

# Internet-based breastfeeding peer support for breastfeeding parents: An integrative review

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## Abstract

**Aim:** To explore what Internet-based breastfeeding peer support offers to breastfeeding parents.

**Design:** Integrative review.

**Data Sources and Review Methods:** A systematic literature search was conducted in March 2024 using the following electronic databases: CINAHL, The Cochrane Library, PubMed/MEDLINE and PsycINFO. Database searches yielded 717 results. Two researchers removed the duplicates ( $n=256$ ) and screened the remaining titles ( $n=461$ ), abstracts ( $n=197$ ) and full texts ( $n=60$ ) independently. Eventually, 19 studies were included in the review. The chosen studies had qualitative ( $n=11$ ), quantitative ( $n=6$ ), or mixed methods designs ( $n=2$ ) and were published between 2015 and 2024. Qualitative content analysis was conducted.

**Results:** The main categories were *supplying support that is responsive to the needs of parents* and *belonging to a breastfeeding community*. The parents looked for and received breastfeeding support, advice, information, emotional support, reassurance and access to shared experiences from various online breastfeeding peer support groups. The support groups helped them in their breastfeeding decisions, thus making a difference in their breastfeeding experience. The support groups created breastfeeding communities for these parents and they were able to bond with others, feel like they belonged and share experiences. Additionally, these breastfeeding communities helped to normalize various breastfeeding practices.

**Conclusion:** Breastfeeding peer support groups can offer parents the support and guidance they seek and a sense that they are part of a breastfeeding community. However, it is vital these groups are efficiently moderated to ensure the advice parents receive is evidence-based and the support is encouraging.

**Impact:** These findings show that well-moderated online breastfeeding peer support can offer parents high-quality support. It is essential for health care professionals to be aware of the various options available in order to recommend high-quality support groups for breastfeeding parents.

**Reporting Method:** PRISMA.

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**Patient or Public Contribution:** This was an integrative review therefore no patient or public contribution was necessary.

**KEYWORDS**

breastfeeding, integrative review, internet, nursing, peer support, social media, systematic review

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding can be a very challenging yet rewarding part of early parenthood. Parents need support from healthcare professionals as well as their own social environment and peers. Parents of the current era are part of the Millennial and Generation Z generations and they have grown to adulthood using the Internet and social media. On average, young adults aged 16–34 spend 7–7.5 h a day using the Internet and 38% of that time is spent on social media (Data Reportal, 2023). Hence, it is no surprise that social media networks have also become increasingly important for parents and 75% of whom use social media for parenting-related information and social support (Duggan et al., 2015). Women use social media more than men; thus, mothers are slightly more inclined to use social media as a parenting resource than fathers (Data Reportal, 2023; Duggan et al., 2015). The authors investigated different breastfeeding-related online groups, accounts and posts from Facebook and Instagram using 'breastfeeding' as a search term. For example, in May 2023, hundreds of Facebook groups were focused on breastfeeding and, on Instagram, over 60 accounts created mainly breastfeeding-related content (Facebook.com: Instagram.com). Additionally, there are over 6.3 million posts on Instagram and over 2.5 million on Facebook about breastfeeding (Facebook.com: Instagram.com).

Peer support has been acknowledged as an important part of breastfeeding support (Clark et al., 2018; Gavine et al., 2022) supplementing other methods of support such as the evidence-based counselling provided by nurses and midwives (Moon & Woo, 2021). Peer support can be organized as group meetings (Hunt et al., 2022) or one-to-one contact with a supporter (Trickey et al., 2018) and it can be reached in different settings, from the hospital (Chepkirui et al., 2020) to the community (Shakya et al., 2017), as well as online (Moon & Woo, 2021; Morse & Brown, 2022). According to a meta-analysis (Shakya et al., 2017), community-based breastfeeding peer support can be effective in increasing the duration of exclusive breastfeeding, especially in 3- to 6-month-old infants. Peer support also encourages postpartum parents to initiate breastfeeding earlier after birth (Shakya et al., 2017). In addition, breastfeeding peer support increases parents' self-esteem and breastfeeding confidence (Chang et al., 2022).

Only a few reviews conducted have concentrated on online breastfeeding peer support. Internet-based support for breastfeeding parents is available, such as in mobile applications, on web pages and in Facebook groups or other social media venues (McArthur

et al., 2018). Morse and Brown (2022) conducted a systematic review concerning the benefits, challenges and impacts of social media groups' support for breastfeeding and they concluded that Internet-based breastfeeding peer support increases positive breastfeeding experiences, enhances knowledge and has the potential to increase breastfeeding duration (Morse & Brown, 2022).

Another review (Moon & Woo, 2021) has been published concerning online breastfeeding peer support that focused on the experiences of breastfeeding parents. The findings concluded that online peer support was regarded as a community that was easily accessible and had vast resources from experienced parents. The focus of the previous reviews (Moon & Woo, 2021; Morse & Brown, 2022) was on the experiences breastfeeding parents have of online breastfeeding support, but the aim of this review is to explore what Internet-based breastfeeding peer support offers to breastfeeding parents; thus, this review focuses on whether this type of breastfeeding peer support answers to breastfeeding parents' demands.

## 2 | AIM

The aim of this review is to explore what Internet-based breastfeeding peer support offers to breastfeeding parents.

## 3 | METHODS

### 3.1 | Design

This study was conducted as an integrative review, following Whittemore and Knaf's (2005) methodology. An integrative review allows the inclusion of various methodologies; hence, it enabled the authors of this review to create a comprehensive view of the phenomenon (Whittemore & Knaf, 2005).

### 3.2 | Search methods

A systematic literature search was conducted in March 2024 using the following electronic databases: CINAHL, The Cochrane Library, PubMed/MEDLINE and PsycINFO. The search terms and Boolean operators are listed in Table 1. No restrictions considering the publication date were used. The languages of the articles were restricted to English and Finnish.

TABLE 1 Search terms used in selected databases.

Database	Search terms
PubMed/MEDLINE	("Breast Feeding"[Mesh] OR breastfe* OR "breast fe*" OR "breast milk*") AND ("Peer Group"[Mesh] OR "Social Support"[Mesh] OR "Self-Help Groups"[Mesh] OR "peer group*" OR "social support*" OR "self-help group*" OR "peer support*" OR peer-support* OR "support group*" OR "peer counsel*" OR "peer event*" OR "online support*") AND ("Social Media"[Mesh] OR "Internet"[Mesh] OR "Mobile Applications"[Mesh] OR "social media*" OR Internet* OR "mobile application*" OR Internet-based* OR online* OR facebook* OR twitter* OR instagram* OR tiktok* OR snapchat* OR whatsapp* OR jodel* OR application* OR web OR "web forum*" OR forum*)
CINAHL	((MH "Breast Feeding+") OR breastfe* OR "breast fe*" OR "breast milk*") AND ((MH "Peer Counselling") OR (MH "Peer Group") OR (MH "Support Groups+") OR "peer counsel*" OR "peer group*" OR "support group*" OR "peer support*" OR peer-support* OR "peer event*" OR "self-help group*" OR "social support*" OR "online support*") AND ((MH "Social Media+") OR (MH "Internet+") OR (MH "Facebook") OR (MH "Mobile Applications") OR "social media*" OR Internet* OR facebook* OR "mobile application*" OR Internet-based* OR online* OR twitter* OR instagram* OR tiktok* OR snapchat* OR whatsapp* OR jodel* OR application* OR web* OR "web forum*" OR forum*)
PsycINFO	(DE "Breast Feeding" OR breastfe* OR "breast fe*" OR "breast milk*") AND (DE "Peer Counselling" OR DE "Support Groups" OR "peer counsel*" OR "support group*" OR "peer support*" OR peer-support* OR "peer group*" OR "peer event*" OR "self-help group*" OR "social support*" OR "online support*") AND (DE "Social Media" OR DE "Internet" OR DE "Mobile Applications" OR "social media*" OR Internet* OR "mobile application*" OR Internet-based* OR online* OR facebook* OR twitter* OR instagram* OR tiktok* OR snapchat* OR whatsapp* OR jodel* OR application* OR web* OR "web forum*" OR forum*)
The Cochrane Library	(breastfe* OR breast NEXT fe* OR breast NEXT milk*) AND (peer NEXT support* OR peer-support* OR support NEXT group* OR peer NEXT counsel* OR peer NEXT group* OR social NEXT support* OR peer NEXT event* OR self-help NEXT group* OR online NEXT support*) AND (social NEXT media* OR online* OR Internet-based* OR Internet* OR facebook* OR twitter* OR instagram* OR tiktok* OR snapchat* OR whatsapp* OR jodel* OR mobile NEXT application* OR application* OR web* OR web NEXT forum* OR forum*)

### 3.3 | Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The articles included in the review were empirical qualitative and quantitative studies and mixed-methods research that investigated Internet-based breastfeeding peer support from the breastfeeding parents' perspective and had some breastfeeding-related outcomes. Only original research articles published in English or Finnish were included in the review; thus, reviews, theses, dissertations, editorials, discussion papers and commentaries were excluded. Studies that explored professionally led or face-to-face support or support provided by phone were excluded from the review. Studies examining breastfeeding interventions that had elements of peer support in the intervention, which were not identified in the results, were excluded from the review as well. Furthermore, studies that examined adoptive and nonbiological parents, breast milk expression or breast milk donation were excluded.

### 3.4 | Search outcome

Database searches yielded 717 results. The researchers used the reference management software Zotero 6.0.36 (Corporation for Digital Scholarship) to remove duplicates and for the title and abstract screening stages. At least two researchers (EH, RI and HN-V) independently removed the duplicates ( $n=256$ ) and screened the remaining titles ( $n=461$ ), abstracts ( $n=197$ ) and full texts ( $n=60$ ). The decisions concerning the selection of the studies were made in agreement in every phase of the selection process

and disagreements were solved through discussion in the research group. After the screening of full texts, 19 studies were included in the review. The reference lists of review articles from the database search were manually screened, but no additional studies were included in the review. Details of the selection process can be seen in [Figure 1](#).

### 3.5 | Quality appraisal

At least two researchers (EH, RI and HN-V) independently assessed the quality of the included articles ( $n=19$ ) using the Joanna Briggs Institute's Critical Appraisal Tools for qualitative studies, cross-sectional studies and randomized controlled trials, according to the study design of the articles. The studies that received at least 50% of the total score in the checklists were included in the review. The articles were assessed to be of good quality and no severe shortcomings were found ([Table 2](#)). All assessed articles were included in the review.

### 3.6 | Data abstraction and synthesis

The essential characteristics from the included articles were extracted. These consisted of author(s), publication year, country, aim, design of the study, participants, data collection methods, moderators of the support groups and key findings ([Table 2](#)). Additionally, the strengths and limitations of the studies were reviewed. The included studies were first read and reread and notes were made.

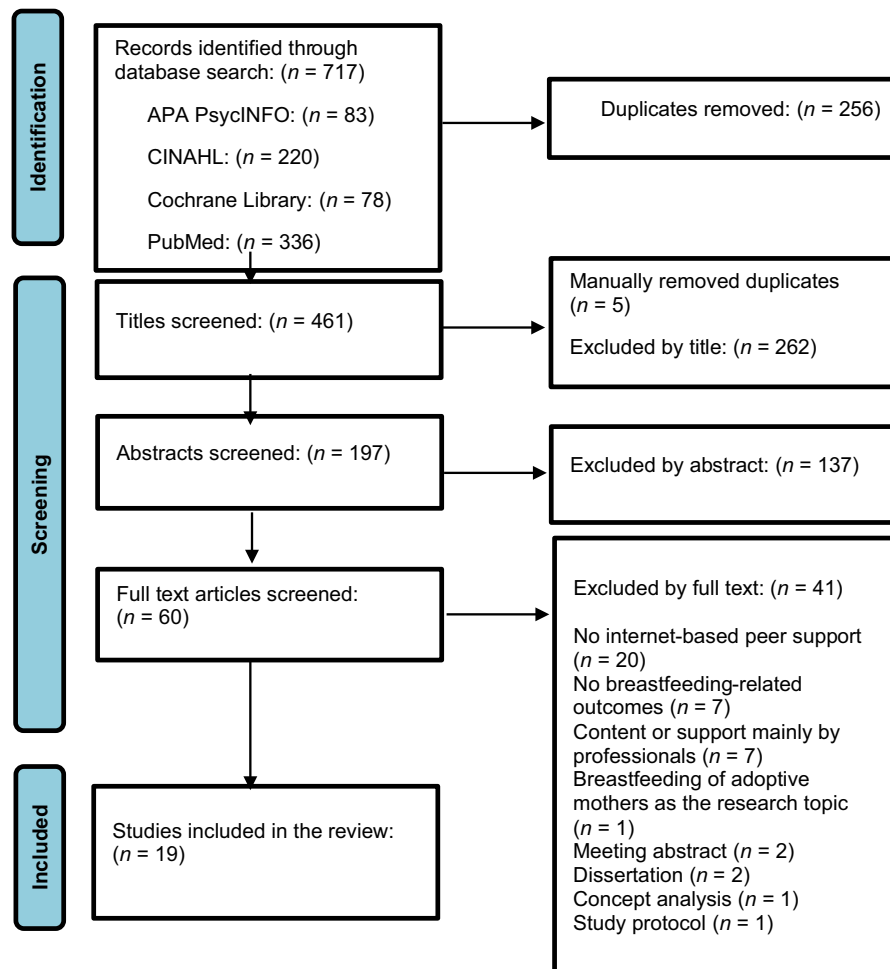


FIGURE 1 Prisma flow chart (Page et al., 2021).

The data concerning the research question from the articles were extracted to Microsoft Word and coded for analysis.

The extracted data were synthesized through qualitative content analysis according to Elo and Kyngäs (2008). The data were divided into meaning units, which were condensed and codes were inductively created from condensed meaning units according to content and meaning. The codes were categorized freely according to similarity and belonging together and subcategories were grouped together to formulate main categories with the purpose of describing the phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). One researcher (EH) performed the extraction and coding of the data and the codes and categories were discussed in the research group. Two main categories were identified: *supplying support that is responsive to the needs of parents* and *belonging to a breastfeeding community*.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Study characteristics

The included studies ( $n=19$ ) were published between 2015 and 2024 and conducted in the United States ( $n=9$ ), the United Kingdom ( $n=2$ ), Spain ( $n=1$ ), Northern Ireland ( $n=1$ ), Finland ( $n=1$ ), Australia

( $n=2$ ), New Zealand ( $n=2$ ) and Hong Kong ( $n=1$ ). The study designs varied, but most of the studies had qualitative designs ( $n=11$ ) and others had a quantitative ( $n=6$ ) or mixed methods design ( $n=2$ ). Eight of the qualitative studies used interviews as the data collection method. The applied interview methods were individual interviews ( $n=5$ ) and focus groups ( $n=1$ ) or their combinations ( $n=2$ ). Three of the qualitative studies were ethnographies (Asiodu et al., 2015; Bridges, 2016; Bridges et al., 2018), which used community participant observations (Asiodu et al., 2015), field notes (Asiodu et al., 2015) and data from Facebook groups (Bridges et al., 2018) in addition to the interviews. The number of participants in qualitative studies varied from 8 to 187.

The studies with a quantitative approach were randomized controlled trials (Gonzalez-Darias et al., 2020; Munyan & Kennedy, 2022; Niela-Vilén et al., 2016) and cross-sectional studies (Fan et al., 2022; Morse & Brown, 2021; Robinson, Lauckner, et al., 2019). Niela-Vilén et al. (2016) used structured questionnaires and telephone interviews as the method of data collection and Gonzalez-Darias et al. (2020) collected data through questionnaires and monitored the use of the intervention. Fan et al. (2022) used self-administered questionnaires, telephone follow-up and structured interviews as their data collection methods. All cross-sectional studies collected data from online surveys. The sample size of the quantitative

TABLE 2 Study characteristics.

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim of the study	Design	Participants	Method of data collection	Moderators	Key findings	JBI quality appraisal score (/max score)
Alianmoghaddam et al. (2019), New Zealand	To explore the influence of social media on exclusive breastfeeding practice	Qualitative descriptive study	New mothers (n=30).	Questionnaire, face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews	Undefined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mothers need reliable online infant feeding information.</li> <li>Smartphone apps can be a good option for promoting breastfeeding.</li> <li>Information is accessed among breastfeeding mothers on Facebook.</li> <li>The utility of geographically distant infant feeding support via Skype.</li> </ul>	8/10
Asiodu et al. (2015), USA	To describe the use of social media during the antepartum and postpartum periods among first-time African American mothers and their support persons	Ethnography	Pregnant mothers (n = 14) and their supporters (n = 8)	Semi-structured interviews, community participant observations and field notes	Undefined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most participants reported using at least one mobile application during their pregnancies and after birth.</li> <li>Participants gleaned considerable information about infant development from the applications but had difficulties finding and recalling information about infant feeding.</li> <li>Most participants noted reviewing a mobile application or website on a daily or weekly basis, but the usage decreased during the postpartum period.</li> <li>Social media was often used to obtain support, especially for breastfeeding mothers.</li> </ul>	8/10

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim of the study	Design	Participants	Method of data collection	Moderators	Key findings	JBI quality appraisal score (/max score)
Black et al. (2020), Northern Ireland	To investigate the experiences of women using a social media Facebook group for breastfeeding support and to attempt to explore whether it has aided in extended breastfeeding success	Qualitative descriptive study	Primiparous mothers that were members of a closed national breastfeeding support group (n = 8)	Semi-structured interviews	Experienced breastfeeding mothers, volunteer peer supporters and International Board-Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLC's)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The mothers gained self-efficacy belief with the help of the Facebook group in different ways.</li> <li>Education: one of the greatest benefits of the Facebook group was the plethora of information available.</li> <li>Accessibility: easy access to specific information and support.</li> <li>Community: existence of an online community was paramount in ensuring the participants felt supported in their breastfeeding journey and encouraged success.</li> <li>Normalizing: the group helped to normalize breastfeeding.</li> <li>Extended goals: extending personal breastfeeding goals</li> </ul>	9/10
Bridges (2016), Australia	To advance understanding of the experiences of mothers using closed Facebook groups attached to the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) and how these mothers find and share breastfeeding support and information using this forum	Online ethnography	Administrators and active participants of the Facebook groups (n = 23)	Online in-depth interviews and online focus groups	There were moderators in the groups, but they were not defined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The closed Facebook groups became a community for breastfeeding mothers.</li> <li>The groups complemented and added value to other forms of support.</li> <li>The groups gave access to immediate help.</li> <li>Information and education were important reasons participants engaged with the groups.</li> </ul>	7/10

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim of the study	Design	Participants	Method of data collection	Moderators	Key findings	JBI quality appraisal score (/max score)
Bridges et al. (2018), Australia	To investigate the specific breastfeeding topics that women are investigating via social networking sites and how breastfeeding peer supporters respond with informational and emotional support to queries about breastfeeding concerns	Online ethnography	Participants of 15 closed Facebook groups attached to the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA)	Wall posts, comments and images from 15 closed Facebook groups over a four-week period	Trained peer breastfeeding counsellors	<p>Most asked breastfeeding topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Breastfeeding management: for example, timing and frequency of feeds, feeding to sleep and breast refusal.</li> <li>Breastfeeding and health: for example, protective benefits of breastfeeding, breastfeeding during baby's illness and mothers' illness while breastfeeding.</li> <li>Breastfeeding and work: for example, breast pump hire, expressing and storing breastmilk and leaving breastfed babies for prolonged periods of time</li> </ul>	8/10
Cueva et al. (2017), USA	To explore the implementation of a breastfeeding peer counsellor program with Alaska Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)	Qualitative descriptive study	WIC clients, peer counsellors and WIC staff members. (focus groups $n = 25$ , in-depth interviews $n = 33$ , surveys $n = 129$ )	In-depth interviews (peer counsellors and WIC staff), focus groups (WIC clients) and surveys (WIC clients)	Trained breastfeeding peer counsellors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The strengths of the programme were peer counsellors' supportiveness, accessibility and knowledge.</li> <li>The challenges included the peer counsellors' limited hours, funding, in-person contact and the confusion about their role.</li> <li>The peer counsellors' innovative use of texting and online support groups assisted WIC clients' breastfeeding success.</li> </ul>	7/10

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim of the study	Design	Participants	Method of data collection	Moderators	Key findings	JBI quality appraisal score (/max score)
Fan et al. (2022), Hong Kong	To assess the feasibility and acceptability of an online instant messaging peer support group for breastfeeding	Pilot randomized controlled study	Primiparous women (n = 33)	Telephone follow-up at 1, 2 and 4 and 6 months postpartum or until they stopped breastfeeding, which ever came first	Trained peer counsellors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Online messaging peer support group is feasible and acceptable to women.</li> <li>Participants perceived that providing peer support through instant messaging app is appropriate and serves as a channel for the participants to ask questions and obtain information.</li> <li>Furthermore, meetings of the peer supporters and group members can be held to enhance the effectiveness of the intervention.</li> <li>In addition, no significant differences were found in any and exclusive breastfeeding rates, breastfeeding attitude and breastfeeding self-efficacy between the two groups</li> </ul>	11/13
Gonzalez-Darias et al. (2020), Spain	To measure the effectiveness on breastfeeding rates by the programme "Supporting a First-time mother", a web-based platform of interaction between first-time mothers and breastfeeding-experienced women who act as peer-supporters	Randomized controlled trial	Breastfeeding mothers (n = 154) and trained peer supporters (n = 70)	The monitoring and assessment of intervention and control groups at 3 and 6 months post-delivery (email or telephone)	Trained peer supporters and the research team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The "Support a First-time Mother" programme increases the likelihood to maintain breastfeeding.</li> <li>Other factors that had an effect on successful breastfeeding, were maternal age and education, the use of epidural analgesia and early initiation of breastfeeding.</li> </ul>	7/13

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim of the study	Design	Participants	Method of data collection	Moderators	Key findings	JBI quality appraisal score (/max score)
Morse and Brown (2021), UK	To explore how and why women find, use and value local breastfeeding support Facebook groups and who is providing them	Cross-sectional study	Breastfeeding mothers (n = 2011)	Online survey	Trained peer supporters (47.9%), lactation consultants (29.1%) and parents (19.9%), varying between different Facebook groups (n = 227)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local breastfeeding support Facebook groups are widely used and highly valued for their connection with local face-to-face services and other mothers.</li> <li>They offer access to expertise and shared experience in a format mothers find convenient and timely, improving confidence and self-efficacy.</li> <li>Local breastfeeding support Facebook groups enable the formation of support networks and development of breastfeeding knowledge that mothers credit with increased well-being, motivation and breastfeeding duration.</li> </ul>	5/8
Munyan and Kennedy (2022), USA	To describe levels of perceived informational social support among mothers in an online virtual community and to determine which features of the virtual community were perceived most favourably by breastfeeding mothers	Cross-sectional study	Members of an online virtual lactation group (n = 56)	Online survey	An IBCLC and a Certified Lactation Counsellor (CLC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The reported social support was moderate to high.</li> <li>Participants perceived informational support 'pretty often' from their group interactions.</li> <li>Participants in this study had an average Breastfeeding Self-Efficacy-Short Form score of 57.91, indicating a moderately high level of breastfeeding self-efficacy.</li> <li>Participants appreciated the immediacy of feedback and the presence of lactation support professionals within the community.</li> </ul>	6/8

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim of the study	Design	Participants	Method of data collection	Moderators	Key findings	JBI quality appraisal score (/max score)
Niela-Vilén et al. (2016), Finland	To examine whether an Internet-based peer-support intervention has an effect on the duration of breastfeeding or breast milk expression or maternal breastfeeding attitude compared with routine care in the mothers of preterm infants	Randomized controlled trial	124 mothers of preterm (<35 weeks) infants (60 in an experimental group and 64 in a control group)	Structured questionnaires in five different time points (1 week postpartum, at infant's discharge, at 3, 6 and 12 months corrected age). At 12 months corrected age, mothers were interviewed by phone by the researcher	A midwife and peer supporters that had experience breastfeeding their own preterm infants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The intervention had no effect on breastfeeding or breast milk expression or maternal breastfeeding attitude.</li> <li>A maternal breastfeeding-favourable attitude and at least two previous children were predictors of a longer duration of breastfeeding.</li> <li>The mothers in the experimental group enjoyed peer support, but only a few reported it as having some impact on breastfeeding.</li> </ul>	11/13
Regan and Brown (2019), UK	To explore the impact of social media support upon women's experiences of breastfeeding in a UK setting, specifically exploring their motivations for use alongside positive and negative outcomes they experience	Qualitative descriptive study	Mothers with a child up to 3 years old, who had breastfed or were currently breastfeeding ( $n = 14$ )	Semi structured interviews	Undefined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of professional support, isolation as a breastfeeding mother, difficulty accessing face-to-face support, round-the-clock availability and variety of online support available motivated to seek out online support.</li> <li>Mothers experienced several positive aspects when using online support, such as receiving emotional support and reassurance and sharing experiences with other mothers.</li> <li>Limitations of online support were perceived judgement, polarized debate and the lack of regulation.</li> </ul>	6/10

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim of the study	Design	Participants	Method of data collection	Moderators	Key findings	JBI quality appraisal score (/max score)
Robinson, Davis, et al. (2019), USA	To describe the experiences of African American mothers who participate in breastfeeding support groups on Facebook and the breastfeeding beliefs, practices and outcomes for this population of mothers	Qualitative prospective study	African American mothers who were participating in breastfeeding support groups on Facebook (n=22)	Online focus groups	Not defined in all Facebook groups (n=6). The largest group had two licensed lactation support professionals and two additional mothers as moderators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants regarded Facebook support groups as positive and valued community of support.</li> <li>The advantages of participating in online support groups were access to evidence-based information and a large range of opinions and the convenience and accessibility of the groups.</li> <li>The disadvantages of participating in online support groups were negative feedback and the inability to understand the tone of Facebook messages.</li> <li>Shared experiences in the groups improved confidence with public breastfeeding and prolonged goals for breastfeeding duration.</li> </ul>	10/10
Robinson, Lauckner, et al. (2019), USA	To explore the sources of support among users of Facebook breastfeeding support groups and a possible mechanism by which support received on Facebook may translate to behavioural outcomes among breastfeeding mothers	Cross-sectional study	African American first-time mothers (n=277)	Online survey	Undefined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants received the highest amount of breastfeeding support from Facebook.</li> <li>Facebook support was significantly correlated with intended breastfeeding duration.</li> <li>Self-efficacy and breastfeeding attitudes remained significant predictors of intended breastfeeding duration.</li> </ul>	8/8

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim of the study	Design	Participants	Method of data collection	Moderators	Key findings	JBI quality appraisal score (/max score)
Severinsen et al. (2024), New Zealand	To understand the experiences of young mothers who exclusively breastfed for 6 months and beyond and explore their experiences of stigma and active resistance through social media	Qualitative descriptive study.	Young mothers (18–25 years of age) who breastfed exclusively for 6 months or longer (n=44)	In-depth, semi structured telephone interviews	Undefined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Young mothers faced negative judgements about maturity and competence, adverse guidance to supplement or cease breastfeeding and an undermining of their breastfeeding efforts.</li> <li>Young mothers sought alternative support in online environments to avoid negative interactions. Online spaces provided anonymity, convenience, experiential knowledge and social connections with shared values. This facilitated identity strengthening, empowerment and stigma resistance.</li> </ul>	8/10
Skelton et al. (2020), USA	To explore the utilization of an existing pro breastfeeding Facebook group and how utilization influences breastfeeding-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviours	Mixed methods study	Mothers who were pregnant, breastfeeding or had recently breastfed (in the past 3 years)	Online focus group discussions (n=21), individual interviews (n=12) and an online survey (n=314)	IBCLC's and experienced breastfeeding mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Breastfeeding mothers reported the peer-to-peer support from the pro breastfeeding groups to be invaluable and that the groups itself is a resource for knowledge and interaction that consequently impacts the breastfeeding relationship.</li> <li>The Facebook group organically formed a community of practice with commitment and a virtual community.</li> </ul>	5/8

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author(s), year of publication, country	Aim of the study	Design	Participants	Method of data collection	Moderators	Key findings	JBI quality appraisal score (/max score)
Skelton et al. (2018), USA	To leverage mothers' attitudes and behaviours of social media usage to understand effects on breastfeeding outcomes	Qualitative descriptive study	Mothers who were pregnant, breastfeeding or had recently breastfed (in the past 3 years)	Online focus group discussions (n = 21) and individual interviews (n = 12)	IBCLC's and experienced breastfeeding mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants indicated that the social media group formed a community of support for breastfeeding.</li> <li>The community normalized breastfeeding, gave empowerment and resource for breastfeeding and gave a platform to share experiences about breastfeeding.</li> </ul>	7/10
Wagg et al. (2022), USA	To provide insight into women's experiences of using online social support via Facebook, capture the meaning that they assign to the groups and the perceived impact that the groups have on breastfeeding decisions and their journey	Qualitative descriptive study	Mothers with experience of using UK based online breastfeeding support groups (n = 10)	Semi structured telephone interviews	Undefined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mothers characterized the online social support groups as offering emotional, technical, informational and experiential support for breastfeeding.</li> <li>Shared experiences of others were valued in the groups.</li> <li>Mothers were able to learn from the groups and grow in confidence.</li> <li>The group provided reassurance and normalized breastfeeding.</li> </ul>	7/10
Wilson (2020), USA	To explore the variables that lead to sustained, exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months for breastfeeding women of the millennial generation who follow social media breastfeeding support groups	Mixed methods study	Exclusively breastfeeding women (n = 241)	Online surveys at two timepoints (follow-up at 6 months later)	Undefined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Breastfeeding social support had a direct effect on participants' breastfeeding confidence, knowledge and attitudes.</li> <li>Within social media breastfeeding support groups, exclusive breastfeeding to 6 months was reported to be three times greater than the U.S. national average.</li> <li>Social support was directly and indirectly related to exclusive breastfeeding duration to 6 months.</li> </ul>	6/8

studies varied from 33 to 2011. The mixed methods studies (Skelton et al., 2020; Wilson, 2020) combined qualitative and quantitative data collection methods; thus, both online surveys (Skelton et al., 2020; Wilson, 2020) and focus groups (Skelton et al., 2020) and individual interviews (Skelton et al., 2020) were used.

Most of the studies ( $n=15$ ) examined the support of existing peer support groups or programmes. Three studies (Fan et al., 2022; Gonzalez-Darias et al., 2020; Niela-Vilén et al., 2016) investigated a programme or support group specially developed for research purposes and Cueva et al. (2017) researched the implementation of a breastfeeding peer counsellor programme with Alaska Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Most of the studies of this review investigated breastfeeding support groups on Facebook ( $n=13$ ). The other studies researched various breastfeeding support groups or programmes or did not disclose the platform of the support groups ( $n=5$ ). Additionally, Asiodu et al. (2015) utilized a wider perspective in their study; thus, they examined the use of social media during the antepartum and postpartum periods.

The research participants in all studies were pregnant or breastfeeding parents or parents who had recently breastfed. Moreover, in some studies, supporters of the pregnant parents (Asiodu et al., 2015), the administrators of Facebook breastfeeding support groups (Bridges, 2016), trained peer supporters (Cueva et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Darias et al., 2020) and healthcare staff (Cueva et al., 2017) were also considered as study participants. A detailed description of the included studies is presented in Table 2.

## 4.2 | The organization of the support

Facebook was the most popular platform for arranging peer support online (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Black et al., 2020; Bridges, 2016; Bridges et al., 2018; Morse & Brown, 2021; Niela-Vilén et al., 2016; Regan & Brown, 2019; Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019; Robinson, Lauckner, et al., 2019; Severinsen et al., 2024; Skelton et al., 2018; Skelton et al., 2020; Wagg et al., 2022; Wilson, 2020). Various kinds of support groups existed on Facebook for different purposes, such as groups according to the due date (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019), groups for different breastfeeding issues (e.g. breastfeeding a premature baby or breastfeeding a baby with a tongue tie) (Regan & Brown, 2019), groups promoting breastfeeding among Black parents (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019) and general breastfeeding support groups (Regan & Brown, 2019). There were international (Wilson, 2020), national (Black et al., 2020; Bridges, 2016; Bridges et al., 2018; Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019; Skelton et al., 2018, 2020; Wagg et al., 2022) and local groups (Morse & Brown, 2021; Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019; Severinsen et al., 2024). Other online breastfeeding support groups included a social media community (Munyan & Kennedy, 2022), a closed group for the clients of the Alaska WIC programme (Cueva et al., 2017) and different mobile applications (Asiodu et al., 2015). Gonzalez-Darias et al. (2020) investigated the effectiveness of a breastfeeding peer support programme and Fan

et al. (2022) conducted a trial investigating the feasibility and acceptability of a WhatsApp online group.

Online peer support groups were moderated by both healthcare personnel and peer supporters ( $n=8$ ) or only by peer supporters ( $n=3$ ). The support groups were administered and moderated by International Board-Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) (Black et al., 2020; Munyan & Kennedy, 2022; Skelton et al., 2018, 2020), midwives (Niela-Vilén et al., 2016), lactation consultants (Morse & Brown, 2021), lactation support professionals (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019), lay Certified Lactation Counsellors (CLCs) (Munyan & Kennedy, 2022), trained peer supporters (Bridges et al., 2018; Cueva et al., 2017; Fan et al., 2022; Gonzalez-Darias et al., 2020; Morse & Brown, 2021), volunteer peer supporters (Black et al., 2020), experienced breastfeeding parents (Black et al., 2020; Niela-Vilén et al., 2016; Skelton et al., 2018, 2020) and parents (Morse & Brown, 2021; Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019). In a randomized controlled trial by Gonzalez-Darias et al. (2020), the research team was also involved in the moderation of the support group. Administration and moderation of the support groups were undefined in eight studies (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Asiodu et al., 2015; Bridges, 2016; Regan & Brown, 2019; Robinson, Lauckner, et al., 2019; Severinsen et al., 2024; Wagg et al., 2022; Wilson, 2020).

Peers provided support in all the groups and some groups also had health professionals (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019), IBCLCs (Black et al., 2020; Munyan & Kennedy, 2022; Skelton et al., 2018, 2020), CLCs (Munyan & Kennedy, 2022) and lactation specialists (Morse & Brown, 2021) as supporters. Peer supporters in five studies were trained for their role as supporters (Bridges et al., 2018; Cueva et al., 2017; Fan et al., 2022; Gonzalez-Darias et al., 2020; Morse & Brown, 2021). The training that peer supporters received in the randomized controlled trial by Gonzalez-Darias et al. (2020) consisted of information about the project, the use of the website, common breastfeeding difficulties and how to advise parents experiencing them. Cueva et al. (2017) mentioned that, in their study, the peer counsellors received online training through the *Loving Support* curriculum. In three studies the training content the peer supporters had received were not clarified (Bridges et al., 2018; Fan et al., 2022; Morse & Brown, 2021). However, none of the peer supporters' training was mentioned in 12 studies (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Asiodu et al., 2015; Black et al., 2020; Bridges, 2016; Munyan & Kennedy, 2022; Regan & Brown, 2019; Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019; Robinson, Lauckner, et al., 2019; Skelton et al., 2018, 2020; Wagg et al., 2022; Wilson, 2020). Additionally, Niela-Vilén et al. (2016) declared that the peer supporters in their study were not trained.

## 4.3 | Supplying support that is responsive to the needs of parents

Online breastfeeding support mainly answers to the needs of the parents; thus, the supply meets the demand. Breastfeeding parents accessed breastfeeding support groups in search of reassurance (Bridges et al., 2018; Morse & Brown, 2021), informational and

emotional support, practical information (Bridges et al., 2018), access to shared experiences (Morse & Brown, 2021), experiential support (Wagg et al., 2022) and trained support (Morse & Brown, 2021). The peer support that parents received from these groups was considered convenient (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Fan et al., 2022; Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019; Severinsen et al., 2024), practical (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Severinsen et al., 2024), timely (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Severinsen et al., 2024), accessible (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019), invaluable (Asiodu et al., 2015), helpful, appropriate (Fan et al., 2022) and fast (Severinsen et al., 2024). Parents appreciated the accessibility of the groups (Morse & Brown, 2021; Munyan & Kennedy, 2022), the anonymous nature of online support (Severinsen et al., 2024) and the ability to receive responses quickly (Munyan & Kennedy, 2022).

Two subcategories regarding the supply and demand of the support were identified: (1) helpful informational support in breastfeeding-related decisions; and (2) reassuring emotional support.

#### 4.3.1 | Helpful informational support in breastfeeding-related decisions

Parents in breastfeeding support groups in social media received informational support (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Bridges et al., 2018; Cueva et al., 2017; Fan et al., 2022; Gonzalez-Darias et al., 2020; Morse & Brown, 2021; Munyan & Kennedy, 2022; Regan & Brown, 2019; Skelton et al., 2018; Wilson, 2020). Social media was the preferred way to receive information before and after birth and the information received from social media was considered credible, appropriate and educational (Asiodu et al., 2015). The information specifically from the support groups was evidence-based (Black et al., 2020; Skelton et al., 2020), accurate (Skelton et al., 2018, 2020), reliable (Morse & Brown, 2021) and practical (Black et al., 2020). The groups improved breastfeeding knowledge (Morse & Brown, 2021) and the received health information benefited breastfeeding (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019); for example, parents were able to receive timely advice in situations where a health professional was not readily available (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019).

Some of the breastfeeding parents joined support groups when they were experiencing breastfeeding problems, whereas others joined support groups in preparation for possible breastfeeding problems in the future (Morse & Brown, 2021). Some parents sought out support in situations where health professionals were not available and some wanted to seek support from social media because of the variety of support that was available (Regan & Brown, 2019).

Participants considered the availability of evidence-based information extremely important (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019). Parents had different viewpoints in trusting the online support. Many parents trusted the online information and support, whereas some participants had doubts about seeking health information from social media (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019). However, some parents had

difficulties recognizing the trained supporters, which caused them challenges in trusting the support, but knowing who was providing the trained support increased their trust (Morse & Brown, 2021). The participants also voiced some concerns about the lack of regulation in the groups, even though they had administrators (Regan & Brown, 2019). Parents expressed more trust in the information they received from the groups because it came from other breastfeeding parents and the information from peers was also easier to understand (Skelton et al., 2018). Nevertheless, lay parents sometimes provided medical advice that was considered inappropriate (Regan & Brown, 2019).

For many parents, the greatest benefit of belonging to a support group was the available information (Black et al., 2020). Participants received quick advice from the support groups (Regan & Brown, 2019). The information in the groups was easily accessible and applied (Skelton et al., 2020) and it was given quickly at any time of the day (Black et al., 2020), which enabled parents to receive immediate help when needed (Bridges, 2016). The availability of information also enriched its value (Skelton et al., 2018). Additionally, the groups enabled parents to access specific information that was tailored to their own needs (Black et al., 2020). Participants valued the support (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Morse & Brown, 2021; Skelton et al., 2020), information (Bridges, 2016) and advice (Morse & Brown, 2021) received from the groups. More specifically, parents reported appreciating breastfeeding information that was viewed as practical (Regan & Brown, 2019) and information that was based on evidence (Munyan & Kennedy, 2022).

The support parents received in breastfeeding support groups helped them in their breastfeeding decision-making (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019). Support received from peer supporters and other parents helped them to continue breastfeeding (Cueva et al., 2017; Morse & Brown, 2021; Regan & Brown, 2019) and to reach (Morse & Brown, 2021) or extend (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019) their breastfeeding goals. Many parents were able to maintain breastfeeding with the help of peer support and encouragement despite lactation problems (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Skelton et al., 2020). For some parents, the education and support of the groups helped them alter their breastfeeding goals (Black et al., 2020; Skelton et al., 2018) and aim for natural term weaning (Black et al., 2020). Similarly, others' examples of breastfeeding longer in the group motivated them to extend their own breastfeeding goals (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019). Additionally, the encouragement to continue breastfeeding (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019) and support (Morse & Brown, 2021) received in the groups led to longer breastfeeding duration or extension of their breastfeeding goals. Seeing so many other parents breastfeeding in the support group and receiving support from them gave parents confidence to defend their breastfeeding-related decisions, resulting in their desire to encourage and empower other parents in breastfeeding (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019). Parents also valued that the support of the group resulted in improved breastfeeding experiences and a longer breastfeeding duration (Morse & Brown, 2021).

### 4.3.2 | Reassuring emotional support

Parents in breastfeeding support groups in social media received emotional support (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Bridges et al., 2018; Fan et al., 2022; Morse & Brown, 2021; Regan & Brown, 2019; Wilson, 2020) and reassurance (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Fan et al., 2022; Severinsen et al., 2024; Wagg et al., 2022). Receiving emotional support was common (Morse & Brown, 2021) and conversations in the groups provided reassurance (Bridges et al., 2018), comfort (Bridges et al., 2018) and enhanced self-confidence (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019). The online groups ensured that the participants felt supported in their breastfeeding journey (Black et al., 2020). The groups helped to alleviate concerns regarding breastfeeding (Skelton et al., 2018) and parents found comfort and reassurance in lonesome situations from the support groups (Black et al., 2020). There were also conflicting experiences and some parents described a polarization between parents that exclusively breastfed and parents that used formula (Regan & Brown, 2019). Some African American parents wanted to participate in groups that had other members they could relate to or groups that specifically targeted African American parents (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019).

The online groups offered confidence (Bridges, 2016; Wagg et al., 2022; Wilson, 2020) and empowerment (Bridges, 2016) to breastfeeding parents. The groups' support imparted a sense of breastfeeding preparedness and gave them confidence in their own ability to breastfeed, which increased parents' breastfeeding self-efficacy (Black et al., 2020). Additionally, the reassurance from trained supporters and professionals improved parents' confidence and self-efficacy (Morse & Brown, 2021). The social media groups helped parents feel empowered and confident in various issues concerning breastfeeding, such as having enough milk supply and returning to work (Skelton et al., 2018). Furthermore, the online community encouraged and gave self-assurance in public breastfeeding (Black et al., 2020), by providing images of other breastfeeding parents (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019) and encouraging parents to breastfeed in public (Skelton et al., 2018). The reassurance parents received from the support groups was highly valued (Morse & Brown, 2021). Parents also valued the range of solutions that experienced parents offered to different breastfeeding challenges (Severinsen et al., 2024). Participants in the groups valued the experience of peers and the reciprocity of the group, so that they were also able to support each other (Morse & Brown, 2021).

## 4.4 | Belonging to a breastfeeding community

The breastfeeding support groups created a community for breastfeeding parents (Bridges, 2016) as they searched for people they could relate to. The groups were a source of connectedness for breastfeeding parents (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Cueva et al., 2017; Regan & Brown, 2019) and through that connection

parents developed solidarity with the breastfeeding community (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019). The breastfeeding communities also brought people together to share experiences (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019) and some parents considered breastfeeding support groups as tribes with an emotional connection (Morse & Brown, 2021).

Two subcategories regarding belonging to a breastfeeding community were identified from the included studies: (1) sense of community; and (2) normalization of breastfeeding.

### 4.4.1 | Sense of community

Many parents felt a familial-like bond in their support group (Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019) and that they were able to bond with other parents in the group that united them (Skelton et al., 2018, 2020). In these groups, parents also found like-minded peers with whom they shared values and experiences (Severinsen et al., 2024). Parents in these communities supported (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Morse & Brown, 2021; Regan & Brown, 2019) and encouraged (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019) other parents and received encouragement from other parents in return (Skelton et al., 2020). Additionally, parents received (Fan et al., 2022) and gave advice to each other (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Regan & Brown, 2019). Sharing experiences was a very important part of peer support and that gave comfort (Skelton et al., 2018), empowerment (Skelton et al., 2018), hope (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019), motivation (Morse & Brown, 2021) and enjoyment (Skelton et al., 2020) to breastfeeding parents. Parents learned through others' experiences (Morse & Brown, 2021; Wagg et al., 2022) and the experiences of others helped them to recognize that they were not alone in their breastfeeding struggles (Asiodu et al., 2015; Fan et al., 2022; Niela-Vilén et al., 2016).

These breastfeeding communities offered a strong sense of confidentiality, trust, nonjudgement (Skelton et al., 2018, 2020) and safety (Bridges, 2016). In other contradictory experiences, some parents had witnessed judgemental comments in some of the support groups (Regan & Brown, 2019). The communities united strangers around one topic and gave them a place where they were understood (Skelton et al., 2018). Connecting with other parents was common (Morse & Brown, 2021; Severinsen et al., 2024) and it involved sharing experiences (Alianmoghaddam et al., 2019; Skelton et al., 2018) and struggles (Skelton et al., 2018). Some parents felt that breastfeeding communities had a positive impact on their breastfeeding (Morse & Brown, 2021; Skelton et al., 2018) and facilitated better breastfeeding success and a longer breastfeeding duration. (Black et al., 2020).

Another important part of peer support in these communities was the reciprocity between parents. Many more experienced parents were active in the community (Bridges, 2016) and wanted to use their knowledge and experience about breastfeeding to help other parents (Wagg et al., 2022). Some parents were even motivated to train as peer supporters because of the experience they had in the group (Morse & Brown, 2021). Many experienced parents felt

a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction when they were able to help others (Bridges, 2016) and took enjoyment in supporting others (Morse & Brown, 2021).

#### 4.4.2 | Normalization of breastfeeding

The breastfeeding communities helped to normalize breastfeeding (Black et al., 2020; Skelton et al., 2018; Wagg et al., 2022), for example, by clearing up misconceptions about breastfeeding (Black et al., 2020) and providing understanding about what to expect and what is normal when breastfeeding (Skelton et al., 2018). Many parents appreciated that the group was able to normalize breastfeeding and breastfeeding troubles (Skelton et al., 2020).

More specifically, communities normalized breastfeeding an older child (Morse & Brown, 2021; Wagg et al., 2022), feeding in public (Morse & Brown, 2021; Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019; Wagg et al., 2022), breastfeeding to sleep (Bridges et al., 2018) and the behaviour of a child when breastfeeding (Wagg et al., 2022).

The normalization of breastfeeding gave parents self-assurance to feed in public (Black et al., 2020) and helped them to feel more comfortable while doing it (Black et al., 2020; Robinson, Davis, et al., 2019). Normalizing public breastfeeding (Morse & Brown, 2021) and breastfeeding in general (Skelton et al., 2018) also helped some parents to continue breastfeeding.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this review was to explore what Internet-based breastfeeding peer support offers to breastfeeding parents. It seems that online support mainly answers parents' needs and provides a community that parents can belong to. The parents looked for breastfeeding support, advice, information, emotional support, reassurance and access to shared experiences from various online breastfeeding peer support groups. The findings showed that the parents in these support groups indeed received both informational and emotional support and were also able to share their experiences with other parents in similar situations. The support groups also helped them in their breastfeeding decisions; thus, positively advancing their breastfeeding experience. The support groups created breastfeeding communities for these parents and they were able to bond with others and feel like they belonged. The groups also normalized breastfeeding, which gave parents self-assurance to breastfeed in public (Black et al., 2020) and continue breastfeeding for longer (Morse & Brown, 2021).

In many ways, these online peer support groups offered different breastfeeding support than what was offered by traditional local support groups or by health care professionals. Parents valued the fact that the support was easy to access and that they were able to get immediate help and reassurance. However, traditional breastfeeding support groups are held in a specific time and place (e.g. in community venues, children's centres and health clinics;

Grant et al., 2018) and thus cannot offer support around the clock. Likewise, the support that healthcare professionals provide (e.g. home visits) must be planned ahead of time (Bengough et al., 2022), which does not consider urgent situations where immediate support is needed.

The findings in this study showed the importance of these groups' moderation. The moderators' role is vital; hence, they are the ones that monitor and modify the content of the groups and make sure that the support given is evidence-based. In other online support groups focusing on different topics, the moderation of experts has also been considered useful (Egerton et al., 2022) and the importance of moderation in ensuring the validity of shared information has been acknowledged (Petrič et al., 2023).

In addition to the moderators, a lot of responsibility is put on parents themselves. So much health-related information is available online and the Internet and social media are so frequently used by new parents (Walker et al., 2017); thus, it is important to make sure that pregnant and breastfeeding parents have enough education about health literacy so that they can discern where to find evidence-based information and support concerning breastfeeding. Digital health literacy can be a contributing factor in putting health-related information into practice (Kim et al., 2023) and it can also reduce health inequalities (Yang et al., 2022), which makes it an important element when discussing the benefits of receiving breastfeeding-related information and support online. Even though all the support groups investigated in this review were of high quality, parents can seek out information through many different kinds of groups and venues for breastfeeding. Not all of them are beneficial and some spread information that is not evidence-based and might even be harmful. Therefore, nurses and midwives should be aware of these groups in order to guide parents to high-quality peer support groups. Furthermore, it is important to ensure the health literacy skills of pregnant and breastfeeding parents.

According to this review's findings, a very important aspect of online breastfeeding peer support is the sense of community developed in the support groups. Currently, many families are without a solid support network and can feel quite alone with their parenting choices. Especially parents that are staying home with young children have a higher risk for loneliness (Arimoto & Tadaka, 2021). Additionally, social media can increase comparison, envy and even anxiety in parents (Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022), even though it also has many positive attributes. It is vital that breastfeeding parents have access to communities they can rely on because social support is positively associated with parental role satisfaction (Akaroglu, 2023) and this review also found that belonging to these communities increases parents' breastfeeding self-efficacy. This sense of community was especially important for parents who did not have a supportive environment concerning breastfeeding in their own social networks. Belonging to these breastfeeding support communities supplements other methods of support, such as evidence-based breastfeeding counselling provided by nurses and midwives (Moon & Woo, 2021).

Sharing both positive and negative experiences in breastfeeding was an important element of these communities because that gave the parents a feeling that they were not alone in their breastfeeding struggles and that they could overcome them as others have. These findings are similar to those in a review by Chang et al. (2022), who concluded that peer support increased parents' confidence in breastfeeding and that parents appreciated the peer supporters' shared experiences. It is important to point out that Chang et al. (2022) examined breastfeeding peer support in a wider perspective, whereas this review concentrates on online peer support. Thus, the findings of this review show that online peer support can also bring about these positive experiences for breastfeeding parents.

## 5.1 | Limitations

This integrative review has its limitations. It aimed to develop a search strategy to include all relevant data, although it is possible that the selected search terms or databases did not cover all of the publications examining the topic. The concepts of breastfeeding support and social media are not straightforward, so this review aimed to use a broad definition of the concepts in order to include all published studies relevant to this topic. One limitation of this review is that only one author performed the data analysis, even though it was thoroughly conversed and confirmed with the research team.

There are also some limitations considering the included research. Most of the studies investigated parents who were part of an online breastfeeding support group, so it is possible that parents who have a positive breastfeeding attitude and positive breastfeeding experiences stay in the groups and are more willing to participate in studies concerning breastfeeding. Only three studies in the review used randomized controlled trials and most of the studies included in the review had qualitative research designs. Thus, there is a lack of rigorous information considering the effects of online breastfeeding peer support. There is clearly a need for more controlled quantitative studies on this topic and it would be important to have more evidence about the breastfeeding outcomes and the role of moderation in these support groups.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Breastfeeding parents need support in their breastfeeding journey and online peer support is a very convenient and accessible means of obtaining it. Parents search for and receive versatile support from online peer support groups and the groups also offer a community where parents can share their experiences and help each other in their breastfeeding challenges. These groups add to the breastfeeding peer support that is offered in healthcare but should not replace it. Breastfeeding peer support groups are a great possibility for parents to receive support and guidance and it is vital that these groups are efficiently moderated to ensure that the advice parents receive in these groups is evidence-based and that the support is

encouraging. In the future it would be very important to study the importance of health literacy and digital literacy among breastfeeding parents. This might help prevent online misinformation from harming parents' breastfeeding practices or decisions.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

EH, RI, HN-V: Made substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; EH, RI, HN-V: Involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content; EH, RI, HN-V: Given final approval of the version to be published. Each author should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content; EH, RI, HN-V: Agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None.

### FUNDING INFORMATION

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

### PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/jan.16221>.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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**How to cite this article:** Hiito, E., Ikonen, R., & Niela-Vilén, H. (2024). Internet-based breastfeeding peer support for breastfeeding parents: An integrative review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 00, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.16221>

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