Digital emotions and emotional labour among professionals supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection between voluntary sector work, emotions, and remote service provision among frontline staff supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children online during and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on the findings of two interrelated projects, we consider how frontline workers experienced and managed *digital emotions* and *emotional labour*. Like professionals in other sectors, staff in the refugee sector experienced stress and overwhelm due to challenges faced during the rapid digitisation of the sector at a time of crisis. The findings also highlighted nuanced emotional experiences that were distinct to staff working remotely with unaccompanied refugee children, such as role dissatisfaction and empathy. Emotional labour was particularly intense for staff working in the refugee sector who needed to establish online boundaries with the young people due to their heightened vulnerabilities. The study also demonstrated that a training on how to cope with digital emotions was beneficial to staff's self-esteem and knowledge.

Key words:

Voluntary sector; digital emotions; emotional labour; unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Introduction

The voluntary sector (VS) has played an integral role in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath as charities ensured that the basic needs of vulnerable groups were being met (McMullin, 2021; Thiery et al., 2021). Frontline VS workers adapted their standard working practices from providing face-to-face support to various forms of remote services to help curb the spread of the deadly virus. VS organisations supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee youth during the pandemic faced additional levels of complexity to their work including illiteracy, language barriers and lack of resources (Nanton, 2020). The level of emotional support that these young people required also

increased as the pandemic exacerbated past traumas, their precarity as well as the daily obstacles they face as refugees (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2021; Browne et al., 2021).

Working in an unfamiliar digital setting, amidst a climate of heightened distress, with young people who required significant emotional support was likely to trigger a plethora of emotions among staff working in the field. The intersection of emotions and the transition to working digitally in the VS is an area that is currently under researched. As such, this paper examines the emotional experiences of front-line workers as they transitioned to online service delivery and their responses to the additional stressors that refugee youth faced. The paper draws on findings from two interrelated evidence-based projects that were conducted at the Refugee Council Children's Section during the pandemic. It addresses the following research questions: what are the emotional experiences of staff in the refugee sector transitioning to online service delivery? To what extent is emotional labour affected when delivering services online instead of in person? What role does training play in supporting the digital emotions of VS workers who deliver services remotely?

In analysing the findings from the projects, it is necessary to situate the digital emotional experiences (or 'digital emotions') of VS staff within the broader context of the concept of 'emotional labour'. A concept developed by Horchschild (1983), emotional labour is the effort required to control one's own emotions to produce a desired effect on clients within a workplace; it 'requires workers to suppress their private feelings, in order to show "desirable" work-related emotion' (Mastracci et al., 2010). The term has been discussed in relation to statutory service professionals, e.g. nurses (Bolton, 2000; Sawbridge, 2017; Xu and Fan 2023), teachers (Kinman et al., 2011) and lawyers (Westaby, 2010; Flower, 2021). However there are limited studies on emotional labour in the VS, specifically working with refugees and in the transition to online service delivery. Whilst front-line VS workers will have undoubtedly shared similar emotional challenges to other professionals working remotely, this paper argues that there are specific and nuanced emotional experiences when working with refugee youth digitally. Our findings will highlight that this is due to the unfamiliarity of the sector delivering services online coupled with the specific circumstances of unaccompanied refugee youth who speak different languages, are from different cultures and backgrounds and who are living without the support of family members and are thus highly dependent on social services and the VS. Furthermore, the paper underlines how a tailored training on addressing digital emotions and emotional labour can equip frontline workers with knowledge and confidence to deliver effective remote services to service users in the post-Covid era.

Increased needs and requests for support among asylum seekers and refugees

Whilst the pandemic had grave consequences globally, the virus had a disproportionate impact on minority groups, necessitating a rapid response from VS organisations to provide help (Hulbert, 2020). Vulnerable populations depending on charities were at greater risk of being adversely affected (Chase et al., 2022) which was the case for asylum seekers and refugees during lockdowns and border closures (Bartovic et al., 2021; Browne et al., 2021; Jozaghi and Dahya, 2020). Asylum-seeking and refugee youth had to deal with further challenges including the unavailability of personal space to conduct schoolwork, difficulties adjusting to online education due to limited computer literacy levels, familial responsibilities, as well as feelings of boredom and sadness (Kollender and Nimer, 2020; Magan et al., 2022; You et al., 2020).

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were particularly isolated and challenged during the pandemic as they depend heavily

on care, education, legal and social support. They faced a curtailment in their freedom and autonomy (López Peláez et al., 2020) as they had less access to funds and fewer rights (Bhatti-Sinclair, 2021). Their mental health further deteriorated due to delays in the asylum process, unsuitable accommodation, lack of social networks and limited access to mental health services (Chase et al., 2022). Consequently, unaccompanied children experienced high rates of PTSD and depression (Blackmore et al., 2020). The complex needs of these young people and subsequent requests for services affected VS professionals working with them.

The literature on the impact of Covid-19 has rightly prioritised the experiences, emotions and needs of vulnerable clients. Yet staff in both the statutory and VS were evidently facing significant obstacles during the pandemic which were likely to have affected professionals providing support to refugee youth. Social workers were advised to limit in-person contact by making virtual visits to low-risk children, thus disrupting standard child protection protocols (Ferguson et al., 2022). Non-profits faced increased demands for services alongside decreased revenues (Kuenzi et al., 2021) and staffing, events, fundraising, volunteering and service delivery were all being heavily affected (Charity Commission, 2021; Dayson et al., 2021). Such challenges may therefore have led workers to change their perceptions and commitment to the sector (Kuenzi et al., 2021).

Pandemic-related digitisation in the Voluntary Sector

In response to the pandemic, many VS organisations rapidly transitioned their services online to protect service providers and service users from the virus. While the introduction of digital support to clients in difficult circumstances like asylum seekers and refugees existed prior to the pandemic (Baumel, 2015; Forde and Buckley, 2022; Salahie, 2017), the rapidity of the expansion intensified during lockdowns. The accelerated digitisation of service provision presented multiple challenges for VS workers; they had to perform under digital or hybrid working environments while simultaneously deal with shifts in their personal lives, new working patterns and managing relationships with vulnerable service users who were experiencing heightened distress.

Statutory service providers faced similar obstacles to the VS in the transition to working online. For instance, with the closure of schools, teachers adapted by providing education remotely posing difficulties for children with varying levels of access to technology (OECD, 2020). Balancing teaching online with personal responsibilities such as home schooling, caring for vulnerable family members as well as managing the impact the lockdown was having on their own mental health also created additional stressors in their lives (Kim and Asbury, 2020).

VS staff supporting refugees faced nuanced challenges as they had less experience of digital service provision compared to other industries and less confidence in their ability to deliver work remotely (Skills Platform, 2020). The ongoing preference of working in person prior to the pandemic allowed these digital challenges to be overlooked; charities typically offered in-person services due to the personalised and warm experience that can be created as working face-to-face is conducive to building trust (McMullin, 2021).

The sudden transition to digital services in the VS during the pandemic was not only likely to affect service provision but there were also likely to be emotional consequences. Yet, the emotions of VS staff have received less recognition than the more visible challenges such as digital capabilities and adapting organisational operations. Given that the principal role of the VS is to provide care, protection, and social support, all of which involve emotions, it is important to understand how VS staff

managed digital emotions at a time of widespread emotional distress.

Digital emotions and emotional labour

The pandemic was a highly emotive period for all. It generated uncertainty, vulnerability, loneliness and fear (Canet-Juries et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2023; Pedrosa et al., 2020). Similar to the rest of the population, frontline staff were worried about exposure to the virus that could endanger them and their families, they were anxious about the future and having to contend with the challenges of societal shut-down making it difficult to find ways in which they could destress (Greenberg and Tracy, 2020) Professionally, they had to deal with broad emotional demands placed upon them by service users, with many people facing loss of family members and friends, redundancies, loneliness, and isolation (Wood, 2021). An additional challenge for VS staff was the need to respond to these material, social and emotional demands remotely.

Digital emotions

The VS response to the lockdowns during the pandemic as well as the rapid transition to online service delivery contributed to changes in emotional experiences, needs, and challenges. We refer to these as 'digital emotions' because they are emotions generated and mediated through the digital. One key factor underlying these emotions was a blurring of boundaries between the professional and the personal, causing a loss of work-life balance (Staniec et al., 2022). Maintaining boundaries between the professional and private spheres became challenging for any employee working from home and in some cases led to inter-role conflict, an incompatibility between the two spheres which negatively impacted wellbeing (Adisa et al., 2022). Digital devices and platforms 'emerged as the new boundaries of everyday life' (Risi et al., 2020) and for professionals accustomed to providing in person services and support, digital communication became overwhelming, stressful and exhausting (Lepper, 2021; Littlejohn et al., 2021; Wrede et al., 2022). Furthermore, mobile technologies enabled employees to be contactable at all hours which could lead to higher workloads resulting in 'a constant feeling of inadequacy' (Flower, 2023). As such, burnout became a significant threat to their emotional wellbeing (Lepper, 2021).

The lack of face-to-face interaction led to feelings of dissatisfaction among front-line workers (Charity Commission, 2021) as the digital space offered less opportunity for informal interaction than meeting face to face, the time when relationships would usually develop and staff would experience fulfilment. The uncertainty around when operations would return to 'normal' also led to feelings of frustration. Social workers and teachers shared feelings of frustration due to lack of government support and promises going unfulfilled, such as providing laptops and food to children who needed them (Kim and Asbury, 2020).

The technological demands of remote service delivery added to the emotional strain of staff working in the sector during the pandemic. This resulted in staff having to manage 'digital emotions' in their roles demanding a higher degree of emotional control and management in order to work effectively, a phenomenon called emotional labour.

Digital emotional labour

The term 'digital emotional labour' best describes the emotional effort required of VS staff working with refugee youth remotely as it integrates the concepts of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and digital care labour (Leurs, 2019). Hochschild (1983) describes emotional labour as the conscious control of feelings to instigate a desired effect on clients. Emotional labour is what underpins an effective public service even if it demands the suppression of the service providers' own emotions (Mastracci et al., 2010). Emotions are managed in accordance with 'feeling rules': 'rules or norms according to which feelings may be judged appropriate to

accompanying events' (Hochschild, 1983). These rules tend to conform to societal norms but can also be defined by an organisation to achieve objectives such as friendly customer service. Westaby (2010) provides an example of feeling rules in relation to legal work with asylum seekers. This quote from a solicitor highlights the control that is needed over emotions in order to remain professional: *You get these tiny . . ., really small children in front of you, and they've watched their mother be killed, or something, and you just want to reach out, and give them a cuddle, but you can't, and I would never dream of doing that.* In this example, the solicitor supresses his emotion and continues his session with the client in a neutral manner.

Another term Hochschild uses in defining emotional labour is 'surface acting', which is when one feigns an emotional expression in order to control true emotions. Leurs (2019) adds to this notion by placing it in a digital context by researching the relationships of migrants who have been separated and live transnationally. Technologically mediated co-presence with loved ones and friends abroad gives shape to feelings of co-presence and joy. However, maintaining bonds as well as keeping face can be felt as emotionally taxing, triggering feelings such as fear, anxiety, shame and guilt, hence employing the term 'digital care labour'. Such surface acting within human service professions was likely to have increased during the pandemic given the widespread distress, fear and uncertainty of the time coupled with the transition to digital services.

There was an increase in negative emotions amongst employees working remotely which in some cases led to emotional dissonance (Needham et al., 2023; Staniec et al., 2022). This resulted in frontline staff having to perform 'digital emotional labour' to work effectively. During lockdowns, frontline staff took on new tasks such as helping clients with digital literacy. This resulted in extending themselves beyond their usual role, becoming substitutes for other professions (Adams et al., 2000) thus creating further

strain on themselves during a period of rising service demand. Yet within the boundaries of professional feeling rules, staff retained a certain amount of autonomy in the delivery of services and personal discretion in how they negotiated relationships with clients. They not only performed emotional labour within the confines of the labour process, but also willingly offered extra emotion work as a gift to those they supported in the form of 'authentic caring behaviour' (Bolton, 2000).

Sawbridge (2020) describes the ability to perform emotional labour in terms of an 'emotional bank account' and when running on empty, staff can develop an unhealthy detachment and become blind to the distress of others which can eventually lead to stress and burnout. It is widely known that VS staff working with asylum-seekers and refugees require emotional support to avoid emotional fatigue. Doidge and Sandri (2018) explain that volunteers working with refugees in the Calais camp or 'Jungle' were not trained on how to deal with emotional stresses and had to find ways to cope when they faced unfamiliar and unexpected situations which triggered their emotions. Volunteers found solace through the shared experience with other volunteers in the camp. The sharing of experiences as a coping mechanism to manage complex emotions is defined by Hochschild as 'collective emotional labour'. Like the volunteers in Calais, Westaby (2010) found that solicitors working with asylum seekers and refugees coped with their emotions by talking to colleagues. Through conversing with colleagues and sharing emotions, Sawbridge (2020) believes that one's emotional bank account is restored. Organisations need to be more aware and supportive of emotional labour and provide appropriate training (Bolton, 2000).

Addressing digital emotional labour through training and support

Trainings and supervision sessions have been found to be beneficial in frontline work in general (Horchschild, 1983; Westaby, 2010)

and especially during the pandemic (Miotto et al., 2020). The research, most of which was conducted in the health-care sector, concurs on the value of trainings in the form of psychological first aid and debriefing (Gavin et al., 2020), coping skills training (Greenberg and Tracy, 2020) and psychological resilience intervention (Albott et al., 2020). Psychologically informed training has been found to be useful also among staff working directly with refugees (Pell, 2013).

In the VS, the issues that are tackled can render all staff and volunteers vulnerable to trauma thus emotional support is essential to ensure they can carry out their work in ways which are safe for them (Hulbert, 2020). This underlines the importance of psychological training for VS organisations working with refugees, asylum seekers and unaccompanied children. On the one hand, training should convey knowledge about how to deal with traumatised refugees and, on the other hand, provide strategies for maintaining one's own mental health (Borho et al., 2019).

As the transition to remote service provision created additional emotional labour, it could be argued that training on how to cope with digital emotions could be beneficial to frontline staff in the refugee sector to ensure that they are appropriately supported to maintain reliable services. Yet, limited research is available on the impact of therapeutic informed trainings on how to address digital emotions.

Methodology

This paper draws on the findings of two interrelated evidence-based projects which explored the experiences of staff in providing online services at the RC Children's Section. The first study was an evidence-based situation analysis which adopted a mixed methods approach. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with five RC practitioners specialising in asylum and welfare advice, therapy and youth work were undertaken. A further five in-depth interviews were carried out with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children on accessibility, feasibility, and their usage of digital services. While interviews with young people are not explicitly used in the findings below, they informed the analysis. All participants were interviewed over Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Interviews were analysed qualitatively by using content analysis.

Based on the recommendations of this evidence-based study (Nanton and Doná, 2022), a second project, a research-cum-training session, was undertaken to address emotions while working online. A pre-training needs-assessment questionnaire was created based on the findings from the first project. The questionnaire which consisted of open and closed questions, Likert scale questions, matrix questions and ranking questions, was sent to thirty staff and volunteers of which eight completed the questionnaire. Results were shared with a psychotherapist who works closely with RC frontline staff, and who co-designed and delivered the training programme along with the researchers.

There were two training sessions which lasted 90 minutes each and participants were asked to attend both sessions to ensure continuity. Ten participants attended the first session and nine attended the second. A post-training questionnaire was sent to all participants; questions were formulated based on the answers to the pre-training questionnaire and were also structured in a similar way. Due to low levels of completion, results from the questionnaires were combined with feedback given during the training. Ongoing support was given during regular supervisory meetings by the psychotherapist. Based on the findings of the research and training, a guide on providing emotional support online was compiled (Nanton et al., 2022).

Participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research. Across the projects,

the ethics of care standpoint (Taggart, 2016) was adopted. Safeguards were in place in the event that interviewees required emotional support following the interviews: young people were contacted following the interview to check on wellbeing and all declined the offer of additional care; given the emotional toll that staff recounted of working online during the pandemic, the second study/ training led by a psychotherapist was implemented to allow staff to speak about their experiences in the presence of an expert. Staff were also encouraged to attend their regular supervision sessions with the psychotherapist provided by the RC.

Participant observation was carried out over five months to cross-check data and interpret the findings by a research assistant (RA) who was a part-time RC children's adviser at the time of the study. Conducting research as an insider researcher during the pandemic was advantageous to the study as the RA held pre-existing knowledge (Bell, 2005) of how services were delivered pre-Covid. As it takes longer for an outsider researcher to acquire the knowledge held by an insider researcher (Smyth and Holian, 2008), the RA's extensive experience within the organisation facilitated 'a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study' (Merriam et al., 2001). Furthermore, due to the RA's familiarity with her colleagues, participants were open to sharing their experiences of transitioning to remote working during Covid with someone who could relate to their situation and young people felt at ease speaking to someone from a trusted organisation. Efforts were made to mitigate any biases by debriefing, discussing positionality, and cross-checking data with the lead researcher who was an outsider (Greene, 2014).

Findings

Findings are presented in two parts. The first part will highlight staff experiences of 'digital emotions' and 'digital emotional labour' supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The second will describe the areas in which staff needed support to effectively work remotely and how these needs were addressed through a training programme.

Experiences of Remote Service Delivery: Emotions and Emotional Labour

During the interviews, the term 'difficult' was the most common word used by staff to convey the challenges they faced in providing and adapting to digital service provision during the pandemic. The interviews and training sessions highlight that the challenges that arose were mainly from the unfamiliarity of supporting unaccompanied children remotely and the lack of boundaries between personal and professional life. For some staff, these challenges provoked feelings of stress, overwhelm and dissatisfaction. All staff acknowledged the difficulties that the young people were experiencing due to the pandemic and expressed empathy towards their increasingly complex lives.

Stress and Overwhelm

Stress and overwhelm were found to be common emotions experienced by staff working remotely. These feelings were provoked due to the blurring of personal and professional spaces. During an interview, a children's adviser reflected on how challenging it had become to maintain boundaries and a healthy work-life balance:

"It has been quite difficult managing the feeling that there's an infinite amount of work to do and if you're working from home there's almost an infinite capacity to do it. And I know both myself and [my colleague] have struggled with that."

The blurring of personal and professional boundaries due to remote working from home resulted in staff feeling conflicted as well as overwhelmed about how to manage their time. Without defining clear working patterns, young people could easily assume that staff were available to contact at all

hours. In the training session, an adviser stated: *"They can call you at any time in the day and they expect you to pick up."*

Digital emotional labour was involved in creating boundaries with the young people as they were aware of their heightened vulnerabilities and support needs during the pandemic. Staff appeared to lack confidence and were also concerned that young people might feel neglected if they only responded to calls within certain hours, as highlighted by an adviser during the training: "*It's difficult to enforce boundaries, as it's re-enforcing a sense of abandonment.*"

Furthermore, emotional labour was needed to manage the impact that the pandemic was having on the personal life of staff in order to maintain professionalism when working online. During an interview the therapist reflected on how she needed to take time to assess how she was feeling and maintain a good level of self-care to ensure she was fit to affectively support the young people:

"*If I'm in a ragged state, it's unprofessional and unethical of me to work with somebody else, you know, so I have to work really hard on myself, all the therapists have to work really hard on themselves and be really conscious of what lockdown is doing to us.*"

The therapist had a high level of consciousness of the impact of the pandemic on her wellbeing due to her profession. She was therefore able to critically assess whether she could offer the support that the young people needed without their worries and concerns further affecting her own mental health.

Stress and overwhelm were heightened by working online, as good technological skills were required to guarantee sessions ran smoothly, particularly group sessions. Staff were often required to extend their role to offer support to young people if they ran into IT issues, especially if no one was present to guide them. Providing support outside of their field of expertise and in addition to existing tasks often became stressful and overwhelming necessitating digital emotional

labour. Ensuring that clients had sufficient technical support came at an emotional cost to the therapist during group sessions:

"*I think I lost about a stone in anxiety over the five weeks we did it I was so wound up. […]. Some people struggle to join the Zoom link and then you had to get everyone to log out and send a new link to everybody and then everyone would log back in and one time in the middle of a session, my computer for no apparent reason just turned itself off. It just made a horrible electronic sound and disappeared. My heart was in my mouth.*"

The therapist experienced deep concern and worry in trying to ensure the young people could access her online session. She faced a further obstacle due to the unreliability of technology when her computer shutdown which left her panic-stricken and overwhelmed knowing that the young people would have not known what was happening.

Role Dissatisfaction

Whilst staff managed to rapidly adapt to working remotely, they believed that the level of service they were offering online was inferior to the original face-to-face service which resulted in a sense of dissatisfaction. Digital emotional labour was—needed to control negative emotions in order to maintain enthusiasm and support the young people with engaging in the activities. A youth worker reflected during their interview:

"*It's been really hard for us to adapt the activities to Zoom because usually the social evenings are really active and they are fun, there is music, dance, but now we are very limited.*"

The youth worker was also dissatisfied due to the restriction of activities that could be provided online and she suggested that these were not as entertaining as the activities they used to offer face-to-face. Dissatisfaction also arose due to the physical distance between staff and young people as this affected how staff would usually build relationships in their roles. During an interview, a senior adviser recounted:

"When I visit people in the past, I give them my [business] card, I explain what we can do, it is quite often they get in touch with me about things. Whereas when you just phone someone up […] they are more likely to not follow things up because you're just a voice at the end of the phone […]."

The senior adviser used to visit the young people in their accommodation, explain how support can be provided and handover a business card with his contact details on it. He believes that without this interaction, the young people are less likely to contact him if they have only received a phone call. He is less satisfied by this way of working as it affects the relationship with the young person and thus appears to be disparaging about his role.

Furthermore, connecting with young people in-person was a way in which staff experienced a sense of fulfilment and happiness in their work. The youth worker highlighted that working face-to-face with young people is what brought joy to her role and without any informal time spent together, she feels dissatisfied as she is less connected to them:

"I [would] feel very uplifted when I see young people because I'm not used to spending the whole day on the laptop, […] yeah it's really difficult. […] Now we can't have this connection with the young people, we can't have this kind of fun with them, we can't do activities with them, we can't have these long chats with them, I feel like I'm doing more kind of admin work more than this human connection and work with young people."

It is evident that the youth worker feels constricted working remotely and that her responsibilities have changed which she finds frustrating. Her mood was uplifted when interacting with the young people face-to-face however she now feels that she is unable to connect with them via a laptop. Digital emotional labour was required from staff to manage personal-professional boundaries, take on new tasks, deal with personal emotions whilst consistently being available to offer emotional support to the young people.

Empathy

Staff were emotionally affected by the young people's experiences and concern for their wellbeing. Staff empathised with the situation of the young people as they were worried about how they were coping with the lockdowns and remote service provision. During the interview, the therapist explained that the pandemic was having an adverse effect on the mental health of the young people: *For many young people a lockdown and pandemic has left them feeling very much more isolated and […] their wellbeing has plummeted in so many ways.* Staff witnessed the mental health of some young people deteriorate and at the same time, some young people struggled to access the support they needed digitally. The youth worker recounted:

"We had some cases where young people came for the first time and they dropped off because they don't feel comfortable online, on camera. Some of them are IT illiterate so they don't have the knowledge to play around Zoom […]. Most of them have been feeling low, […] they say oh it's really boring we can't go out, we can't meet friends. And for the new ones there have been a lot of challenges because they can't really make friends, they're not meeting anyone […]. It's a really sad time for them."
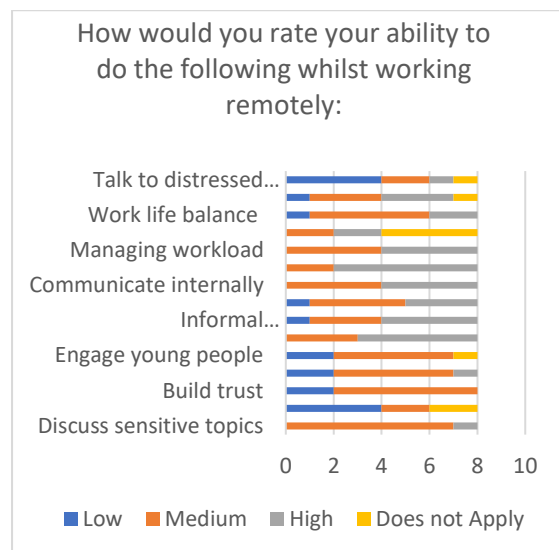
During the interview, the youth worker highlighted that newly arrived young people were hesitant to engage in online services, they were perhaps distrustful of being online or simply did not understand the digital platforms they were using. Young people also shared feelings of boredom and low mood due to the Covid restrictions and lack of face-to-face contact with friends. Staff applied emotional labour to manage the complex and divergent emotions they felt towards the situation of young people as well as in coping with the less satisfying experience of working digitally.

The Role of Training to Manage Digital Emotional Labour

Given the range of emotions experienced by professionals working with unaccompanied

asylum-seeking and refugee children, a needs assessment was conducted to ascertain how staff could be appropriately supported to cope with the emotional labour that was demanded of them whilst working remotely. Subsequently, a training was developed which aimed to upskill and meet the emotional needs of the professionals. The table below provides a basic indication of the areas in which staff required support.

Graph 1

How would you rate your ability to do the following whilst working remotely:

| | Low | Medium | High | Does not Apply |

(Bar graph showing ratings for: Talk to distressed…, Work life balance, Managing workload, Communicate internally, Informal…, Engage young people, Build trust, Discuss sensitive topics; x-axis from 0 to 10.)

Staff were asked how they would rate their ability to carry out certain tasks remotely, from low to high. Findings were converted into a bar graph (Graph 1). The findings were analysed by examining which areas had the highest amount of blue (low) and grey (high), with four being taken as the midpoint. On this basis, the lowest self-ascribed ability was in reading body language and talking to distressed clients. The highest low-to-medium ability was in building trust, building relationships, engaging young people and discussing sensitive topics. Conversely, staff believed that they had medium-to-high ability in elements of their role which were not associated with the young people as they rated their ability as either 'high' or 'medium' in being able to communicate internally and with stakeholders, organise meetings or activities and manage workload. The data therefore suggests that despite experiencing stress and overwhelm from working online,

staff have the capability to do so. Instead, they doubted their ability to effectively provide emotional and other types of support to young people when they were not working with them face-to-face.

Addressing digital emotions

During the training staff reflected on why they were experiencing greater difficulties in providing emotional support online: they believed that their communication was hindered due to the inability to see facial expressions and body language when providing telephone support which made it harder to read client emotions. An adviser stated: *"When they are really upset and you can't be there to make eye contact, you've only got your voice as a resource so the words that you choose are more important than anything else."* During the training the psychotherapist explained the importance of tone of voice, both of the young person and staff member; often the emotional state of the young person can be inferred from their tone of voice and a low tone of voice can help calm distress. As staff were often using interpreters, it was recommended that they ask the interpreter to inflect the same tone of voice and rhythm as this was said to be helpful in calming young people. Using the same interpreter was also important so the young person could build a mental and emotional connection with who was talking to them.

The physical distance and speaking via a screen or mobile phone limited the ability of some staff to form strong relationships with the young people. Given that staff had transitioned to a hybrid form of working, during the training staff noted that it may be helpful to meet with young people at least once before working with them online: *"Now it's mixed which I've found helpful because even if you meet someone just once, your online communication just feels different because you've had that chance to build a bit of a personal relationship."* Staff felt more confident once they had had at least one face-to-face interaction with a young person before supporting them remotely.

Staff noted a change in behaviours when working with young people online. Some staff believed that young people were more easily distracted online than in person which had implications on their levels of understanding. They would also more willingly share information: *"They definitely would share a lot, [it was] a bit out of character. And then they would disappear for sometime, feeling regret after".* The oversharing of information online, known as the disinhibition effect, was a concept unknown by staff and it was only through the training that they were informed how to respond to it. When young people exhibited signs of distress over the phone or via video, staff were unable to soothe clients through physical actions, like they had done previously. An adviser recounted how he would usually soothe a client through physical actions, especially due to the language barrier: *"When people don't speak your language […], then a lot of what you do to comfort them I find is not talking, it's like making a cup of tea, going for a walk to calm down. So when you are just sat on the phone like you don't know what to do".* Staff were advised to use grounding techniques with young people that were distressed online or over the phone and if young people were unable to concentrate, to keep remote sessions short and if necessary to end and reschedule them.

During the training, an adviser became aware that she was using set phrases in response to young people who needed emotional support, thus she was exhibiting signs of using emotional dissonance as a coping strategy: *"When you go through a lot with them you find that your answers are like stock answers that you've used before, in a sense that's distancing".* During the training the psychotherapist highlighted that staff needed to be aware of the emotional labour involved in working with young people who have experienced trauma and that self-care is an ethical responsibility.

Knowledge and Self-confidence

As a result of the training, a higher degree of self-confidence emerged among staff. An adviser reflected on what he had learnt during the final training session:

"This training has highlighted how a lot of those skills that we assume we can only have in person […] can easily be translated online. There's a bit of a mental block […], a bit of an assumption that in person is better and it's not always the case."

The adviser came to the realisation that the skills he has are transferable to working online. He assumed that working face-to-face was superior without considering the benefits of working remotely as it was what he was familiar with. Another adviser similarly expressed that he has the skills to work online but was not conscious of the theory behind his work and learning this was helpful. He explained:

"I learned some theory behind some things that I already do naturally but understanding it theoretically is helpful. For example, the importance of tone of voice when working remotely. I also learned the importance of body language and trying to use different camera angles to introduce more of that into video work."

Additionally, staff learnt new skills and knowledge that increased their awareness of how to deal with emotions online and the emotional labour required in their role. Whilst many staff naturally adapted their tone of voice and body language to comfort young people and make them feel at ease, they were not aware that they were doing so. Understanding the theory behind why this was important in working with young people was said to be helpful. Thus, the training on how to manage emotions and emotional labour online improved the self-confidence of staff and raised awareness around the transferability of in-person skills to online. The training revealed to staff that they have high capability in transferring their skill set to the virtual space.

Discussion

This paper contributed new empirical knowledge about the intersection between work, emotions, and remote service

provision by documenting the experiences of frontline workers supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children during the accelerated shift to remote and hybrid working. Its focus on digital emotions and emotional labour addressed a gap in the VS literature on the digitisation of service delivery in the sector (Forde and Buckley, 2022; Disney et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings contribute to existing literature on the sector's digitisation by showing that VS workers encountered similar emotional challenges to other professionals working remotely, principally maintaining boundaries, managing stress and building relationships online (Flower, 2023; Littlejohn et al., 2021; Lepper, 2021; Staniec et al., 2022; Wrede et al., 2022). They also contributed to the expansive literature on emotional labour (Bolton, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Needham et al., 2023) by revealing that emotional labour intensified in the transition to online service delivery, and that similarly to other sectors, staff in the VS managed emotions in digital spaces relying on 'feeling-rules' and surface acting (Hochschild, 1983). However, the findings also foregrounded additional nuanced emotional experiences that were distinctively important for staff working remotely with unaccompanied refugee children. Staff were dissatisfied with the level of services they were offering online compared to face-to-face service for this specific group of clients. They showed strong empathy toward the situation of the young people as they were worried about how they were coping with the lockdowns and remote service provision.

Emotional labour was particularly intense for staff working in the refugee sector who needed to establish online boundaries with the young people, as they were aware of their heightened vulnerabilities and support needs during the pandemic. Digital emotional labour was also needed to control negative emotions in order to maintain enthusiasm and support the young people to engage in activities remotely. At a practical level, the findings confirmed the role that training on addressing digital emotions and emotional labour can have on equipping frontline workers with knowledge and confidence to deliver effective remote services to young clients in the post-Covid era. The analysis of the training contributes to the emerging literature on the professionalising of digital service delivery (Baumel, 2015; Flower, 2023; Thompson-de Benoi and Kramer, 2021) with its focus on the VS's increasing understanding of the additional emotional labour required when working remotely with clients in difficult circumstances.

The study is limited by the small number of participants hence it is difficult to generalise the findings. It is recommended that future research adopts a systematic approach to assess the value of trainings on emotions in the VS. It is also recommended that the training sessions be expanded and followed up beyond the duration of the training. Although the study was only conducted within one UK charity working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children, the findings are likely to have implications for the VS both nationally and internationally. As the transition to a post-covid era unfolds, changes in lifestyles and working practices continue to affect the professional and personal lives of frontline VS professionals, thus requiring more in-depth knowledge of the role of digital emotions and emotional labour within the field.

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