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1       **Women’s experience of social media breastfeeding support and its**  
2               **impact on extended breastfeeding success: a social cognitive**  
3                               **perspective.**

4  
5

6       **Introduction**

7       A plethora of research has demonstrated there are significant health benefits of  
8       breastfeeding for both mother and child. A meta-analysis conducted by Victora et al.  
9       (2016) reported a reduction in child infections, malocclusion, an increase in  
10       intelligence and possible reduction in obesity and diabetes as some of the benefits for  
11       the child. Additionally, they found breastfeeding to increase maternal protection  
12       against breast cancer. Moreover, breastfeeding can decrease women’s chances of  
13       developing ovarian cancer and type two diabetes (Jäger et al., 2016; Li et al., 2014).

14       As a result of these benefits The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2018)  
15       recommends breastfeeding “exclusively for the first 6 months of life and continued  
16       with safe and adequate complementary foods for up to 2 years or beyond” (p6).  
17       Despite this, according to the 2010 Infant Feeding Survey (IFS) breastfeeding rates in  
18       the UK are the worst in Europe with only 81% of mothers initiating breastfeeding,  
19       34% still breastfeeding at 6 months and <1% at 12 months postpartum (McAndrew et  
20       al., 2010). Global comparisons highlight the severity of this problem; at 12 months  
21       postpartum prevalence rates of 35% (Norway) and 16% (Sweden) have been reported  
22       in Europe and 27% in the USA, with the highest rates found in low-income countries  
23       such as the sub-Saharan Africa, south Asia and parts of Latin America (Victora et al.,  
24       2016).

1           Perhaps somewhat surprising given the observed prevalence rates is that  
2 nearly all women are biologically able to breastfeed with few suffering from medical  
3 conditions limiting their physical ability to breastfeed successfully (WHO, 2018).  
4 However, whether a mother breastfeeds or not would appear to be influenced by a  
5 number of socioeconomic, cultural and individual factors. For example, the impact of  
6 social and cultural attitudes can cause women to choose not to breastfeed or stop  
7 prematurely, particularly if they have been subject to a negative experience when  
8 breastfeeding in public (Rollins et al., 2016). Leeming, Williamson, Lyttle and  
9 Johnson (2012) posited the added pressure of women to practice socially sensitive  
10 lactation, where they feel the need to only feed discreetly or away from others, causes  
11 many to cease breastfeeding altogether.

12           Women's experience of the healthcare system, including healthcare  
13 professionals' attitudes towards breastfeeding and the reported lack of breastfeeding  
14 skills, can also have a significant impact on breastfeeding initiation and continuation  
15 (Rollins et al., 2016) coupled with individual factors such as a lack of maternal  
16 confidence and poor self-efficacy (Brown, Dodds, Legge, Bryanton & Semenic,  
17 2014). According to Bolling, Grant, Hamlyn and Thornton (2007) the pain associated  
18 with bad latch and worries about supply are the most common reasons for early  
19 cessation. Research suggests that women are most susceptible to giving up during the  
20 first six weeks postpartum (Brown et al., 2014) with many describing their struggle  
21 with the physical challenges exemplified by the lack of support from health-care  
22 professionals (Redshaw and Henderson, 2012, p28). Certainly, in the UK there is a  
23 substantial gap in the availability of NHS peer support services and coverage within  
24 areas varies greatly (Grant, et al. 2017). Grant et al. (2017) also highlighted that the  
25 training, supervision and peer support roles varies substantially between the services.

1 This variation in available services may account for many women's decisions to  
2 source alternative means of support. As a consequence, Fox, McMullen and Newburn  
3 (2015) postulate that effective social support in addition to guidance from skilled  
4 practitioners would enable women to overcome challenges associated with  
5 breastfeeding, providing them with confidence in their own abilities to achieve their  
6 breastfeeding goals (see also WHO, 2003).

7         Indeed, Ingram, Rosser and Jackson (2004) provided evidence to suggest that  
8 peer and community support increased women's confidence in breastfeeding by  
9 providing them with the opportunity to see others breastfeeding and talk about their  
10 experiences. Similarly, a qualitative study by Hoddinott and Pill (1999) found that  
11 breastfeeding initiation was influenced more by embodied knowledge gained from  
12 seeing other women breastfeed than from gaining theoretical knowledge on the  
13 benefits. They also acknowledged that breastfeeding is a skill often acquired through  
14 seeing others. Although, it is worth noting that social influences are not always  
15 positive and can negatively impact on breastfeeding women by increasing feelings of  
16 failure and judgement (Brown, 2016; Regan and Brown, 2019), the research evidence  
17 suggests that seeing the successes of others with similar goals can strengthen an  
18 individual's belief that they too possess the skills and ability to succeed. Therefore,  
19 social support from peers can be a powerful way to gain self-efficacy.

20         An expanding source of social support has come from widespread access to  
21 high speed Internet. Online health information seeking behaviours have been found to  
22 be most commonly exhibited by women; they often seek online support groups to  
23 provide them with education and social support (Higgins, Sixsmith, Barry &  
24 Domegan, 2011). Research into online social support identified that the types of  
25 social support available off-line is also found on-line (Eastin and LaRose, 2004);

1 these include emotional support, instrumental support, informational and network  
2 support. A study by Herron, Sinclair, Kernohan and Stockdale (2015) aimed to  
3 conceptualise online breastfeeding support and found a number of factors; women  
4 often turned to online support due to a lack of face to face support, they found it more  
5 convenient and felt they were not inconveniencing others. Additionally, they noted  
6 women's awareness of the opportunity to reciprocate.

7         The use of social media (SM) for online support has seen a considerable  
8 increase in users. 2019 saw 3.484 billion users globally, an increase of 9% on the  
9 previous year (Hootsuite, 2019). The biggest SM penetration came from Saudi Arabia  
10 at 99%, the UK had 67% penetration (45 million active users), whilst the lowest level  
11 of SM penetration was found in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria. Furthermore, SM usage  
12 has found Facebook FB to be the biggest SM platform with 2 billion active users.  
13 Alianmoghaddam, Phibbs and Benn (2018) aimed to explore the influence of SM on  
14 exclusive breastfeeding up to 6 months. They considered the type of breastfeeding  
15 support women accessed including health websites, forums, SM sites and smartphone  
16 apps. They found FB to be the most popular social networking platform for  
17 breastfeeding support and highlighted the importance of SM and the internet for  
18 promoting breastfeeding in a digital age. They posit that the mothers who are from the  
19 generation known as "Generation Y" require reliable online feeding information and  
20 smartphone apps may provide a good option for breastfeeding promotion. Further  
21 evidence in support of this is demonstrated by Skelton et al. (2018) who explored  
22 women's use of SM groups in breastfeeding mothers throughout the USA. They  
23 concluded that online support groups provide a positive influence on breastfeeding  
24 attitudes, knowledge and behaviours through the creation of a community of support  
25 to normalise and empower.

1           As the current breastfeeding rates demonstrate, knowledge and promotion of  
2 the benefits of breastfeeding alone is not sufficient, therefore developing a theory-  
3 based intervention to improve breastfeeding outcomes would be beneficial. Theory  
4 based research that facilitates the understanding of factors which are associated with  
5 any given health behaviour can enable the development and evaluation of  
6 interventions. There are a number of behaviour change theories that have been  
7 developed which can be utilised for health behaviour research. In light of the evidence  
8 into online SM support groups' ability to create interactive online breastfeeding  
9 communities, the emphasis on women's confidence in breastfeeding success, and the  
10 impact of goals on breastfeeding outcomes, it is postulated that Social Cognitive  
11 Theory (SCT) is a suitable framework for understanding the factors associated with  
12 breastfeeding behaviours and how women are influenced by their membership of SM  
13 groups. According to Bandura (1997), individuals are active agents in their own  
14 development, they are self-reflective, self-organising and self-regulating. SCT  
15 suggests that an individual's behaviour depends on the interplay between person,  
16 environment and behaviour which is termed reciprocal determinism. Therefore,  
17 behaviour is determined by the interaction of a number of factors: personal goals,  
18 self-efficacy, outcome expectancies and social structural factors (Bandura, 1997).

19           Edwards, Jepson and McInnes (2018) provided a qualitative analysis of the  
20 perspectives of women and midwives on breastfeeding initiation using SCT. They  
21 found that the use of SCT enabled the focus of a situation specific analysis with rich  
22 exploration of experiences and understanding of breastfeeding initiation behaviour  
23 rather than a mere description of the behaviour. Key SCT constructs associated with  
24 their themes of expectations, knowledge and experiences were; out-come  
25 expectancies, self-efficacy and vicarious experience. This demonstrates the suitability

1 of investigating breastfeeding outcomes using SCT as a theoretical framework.  
2 However, their focus was on the initiation of breastfeeding, whereas the focus of the  
3 current study was the effect of SM on breastfeeding duration which fills a gap within  
4 the current literature.

5 In light of the above, the aim of the study was to explore the use of SM  
6 for breastfeeding support by seeking the experiences and perspectives of primiparous  
7 mothers (first time mothers) in Northern Ireland, whilst also considering the value of  
8 SCT as a theoretical framework for understanding those experiences.

9

10

11

## 12 **Methods**

### 13 *Design*

14 The study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach using semi-structured face-to-  
15 face interviews to gain the subjective experiences of participants who are members of  
16 the private members only SM FB group “Breastfeeding in Northern Ireland” (BFNI).  
17 Private FB groups allow any FB user to find the group but not view posts until they  
18 are added as members. This allows members to post and share privately within the  
19 group. This was considered appropriate to allow the researchers to investigate the  
20 value of SCT for helping to understand the experiences of women seeking online  
21 social support.

22

### 23 *Participants and Procedure*

24 Participants were recruited using purposive sampling through the FB page  
25 Breastfeeding in Northern Ireland (BFNI). This was deemed to be the most

1 appropriate method for providing a sample representative of the population  
2 (Lavakras, 2008). BFNI is a volunteer led independent group set up by passionate  
3 women consisting of volunteer peer supporters, experienced breastfeeding mums and  
4 IBCLC's. The content provided varies from general peer support and light-hearted  
5 content to scientific literature when requested or required. Advice is given mother to  
6 mother but well moderated and when necessary administrators step in to ensure  
7 evidence-based information is being provided.

8

9 The inclusion criteria were: all primiparous mothers over the age of 18 who have  
10 initiated breastfeeding. This was to gain an insight into both the experiences of  
11 women who fed for the WHO recommended term of 6 months and those who didn't.  
12 The term 'successfully breastfed' referred to having fed their children breast milk  
13 either directly from the breast or via exclusive pumping and included those who  
14 adopted a combination feeding approach using formula and breast milk. The  
15 exclusion criteria included anyone who had suffered birth trauma or postnatal  
16 depression as this demographic was deemed beyond the scope of this study. The  
17 demographic information collected can be found in Table one.

18

19 [Table one here]

20

21 Permission for recruitment of participants was gained via email from the  
22 administrators of BFNI. The lead researcher was the main point of contact for the  
23 administrators and once email confirmation was gained for the recruitment of  
24 participants within the group all contact moved to each individual participant via  
25 private FB message.



1 Mothers were invited to take part in the research via an advertisement posted onto the  
2 BFNI page. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. The researcher  
3 explained to participants that their identity would be anonymised and that they had  
4 right to withdraw at any time.

5 It was decided that the interviews would continue to the point of saturation to ensure a  
6 full investigation of the phenomenon was undertaken. This was achieved in the first  
7 round of recruitment when it was noted that the interviews were producing similar  
8 content. Once the first set of participant's interviews had been transcribed it was  
9 decided that a second round of participant recruitment was not required.

10         Eleven women gave consent to be interviewed however two did not meet the  
11 criteria and one was unable to arrange a suitable time for interview. Eight interviews  
12 were successfully conducted by the lead author between March and April 2018.

13 Participants received a £10 gift voucher as remuneration.

14         Interviews lasted between 20- 40 minutes, were conducted in English, audio  
15 recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants and individuals mentioned within  
16 the interviews were assigned pseudonyms which have been used throughout to protect  
17 their identity. Following completion, all participants were debriefed and provided  
18 with relevant contacts should they have required some support.

19

## 20 ***Data Analysis***

21         Analysis was undertaken using the principles of theoretical thematic analysis  
22 and was underpinned by the epistemological assumptions of constructivism. It  
23 followed a largely deductive method and adopted a six-phase process as described in  
24 Braun and Clarke (2006).

1           Phase one began by reading and re-reading the participants' transcripts. This  
2 enabled the author to familiarise themselves with the data, whilst considering the  
3 social cognitive themes they expected to find reflected within the participant  
4 interviews. Following this, initial note taking and exploratory comments were made  
5 and possible suggestions for codes were noted. Phase two involved generating initial  
6 codes (e.g. "confidence", "goals", "information", "supported", "normal") which was  
7 recorded manually alongside initial notes. The third stage involved analysing the data  
8 on a broader level and looked for themes within the codes. Themes were identified at  
9 a semantic level in an attempt to understand the significance of the patterns and their  
10 broader meanings within the context of social cognitive theory. Phase four reviewed  
11 the themes and sought to identify similar themes to be merged and enabled renaming  
12 of themes to ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun &  
13 Clarke, 2006). Phase five defined the superordinate and subordinate themes.  
14 Following the identification of the themes the researcher removed themselves from  
15 analysis for a period of a week before returning to ensure reliability of the coding.  
16 This is in line with the recommendations by Joffe and Yardley (2004) and provided a  
17 method of test-retest as a method of reliability. Two other authors read through  
18 transcripts independently and themes were discussed collectively until a consensus  
19 was reached.

20

### 21 *Ethical Considerations*

22 The study was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society (BPS)  
23 ethical guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research  
24 Ethical Committee prior to commencement of the study. As the researcher was  
25 working alone, the lone worker policy was adhered to and all interviews were carried

1 out in public coffee shops. Care taken to choose a private area and to ensure  
2 participants were comfortable before commencing the interviews.

3

4 **Results**

5 From the interview data it was clear that the prominent social cognitive  
6 concept of “self-efficacy” permeated throughout each. Dennis (1999) cites four  
7 information sources that influence breastfeeding self-efficacy. She posits that  
8 individuals choose, perform and maintain a particular behaviour based on  
9 performance accomplishments such as previous breastfeeding experiences either  
10 positive or negative; vicarious experiences, which often involve watching other  
11 women successfully breastfeed; verbal persuasion such as the supportive  
12 encouragement provided by the members of BFNI; their physiological state such as  
13 stress or fatigue. Each of these factors was demonstrated within the participant’s  
14 experiences of the group. The participants described a number of factors that seemed  
15 to have an impact on their perceived self-efficacy and ultimately on breastfeeding  
16 success. These factors are presented here as subordinate themes; “education”,  
17 “accessibility”, “normalising”, “extended goals” and “online community”. Table 2  
18 provides an overview of these themes and their relationships to SCT. The value of  
19 SCT in understanding breastfeeding experiences will be further explored in the  
20 discussion.

21

22

23 (Table Two Here)

24

25 ***Increased Self-Efficacy***

1 The concept of self-efficacy was perceptible throughout all of the interviews as many  
2 of the themes appeared to be linked to the way a participant gained self-efficacy  
3 belief. The mothers have gained self-efficacy belief with the help of BFNI in different  
4 ways. For some, the group's support provided them with confidence that they could  
5 breastfeed no matter what others thought.

6

7 Elizabeth: its sort of give me confidence to not really care about the rest of societies  
8 opinions as long as I am happy with my own mothering and parenting.

9

10 In the quote below Heather's ability to reciprocate and extend her knowledge out to  
11 others bolstered her own self-efficacy giving her feelings of empowerment.

12

13 Heather: Knowing that there are other mummies at the other end of their phone or  
14 computer too, (...) sometimes you feel empowered because you look at a question  
15 and you have a wee answer for someone else. (...) maybe a mum is maybe three or  
16 four days in and whilst I am only so many months into my journey of motherhood I  
17 kinda have a bit of an answer for someone else.

18

19 Another salient demonstration of increased self-efficacy came from Patricia who  
20 described the experience of the group as 'it's, it's just your motivation that you can  
21 see these women who are feeding their three year olds and it's just amazing like (.) I  
22 can do that.'

23

24 The subordinate themes presented below highlight the number of ways the women's  
25 experiences of BFNI encouraged and supported them and increased their confidence  
26 and self-efficacy beliefs.

1

2 *Education*

3 For several of the participants, the greatest benefit of being a member of BFNI was  
4 the plethora of information available. They highlighted how this information is often  
5 evidence backed and provides more practical information than the NHS currently  
6 provides. 'I think it's very supportive, very supportive. It's not just (.) primarily it's  
7 backed by research and the research is there posted and the articles are great'  
8 (Rebecca).

9

10 In the excerpt below Catherine discusses how the group gave her a sense of  
11 preparedness prior to having her baby, which increased her confidence in her ability  
12 to breastfeed.

13

14 Catherine: I probably know most of my knowledge from that particular group or at  
15 least it mentioned stuff I had never heard of before like blebs and stuff like that so  
16 then I was able to go and Google it and be like kind of well prepare for all  
17 eventualities even before I had her (...)

18

19 For Sarah this idea of being prepared for any possible challenges was also important.  
20 For her it wasn't a conscious awareness but one that came with reading other  
21 member's posts. This exemplifies how social modelling can increase self-efficacy and  
22 impacts on breastfeeding behaviour in a positive way.

23

24 Sarah: So then I had mastitis.... I think I had it cause I felt really sick. (...) I felt really  
25 like fluey and the only reason I knew about it was because of the thing, the  
26 breastfeeding group thing on Facebook (...) So thank god but that page, just you

1 don't (.) you don't know you're reading it but you're taking it in. Even if it's not  
2 concerning you, you're still, it's there you're taking it in and it will, it will be a wee  
3 bit of a twinkle in the back of your head, oh here I've seen this before.

4

5 The view of the group being a source of education was particularly pertinent  
6 for those participants who had other considerations such as their own medication or  
7 had been prescribed medication for their baby. In the next excerpt Fiona discusses  
8 how the group signposted her to places where she was able to find information on  
9 medication which is safe for breastfeeding mothers, giving her peace of mind that it  
10 was safe to continue breastfeeding.

11

12 Fiona: Yes it's been a great place to go even for things even like medication and stuff  
13 like that and even people with the same condition that I have (...) especially bad  
14 days when I have been in a lot of pain I can go through the search tool in the group  
15 and find out, you know, well, what can I take? You know, and a lot of references to  
16 the BNF and things like that so, (...) it's been a great tool since having her.

17

18 In another example of education through signposting, Sarah found out through the  
19 group about a lactation consultant that was able to advise her on some reflux  
20 medication that had been prescribed to her daughter.

21

22 Sarah: I had to give her medication that I really wasn't happy about but Caroline the  
23 lactation consultant (...) I just asked her and she said no you're doing (.), cause I read  
24 like a thing about reflux and I was like no actually she's not. Cause it actually made it  
25 worse.

26 Researcher: And how did you find out then about Caroline?

27 Sarah: Through that breastfeeding page (laughs) it's a lifeline like it really is.

1

2

3

4 *Accessibility*

5 A prominent theme within all participants' interviews was how accessible support is  
6 from an online social media group. 'It's so much more accessible you know, you're  
7 sitting at home and you're having a struggle you can just go on and look' (Patricia).

8 Each participant described situations when they asked for help at any time of  
9 the day or night and were quickly given advice and support. Both Fiona and Elizabeth  
10 describe times where they found themselves feeling vulnerable and alone in the early  
11 hours of the morning but with the help of BFNI they were able to find comfort and  
12 reassurance.

13

14 Fiona: You know you could go there at two o'clock in the morning and ask a question  
15 and somebody is going to respond to you because there is other mummies in the same  
16 position as you at two o'clock in the morning.

17

18 Elizabeth: it was later that night that my milk came in and I had engorgement so I  
19 was up at three o'clock in the morning crying my eyes out on the page and within like  
20 twenty minutes of posting I had like ten replies. So like I thought that that really  
21 settled me do you know.

22

23 As well as using BFNI for 24-hour support, it also seemed important that they were  
24 able to access the specific information and support they needed, therefore providing  
25 them with tailored support for free. For Suzanne and Rebecca, it was the ability to get

1 different advice, not the “one size fits all” method that is apparently often adopted by  
2 the NHS.

3

4 Suzanne: You know it’s (.) you can take your time sit back and read through all the  
5 posts, read through everybody's advice or you know see what you can come up with.  
6 You know because the same thing doesn’t help for everybody. You know.

7

8 Rebecca: I think so because you know what the workshop is like the information is  
9 force-fed down your throat it may not be compatible to you or easily understood by  
10 you whereas the Facebook group you can just dip in and out (...) find stuff that  
11 interests you and will help you in a tailored way.

12

13 For Elizabeth the group provided access to advice from peers and professionals  
14 without cost, something she felt was an added advantage as it made it accessible to all  
15 regardless of social class.

16

17 Elizabeth: It is accessible to all whereas somebody mightn’t have the money to be  
18 able to get a lactation consultant out and, emm, or do you know they mightn’t know  
19 what services are available through the NHS or Sure Start, you know more or less  
20 everyone has a Facebook account.

21

22 The accessibility of SM support groups provides a way to promote a mother’s sense  
23 of agency by enabling her to access the support she requires when she needs it.

24

25 *Online Community*



1 The existence of an online community was paramount in ensuring the participants felt  
2 supported in their breastfeeding journey and encouraged success. For Claire the  
3 advantage of the group included feeling a community surrounded her where she felt  
4 comfortable enough to ask a question without feeling like she was a burden on  
5 anyone.

6 Claire: you don't feel like you are putting anybody out. Like it's a community. Like  
7 you ring your doctor, you ring your midwife thinking god they probably think they  
8 have more important things to do, they haven't got time to answer my call about why  
9 her nappy looks bad (...) so it's the fact that it's always there and people are always  
10 willing to help.

11

12 Similarly, Sarah highlighted how the group gave her a sense of community that was  
13 behind her and supporting her through all the challenges: ' it's like a wee community  
14 and I will always remember the saying "don't give up on a bad day" and that stayed  
15 with me'. In addition, Elizabeth expressed the value of having both professional  
16 support and peer support:

17

18 I think that it's great that there are so many health professionals active on it as well.  
19 You know you recognise names coming up of lactation consultants and midwives  
20 who would, you know, respond frequently so I think it's nice to have a balance of  
21 professional advice coming through with, you know, real stories with people who are  
22 relating and as I say some are experienced.

23

24 *Normalising*

1 Some of the participants spoke about how the group helped to normalise  
2 breastfeeding for them. They felt supported, like they were not alone and that their  
3 natural instinct to breastfeed was “normal” and the biological way to feed a child.

4

5 Fiona: You know what else was my motivation, people getting shout outs. You know  
6 that people would be sitting at home, or people would be out and about and they were  
7 like oh shout out to the mum who was feeding in such and such. I was like that’s  
8 really really good that’s really nice.

9

10 For some women it was the group’s ability to debunk many of the misconceptions of  
11 breastfeeding that helped to normalise it for them.

12

13 Elizabeth: Definitely sort of normalising it and there didn’t have to be a cut-off point  
14 at six months, it’s sort of give me confidence to not really care about the rest of  
15 society’s opinions as long as I am happy with my own mothering and parenting

16

### 17 *Extended Goals*

18 Many of the women began their breastfeeding journey with a goal in mind for  
19 how long they would feed for; for some women that goal was shorter than others.

20 Sarah talked about how the difficulties of the initial week made her take it week by  
21 week and as the interview progresses, she expressed how being part of the group has  
22 saved her breastfeeding journey.

23

24 Researcher: so did you have any goals then?

25 Sarah :Ehh six weeks.

26 Researcher: Six weeks (.) ok

1 Sarah: Well it was kind of like initially just get through the first week because it was  
2 absolutely hateful (...)

3 Sarah: if I didn't, if I didn't have that group I wouldn't be where I am now. It's been  
4 the only thing that's kept me going (...)

5

6 For other women, the education and support from the group has enabled them to alter  
7 their goals and aim for natural term weaning.

8

9 Rebecca: Well originally before I came across the Breastfeeding in Northern Ireland  
10 page I think originally my goal was to get to the minimum six month period and now  
11 having educated myself my goal is probably to get to either the age of two or a  
12 natural weaning point or when I get pregnant again and I can't.

13

14 Heather: For me like with him being 3 months my partner said "well that's you nearly  
15 half way through feeding him" and I was like no...it's kind of moved my goal posts  
16 further along, rather than something that imminent.

17

## 18 **Discussion**

### 19 ***Summary of results***

20 The aim of the study was to answer the question 'how do women experience  
21 breastfeeding support via SM: can it aid extended breastfeeding success?' We have  
22 attempted to understand the phenomenon of SM for breastfeeding support and have  
23 explored the value of SCT in understanding its use as a theoretical framework. The  
24 analysis highlighted women used BFNI to provide them with increased self-efficacy  
25 belief, which was facilitated by the group's ability to provide education, a sense of  
26 community, the normalisation of breastfeeding, easy access to support and extend

1 their breastfeeding goals. It is therefore posited that the symbiotic relationship  
2 between members of the SM group facilitates greater breastfeeding success and a  
3 longer duration of breastfeeding through the central concept of SCT: reciprocal  
4 determinism (Bandura, 1998).

5         The analysis identified self-efficacy belief as the overarching theme; each  
6 participant described situations where BFNI had positively impacted on their  
7 breastfeeding journey, providing them with the skills and confidence to successfully  
8 breastfeed. In addition, they described how it has given them the self-assurance to  
9 feed in public regardless of the social stigma. This point is sustained in the work of  
10 Brown et al. (2007) who postulated that a lack of maternal confidence and self-  
11 efficacy can lead to negative effects on breastfeeding and contributes to early  
12 cessation.

13         SCT suggests that perceived self-efficacy is increased through mastery  
14 experiences. It posits that it operates as “one of the determinants which regulates  
15 motivation, and affects behaviour by working alongside goals, outcome expectations  
16 and environment” (Bandura, 1998, p.627). It also posits that should an individual  
17 experience easy successes, then they will be more easily discouraged when they are  
18 faced with challenges (Bandura, 1998). This was evident in the analysis, which found  
19 that BFNI provided each of the participants with peer support, enabling them to  
20 overcome challenges in a way that appears to promote a sense of self-efficacy.  
21 Additionally, the interview data demonstrated how self-efficacy can be increased  
22 through observational learning thus demonstrating one of the ways the SCT of  
23 behaviour change can be used to promote breastfeeding behaviours. By seeing other  
24 mothers online, who they consider similar to themselves, succeed through their  
25 challenges provides them with a sense that they also possess the capabilities to

1 succeed (Bandura, 1998). An equally significant concept within SCT, reciprocity, was  
2 identified in the data as impacting self-efficacy. Herron et al. (2015) explored  
3 women's use of online breastfeeding support and highlighted that the women showed  
4 awareness of the opportunity to reciprocate. They observed the presence of upstream  
5 indirect reciprocity by women using online breastfeeding support; a phenomenon  
6 which appears to be present within the current data.

7           The subordinate themes were identified as factors which came from  
8 membership of the group and which positively impacted self-efficacy belief. The  
9 theme around the groups' ability to educate highlighted the different types of support  
10 accessible through online SM support groups. This reflects the findings of Gray  
11 (2013) who reported that 80% of requests for breastfeeding support online were for  
12 informational support. Additionally, it echoed Gray's findings regarding the use of  
13 instrumental support online by providing help and resources from lactation  
14 consultants. Therefore, by providing the members the resources to educate themselves  
15 promoted their self-efficacy belief and sense of agency.

16           The theme of accessibility also demonstrated how SM support groups provide  
17 a way to promote a mother's sense of agency by enabling her to access the support  
18 she requires when she needs it. According to Bandura (1998), "people act as agents  
19 over their own environment, drawing on their knowledge, cognitive and behavioural  
20 skills to produce desired results". (p.1181) Self-efficacy beliefs are inextricably linked  
21 to a person's sense of agency; people's beliefs about their ability to effect change and  
22 exercise control over events are central to the concept and this is demonstrated within  
23 the accessibility theme.

24           Given that there is much debate surrounding the topic of breastfeeding, and in  
25 particular the cultural debate around breastfeeding in public, it was not surprising that

1 many of the participants talked about normalising breastfeeding when referring to  
2 advantages of the FB group. As mentioned previously, the determinants of  
3 breastfeeding are complex and the feeling that women are required to practice socially  
4 sensitive lactation can increase the chances of women deciding to cease early  
5 (Leeming et al., 2012). Therefore, the women's experience of the group aiding in  
6 normalising breastfeeding facilitated them to feel comfortable breastfeeding in public.  
7 Furthermore, feelings of pride and purpose that participants expressed can be  
8 described in terms of SCT as outcome expectancies. Posited by Bandura (1997),  
9 outcome expectancies are the perceived consequences of performing a behaviour.  
10 They can be both positive and negative, which subsequently can have a positive or  
11 negative effect on self-efficacy: known as self-efficacy expectancy. In the context of  
12 normalising, the group's ability to elicit positive outcome expectancies for  
13 participants, through the normalising of breastfeeding, increases the frequency of the  
14 breastfeeding behaviour.

15 A salient point was how the data illustrated the groups' ability to provide a  
16 community feel and highlighted the impact it can have on their breastfeeding  
17 journeys. It concurs with Fox et al. (2015) who found that mothers valued the  
18 combination of peer support and professional support; the emotional need for support  
19 from mothers like themselves to enable them to continue breastfeeding is apparent  
20 across every interview. Moreover, the online community theme demonstrated that SM  
21 support groups are able to provide both emotional support and network support;  
22 providing group members with comfort during times of stress and a sense of  
23 belonging. The use of these forms of support in online communication for  
24 breastfeeding support was also demonstrated by Gray (2013) as being particularly  
25 relevant to breastfeeding mothers.

1           Goals are a key motivational process within SCT and according to Bandura  
2 (1998) goals are rooted in a value system, they serve as guides and incentives to  
3 health behaviours such as breastfeeding. When using goals as a self-motivation tool,  
4 individuals react to their behaviour and depending on whether they perceive it to be  
5 positive or negative they will adjust their goal aspirations accordingly. It is postulated  
6 that the group has given the participants' the self-efficacy belief to extend their  
7 breastfeeding goals with many women even expressing an interest in natural term  
8 weaning.

9

### 10 *Limitations and Implications for practice*

11           When considering the implications of the findings it is important to consider  
12 the population from which the study sample was drawn, as participants were drawn  
13 from an individual FB group that was for Northern Irish members only. It may be  
14 pertinent to reflect on whether the women's experiences would have been different  
15 had they been members of another SM support group for breastfeeding or a  
16 worldwide group; are their experiences group-specific or do they reflect the  
17 experience of social media support in general? Therefore, future research may want to  
18 incorporate a number of different SM groups that provide breastfeeding support when  
19 recruiting participants. In addition, the sample consisted of a relatively affluent group  
20 of white mothers who lived with partners and were above the age of 28; their cultural  
21 context may have impacted on the experience of the group and contributed to their  
22 sense of self-efficacy through having more support at home and more extensive life  
23 experience. Research conducted by Mannion, Hobbs, McDonald and Tough (2013)  
24 highlighted the impact of partner support on maternal breastfeeding confidence with  
25 active verbal encouragement from partners eliciting an increase in confidence.

1 Conversely, ambivalent partners who were more concerned about “best for baby” led  
2 to women feeling less confident about breastfeeding. This is an interesting point as  
3 partner support could have a direct impact on breastfeeding outcomes but could also  
4 impact on women’s decision to seek out support from online mediums. Therefore,  
5 women may find the support required to increase their confidence online when they  
6 don’t have the support at home. It also raises questions surrounding the negative  
7 impact of SM on personal relationships. Could the use of SM support groups put a  
8 strain on personal relationships when parenting ideals are not shared? Additionally, is  
9 also important to note the limitations of SM usage in terms of global health  
10 inequalities. It could be suggested that the use of SM for peer support could widen the  
11 gap between the more affluent countries and those from lower income countries such  
12 as those that are noted to be lower SM users.

13 Furthermore, in regard to sampling, the participants in this study were all  
14 primiparous mothers the implication of this is that the data is limited to those who are  
15 novices. The experiences of women who are attempting to breastfeed whilst caring for  
16 other children or even tandem feeding toddlers and babies may be pertinent when  
17 considering if SM support can aid extended breastfeeding. The impact of parity on  
18 breastfeeding intention and duration is linked to prior breastfeeding and ignores social  
19 norms (Kloeblen-Tarver, Tompson & Miner, 2002); therefore, how multiparous  
20 women experience SM support may elicit different themes. Research that looks at  
21 how multiparous women experience SM breastfeeding support is suggested to ensure  
22 a comprehensive investigation.

23 A pertinent point to consider is the researcher’s own preconceptions of  
24 breastfeeding support through SM. As the primary researcher was tandem feeding two  
25 children at the time the study was being conducted the researcher could have more



1 easily identified with the challenges breastfeeding brings and the various nuances  
2 involved when using SM as a source of breastfeeding support, therefore identifying  
3 them as the main themes. It should be considered that certain patterns or themes found  
4 within the data may have elicited more interest to the researcher and again impacted  
5 on them being identified as prominent themes.

6         It is, however, also important to note the limitations of SCT. This research has  
7 highlighted the ability of SCT to provide the mechanisms of action for breastfeeding  
8 behaviours in the context of SM support groups but in terms of intervention design it  
9 cannot provide the active content of the intervention (Bourne, Ivanova, Gainforth and  
10 Jung, 2019). Therefore, to translate these findings into a behaviour change  
11 intervention for breastfeeding requires consideration. Meta-theories such as the  
12 Theoretical Domains Framework (TDF) provides a guide to demonstrate how  
13 theoretical insights on behavioural processes can be mapped to behaviour change  
14 techniques (Atkins et al., 2017).

15         In addition, future research could aim to use quantitative measures to further  
16 test the applicability of SCT as a means of measuring breastfeeding behaviours and  
17 intention with a larger sample.

18         However, our findings have a number of implications for informing practice.  
19 The promotion of breastfeeding has typically been idealistic and often negated to  
20 highlight possible difficulties for breastfeeding mothers and subsequently don't  
21 demonstrate how there are breastfeeding solutions (Kukla, 2006). This research has  
22 demonstrated that to improve breastfeeding rates care must be taken to improve on the  
23 education of breastfeeding and its challenges. The participants expressed how their  
24 lack of preparedness impacted their breastfeeding experience, which reflected the  
25 sentiments of the participants cited by Redshaw and Henderson (2012). By targeting

1 breastfeeding education for both mothers and their partners in the prenatal stage it  
2 could help prepare them for the physical and emotional challenges of breastfeeding  
3 and the impact it can have on relationships. It is hoped that through earlier and more  
4 comprehensive education it would result in more women being willing to persist  
5 through challenges, encourage them to seek professional help when required and  
6 indeed inform them of where they can go for help.

7         Another significant factor emphasised in the analysis was the impact of having  
8 support available twenty-four hours a day and particularly peer support. This builds  
9 upon the research by Herron et al (2015) who identified one of the attributes of online  
10 breastfeeding support as being “accessibility”. As can be seen from the participants’  
11 interviews in the current study, breastfeeding is not a practice that is reserved for  
12 daytime; therefore, it requires support to be available around the clock. With no  
13 current helplines in the UK available past midnight, it could be suggested that these  
14 online SM support groups are providing a service that is of great need. Therefore, we  
15 should be questioning why support such as this has become secondary to other  
16 breastfeeding support services.

17         A further consideration of SM usage is the potential impact it can have on the  
18 wider social and cultural views of breastfeeding which were highlighted by Pain,  
19 Bailey and Mowl (2001). SM support groups have the potential to challenge  
20 ideologies such as the negativity surrounding feeding in public space, and the belief  
21 that you have to wean before going back to work due to unsupportive male  
22 environments. It does this by providing a place whereby women are able to empower  
23 and inform each other. Additionally, it can help transcend social divides by bringing  
24 together women from all class backgrounds to support each other to breastfeed.

1           Given the applicability of SCT to the participant’s accounts of their  
2 experiences we propose considering applying SCT when developing future  
3 breastfeeding promotion campaigns; according to Bandura (1997) “a comprehensive  
4 approach to health promotion requires changing the practices of social systems that  
5 have widespread detrimental effects on health rather than the solely changing the  
6 habits of individuals”. (pp. 623). Additionally, with the prevalence of people turning  
7 to mobile health the development of an SCT based mobile app to support and educate  
8 women may provide a cost-effective way for governments to increase breastfeeding  
9 rates.

10 *Conclusion*

11           In conclusion, the study has demonstrated that for the women who took part in  
12 this study, being a member of the online SM group has provided them with the self-  
13 efficacy belief to succeed and the network support to make them feel like they are not  
14 alone. Importantly, it has given them the courage and determination to extend their  
15 feeding goals and, in many cases aim for natural term weaning. The authors suggest  
16 that this study adds to the existing literature into online breastfeeding support by  
17 proposing a theory of behaviour change, which has the potential to be applied to  
18 interventions with the aim of increasing breastfeeding rates and duration. It has aided  
19 in furthering the understanding of how women use SM to gain different types of  
20 support and the impact SM has on social and cultural views of breastfeeding. Of  
21 particular salience is that, through the use of social media women are able to access  
22 support at a distance. The recent impact of the covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the  
23 benefits of an online support network and has made the findings of this study more  
24 pertinent.

1           Furthermore, by adopting a qualitative approach we were able to consider the  
2 socioeconomic, cultural and individual factors impacting breastfeeding, from the  
3 viewpoint of breastfeeding mothers.

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24 **Table 1 Participant demographic information**

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Participant	Age	Marital Status	Breastfeeding Duration	Feeding method	NIMDM17
Heather	28	Co-habiting	3 Months	EBF	508
Fiona	30	Married	9 weeks	C	779
T Sarah	29	Co-habiting	9 Months	EBF	761
Suzanne	33	Co-habiting	11 Months	EBF	524
Claire	33	Married	11 Months	EBF	707
Rebecca	35	Married	10 Months	EBF	707
Elizabeth	28	Co-habiting	10 Months	EBF	41
Catherine	31	Married	13 Months †	EBF	747

1 Feeding Method – Exclusive (EBF), Combination (C), Exclusive Pumping (EP).  
2 NIMDM17 – Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure: ranked from 1 (most deprived) to 890  
3 (least deprived). † - No longer feeding

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15 **Table 2 Example codes, themes and relationship to SCT constructs**

Codes	Theme	Relationship to SCT
Confidence, knowledge, signposting, preparedness, information	Education	Self-efficacy & agency increased by advancement of knowledge and ability to self-help
24-hour, free for all, in control, filling a gap in support, instant support	Accessibility	Increased agency by taking control of difficult situations. Self-efficacy by increasing confidence through support at any time of day
“it’s normal”, feeding in public	Normalising	Vicarious experiences, self-efficacy social modelling, outcome expectancies
Natural term/self-weaning, feeding older children, goals	Extended Goals	Outcome expectations
Loneliness, connections, supportive, security, village, reassurance	Online Community	Verbal encouragement, perceived self-efficacy

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