling' – en empirisk undersøkelse av følelser og deres funksjon i digitalt førstelinjearbeid

Ida Bring Løberg  and Cathrine Egeland

Work Research Institute, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

### ABSTRACT

In this study of how counsellors in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) experience digital frontline work, most informants agreed that digital interaction with clients produces a 'different feeling' – but what is this feeling? Based on interviews with frontline workers, the study unpacks this 'different feeling' as a form of alienation that occurs when digital interaction causes information to fragment, leaving counsellors working on segments of a case rather than 'the entire client'. The study findings indicate that emotions can influence the use of digital technologies and, conversely, that digital information can influence emotions in face-to-face interactions. Drawing a parallel between the literatures on emotional labour and street-level bureaucracies, emotions can create work pressures that frontline workers must cope with. However, the present findings show that emotions are not always a source of pressure, and that *both* emotions and their absence can create pressure at work. Digital interaction offers new forms of emotional support, and workers can use emotions to establish connections as potential resources in digital work.

### SAMMENDRAG



I denne artikkelen undersøker vi hvordan veiledere i den norske Arbeids- og velferdsforvaltningen (NAV) forstår det digitale førstelinjearbeidet i form av følelser og hvilke funksjoner følelser har i deres digitale arbeid. Veilederne ser ut til å være enige om at digital interaksjon med brukere gir 'en annen følelse.' Men hva er denne følelsen? På bakgrunn av intervjuer med medarbeidere i førstelinjen, definerer vi følelsen som en form for fremmedgjøring. Følelsen oppstår når digital interaksjon fragmenterer informasjon, hvilket innebærer at veilederne arbeider med segmenter av en sak fremfor 'hele brukeren.' Vi finner at følelser kan påvirke bruken av digitale teknologier, men også omvendt, at digital informasjon kan påvirke veilederens følelser i den tradisjonelle interaksjonen. Ved å trekke paralleller mellom emosjonelt arbeid og bakkebyråkratilitteraturen, kan følelser tolkes som ulike former for arbeidspress som førstelinjen må mestre. Våre funn viser imidlertid at *både* tilstedeværelsen av og mangel på følelser kan utgjøre et arbeidspress. Følelser kan dessuten være mer enn kun et arbeidspress.

### KEYWORDS

Digitalisation; feelings; emotional labour; street-level bureaucracies; resources

### NØKKEORD

Digitalisering; følelser; emosjonelt arbeid; bakkebyråkrati; ressurser

**CONTACT** Ida Bring Løberg  [Loib@oslomet.no](mailto:Loib@oslomet.no)  Work Research Institute, Oslo Metropolitan University, Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, 0130 Oslo, Norway

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Digital interaksjonen kan tilrettelegge for nye former for emosjonell støtte og medarbeidere kan aktivt bruke følelser for å skape tilhørighet, hvilket gjør følelser til mulige ressurser i digitalt førstelinjearbeid.

## Introduction

Frontline work in the public sector involves emotional labour. Frontline workers are exposed to all aspects of human life and emotion, ranging from the mother giving birth in hospital to the client who threatens to take his life at the social welfare office. In meeting service recipients and exercising discretion, their practical role in service provision makes them street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). Although emotions can have significant impacts on both the worker and the organisation – for example, in terms of burnout and turnover (Cho & Song, 2017) – this often seems to remain an implicit dimension of street-level work. Nevertheless, some authors have discussed emotions as work pressures that frontline workers must manage according to established ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1979). With increasing digitalisation, i.e. the deployment of digital information and communication technologies (ICTs), emotions have acquired a new relevance. According to the 2010 report *Digitizing Public Services in Europe: Putting Ambition into Action* prepared for the European Commission, digitalisation will make services more accessible, efficient, and transparent (Capgemini et al., 2010). By implication, this should make services ‘better’, but it remains unclear what impact ‘feelingless’ computers may have on emotional work. In particular, as new research suggests that emotions can also be understood as resources in street-level bureaucracies (Lavee, 2021), digital work raises issues about how computers mediate emotions and what their functions are in digital frontline work.

The present study explores counsellors’ emotional experiences of digital frontline work in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). Unlike other European countries, where labour and welfare agencies are often separate, NAV is a merger of Norway’s employment services, social services, and national insurance administration. The purpose of merging these agencies was to create integrated and user-friendly services (now online and available 24/7) as a single point of access to both municipal and government services. These frontline workers’ experiences of digital client interaction can be summarised by the idea that it produces a ‘different feeling’. While this feeling might be written off as a fluffy emotional category, it is exactly this ‘fluffiness’ that we sought to understand by probing NAV counsellor’ emotional experiences of digital frontline work and the function of those emotions in their digital work. While work is often characterised as either digital or non-digital, NAV combines traditional and digital service provision, and NAV counsellors use both text-based and video chat in their interactions with clients. This blurs the emotional space between ‘unfeeling’ technologies and feeling humans, making it an interesting setting in which to explore the role of emotions in digital frontline work.

In the next section, we outline the relationship between emotions and digital work in street-level bureaucracies. Following a description of the study material and methods, the results section first unpacks the ‘different feeling’ this work engenders as a form of alienation. We go on to show how the emotions associated with traditional ways of working can influence digital documentation, and vice versa. We conclude that both emotions and their absence can create work pressures, that digital interaction is not ‘feelingless’, and that emotions can serve as resources in digital frontline work.

## Emotional and digital work in street-level bureaucracies – contrasts or complements?

Frontline NAV workers are street-level bureaucrats on the same level as teachers, police officers, and nurses (Lipsky, 2010); what unites them is not professional background but the structural conditions of their work. One prominent feature of that work is how pressures of different kinds, such as limited

resources, inform their responses to various situations. These street-level bureaucrats develop coping strategies or rules of action to manage these pressures, which in turn shape service delivery. While the street-level literature tends to focus on dilemmas rather than emotions, it also describes potentially emotional situations such as meeting clients in vulnerable circumstances or being exposed to threats. These workers' dual role as helpers and controllers of public services adds to that pressure; street-level bureaucrats depend on interpersonal relationships to advocate for the client, but their work can also lead to alienation, as structural conditions make it difficult to control the final result (Lipsky, 2010). In practice, power and status in social relationships can introduce stressful emotions such as guilt or shame (Kemper, 1978).

In contrast, the emotional labour literature describes how frontline workers manage their emotions according to established 'feeling rules' that prescribe appropriate responses to emotional situations (Hochschild, 1979). As one example, social workers may 'turn off' their emotions in meetings, which suggests that shows of emotion to clients are considered inappropriate (Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015). Drawing a parallel with the street-level literature, emotions can be understood as a source of work pressure and managing those emotions as a form of coping. While this suggests that feelings are not resources but something that must be managed, there are exceptions. According to Guy et al. (2010), relational street-level work requires *both* emotional management and engagement. Lavee (2021) described emotions as informal personal resources used by frontline workers during client interactions to compensate for structural deficiencies such as a lack of formal resources or as an expression of professional values. Examples include different forms of emotional support, such as companionship or consolation, that exceed the expectations associated with their role (Lavee, 2021). Senghaas et al. (2019) argued that frontline workers seek to develop trust during the interaction with clients in order to acquire information and increase compliance. These perspectives on emotional resources contrast with the emphasis in the street-level literature on more tangible resources such as time and information. While street-level explanations are often considered structural, Collins (2005) argued that macro-level concepts can be expressed in terms of emotions at the micro level, and Scheff (1997) suggested that emotions can express wisdom we are unaware of or take for granted.

Descriptions of people as 'warm' and technologies as 'cold' (see, for example, Lange et al., 2019) distinguish emotional and digital work as contrasting elements of street-level bureaucracies. In fact, compassion is often used as an argument for the future of professions (Susskind & Susskind, 2015); as compassion cannot be automated, emotions play an important role as professional resources in digital contexts. While this argument has been criticised as idealistic – that is, not all public encounters are (or are required to be) compassionate – it raises the important question of how interpersonal relationships translate into digital settings (Susskind & Susskind, 2015). However, distinctions that frame practice as either digital or traditional are themselves problematic, as relations may be multi-modal (Vitalis & Duhaut, as cited in Buffat, 2015), involving interactions in both digital and traditional channels. On that basis, emotions are likely to be more complex than the distinction between 'warm' and 'cold' actors suggests. In fact, the transition from traditional to digital social work creates its own context and specialisation, embodying new practices, interventions, and forms of interaction with clients (López Peláez & Marcuello-Servós, 2018).

The existing evidence both supports and challenges the notion of 'feelingless' digital work. Digital technologies can reduce contextual information and may render social work less relational (De Witte et al., 2016; Parton, 2006). Equally, however, new opportunities for emotional interaction arise when there are people on both sides of the screen; for example, digital interactions such as text-based and video chat mimic traditional conversation. Digital interaction can also make frontline workers more available and can improve participation for clients with the relevant skills and resources (Fang et al., 2018; Zhu & Andersen, 2020). Derks et al. (2008) showed that digital interaction can make emotions more explicit but also less intense; while text-based interaction requires explicit formulation and so requires clients to 'label' their feelings, reduced non-verbal communication makes it harder to interpret ambiguous emotions. Digital interaction also facilitates new forms of emotional control, as less direct communication enables participants to hide their real emotions and allows them time to consider

their responses (Derks et al., 2008). This lessening of intensity may reduce work pressure but can also complicate matters, as unclear ‘feeling rules’ can also be a source of tension (Barlow & Hall, 2007).

In summary, the emphasis on emotion as something that must be managed invites research exploring whether emotions have different functions in street-level bureaucracies, perhaps even as resources in frontline work. Emotions gain in relevance when interaction moves from traditional settings to the digital space, as computer mediation can change how we express and understand emotions. In the existing literature, work tends to be treated as either traditional or digital; by placing greater emphasis on the multimodal nature of work, we can gain new insights into computer-mediated emotions that blur the line between ‘unfeeling’ technologies and human feeling.

## Materials and method

### Research context

For present purposes, we focused on local NAV offices, where frontline workers provide labour-oriented counselling to unemployed clients. NAV’s commitment to digital service provision has generated new forms of interaction in delivering multimodal services that integrate digital and traditional communication channels; for example, clients can chat online with their counsellors between traditional meetings. The channel strategy specifies how new communication channels should be used. In essence, this involves referring resourceful clients to cost-efficient (often digital) channels in order to free up time for counselling more vulnerable clients. Given these new communication channels, NAV offices have reduced manned opening hours, and clients must book an appointment in advance. While some clients have complex service needs (e.g. health issues, social problems), digital skills in the Norwegian population are considered strong overall (Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2016).

We refer here to two core NAV computer systems. *Arena* is an administrative case management system that enables counsellors to find information about the client and supports formal decision-making. The client has no immediate access to this system. The second system is *Modia*, an online platform that connects clients with their counsellors. The original version provided an overview of the client’s case and an electronic chat facility. A new version of Modia incorporates an activity plan – an agreement that regulates both parties’ responsibilities through activities (Breit et al., 2021). As well as allowing clients to chat with their counsellors, Modia now enables clients to register completed activities and to suggest new ones, ‘editing’ their own plan. During the Covid-19 pandemic, NAV also introduced video chat. While we conducted a few follow-up interviews to address frontline work during the pandemic, we have less data from this period, and the paper concentrates more on text-based digital interactions.

NAV compares to other street-level bureaucracies in the sense that frontline staff deliver services to the public while experiencing various structural work pressures (e.g. shortages in resources) that influence emotional dimensions of their work. In this context, the contrast between ‘cold’ technologies and warm feelings become manifest both as a street-level dilemma that must be coped with and, in professional terms, as a matter of how service ideals can be realised in a non-traditional context. Clearly, the incidents that trigger emotions in frontline work and the feeling rules that dictate their expression may be context-specific, e.g. in terms of available resources or workers’ professional background. At the same time, social scientists can explore the social cues, events, and conditions that trigger various emotions (Kemper, 1978). For that reason, we chose to emphasise the structural conditions of the street-level context of service provision.

### Data

The article draws on data from four years of fieldwork between 2017 and 2021 at two local NAV offices, collected as part of Front line innovations in the welfare services (INNOWEL). Most of the

informants were frontline workers who meet and follow-up with their clients through both traditional and digital channels. NAV refers to these workers as 'counsellors'. In total, we interviewed 36 informants in 42 interviews, including 27 counsellors. The data also include interviews with 9 local/frontline managers or workers with similar responsibilities, and these were used to recruit further informants. While the informants include both social workers and non-social workers, their work is regulated and all therefore share certain professional qualities, as well as common knowledge and values in many cases (Røhnebæk & Løberg, 2021; Susskind & Susskind, 2015). Nine of the informants were social workers; the non-social workers held other vocational qualifications or had completed higher education in other social sciences. Informants ranged in age from 23 to 66 years, and 30 of them were female.

Each interview lasted about an hour. Informants were asked about their experiences of digitalisation, the channel strategy, and various technologies. Other than in the follow-up interviews, we did not ask informants directly about emotions, which emerged instead as an inductive feature of the data. During our fieldwork, we also observed different elements of the frontline work such as assessments and meetings, and these were documented in fieldnotes. All interviews were transcribed and coded. Informed written consent was obtained from all informants.

## Analysis

Thematic analysis involves exploring patterns of meaning to identify themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the initial phase of familiarising ourselves with the data, we noted that digital frontline work gave the informants a 'different feeling' (in the words of the informants), and this inspired the initial thematic coding of emotions. The gradual transitions we identified between emotion, communication, and relations highlighted the 'fluffiness' of these issues and suggested that emotions intersect with other activities. This interpretive approach enabled us to describe and assign meaning to the target phenomenon and the complex and implicit dimensions of emotion requiring interpretation, including embodied expressions like compassion as expressed in close follow-up or similar engagement. As the idea of a 'different feeling' did not fit any pre-existing category, we adopted an inductive approach, allowing the data determine the boundaries for what constituted an emotional context.

In the first round of coding, we identified feelings expressed by the informants to map the subset of emotions that constituted the so-called 'different' feeling. However, it proved hard to code emotions during this round, as informants seldom expressed these explicitly. Rather than saying something like 'I am angry because of X', feelings often remained implicit and had to be interpreted. For example, one informant's account of a client with no teeth entailed an expression of surprise, highlighting the need for an interpretive approach. For that reason, we included descriptions of dilemmas that could be assumed to generate an emotional reaction (Kemper, 1978). We also included implicit emotional expressions that could be 'inferred from the degree of personal involvement, self-disclosure, language use, etc.' (Derks et al., 2008, p. 768). This approach enabled us to identify implicit and embodied expressions of emotion. Additionally, some text excerpts were assigned multiple codes because, for example, the margin between frustration and anger was small.

In the second coding round, we built on existing theory to explore the connection between emotions and frontline actions in order to assign meaning to the data. In particular, we identified the functions of emotions in this context, capturing both positive and difficult feelings. This emphasis on function served to confirm how emotions influence frontline actions and how the informants make active and advantageous use of emotions in their work. In contrast to the first round of coding, some data, such as general feelings about change processes, were omitted because they did not relate to emotional functions. The different codes were then merged into three larger themes: 'the different feeling' (descriptions of the feeling and its implications for frontline work); 'multimodal work' (how emotions associated with traditional and digital work interrelate); and 'resources' (how emotions are used as resources in client follow-up).

## Findings

In unpacking the ‘different feeling’, we show how fragmented information can create alienation in frontline work. We go on to outline some characteristics of multimodal services that explain how emotions associated with traditional and digital work can influence each other. Finally, we describe how frontline workers use emotions to show support and to position themselves within a digital interaction, turning emotions into resources for digital work.

### *The ‘different’ feeling*

A key idea advanced by these frontline workers was that digital work can produce a ‘different feeling’ as compared to traditional counselling. One informant explained what digital interaction lacks.

Quite simply, [it lacks] the person in front of you, so you get a completely different impression of them. The relationship becomes completely different for me, and for the client, when we have a face to relate to. A lot is lost when you don’t see the person. (I35)

Informants explained that digital interaction concentrates and fragments information, which diminishes the coherence of client representations. In contrast, traditional interactions provide richer information and information that the counsellor did not ask for, based for example on follow-up questions, immediate feedback, and unspoken information. One informant explained how traditional interaction provides unspoken information.

Perhaps we observe when we tell [them] things or explain things ... How do they react? What is their mood like, and how does it work? We get a much more coherent picture by seeing them face-to-face than when sitting behind a computer. (I31)

Counsellors said they often look out for non-verbal information and emotional expressions during the interaction, including facial expressions, body language, and disposition. Some informants claimed that this applies even to video communication.

There is something about making eye contact physically versus making it on a screen. (...) It’s partly about reading body language; you cannot read it in the same way from here [points to the chest] and up. Do they have fidgety fingers, right? If they are restless on their chair, this is not visible on a screen in the same way as it would be in a physical meeting room. (I27)

This fragmentation of information means that frontline workers deal increasingly with segments of the case rather than the complete client, which can be viewed as a form of alienation (Lipsky, 2010). Informants argued that digital interaction makes it harder to ‘see the entire person’, and this fragmentation can make it hard to identify the client’s core problem, as different segments are often interrelated. This alienation can ultimately lead to less meaningful work (Lipsky, 2010).

You get a completely different feeling when you meet a person. Perhaps they open up more about other things, other problems. Once, I met a woman in the reception area (...) and I discovered that she had a lot of debt. No one had discovered this before; it was because she showed up and was so frustrated. A couple of hundred thousand in debt. At that point, I felt it’s good to meet people (...). (I24)

There is also a relational element in this ‘different feeling’. Informants argued that it can be difficult to establish and sustain interpersonal relations online, and they feared that, in the long run, excessive fragmentation can turn clients from ‘persons’ into ‘a name and national insurance number’ (I19). While traditional meetings encourage trust, digital communication was described as ‘mechanical’ and ‘static’. One counsellor reflected on what she learned in school.

We often learned that we could bring a cup of coffee but that’s not possible [online]. (...) That’s why I wanted to become a social worker; I wanted to meet people face to face. (I24)

The coffee cup is a minor aspect of the encounter, but it invites the client to converse; it is less clear what the digital coffee cup would look like, which suggests that digital interaction can make for



unclear feeling rules. Contrary to the idea that emotions are seen as a source of pressure, informants sought out emotions during digital interaction, which implies that the absence of feelings can also be a burden.

[It's very difficult to find] the person in all of this. You are communicating through a ... Unless they use a lot of emojis and smileys and winking face emojis ... You still get no emotions out of it. It makes it a lot easier to be cynical in my job as a case worker, as if "This is what it's like—behave accordingly!" Had it been face-to-face, perhaps I would have made more compromises—met them halfway—because tragic fates make a greater impression on us. (I21)

While informants emphasised the different feeling, this should not be interpreted as disenchantment with digitalisation overall.

The mood is sort of ... It is almost a bit of a hallelujah atmosphere' (I21).

Instead, the counsellors were satisfied with digital work.

At times, digitalisation will distance people from each other, but if used properly, it can also bring them closer. But that depends on who we are helping and on their needs (...) We cannot adapt it for everyone; we must instead adapt it for the majority and figure out what to do with those we cannot accommodate. (I24)

This concern related to clients who lack technical skills or who cannot use digital channels for other reasons, such as language barriers or limited bureaucratic competence.

In summary, while reporting both positive and negative experiences of digital work, the counsellors continued to argue that digital interaction produces 'a different feeling'. This feeling often related to the fragmentation of information, which can make it hard to see the whole person. We contend that this involves working on segments of the case rather than on the client in their entirety, which is ultimately a form of alienation that can rob work of its meaning.

### ***Emotions in multimodal work***

The distinction between feeling humans and unfeeling technologies seems to be blurred in multimodal work, as emotions associated with traditional interaction can influence the use of digital technologies and vice versa. For example, documentation practices have implications for what counsellors share and learn from digital records. Our data suggest that these learning experiences often reflect an element of surprise, implying emotions that can range from compassion to horror.

Sometimes it is useful to see ... who it is we have in front of us. Are there any teeth missing and ... ? I believe this tells us something about the person we can lose sight of when everything is digital ... [For example,] I met a woman who only had stumps of her teeth left. [Experiences like these invite us] to provide different counselling and follow-up that relates to the situation. (I33)

In this example, the emphasis is on the client's memorable appearance, implying some degree of surprise on the counsellor's part. This kind of surprise often reflects a mismatch between online and face-to-face perceptions of the client, prompting an awareness that 'things are not always written in the system' (I34). That impression serves a function here, as the need for dental care can be indicative of more complex issues and alternative courses of action. The example is relevant for digital work because NAV requires even traditional counselling to be documented in digital records. This reflects the multimodal character of the work and how impressions from traditional settings can influence the use of digital technologies.

Of course, we have clients with whom something brutal has come up, perhaps in relation to suicide. I have thought a bit about how we formulate ourselves here in the minutes to put it the best way for the client—because the client sees it. And I don't feel like writing suicide or something similar straight out (...) because it is obvious that these things can be difficult to write down and record, and it's partly about not making it worse for the client too. (I31)



Traditional activities such as telephone conversations and meetings must be documented in written summaries in the chat function in Modia, which the client can access. Notes were previously written in a closed system: 'If you go back and read the comments, you just get ... Oh, ulcers!' (I27). The same informant explained what is lost because of this new practice.

You lose your own opinion about the client and perhaps ... warn the next one, who takes over, that he is weird, quarrelsome, and similar. (I27)

Transparent chat has created new awareness and new documentation practices, as the counsellors' formulations must now withstand client scrutiny. Informants expressed concern that messages and minutes in the chat could be shared with the clients' families and friends, on social media and in news media, making documentation stressful. However, the process also provides a sense of security because it enables them to record their work in case of complaints or lawsuits. Their documentation practices also encourage empathy, as counsellors wish to spare the client any additional pain by 'not making it worse'. Their compassion can lead to general formulations, which suggests that feeling rules develop within their documentation practices.

If something is very sensitive, then I might write it in a different way. For example, I had a client whose son was abused by a friend. I did not write it bluntly but more vaguely because it served no purpose for his case really either to write it in the minutes. [It's] written in other places ... (I34)

The need for considerate formulation is often greater in tough cases, suggesting an emotional dimension. Rather than being blunt, the informant might for example write 'traumatic incident' or refer, in other delicate instances, to 'health issues' (I34). Suspected drug abuse was one recurring example of a situation regarded as difficult to document. When information is stored in 'other' records (i.e. records that the client cannot see), other counsellors must read between the lines in open records. In some cases, information is also omitted outright from the client's records or retained in personal notes to protect both clients and counsellors. This undocumented information often includes the counsellor's personal perceptions of the client and thoughts about further follow-up.

While these examples illustrate how emotions in traditional interaction can influence the use of digital systems, other examples confirmed the reverse effect. The following instance illustrates how it can be hard to confront clients with information from digital records.

Sometimes, I have also had conversations in which I ask whether they have any hindrances. They can then inform us but may refrain ... then I find it hard to say "Well, I can see that you were followed up because of *this* and *that*. It was two years ago. How does it affect you now?" (I33)

The records contain information that can create emotional situations. For example, clients with a history of violence can be flagged as such in the system. This is likely to make some counsellors feel safer by allowing them to prepare protective measures, but it may induce fear in others. In this way, digital information can shape counsellors' perceptions of their clients.

I have perhaps felt that we can be somewhat biased when we enter meetings because of what we have read in advance, because of the documentation ... Some are perhaps very tough and hard when they type on the keyboard. But then you meet them, and they are very desperate, nice people who need help. (I36)

In summary, these findings suggest that emotions experienced in one channel can influence the use of another in multimodal work. For example, it can be difficult to document an emotional encounter in the form of summaries or to bring up sensitive issues from previous summaries during a client meeting. For that reason, it was important to understand how frontline workers use emotions to show support and to position themselves in a digital interaction.

### ***Emotions as resources in digital work***

While both emotions and their absence can generate work pressures, we focus here on how emotions can serve as resources for digital work.

I believe that feelings can be used as a resource in counselling. We are also people—not robots who work at NAV (...). To give a little of yourself, you do not have to elaborate in detail but just tell [them] “Yes, I understand your situation well, I have been in something similar” or “This happened with me” or ... (I27)

This example shows how personal experiences can create a common platform and serve as informal counselling resources. While self-disclosure is often an act of compassion, it can also be used to gain trust and compliance.

If we show some compassion and understanding for the situation they are in, then I believe we can get further in the follow-up work too. (I1)

While counsellors felt that digital interaction was less information-rich, they also noted that it can provide new insights and can help to establish social connections with certain groups (e.g. clients with social anxiety): ‘There’s a lot of people who find it hard to walk in that door’ (I1). Informants explained that text-based interaction can lower the threshold for some.

But then I have also had clients where we had good conversations in the office first, and I received messages in Modia afterwards like “All I said was a lie, I am sorry, but it was all a lie. I am not doing well at all”. (...) He drank and told me during the conversation that all was fine, no problem, that he had stopped and was in control and was so happy and so on. Then I received the message. (I26)

The personal meeting can be rough for some clients. This example shows how the exchange of emotional information can be easier in a text-based interaction. In that sense, digital expressions of emotion can help to counteract some of the alienation associated with the initial ‘different feeling.’ One informant suggested that clients can put up a front in personal meetings: ‘It’s almost as if it is easier to write exactly what they feel, think about their health and prospects, and work within a dialogue’. (I32).

Digital interaction also facilitates new forms of emotional support, and informants reported that text-based interaction makes them more available to their clients. Before NAV introduced digital chat, clients had to go through ‘intermediaries’ such as call centres or reception workers to reach their counsellor: ‘Before, one had to stand in line to get a meeting with a counsellor’ (I6). One informant described how digital interaction provides new opportunities for close follow-up.

It is easier for us to be on them. I have someone now who will be going through a tough training plan alone. And then I have said to her “Now, I will be on you. Now, I will send you messages almost every week to hear how the week of training has gone”. We have that opportunity now. (I31)

Digital interaction makes frequent contact and involvement easier, such as sending messages to clients. This interaction does not have to be static; our data confirm that counsellors adapt these digital interactions to clients’ individual needs. In one example, the informant used the activity plan to help a client with myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME).

I had a conversation with someone who had ME, and she told me that her illness affects her memory. Then I told her that she could use her plan to document what she is supposed to do or have done that week. Then she can document for me how she managed to vacuum, clean, and shop once a week. (I27)

This counsellor used flexible digital interaction to show understanding and involvement. Being flexible can be an act of compassion when someone finds it hard to express their emotions through digital channels. One informant explained how she schedules video meetings: ‘We get that it is a burden for some people (...) Then, I’m flexible with meetings, scheduling them for a time when they can perhaps have someone at home’. (I36)

In digital interactions, language is another important and sometimes implicit form of emotional expression. Frontline workers explained that text-based interaction demands simpler language, using more familiar words and less bureaucratic language.

That our writing is more people-oriented. That we don’t write so condescendingly. Because we are often told we are in NAV, it can be a bit didactic and bureaucratic. Instead of writing “work ability assessment”, for example, I

write that I will assess your job prospects. Then they realise “Oh, that’s what you mean” because “work ability assessment”—what the heck is that? (I7)

Counsellors can use language as an instrument to position themselves in relation to the client – for example, as controllers or helpers (Rønnebak & Løberg, 2021) – but it also has an emotional aspect. In digital chat settings, simpler language is more inclusive because it makes services more understandable and accessible, so positioning the worker closer to the client. When digital presence becomes too insistent – for example, when the interaction gets too personal or becomes unkind – counsellors can use bureaucratic language to restore client distance. One counsellor offered this example from the minutes of a chat.

Use more formal words like “During the conversation, you informed me about ...”. I don’t know if I learned that during training or if it is something I feel I must do. But if I notice or know that that the person I’m talking to has weak language skills, I try to write simpler, like “I said. You said”. But I feel it’s wrong ... not wrong, but we are writing [as representatives of] a public service. (I24)

Text-based interaction also involves explicit emotional expression and can facilitate both understanding and positioning. The interaction involves signs that connote emphasis of some sort, such as exclamation marks, caps lock and emotion icons (‘emoticons’), and this has sparked debate at the NAV offices. ‘We have spoken about it often; can you write a smiley face?’ (I24). While some informants find the use of emoticons unprofessional, others use them to invoke trust: ‘At least the young ones, they’re used to using eight smileys; if not, you’re grumpy’ (I24). These explicit expressions can also make it easier to understand the client. In fact, anger is an emotion that counsellors often recognise during chat.

We are not supposed to accept it when someone writes “fuck you” and almost flips us the finger. Now it is possible to use emojis in the activity plan and similar, so we get warning fingers and a lot of other things. (I27)

However, written communication can also lead to misunderstandings. For example, it may be difficult to determine whether an exclamation mark indicates that the client is excited or quick-tempered. In short, some signs can be ambiguous while others are frontline resources that prevent misunderstandings.

To sum up, emotions have functions and can serve as resources in digital frontline work. Digital interactions can engender emotions, and these can make it easier to understand the client. Digital interaction also enables new forms of emotional support by facilitating frequent contact and greater access to services. Language can also have an emotional undertone, and frontline workers can use this to position themselves in relation to clients during text-based interaction.

## Concluding discussion

In this exploration of frontline workers’ experiences of emotion in digital work and the functions of those emotions, informants suggested that digital interaction creates a ‘different feeling’ that relates to the fragmentation of information online. We have argued that this is a form of alienation, in which frontline workers address segments of a case rather than ‘the entire person’. While the missing segments often involve non-verbal communication, the contrast between feeling humans and unfeeling technologies becomes blurred in multimodal work. Our findings suggest that the emotions experienced by frontline workers in traditional interactions can influence how a case is documented in digital systems and, conversely, that information from digital records can influence traditional meetings. Our findings also call into question the one-sided notion of emotions as a source of work pressure. While this may be true in some instances, we found that emotions can also be deployed as resources in digital frontline work. In particular, digital interaction enables new forms of emotional support such as more frequent follow-up. Workers also used emotions position themselves during digital dialogue – for example, as helpers or controllers.

This study makes four useful contributions. First, it augments the existing empirical understanding of emotions in digital frontline work. Within our broad understanding of emotions, this inductive perspective structures the ‘fluffiness’ of the so-called ‘different feeling’, which we conceptualise here as alienation based on a subset of emotions pertaining to fragmentation and meaninglessness.

Second, while emotions are often depicted as work pressures, we argue that diminished emotions and unclear feeling rules are also potential sources of pressure in digital work. That said, digital work is not ‘feelingless’. Digital interaction may also involve explicit emotional expressions such as the use of emoticons or direct language because text-based interaction requires clients to articulate their needs. This aligns with Derks et al.’s argument that users must ‘label their emotions’ better in the absence of non-verbal information (2008, p. 779). The fact that counsellors can also make meaningful connections online counteracts the notion of alienation and the risk of meaningless work by challenging the common narrative of people as ‘warm’ and computers as ‘cold’, as there are people on both sides of the screen.

Third, rather than insisting that work is either traditional or digital, we emphasise multimodal work as a novel context that impacts the function of emotions in client interaction. When the boundaries between traditional and digital work are blurred, emotional boundaries also blur; in our data, this effect is manifest in documentation practices. New feeling rules form at the intersection between digital and traditional work, as counsellors use general terms to describe sensitive matters and seek to avoid placing personal perceptions on the digital record. While professional knowledge often balances subjective and objective matters (Abbott, 1988), NAV’s digital documentation seems to lean towards the ‘factual.’ This observation is not new (Parton, 2006), but it may prove influential if practice is understood to constitute knowledge.

Fourth, in line with Lavee (2021), we argue that emotions serve as resources in frontline work. Our findings show that workers use emotions as informal resources during client interaction by showing their feelings through expressions of understanding, support, or compassion that exceed their expected role. Like Senghaas et al. (2019), our findings confirm that frontline workers develop trust through digital interaction with clients to gain information and increase compliance. Our finding that emotions serve as resources in digital frontline work contributes to the street-level literature, which typically focuses on more tangible resources such as time and information, by showing that ‘softer’ resources can be impactful. As a means of securing information and compliance, these ‘soft’ resources can therefore have ‘hard’ economic impacts, which makes emotions more than mere ‘noise’ during implementation.

In conclusion, the findings presented here suggest that digital interaction demands new forms of professionalism to make practical use of technologies and to preserve relational values based on an awareness of the opportunities for emotional exchange online and appropriate practical training in digital interaction.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Centre for Work Inclusion at Oslo Metropolitan University; and the Research Council of Norway under grant 256706; Norges forskningsråd.

## Notes on contributors

*Ida Bring Løberg* is a PhD candidate in social work and social policy at Oslo Metropolitan University. Her research interests include digitalisation of public services, labour and welfare services, and street-level work. Ida has previous work experience from the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration (NAV).

**Cathrine Egeland**, Ph.D. is research professor at Oslo Metropolitan University. Her research focus on gender equality and diversity in research and higher education organisations, feminist science theory and consequences of digitalisation for work-family boundaries and work organisations.

## Data availability statement

Supporting data are not available; given the nature of this research, participants have not been asked to share their interview data.

## ORCID

Ida Bring Løberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1982-669X>

## References

- Abbott, A. (1988). *The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labor*. University of Chicago Press.
- Barlow, C., & Hall, B. L. (2007). 'What about feelings?': A study of emotion and tension in social work field education. *Social Work Education*, 26(4), 399–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470601081712>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Breit, E., Egeland, C., Løberg, I. B., & Røhnebak, M. T. (2021). Digital coping: How frontline workers cope with digital service encounters. *Social Policy & Administration*, 55(5), 833–847. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12664>
- Buffat, A. (2015). Street-level bureaucracy and e-government. *Public Management Review*, 17(1), 149–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.771699>
- Capgemini, IDC, Europe Rand, DTI & Sogeti. (2010). Digitizing Public Services in Europe: Putting ambition into action. 9th Benchmark Measurement. December 2010. [https://www.capgemini.com/consulting/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2017/07/Digitizing\\_Public\\_Services\\_in\\_Europe\\_\\_Putting\\_Ambition\\_into\\_Action.pdf](https://www.capgemini.com/consulting/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2017/07/Digitizing_Public_Services_in_Europe__Putting_Ambition_into_Action.pdf)
- Cho, Y. J., & Song, H. J. (2017). Determinants of turnover intention of social workers: Effects of emotional labor and organizational trust. *Public Personnel Management*, 46(1), 41–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091026017696395>
- Collins, R. (2005). *Interaction ritual chains*. Princeton University Press.
- De Witte, J., Declercq, A., & Hermans, K. (2016). Street-level strategies of child welfare social workers in Flanders: The use of electronic client records in practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 46(5), 1249–1265. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcv076>
- Derks, D., Fischer, A. H., & Bos, A. E. (2008). The role of emotion in computer-mediated communication: A review. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(3), 766–785. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2007.04.004>
- Fang, L., Tarshis, S., McInroy, L., & Mishna, F. (2018). Undergraduate student experiences with text-based online counseling. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 48(6), 1774–1790. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx111>
- Guy, M. E., Newman, M. A., Mastracci, S. H., & Maynard-Moody, S. (2010). Emotional labor in the human service organization. In Y. Hasenfeld (Ed.), *Human services as complex organizations* (pp. 291–309). Sage Publications.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3), 551–575. <https://doi.org/10.1086/227049>
- Kemper, T. D. (1978). Toward a sociology of emotions: Some problems and some solutions. *The American Sociologist*, 13(1), 30–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27702310>
- Lange, A.-C., Lenglet, M., & Seyfert, R. (2019). On studying algorithms ethnographically: Making sense of objects of ignorance. *Organization*, 26(4), 598–617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508418808230>
- Lavee, E. (2021). Who is in charge? The provision of informal personal resources at the street level. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 31(1), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muaa025>
- Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services* (30th anniversary expanded ed.). Russell Sage Foundation.
- López Peláez, A., & Marcuello-Servós, C. (2018). e-Social work and digital society: Re-conceptualizing approaches, practices and technologies. *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(6), 801–803. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2018.1520475>
- Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. (2016). *Digital agenda for Norge—IKT for en enklere hverdag og økt produktivitet* (St. mld. 27 (2015-2016)). <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-27-20152016/id2483795/>
- Moesby-Jensen, C. K., & Nielsen, H. S. (2015). Emotional labor in social workers' practice. *European Journal of Social Work*, 18(5), 690–702. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2014.981148>
- Parton, N. (2006). Changes in the form of knowledge in social work: From the 'social' to the 'informational'? *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(2), 253–269. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl337>

- Røhnebak, M., & Løberg, I. B. (2021). Kontroll eller samhandling? *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, 38(1-02), 73–85. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1504-3053-2021-01-02-07>
- Scheff, T. J. (1997). *Emotions, the social bond, and human reality: Part/whole analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Senghaas, M., Freier, C., & Kupka, P. (2019). Practices of activation in frontline interactions: Coercion, persuasion, and the role of trust in activation policies in Germany. *Social Policy & Administration*, 53(5), 613–626. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12443>
- Susskind, R., & Susskind, D. (2015). *The future of the professions: How technology will transform the work of human experts*. Oxford University Press.
- Zhu, H., & Andersen, S. T. (2020). ICT-mediated social work practice and innovation: Professionals' experiences in the Norwegian Labour And Welfare Administration. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2020.1740774>