

CHAPTER 9

Limits of Online Supervision in Social Work

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Introduction

In today's digitized society, *online supervision* has become an integral part of professional support in social work, offering flexibility and accessibility. However, as noted by Vrt'ová, Vaska (2022) and Lowe, Speer (2019), it also presents complex challenges affecting its quality and ethics.

Key limitations include *technical issues* like unstable connections (Coker et al., 2002; Gainor, Constantine, 2002) and the *loss of personal contact*, which impacts non-verbal communication and deeper emotional engagement. *Security concerns* regarding privacy and data are also significant.

Venglářová (2013) highlights that supervision, online or in-person, is a systematic process for professional development, requiring a safe, confidential space for self-reflection. Despite digital challenges, the core principles – promoting growth, enhancing competencies, and ensuring quality feedback – remain essential.

This chapter aims to identify and analyze these limitations, proposing strategies to mitigate them and enhance the effectiveness of online supervision in social work. It will cover technological, interpersonal, and ethical dimensions, offering a comprehensive overview of obstacles and solutions.

Technical Barriers and Their Consequences

One of the most significant limitations of online supervision involves *technical issues* that disrupt the flow and quality of communication. Unstable internet connections, low audio and video quality, delays, or signal dropouts lead to participant frustration and can cause the loss of crucial information, negatively impacting the dynamic of the supervisory process (Grames et al., 2022; Watters & Northey Jr., 2020). Technical problems also reduce the supervisor's ability to respond flexibly to the supervisee's needs and can lead to a loss of motivation and engagement.

Furthermore, the use of various digital platforms and tools requires specific *digital competencies* from participants, which are not always sufficiently developed. This deficit can cause uncertainty, stress, and a reduced ability to fully engage in the supervisory process, directly affecting its quality and outcomes (Grames et al., 2022).

Loss of Personal Contact and Nonverbal Communication

The *loss of physical contact* represents a fundamental limitation of online supervision. In in-person supervision, nonverbal communication – facial expressions, gestures, body posture, or tone of voice – plays a crucial role in understanding emotional states and building trust between the supervisor and supervisee (Anthony, 2015; Wong et al., 2018). In an online environment, however, the perception of these signals is significantly limited, leading to an increased risk of misunderstandings, reduced empathy, and weakened emotional connection.

This limited expressiveness can cause feelings of isolation, reduced motivation, and less engagement from supervisees, negatively affecting the depth of reflection and the quality of feedback (Baraka et al., 2021). Moreover, the limited possibilities for utilizing *creative techniques and aids*, common in in-person supervision, can reduce the therapeutic potential of online supervision (Lahad, 2000; Vaska et al., 2020).

The loss of personal contact also complicates the building of informal relationships and emotional connection, which are essential for creating a safe and confidential environment. In group supervision, these limitations can manifest as disrupted group dynamics and hampered member engagement (Baraka et al., 2021).

Challenges in Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Online supervision introduces new challenges in *maintaining clear professional boundaries*. The flexibility of place and time, which is one of the advantages of the online format, can simultaneously lead to working in inappropriate conditions, such as during vacations, illness, or outside standard working hours (Drum & Littleton, 2014; Stoll et al., 2020). This flexibility can blur the lines between work and private life, increasing the risk of burnout and compromising the psychological well-being of participants.

Technology can also create the impression of a less formal environment, which may lead to reduced respect for the supervisory process and changes in the dynamics of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Therefore, maintaining professional standards in an online environment requires conscious effort, clear rules, and consistent communication.

Health and Psychological Consequences

Prolonged exposure to the online environment also carries significant *health risks*. Extended screen time causes physical fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, and other health problems due to lack of movement and poor posture (Hollis et al., 2017; Nadan et al., 2020). Beyond physical ailments, emotional exhaustion and *burnout syndrome* are significant concerns that can arise from intense online interaction and increased cognitive load.

The risk of *dependence on digital technologies* and the online environment can disrupt the balance between online and offline life, negatively affecting sleep, social relationships, and the overall psychological well-being of participants (Haas et al., 1996; Yager, 2003). Therefore, it's crucial to monitor and manage online time and promote healthy habits in the digital space.

Ethical Issues and Security

Ethical aspects of online supervision are crucial for maintaining trust and openness in the supervisory relationship. Issues of confidentiality, personal data protection, and communication security are more complex in the online environment and require heightened attention (Grames et al., 2022; Palomares & Miller, 2018). The risk of cyberattacks, data misuse, or technical failures can lead to feelings of vulnerability and anxiety among participants, negatively impacting the quality of interaction.

The use of secure platforms, adherence to ethical standards, informed consent, and regular security training are essential to minimize these risks. Simultaneously, attention must be paid to supervisors' competencies in digital technologies and the ethics of online work.

Challenges in Engagement and Trust

The online environment can *reduce participant attention and engagement*, leading to superficial discussions and less productive reflection (Fisher et al., 2023). The loss of personal contact also limits the supervisor's ability to capture emotional expressions and subtle nuances, which are often key to understanding the supervisee's needs (Garms, 2020).

A lack of trust and feelings of vulnerability can lead to limited openness and authenticity in communication, negatively affecting the quality of supervision and its contribution to professional development.

Despite these limitations, online supervision remains a valuable tool that expands the accessibility and flexibility of support in social work. However, its effectiveness depends on the systematic development of digital competencies, regular supervision for supervisors themselves, an emphasis on ethics and security, and active reflection on practice.

Importantly, several of the identified limits should not be understood as absolute constraints of online supervision, but rather as context-dependent challenges that become particularly salient in the absence of adequate technical, relational, or organizational conditions.

The research question we seek to answer in this chapter is: What are the perceived limits of online supervision by supervisors and supervisees? Do supervisors' and supervisees' perspectives on limits differ? This chapter aims to identify and analyze these key limitations as perceived by both groups.

From the supervisors' accounts, several limitations of online supervision emerged, touching on technical, psychological, and interpersonal aspects. These limitations appeared across different supervisory experiences and influenced their perception of the effectiveness and quality of the supervision process in an online setting. The limitations of online supervision were divided into 9 categories: 1) Concerns and internal barriers, 2) Technical barriers, 3) Limitations of expressivity and creativity, 4) Limitations in perceiving nonverbal communication, 5) Trust, intimacy, and safety, 6) Limitations arising from the loss of physical contact, 7) Limitations of group supervision, 8) Limitations of the supervisory process, 9) Limitations in building the supervisory relationship. These categories are presented in three parts, as shown in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4. The limitations are presented based on the statements of *supervisors* and *supervisees*, which are not specifically marked in Figures 1–3. Otherwise, they are indicated as follows:

- If a limitation was identified only by supervisors, it is visually distinguished in the text (by a frame).
- If a limitation was described *only by supervisees*, it is highlighted in *bold*.

1 . Concerns and Internal Barriers

This category includes limitations of online supervision that stem from the internal feelings, attitudes, and concerns of supervisors and supervisees toward the digital environment. These barriers are often related to initial uncertainty about the online setting, the lack of prior experience, and psychological obstacles that may affect not only the participants' comfort but also the quality of the supervisory relationship and the very process of reflection. These internal barriers may lead to lower motivation and openness, which in turn affects the quality of collaboration (Aafjes-van Doorn et al., 2021; Feijt et al., 2020). Such barriers can include fear of the unfamiliar online space, concerns about losing personal contact – which is often seen as essential for building trust – personal discomfort in the online environment, and a preference for face-to-face meetings. Another significant limitation is the resistance of supervisees toward the online format and their overall readiness to engage in an online setting. This readiness involves not only technical skills but also the ability to reflect effectively in a virtual environment. In addition, some professionals feel uncertain when using new technologies and fear that the online setting might diminish their professional competence (Simpson & Reid, 2014).

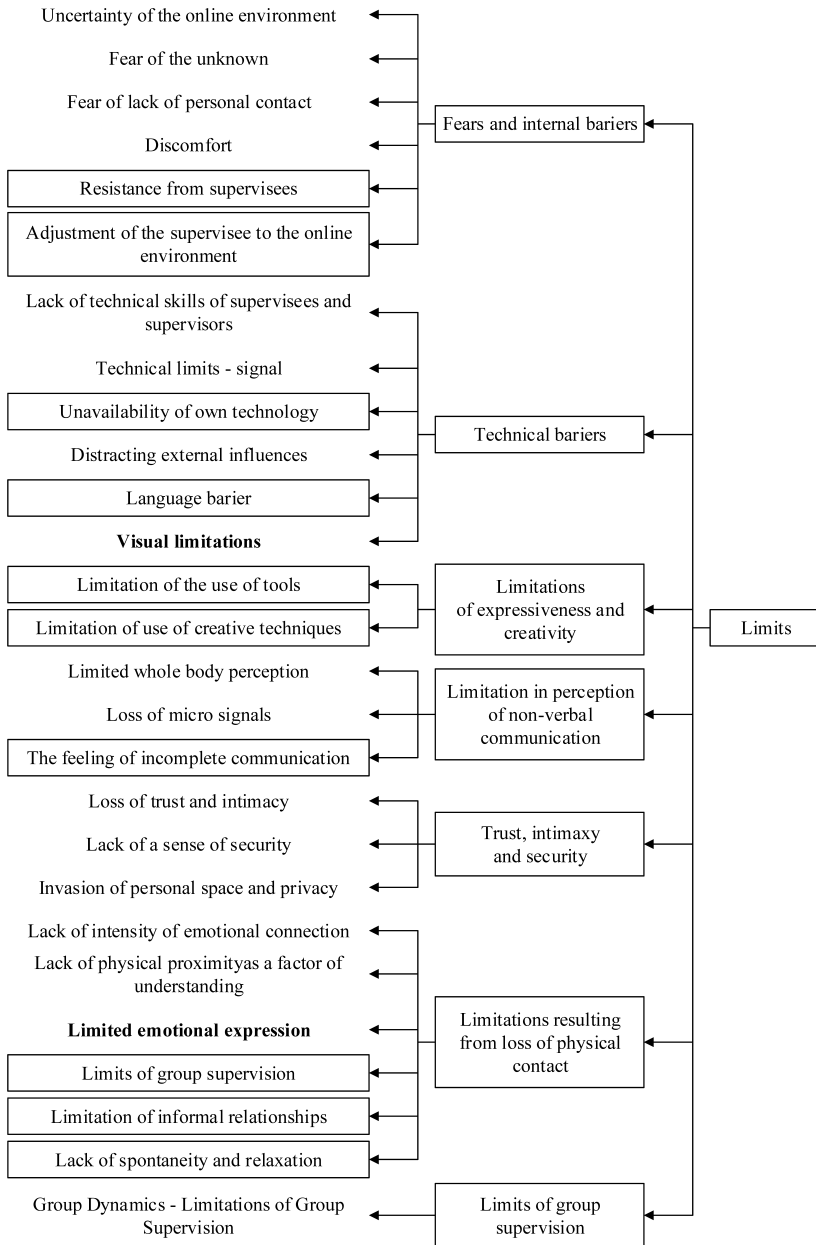


Figure 1: Primary Limitations of Online Supervision

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 1 illustrates the main limitations of online supervision identified in this study. Out of the nine categories of limitations, the figure presents seven selected ones. These categories are displayed in the diagram on an equal hierarchical level, suggesting that none of them has a dominant impact. A specific category, “Limitations of Expressivity and Creativity” (framed in the diagram), stands out in that it was mentioned exclusively by supervisors, while the other categories were reported by both groups of participants. The diagram thus provides an overview of the main areas of constraint in online supervision that emerged from the data analysis. These categories are explored in more detail in the following sections.

Uncertainty in the Online Environment

Some supervisors and supervisees described their initial uncertainty related to technical aspects and the overall transition to an online format. This uncertainty was expressed through concerns about technological instability as well as the unfamiliar nature of the interaction. As one supervisor (S10) explained: “Well, it’s the technical world, so all sorts of issues came up there. At first... It didn’t really make me nervous, because I was already used to being online.” Similarly, the participant P4 noted: “It was something completely different. For me, it wasn’t, I don’t know how to put it, not that it wasn’t credible, but it just felt very different. I didn’t give it the same weight, you know.” This testimony illustrates the need for adaptation to the digital environment, showing that the shift to online supervision was not intuitive for everyone.

Fear of the Unknown

For many supervisors, the online space was associated with concerns stemming from a lack of prior experience and the inability to predict how interactions would unfold in a digital format. As the supervisor S11 explained: “I was kind of afraid of it, because I couldn’t really imagine what it would be like.” S4 adds: “I had to learn to trust it.” She also admits: “I feel safer, because I don’t know... I think there might be risks in the online space, but I don’t know what they are. It’s just that not-knowing.” P14 reflected: “In the beginning, it was like – you didn’t really know what it was exactly, what you were getting into, so there was some fearfulness, or maybe we just didn’t

quite understand it. But later we realized what it was about, what it meant, and that we could express our needs or share our knowledge there, and complement each other.” These accounts highlight the psychological barrier of uncertainty and mistrust toward the new format, which could affect the quality of the supervisory relationship and the ability to reflect openly during the process.

Fear of Losing Personal Contact

A recurring theme was the concern about losing face-to-face contact, which supervisors considered an important factor in building trust and mutual understanding:

“I was afraid that I would miss that contact.” (S11)

“I was worried about the lack of physical contact, but later I came to understand it.” (P4)

The absence of in-person presence was perceived as a barrier to creating an intimate and supportive environment, which is a key prerequisite for effective supervision.

Discomfort in the Online Space

Some supervisors perceived the online format as less suitable for their professional practice. They expressed a personal preference for in-person contact and reported a lower level of comfort when conducting supervision:

“The online space doesn’t really suit me as such.” (S1)

“For me, the online environment is not exactly my favorite.” (S1)

“So I prefer face-to-face contact, and that was something I missed.” (P4)

These attitudes suggest that the online setting may not be suitable for every supervisor – not only due to technical reasons but also because of personal preferences and individual work styles.

Resistance from Supervisees

Supervisors observed that some supervisees showed resistance to the online format of supervision. This resistance was expressed through rejection of

online contact, lack of trust in the effectiveness of the process, and feelings of artificiality. S7 describes: “*With resistance, like ‘online will be strange,’ and there was one particular social worker with whom I had a very good experience in person, but for her it was completely unacceptable.*” Such attitudes could significantly affect the quality of interaction and the course of supervision, despite previously positive experiences of the supervisees.

Supervisee Readiness for the Online Setting

Supervisors pointed out that the readiness of supervisees for online supervision played an important role. Readiness in this sense refers not only to technical proficiency but also to the ability to work reflectively in a digital environment – “*the supervisee is used to the online format*” (S8). The effectiveness of online supervision therefore depends on the individual competencies of supervisees and their attitudes toward this form of supervision.

2. Technical Barriers

Another key area of limitations in online supervision concerns technical barriers. This category includes obstacles directly related to equipment, internet connectivity, and participants’ digital skills. These barriers can be multi-factorial, ranging from the individual level of digital literacy to issues with the reliability of technology and the environment in which online supervision takes place. Their presence may lead to communication breakdowns, reduced comfort, and ultimately limit the potential of the supervisory relationship and the reflective process. Specifically, technical problems such as weak internet connection, software failures, insufficient equipment, or low digital literacy can significantly disrupt the course of online supervision or therapy. According to the literature, these barriers are particularly common among clients from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Andersson et al., 2014; Stoll et al., 2020) or among older participants (Backhaus et al., 2012). The following limitations illustrate the diverse aspects of technical barriers encountered by both supervisors and supervisees in online settings.

Lack of Technical Skills among Supervisees and Supervisors

This limitation refers to the insufficient level of digital literacy and technical skills among participants in online supervision, which poses a significant obstacle to effective communication and the use of digital tools. As S2 noted: *“The great unpreparedness of social workers and organizations for the online world manifested in minimal IT skills, requiring very detailed, step-by-step instructions, such as clicking on the red or green icon.”* P2 added: *“So, this lady is also older, and she herself admitted that this form of supervision basically does not suit her, as she is not really skilled in technical matters.”* These accounts show that the lack of preparedness often concerned even basic IT skills, which required very detailed and gradual instructions. At the same time, age proved to be an important factor influencing both the comfort and ability to use the online supervision format effectively, with some older workers preferring in-person meetings precisely due to their lower level of technical competence.

Technical Limitations – Internet Connection

This limitation focuses on problems related to the quality and stability of the internet connection, which can negatively affect the course of online supervision.

“For me the limitations are mainly the technology, whether the connection will work, you know... whether at that time we’ll actually have a stable connection.” (S10)

“...sometimes the voice would cut out, and I didn’t know if they could hear me or not, or if they could see me properly.” (P4)

“So it was also freezing up on us.” (P7)

These accounts point to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the internet connectivity, which can lead to interruptions in transmission, loss of sound and image, and consequently disrupt the flow of communication. Such technical problems hinder mutual understanding and may increase frustration for both parties in the supervisory relationship.

Lack of Access to Equipment

This limitation highlights barriers related to limited access to general and dedicated technical equipment for online supervision within the work environment of supervisees. S10 describes: *“For example, not every organization provides the necessary equipment. Sometimes the person works on their own computer, but there are organizations where there is just one computer, maybe in the director’s office or somewhere similar, and that in itself creates a barrier. Yes, in the hierarchical state institutions, just the fact that I have to sit at a computer that belongs to the director...”* This testimony illustrates complications arising from shared equipment in hierarchical institutions. The supervisor’s concerns relate not only to the potential lack of privacy but also to the psychological discomfort associated with using the equipment of superiors, which can negatively influence openness and comfort during supervision.

Disruptive External Factors

This limitation concerns unpredictable and uncontrollable external factors that interfere with the course of online supervision and reduce participants’ concentration. S10 describes a situation when construction work was taking place during an online session: *“They were cladding our house, insulating, and drilling at times when they shouldn’t have, for example. I had a scheduled online meeting, and the drilling was so loud that I had to keep turning my microphone off. These are just external factors that no one asks you about – they just happen, right in your face.”* P9 adds: *“When I have online supervision in my room, there are distracting elements – for example, the dog runs in.”* These accounts illustrate how unexpected environmental noises, such as construction work or the presence of pets, can seriously disrupt online meetings, complicate communication, and require frequent interruptions, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the supervisory process.

Language Barrier

This limitation refers to communication obstacles arising from insufficient knowledge of foreign languages, particularly English, in the context of using online communication platforms. S2 points out the problem: *“Because there*

was also a language barrier – all these Zooms and I don't know what else are primarily in English.” This statement, noted only by the supervisor, emphasizes that many commonly used online platforms for videoconferencing and screen sharing primarily have English interfaces, which can pose a significant barrier for participants with limited English proficiency. This barrier subsequently affects the fluency and quality of online supervision.

Visual Limitations

This limitation concerns the restricted possibilities for visual sharing and demonstration of materials, documents, or spaces in the online environment compared to in-person meetings. P2 describes: “For example, when I needed to solve something – say, show a document on the topic, or ask if it was correct – it was very difficult to show it properly through the screen. What bothered me most was that I couldn't demonstrate it clearly – whether a document or a space – because with online communication, it just isn't possible.” This testimony illustrates that online communication makes direct visual sharing and demonstration more difficult, which can be an obstacle for the supervisee in understanding or consulting about specific materials or spaces. Showing a document or physical space, which is simple in face-to-face interaction, becomes complicated or even impossible online.

3. Limitations of Expressivity and Creativity

This category focuses on the limits of online supervision related to restrictions on nonverbal expression, the use of physical tools, and the application of creative techniques compared to in-person formats. The online environment may hinder spontaneous expressivity, restrict interaction with physical objects, and require the adaptation or replacement of traditional methods, which can influence the depth and dynamics of the supervisory process. Online supervision often limits the use of creative and interactive techniques that are more natural in face-to-face contact. Supervisors note that it is more difficult to engage supervisees in creative activities such as working with objects, drawing, or group games, which can reduce the effectiveness of certain approaches (Havlik et al., 2023; Grant et al., 2012). The analysis further revealed that these limits on expressivity and creativity were noted exclusively by the supervisors.

Limited Use of Physical Aids

This limitation highlights the reduced possibility of using physical aids that supervisors normally employ in in-person supervision to support reflection and understanding. *“I usually use props, and in online supervision, that simply wasn’t possible. The best I could do was write or draw something and show it, or ask the person to write it down themselves... so that’s one of the differences.”* S11 *“For example, therapeutic cards cannot be used in online supervision – or post-it notes, which I would normally hand over to the supervisee with ‘Here you go, you can take these home and reflect on them... and the “vibe”.”* S1 These accounts show that the online environment restricts the spontaneous use of tangible tools such as therapeutic cards or post-it notes, which can support visual and kinesthetic learning and help create a particular atmosphere. Supervisors must limit themselves to digital alternatives, which may not necessarily have the same effect. This restriction to digital substitutes can reduce creativity and spontaneity in the supervisory process and limit the supervisee’s opportunities for expression and processing experiences.

Creative Techniques Limitations

This limitation concerns the reduced flexibility and range of possibilities when applying various creative techniques in online supervision. *“Most of the time, in the online setting, I don’t have enough time to work creatively. What I usually use in online supervision is imagination and visualization.”* S3 As S5 adds: *“That limits certain techniques, which then have to be replaced by others.”* These statements suggest that the online format may restrict the time and space for spontaneous and more complex creative methods, so supervisors often have to adapt and rely on techniques that are more feasible in the online environment, such as imagination and visualization. However, this can narrow the range of approaches used.

4. Limitations in Perceiving Nonverbal Communication

One of the most significant limitations of online communication is the loss or reduced quality of nonverbal signals such as facial expressions, gestures, body language, and eye contact. This absence can lead to misunderstand-

ings, reduced empathy, and greater difficulty in recognizing the client's emotions (Simpson & Reid, 2014; Aafjes-van Doorn et al., 2021; Sucala et al., 2013). This category of limitations in online supervision therefore focuses on the restricted ability to perceive nonverbal signals compared to in-person interaction. The digital environment often narrows the field of vision, limits the perception of the whole body, and makes it harder to notice subtle micro-signals that are important for fully understanding emotions, attitudes, and the overall context of communication. Such restrictions can leave the interaction feeling incomplete and can affect the depth of empathy and mutual understanding in the supervisory relationship.

Limited Perception of the Whole Body

This limitation highlights how the narrower field of vision in online communication restricts supervisors' ability to observe the supervisee's full body language.

"I couldn't see the whole person, not even their face properly. I only saw them very small on the screen, and I never had a full picture." (S11)

"With online supervision, you only see a fragment – maybe just the face. You don't see the whole body and how the person moves while speaking." (P8)

These accounts illustrate that supervisors often perceive only a small portion of the supervisee's body – most often just the face, and even that in a reduced, fragmented way. This makes it impossible to notice important nonverbal signals that would be clearly visible in person, such as posture, gestures, or leg movements, which may reveal emotions and inner states.

Loss of Micro-Signals

This limitation refers to the difficulty of fully perceiving subtle nonverbal cues ("micro-signals") that are essential for deeper understanding and for checking mutual attunement in communication. As S3 explains: *"Checking for understanding – reading those micro-signals that assure us we are truly connected – is much more challenging online, because what we see are basically talking heads, like something out of Harry Potter."* P15 adds: *"Facial expressions, signs of nervousness – for example, someone saying 'just*

a second, I'll close the window.' In supervision you normally notice whether a person is fiddling with a pen, shifting in their seat, or what's happening in their environment. In the online world we lost all that and were left with faces switching on and off, one after another, just like we are now. So, in that sense we were really deprived." These testimonies clearly show that the online environment limits the ability to read subtle facial expressions, small gestures, nervous movements, or interactions with surrounding objects. Micro-signals, which are easily observable in face-to-face contact, are often lost online, making it significantly harder for supervisors to fully grasp the supervisee's experiences and emotional states.

A Sense of Incomplete Communication

This limitation concerns the subjective sense of incompleteness and narrowing of communication in the online environment, arising from the restricted perception of nonverbal signals and broader context. As S4 puts it: *"I don't just see the reactions – here I only see a fragment, just a slice of the whole picture..."* S9 elaborates: *"When we basically lose those means of perceiving the environment, I think the whole interpersonal communication is narrowed, and thus it can be more focused."* These accounts suggest that the absence of full nonverbal cues and the wider context create the feeling that online communication is merely a "cut-out" of reality, where important information may be missing. While some view this narrowing as an opportunity to focus more on verbal content, most experience it as a loss of crucial aspects of human interaction.

5. Trust, Intimacy, and Safety

This category addresses the limitations of online supervision related to building and maintaining trust, intimacy, and a sense of safety in the digital environment. The absence of physical presence and shared space can affect perceptions of authenticity, vulnerability, and privacy – key factors for an effective supervisory relationship and open reflection. Building trust, intimacy, and a sense of safety is more challenging in online supervision, particularly if participants lack privacy or have concerns about data security. The sense of "distance" created by the screen can make openness and deeper sharing more difficult (Grant et al., 2012; Reese et al., 2016).

Concerns about breaches of confidentiality, lack of intimate space, and diminished safety may pose significant obstacles in the process of online supervision.

Loss of Trust and Intimacy

This limitation reflects supervisors' concerns about the fragility of trust and intimacy in the online setting, and the challenges of creating a safe and open space for supervisees.

"I would genuinely worry that in the online space, issues of trust could be misused very quickly and easily." (S1)

"What's missing is that intimate space. When I enter the space in person, I can see how it is secured. Online, I never know if someone might walk in, if the space is really private – and that was an issue we often encountered." (S4)

"Overall, I just don't have much trust in these technologies." (P16)

"In employment offices, it was really hard to find privacy – to make sure they were alone in the room during supervision." (S5)

These testimonies express concerns about the fragility of trust in online environments and the uncertainty of securing an intimate and undisturbed space for supervision, especially on the supervisee's side. Fears include potential breaches of confidentiality and the inability to verify whether the environment is truly private and safe.

Reduced Sense of Safety

This limitation addresses the reduced feeling of safety that some supervisors and supervisees report in online settings compared to in-person contact.

"I couldn't really see if they were safe – I had to trust that they were." (S4)

"I still feel safer outside the online space." (S4)

"They didn't feel safe enough in the online environment." (S5)

"And then there's cybersecurity – I feel completely lost with it." (P17)

"It all felt rather superficial, and I don't think I managed to create a real atmosphere of safety where people would feel able to speak more authentically about themselves." (S8)

The quotations illustrate that the absence of physical presence can create uncertainty about the supervisee's environment and its safety. Supervisors have to rely on verbal assurances and cannot visually confirm whether the space is truly private and undisturbed. This lack of visual control may contribute to a diminished sense of safety and make it more difficult to foster the atmosphere of trust needed for deeper reflection.

Intrusion into Personal Space and Privacy

This limitation concerns the potential intrusion into the supervisee's personal space and privacy, especially when online supervision takes place in their home.

“When the person is at home, it feels like stepping into their personal space. And then the question is how to deal with it – what if they say, for instance, that they're at work, or at home?” (S8)

“I think there's also an issue of intrusion into privacy. Like when someone suddenly knocks on the door, or appears on screen out of nowhere. How is that supposed to be secured?” (P17)

These accounts suggest that online supervision in a home setting can be perceived as a violation of the supervisee's privacy and an encroachment on their personal space. Uncertainty about who might be nearby and the possibility of interruptions (such as someone knocking on the door) can create discomfort and reduce the sense of safety and confidentiality.

6. Limitations Resulting from the Loss of Physical Contact

This category addresses the limitations of online supervision that stem from the absence of physical presence and direct contact between supervisor and supervisee. The loss of physical closeness can affect the intensity of emotional connection, make nonverbal understanding more difficult, and restrict the development of informal relationships that contribute to overall ease and comfort in the supervisory process. This absence may lead to feelings of detachment and reduce the capacity for empathic responses. The lack of physical presence can also weaken the sense of support, belonging, and safety – elements that are especially important when working with sensitive or challenging topics. Physical distance further reduces the possibility

of immediate intervention if needed (Reese et al., 2016; Zaheer & Munir, 2020).

Weakened Emotional Connection

This limitation refers to the reduced sense of emotional connection and empathy experienced in the online setting compared to in-person contact.

“There were moments when I felt sad, sometimes even cried. In person, someone would hand you a tissue right away. Online, it wasn’t possible. My supervisor just watched me cry or express my emotions, and it felt strange in that moment.” (P5)

“There’s also a physical, almost physiological aspect to being in the same space – the interpersonal contact is so much more intense.” (S3)

“Having that person physically there really matters, especially when it’s about emotional connection. When tough issues come up and it’s all online, it’s much harder for me to bear it than when I’m sitting in the same room with the person.” (P17)

These testimonies show that the absence of physical presence makes it harder to express support and empathy spontaneously in emotionally demanding situations. Simple physical gestures that would naturally convey compassion in person are missing online, which can lead to a sense of distance and a diminished emotional bond.

Lack of Physical Closeness as a Factor in Understanding

This limitation points to the loss of nonverbal signals and the feeling of mutual understanding that is often mediated by physical closeness.

“In a normal conversation, I can feel understood simply by being there with you and sensing that you feel it too.” (S3)

“You don’t feel the same support – like maybe they would hold your hand, or just that personal presence. When you’re really struggling, it can be enough just to see a compassionate look or a nod.” (P11)

These quotations highlight how physical closeness in face-to-face interaction contributes to the nonverbal expression of understanding and support, which is restricted in the online setting. The absence of gestures, empathet-

ic glances, and a tangible physical presence makes it harder to convey that the supervisor genuinely understands and resonates with the supervisee's experience.

Limited Expression of Feelings

This limitation concerns the reduced ability of some supervisees to fully and authentically express their feelings and emotions online compared to in-person settings.

“Maybe some people, when talking through a device, simply can't express their emotions in the same way they would if they were speaking face to face.” (P6)

This testimony suggests that the technological mediation of communication may pose a barrier for some people when it comes to expressing emotions. It may stem from the lack of nonverbal cues, the greater sense of distance, or simply discomfort in sharing personal feelings through a screen. This can result in less deep and less authentic interactions within the supervisory process.

Reduced Informal Relationships

This limitation highlights the restricted opportunities to develop informal connections and build personal rapport between supervisors and supervisees in the online setting.

“On a human level, I missed meeting some of those people in person.” (S5)
“The downside is that after in-person supervision, you might spend 20 minutes chatting over coffee about random things not related to supervision. Online, everyone just says goodbye, thanks, and logs off. It's rare that we'd stay and talk a bit longer. That human, closer contact is lost.” (S5)

These accounts suggest that online environments limit spontaneous social interactions that often occur before or after in-person meetings, such as informal conversations over coffee. Such interactions contribute to building stronger personal relationships and reinforce human connection, which are considerably restricted in online supervision.

Missing Spontaneity and Relaxation

This limitation refers to the reduced spontaneity and sense of ease in online supervision compared to in-person sessions. It was noted only by supervisors.

“I think there’s simply more room for spontaneity and ease in face-to-face meetings.” (S12)

This testimony suggests that the online environment tends to feel more formal and less relaxed, which may restrict spontaneous exchanges and interactions that add to the depth and dynamic of in-person supervision.

7. Limitations of Group Supervision

This category focuses on the specific challenges that arise when group supervision is conducted online rather than in person. Online group supervision faces unique difficulties, such as technical issues, problems maintaining attention, weaker group dynamics, and limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction. These restrictions primarily concern the disruption of group dynamics and the difficulty of engaging all members in the discussion, which can affect the overall effectiveness and benefit of the group supervision process. Participants may feel less involved, and certain group processes are difficult to translate into the online format (Grant et al., 2012; Havlik et al., 2023; Zaheer & Munir, 2020).

Group Dynamics – Limitations of Group Supervision

This limitation highlights the challenges of managing group dynamics and interactions in the online environment.

“I cannot imagine group supervision online. It would be very, very interesting – whether the supervisees would sit in a circle somewhere and I would only be on the monitor, or all of us would be online. Honestly, I just can’t quite picture it.” (S11)

“A big limitation of group supervision online is that when people want to engage – say there are ten of us – I take a breath to speak, but someone else starts talking, so I stop. Then the topic shifts somewhere else. In person,

I feel that others notice when someone wants to say something, and they circle back to it.” (P5)

These accounts illustrate the difficulties of transferring traditional group dynamics into the online setting. Supervisor S11 voices doubts about whether group supervision can be carried out effectively online. Participant P5 points to the challenges of timing and participation in larger online groups, where it can be harder to “get a word in” and maintain focus on one’s contribution compared to in-person supervision. Such limitations may lead to uneven participation and a reduced sense of belonging within the group.

8. Limitations of the Supervisory Process

This category brings together the limits of online supervision that directly affect the flow and dynamics of the supervisory process. Technical disruptions, distractions from the home environment, and the reduced possibility for spontaneous interaction can interfere with the smoothness and depth of supervision. These limitations involve difficulties in establishing contact and attunement, altered ways of working with silence, a tendency toward greater directiveness and structure on the supervisor’s part, increased pressure to achieve goals within limited time, easier loss of attention for both parties, and a different perception of time passing in the online environment. Moreover, some participants find it harder to sustain attention and engagement during online sessions (Pelling & Renard, 2010; Reese et al., 2016). These factors can affect the depth of reflection, the spontaneity of interactions, and the overall effectiveness of the supervisory relationship.

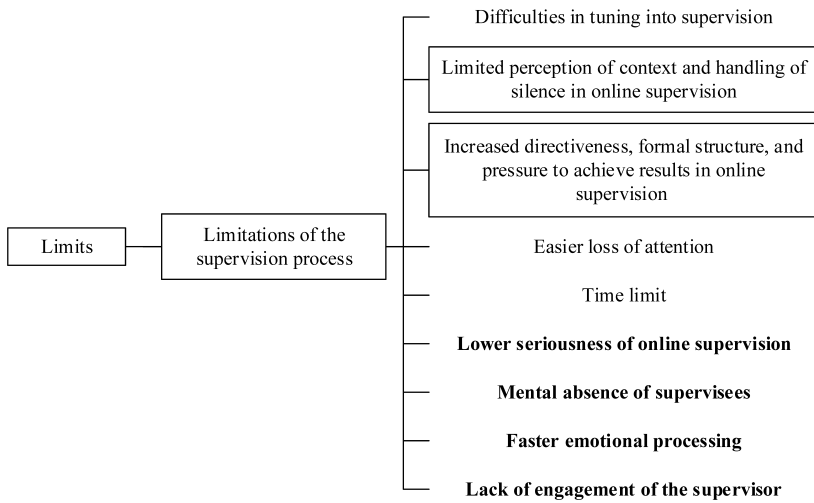


Figure 2: Category: Limitations of the Supervisory Relationship

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Figure 2 presents the processing of limitations in online supervision that fall under the eighth category, Limitations of the Supervisory Process. The figure structures specific obstacles and challenges that arise directly during the course of supervision in the online environment. Several of these limitations were identified in the responses of both groups of participants – supervisors as well as supervisees. The figure highlights how the constraints of the online environment affect key aspects of the supervisory process, such as communication, reflection, empathy, and the overall effectiveness of interventions.

Difficulty in Attuning to Supervision

In the online setting, attuning to the supervisory process is more challenging and takes longer, since the rituals and atmosphere of in-person supervision are absent. The lack of an initial physical greeting and the journey to the meeting place – elements that in face-to-face supervision help participants mentally prepare and establish first contact – is perceived as a limitation. Supervisor S1 expressed it as follows: “*Maybe it’s the atmo-*

sphere. For me, even the journey to supervision matters – when I travel to a facility, I’m already thinking about what will happen, how it will go, what we’ll do. It’s a way of mentally attuning myself to the session.” (S1) Supervisee P16 pointed to the absence of a physical welcome: “*That first greeting is always tactile in some way – a handshake, a hug, those small gestures that break the ice at the beginning. I missed that in the online meetings.*” (P16) This difficulty in attunement often extends the time needed for supervisor and supervisee to align and establish an effective working relationship. As supervisor S3 noted: “*It takes me longer (to get into the right frame of mind), which is frustrating, because normally I use that time in teams or groups to work interactively. But in a one-hour online supervision, I usually end up using a different model.*” (S3) Supervisee P17 added: “*It takes me longer to tune in and transition into the online world.*” (P17) These testimonies indicate that the kind of interactive work typical in face-to-face settings requires more time to reach the same level of attunement and effectiveness in online supervision, which can affect participants’ readiness and emotional engagement.

Limited Perception of Context and the Use of Silence in Online Supervision

In online supervision, the supervisor loses the ability to directly perceive the supervisee’s work environment, which significantly restricts contextual understanding. As the supervisor S1 explained: “*I can see the facility. That means I can form an idea about the clients, the setting, the overall organizational climate – and that’s simply missing in the online space.*” S8 adds: “*You really need to soak up the atmosphere of the organization and see it in action.*” The absence of direct contact reduces the depth of understanding of the challenges the supervisee faces and makes it harder for the supervisor to adapt to the client’s needs. At the same time, the perception and use of silence in online supervision are different. In face-to-face settings, silence often serves as a natural space for reflection and nonverbal attunement within the group. Supervisor S2 describes: “*A big challenge for me – something that felt uncomfortable – is that since I work mostly in a PCA mode, I usually let people speak up when they feel ready. But it’s completely different when you’re sitting in a group in a physical space and you are there present with your own eyes. Online, staying silent – even for a minute – felt really unsettling. So, I would always comment on it, saying something like, ‘We can be silent for a bit; my silence doesn’t mean I expect someone to speak, it just*

means I want to create space.” In the online environment, the absence of nonverbal cues and the natural handling of silence can lead to uncertainty and the need to verbally explain silence, which in turn alters the dynamics of the supervisory process.

Increased Directiveness, Formal Structure, and Pressure for Results in Online Supervision

Online supervision often tends to be more directive, with supervisors taking a more active role in steering the discussion and inviting participants to contribute. Supervisor S2 explains that in the online setting, he had to call on participants more actively – something he found less natural and more directive: *“And I always agreed somehow that I would minimize the use of silence and instead call them out more, which was more directive. And in this I was uncomfortable – that on the screen, when you see people there, you suddenly have to name them and pull them in, call them out. I didn’t like the hand-raising function that online applications created, so in supervisions I said: let’s not use it, let’s just interrupt each other, let’s skip the rule of not interrupting. On the contrary, let’s be more human in the online setting.”* (S2) This need for more active management of communication is linked to the general tendency of online supervision to be more formal and tightly structured, as S4 notes: *“There’s much more structure to it – the format itself feels more rigid.”* (S4) At the same time, participants often feel greater pressure to use the limited time efficiently and achieve specific results, as described by S8: *“In online sessions, I felt more pressure – that we had to make the most of that one hour and get to some sort of outcome. In face-to-face supervision, I don’t have that feeling; it’s more like we explore together and see where the discussion leads.”* (S8) This pressure can reduce the natural flow and spontaneity of discussion. Combined with greater directiveness and structure, it changes the dynamics of the supervisory process in the online setting.

Easier Loss of Attention

This limitation concerns the increased susceptibility to distraction and loss of focus during online supervision for both supervisors and supervisees. As P5 explains: *“It was harder to stay focused. During supervision I couldn’t*

concentrate only on myself. My imagination drifted, and I found my attention shifting away from the topics of supervision. I think that's a limitation." S7 adds: "Online supervision is more demanding because I have to stay more focused – I can't afford to look away even for a moment." And P15 describes: "When the supervisor talks for a long time – for instance, explaining theoretical or technical parts – I sometimes find myself drifting off. I think perhaps I might pick up my phone or reply to a message. But if I were with them in person, I would never do that." These accounts indicate that the online environment may be less stimulating for maintaining sustained attention, requiring supervisors to make a greater effort to keep participants mentally engaged.

Time Constraints

This limitation concerns the different perception and experience of time in online supervision compared to in-person settings. S4 notes that "in the online space, time flows differently," while P2 explains: "In online meetings, because the time is really limited, everything seemed to move faster, more smoothly." In contrast, P14 reports: "Online, it felt more drawn out." (P14) These accounts indicate that time can be experienced subjectively differently in the online environment. Some participants perceive online sessions as faster and more time-bound, while others feel that time passes more slowly or drags on. Such differing perceptions can influence the rhythm and depth of the supervisory process.

Reduced Perceived Importance of Online Supervision

This limitation relates to the perception of online supervision as less serious or important compared to in-person supervision. Supervisee P4 admits: "...I just didn't take it as seriously, I guess." This statement suggests that online supervision may not always be attributed the same level of importance as face-to-face sessions, which can affect the supervisee's engagement, attitude, and willingness to devote full attention and effort to the process.

Mental Absence of Supervisees

This limitation describes situations in which supervisees become mentally absent during online supervision, a tendency facilitated by the environment that prevents full visual oversight by the supervisor. Supervisees can take advantage of the limited camera view or turn off their video altogether to avoid full attention or active participation. As P4 explains: *“Sometimes, when I wanted to avoid paying attention, I’d just move my chair a bit so they couldn’t really see me – and then I didn’t have to focus in that moment.”* Similarly, P6 adds: *“You could do things like turning off the camera and just listening. So you were technically present, but not really there – if that makes sense.”*

Faster Dissipation of Emotions

Another limitation is the quicker fading of emotions among supervisees in the online setting, which can lead to a more superficial or short-lived emotional experience. P5 describes: *“I noticed that whenever it was online, the emotion faded much more quickly.”* This phenomenon may be linked to the reduced intensity of emotional connection or the greater sense of distance inherent to online communication.

Lack of Supervisor Engagement

This limitation concerns the perceived lack of engagement, interest, or willingness of the supervisor to engage actively with the supervisee’s issues. P1 explains: *“It felt like talking to a stranger. She didn’t really invest herself in trying to address the problems I brought up. I said what I needed to say, and that was it.”* She continues: *“Yes, I presented the problem I needed to solve, but her answers were vague – it was obvious she wanted to wrap it up quickly. She didn’t seem interested in going deeper, discussing recommendations, or even really talking about it.”* P4 also comments on the supervisor’s lack of focus: *“He was unfocused, I don’t even know if he was prepared, because the questions or something... It wasn’t the same. Even when we answered something, I felt he didn’t listen to it fully, he didn’t pay attention, he turned away or something, you know.”*

9. Limitations in Building the Supervisory Relationship

Through a comprehensive analysis of the limitations of online supervision in social work, nine main categories were identified, representing distinct dimensions of the challenges and barriers faced by supervisors and supervisees in the digital environment. Each of these categories provides important insights into the specific characteristics and complexities of online supervision, which have a direct impact on the quality and effectiveness of the supervisory process. Among them is the area of limitations in building the supervisory relationship, which is both fundamental to the functioning of supervision and one of the most complex categories identified.

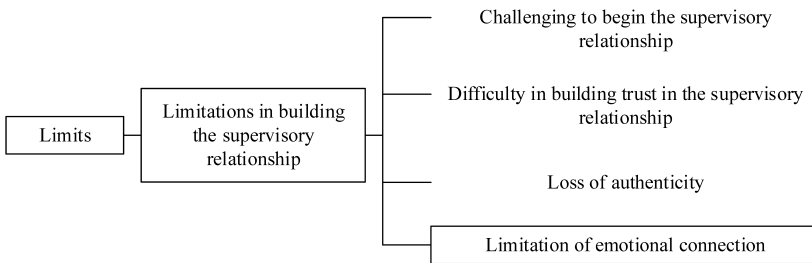


Figure 3: Category Limitations

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 3 illustrates the limitations associated with building the supervisory relationship, representing the ninth and final category of the identified limitations of online supervision. The figure demonstrates how the constraints of the online environment affect key aspects of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. Most of these limitations were identified in the responses of both participant groups. The only exception is “Lack of Emotional Intensity,” which is visually highlighted in the figure to indicate that it was reported exclusively by supervisors. The figure points to the ways in which the online environment can make it more difficult to establish trust, intimacy, and empathy, ultimately weakening the quality of the supervisory relationship.

Building a strong supervisory relationship is a fundamental prerequisite for successful cooperation between the supervisor and the supervisee, as trust, authenticity, and emotional connection form the core pillars of effect-

ive reflection, support, and professional development. However, in the on-line environment, these aspects face significant challenges that differ from those found in traditional face-to-face supervision. The absence of physical contact, limited ability to perceive nonverbal cues, reduced opportunities for informal communication, and the slower development of interpersonal bonds all contribute to making the process of relationship-building in digital supervision more demanding and often less intense.

Given the scope and depth of these issues, this category was not integrated directly into the chapter addressing the broader range of online supervision limitations. Instead, a separate chapter was dedicated to this category, allowing for a detailed examination of its various dimensions – from the challenges of establishing initial contact, through the slower and more demanding process of building trust, to the perception of online interaction as less authentic and emotionally constrained.

This structure enables readers to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the supervisory relationship in the on-line environment – an understanding essential for grasping the specific characteristics of digital supervision and for designing appropriate interventions and strategies to address these limitations. At the same time, this approach highlights that the limitations related to building the supervisory relationship are so fundamental that they require independent attention and more complex solutions extending beyond the general framework of online supervision constraints.

Accordingly, this chapter provides only an overview of this category, emphasizing its significance while directing readers to its more detailed analysis presented in a separate section of the study. This approach also reflects the need to differentiate between the various aspects of online supervision limitations, thereby enabling more precise targeting of professional discussion and recommendations.

Interconnection Between Categories of Online Supervision Limitations

Through an *analysis of the limitations of online supervision* in social work, nine main categories were identified, representing distinct dimensions of the challenges and barriers faced by supervisors and supervisees in the digital environment. Each of these categories provides important insights into the specific characteristics and complexities of online supervision, which have a direct impact on the quality and effectiveness of the supervi-

sory process. Among these categories, particular attention is given to the *limitations associated with building the supervisory relationship*, which are central to the functioning of supervision and represent its most complex dimension.

Building a strong supervisory relationship is a fundamental prerequisite for successful cooperation between the supervisor and the supervisee, as trust, authenticity, and emotional connection form the core pillars of effective reflection, support, and professional development. However, in the online environment, these aspects face significant challenges that differ from those found in traditional face-to-face supervision. The absence of physical contact, limited ability to perceive nonverbal cues, reduced opportunities for informal communication, and the slower development of interpersonal bonds all contribute to making the *process of relationship-building in digital supervision more demanding* and often less intense.

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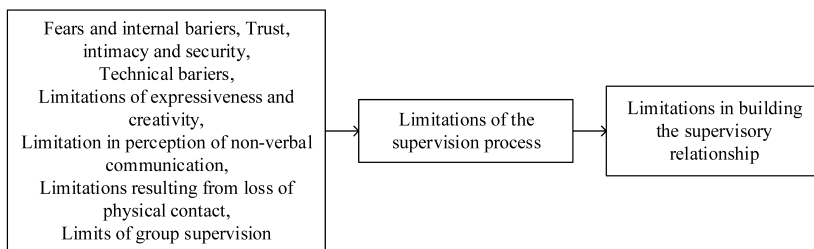


Figure 4: Sequential Model Illustrating How Seven Categories of Online Supervision Limitations Affect the Supervisory Relationship Through the Supervision Process

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Figure 4 presents a sequential model illustrating the organization of the identified categories of online supervision limitations. The model demonstrates how the primary limitations (categories 1–7) influence the supervision process (category 8), and subsequently how the constraints within the supervision process affect the development of the supervisory relationship (category 9). The arrows in the diagram indicate the direction of causal influence, highlighting that the impact of online environment limitations on the supervisory relationship is mediated through the supervision process. This model provides a comprehensive perspective on the interconnections among the individual categories of limitations and their cumulative effect on the effectiveness of online supervision. It also emphasizes the dynamic nature of the relationships between different types of constraints, where primary limitations serve as the starting point for further complications in the supervision process and, consequently, in the supervisory relationship itself.

The analysis identified a set of online supervision limitations observed in interviews with participants engaged in online supervision. Although these limitations do not represent an exhaustive list of all possible obstacles, they capture key challenges associated with the transition to the digital environment. This transition requires adaptation from both supervisors and supervisees across multiple domains – ranging from technical competence to emotional and interpersonal dimensions. The combined influence of the primary limitations (categories 1–7) shapes the overall digital supervisory environment and creates the fundamental barriers encountered by

participants in online supervision. These diverse obstacles – ranging from technical aspects (such as connection, hardware, or software issues) to internal and interpersonal challenges (such as concerns about trust, the absence of nonverbal communication, or difficulties in establishing contact) – subsequently influence the supervision process itself.

For instance, when communication is disrupted by technical difficulties, when nonverbal cues essential for expressing and understanding emotions in face-to-face settings are missing, or when creativity is constrained and uncertainty arises due to an unfamiliar environment, these factors inevitably affect the course of sessions, the dynamics of interactions, and the capacity to work toward supervisory goals. Such limitations may manifest as difficulties in establishing rapport and creating a sense of safety, challenges in working with silence – which may be perceived differently online than in face-to-face settings – or increased time pressure, as time in online supervision is often experienced as more limited and scarcer.

Ultimately, the quality of the supervision process directly affects the ability to build a meaningful supervisory relationship. When the process itself is disrupted by these limitations, it becomes more difficult to establish trust, intimacy, and a sense of safety – elements that are fundamental to effective supervision. The absence of these factors can negatively influence the overall effectiveness of online supervision and its value for the supervisee, potentially resulting in reduced willingness to share personal experiences or in limited self-reflection. Therefore, the quality and effectiveness of the supervision process directly determine the capacity to build and maintain a strong supervisory relationship, which is essential to the overall success of online supervision.

Discussion

A qualitative analysis of interviews with supervisors and supervisees identified nine categories of limitations that complicate the implementation of online supervision in social work. These findings align with existing literature emphasizing the importance of attitudes toward online supervision (Inman, 2019; Lowe & Speer, 2019) and the challenges associated with the loss of personal contact (Anthony, 2015; Wong et al., 2018).

The identified *concerns and internal barriers* among both supervisors and supervisees indicate an initial sense of uncertainty and resistance toward the online format, which directly affects their willingness and ability

to fully engage in the supervisory process. As suggested by Lowe and Speer (2019), such attitudes are often shaped by prior experiences; however, the present analysis shows that even the very idea of online supervision may evoke apprehension.

Technical barriers, including insufficient digital skills, unstable internet connections, and limited access to appropriate technology, represent fundamental obstacles that disrupt the smoothness and effectiveness of online communication. These limitations underscore the importance of developing specific competencies among both supervisors and supervisees in the use of digital tools, as highlighted by Grames et al. (2022) and Watters and Northey Jr. (2020).

Constraints related to *expressivity, creativity, and the perception of non-verbal communication* in the online environment are directly linked to the loss of physical presence, as also emphasized by Wong et al. (2018). The inability to fully perceive nonverbal cues, together with the limited use of physical aids and creative techniques, may reduce the depth of understanding and restrict the therapeutic alliance, which is a key component of supervision in social work (as reflected in the category *Trust, Intimacy, and Safety*).

The loss of physical contact, as confirmed by the analysis, leads to *reduced emotional connection and limited opportunities for building informal relationships*, both of which can negatively affect trust and intimacy within the supervisory relationship. A lack of personal contact may decrease the depth and intimacy of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, thereby hindering the ability to express and understand emotions. In the context of group supervision, these limitations are manifested in disrupted group dynamics and difficulties in member participation.

All of these primary limitations cumulatively contribute to the constraints observed within the supervisory process itself. Challenges related to mutual attunement, changes in the use of silence, a tendency toward greater directiveness and structure, as well as reduced attention, diminish spontaneity and the depth of reflection. Loss of concentration and engagement due to distraction or multitasking can lead to less productive discussions and reflections. This disrupted supervisory process consequently has a direct negative impact on the development of the supervisory relationship, making it more difficult to establish trust, authenticity, and emotional connection.

These findings are consistent with Rambaree and Nässén's (2021) argument that online supervision may not be suitable for everyone. However,

within the broader context of digitalization, it remains essential to explore sensitive ways of implementing online approaches that acknowledge both their advantages and limitations (Vrtová & Vaska, 2020). Emphasis on the development of specific competencies, the selection of suitable digital platforms, and the ethical dimensions of online supervision (Grames et al., 2022; Coker & Schooley, 2009) is crucial for minimizing the identified limitations and ensuring responsible use of technology that supports the mental health and well-being of all participants. Concerns about privacy, confidentiality, and data protection may also influence the level of trust and openness within the supervisory relationship. Furthermore, the online environment may limit the supervisor's ability to perceive emotional expressions and cues, which in turn affects their responsiveness to the supervisee's needs.

It is important to note that some of the limitations emphasized in the theoretical section were not directly confirmed in the present analysis. Specifically, participants in this study did not explicitly mention *health-related problems* associated with prolonged screen time (Hollis et al., 2017; Nadan et al., 2020) or addiction to online environments (Haas et al., 1996; Rugai & Hemilton-Ekeke, 2016; Yager, 2003) as significant barriers to online supervision. Nevertheless, the potential health implications of online supervision should not be overlooked. Extended periods of screen time and the sustained focus required for online interaction may lead to physical and emotional exhaustion, including fatigue, headaches, and burnout. Similarly, the risk of addiction to online environments may result in an imbalance between online and offline life, negatively affecting sleep, social relationships, and overall well-being. This may suggest that such risks were not perceived as primary or immediate when compared to other challenges, or that participants may not be fully aware of them within the context of supervision.

Ultimately, failing to address the identified limitations may significantly reduce the *effectiveness of online supervision* and its ability to provide adequate support and professional development for social workers. It is therefore essential to actively address these barriers through targeted education, the careful selection of suitable tools, and the continuous reflection of supervisory practice in the online environment.

To respond to these challenges and limitations of online supervision, the following strategic approaches are proposed:

- *Development of Competencies*: Focus on the education and training of both supervisors and supervisees in effective online communication and the use of digital tools.
- *Selection of Appropriate Technologies*: Use flexible, secure, and user-friendly platforms and tools tailored to the specific needs of supervision.
- *Ethical Practice and Security*: Implement strict ethical standards and security measures to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and data protection.
- *Well-being Support*: Actively consider the physical and mental health of participants, including strategies for preventing fatigue and promoting balance between online and offline life.

By implementing these strategic approaches, supervisors can optimize the online environment for supervision – ensuring not only the effective achievement of supervisory goals but also the maintenance of high ethical standards and care for the well-being of all participants.

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