




Article

# “Is There Something Wrong with What I Asked”? Digital Strategies for Achieving and Safeguarding Social Capital and Identity in a Facebook Support Group for Israeli Parents

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to investigate how a Facebook support group for parents of young children (ages 0–6) defines its boundaries and evaluates the acceptability of its members and content to safeguard the group’s social capital and identity. Adopting a qualitative critical content analysis approach, this research examined the discourse within the Sane and Rational (S&R) Parents group. This group, which had more than 12,000 members, describes itself as an alternative to groups that address parenting problems through “homeopathy, talismans, energies, and communicating with past incarnations”. Common subjects addressed by the group included medical issues, sleeping problems, potty training, child behavior, and nutrition. For the purpose of this study, a representative sample of 10 discourses (out of 118) that appeared during the research period was selected. The analysis considered group discourse, including both verbal and non-verbal elements such as emojis. Three central themes were revealed: (1) exclusion of participants through rules and emojis; (2) filtering posts as a mechanism for defining in-group and out-group boundaries; and (3) division of roles as a tool for distinguishing between those who do and do not belong. This study identifies power-based digital strategies used by a Facebook parent group to maintain its social capital and identity. It also highlights how verbal and non-verbal communication shapes, and is shaped by, group relationships. Practically, the findings offer tools for professionals to better understand how parental support needs are met in the digital age, emphasizing the importance of face-to-face interventions for those who feel excluded from dominant social identities.

**Keywords:** Facebook; social support group; parents; power relations; social capital and identity

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## 1. Introduction

Social media are broadly defined as platforms that enable users to create, share, and exchange content, with a focus on user participation and interaction across the internet. This includes blogs, social networking sites, and content-sharing platforms, emphasizing the role of technology in facilitating wide-scale communication and networking (Aichner et al. 2021). The widespread use of social media has led to the proliferation of online communities. These communities are characterized as groups of individuals who converge online for a specific purpose and are governed by established norms and policies (de Souza and Preece 2004). Online communities are often categorized based on the nature of interaction among group members, with shared social identity being one of the most prevalent criteria (Porter 2004).

The current study focuses on a Facebook group that unites individuals with a common social identity as parents of preschool children (ages 0–6) who rely on scientific research and conventional medicine in caring for their children and offering advice to one another. The group provides its members with support, knowledge, and a sense of belonging. The innovation of this study lies in attempting to understand, through an investigation of

group dynamics, the digital strategies by which the group maintains its social identity and simultaneously distances perceived outsiders.

Facebook is a major platform for support in social media (Partridge et al. 2018; Li et al. 2015). This network offers access to dedicated groups of information and advice (Haslam et al. 2017). In the context of parenthood, these groups provide an opportunity to share tips, resources, and recommendations relating to parenting, child development, health, and other relevant topics (Johnson 2015), based on real life experience (Frey et al. 2022; Seymour-Smith et al. 2017), while having the potential to foster social capital and identity and a sense of belonging (Jang and Dworkin 2014). Doty and Dworkin (2014) conducted a critical review of 19 international articles addressing online social support for parents. They highlighted the benefits of the online environment, including convenience and anonymity, although in some studies, drawbacks such as the degree to which users are perceived as reliable, truthful, and honest by others in the network was also noted (Alkhamees et al. 2021). Haslam et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study among 523 Australian parents. They found that the more parents used social media, the greater the online support they reported receiving. Other studies have highlighted the contribution of social media to parents' mental health. Thus, for example, a research study that examined parental stress levels before participation in a Facebook support group versus six months after joining the group found a decrease in stress levels (McDaniel et al. 2012). Other studies reported enhanced self-confidence on the part of the parents (Nolan et al. 2015), a sense of personal empowerment (O'Connor and Madge 2004), as well as a positive change in infant feeding regimes as a result of participation in a Facebook support group (Downing et al. 2017). A recent study examined the support that parents sought and provided in a Facebook group during the COVID-19 pandemic. It found that participants mainly shared informational support by reposting content. Although support requests were less common, they received significantly more comments. Key discussion topics included parenting, child development, remote schooling, literacy, and adult mental health (Hooper et al. 2023).

Whereas a physical group has a facilitator who manages group boundaries and relations, in an online group, there is an admin, but the mechanisms for directing and overseeing membership and discourse are less distinct. Matzat (2009) states that the outcomes of interaction in online communities depend to a large extent on finding solutions to typical problems of interaction, such as free-riding and a lack of trust. Groups often use deviants as scapegoats to establish boundaries in order to define who is "in" and who is "out" (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Matzat (2009) argues that a member's online behavior sends signals (intended to express a certain idea or emotion, using digital media), about how he or she regards the relationship with other members and with the group. One of these digital signals can be the use of emojis to represent a range of emotions on the part of the members (Smith and Rose 2020). Emojis have become a ubiquitous feature of social media, facilitating emotional expression, stance-taking, and interpersonal alignment (Logi and Zappavigna 2023). Representing a wide range of facial expressions, objects, places, animals, and weather symbols, emojis are used as communicative tools to enhance digital interactions. According to Coyle and Carmichael (2019), emojis play a significant role in increasing emotional responsiveness in online communication. Similarly, Andrade et al. (2016) observed that in Facebook conversations, emojis function as markers, intensifiers, and enhancers of speech acts, with their usage shaped by factors such as mood, emotions, conversation type, and social trends. Further, Scheffler et al. (2022) investigated the extent to which emojis encode lexical meanings within sentence contexts, concluding that sentence comprehension remains unaffected when emojis substitute for words. In certain cases, emojis are even capable of activating an entire lexical entry, including phonological information.

## 2. The Present Study

Most of the research conducted to date has focused on Facebook support groups comprising parents of preterm infants (Thoren et al. 2013); parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (Roffeei et al. 2015); parents of children with rare pediatric diseases (Tittgemeyer and Schaaf 2020); and single mothers (Kopacz 2021). A recent study explored the motivations of voluntary single-child parents for joining a Facebook online support group meant for all parents of only children, and their experience in the group (Ya'ari et al. 2023). In contrast, the current study focused on a group that provided general knowledge and support to parents. Wellman (2021) contends that while Facebook communities and groups provide a platform for free social support, they are not exempt from rules that govern the group dynamic by delineating both acceptable and unacceptable content and members.

The main objective of the current study was to investigate how the group determines the appropriateness of parental content and assesses membership acceptability. Our research question was how this Facebook support group for parents safeguards and defines its boundaries, as well as how the group handles the influx of out-group content (content that deviates from the rules) and new members. These issues were explored through an analysis of the group's discourse, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal elements, such as emojis.

In order to examine the research question, we chose to focus on the theories of social capital (Coleman 1990) and social identity (Hogg and Abrams 1988), which complement each other.

Social capital refers to the resources and benefits that individuals and groups gain from their social networks, including trust, norms, and social connections (Putnam 2000). It encompasses various types: bonding social capital, involving close-knit ties within groups like family and friends, offering strong support and trust but potentially limiting broader resources; bridging social capital, connecting individuals across different networks, and facilitating access to diverse resources and information; and linking social capital, involving connections with institutions and influential individuals, providing access to opportunities beyond immediate networks (Bourdieu 2011; Lin 2001). The benefits of social capital are manifold: on an individual level, it enhances access to resources, emotional support, and opportunities for advancement, while on the community level, it fosters collective action, trust, and cooperation, leading to effective problem-solving and social cohesion (Coleman 1988). These mechanisms operate through trust and reciprocity, which promote cooperation and the exchange of resources, and the norms of cooperation, which encourage mutual support (Putnam 2000). The impact of social capital on well-being is significant, influencing health, economic success, educational attainment, and overall quality of life by providing essential support and resources (Lin 2001). Social identity theory, as initially defined by Turner et al. (1979), posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their membership in social groups, which influences their self-esteem and behavior. This involves categorizing oneself and others into groups, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. Hogg and Abrams (1988) extended this theory through their work on self-categorization theory, emphasizing how the process of categorizing oneself into social groups helps individuals define their social identity and align their behavior with group norms. They highlighted the fact that social identity influences not only personal self-esteem but also group dynamics, including conformity to group norms and intergroup relations.

An in-depth research study carried out in Australia (Pooley et al. 2005) found a significant correlation between the sense of communal affiliation, social capital in the community, and mental wellbeing of group members. Another study found that participation in forums and virtual communities empowers the individual owing to the sense of group cohesiveness, sharing of information, and interaction between the participants, enabling support to be both received and given (Barak et al. 2008; Valkenburg et al. 2006). A recent qualitative study with family caregivers explored how online support groups shape and support their social identities. It found that caregivers experience a strengthened sense of identity and

belonging through these platforms, allowing them to share experiences, validate their roles, and connect with others in similar situations (Daynes-Kearney and Gallagher 2024). These feelings are particularly important for parents of young children who, for the purposes of forming a parental identity, must carry out an intensive search for information on children and parenting (Piotrowski 2018). In this context, Nelson (2010) explores the pressures inherent in modern parenting, highlighting the impact of intensive parenting on social group dynamics, particularly in fostering competition and conformity among parents. Similarly, Faircloth (2023), drawing on research from the sociology of childhood, argues that intensive parenting is grounded in the concept of “infant determinism”. This belief posits that early childhood experiences significantly shape lifelong outcomes, thus underscoring children’s vulnerability and heightening the perceived importance of the parental role in determining their future development.

### 3. Data Collection and Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Context: The Sane and Rational Parents (S&R) Facebook Group

Israeli society combines individualistic values that emphasize personal freedoms with collectivistic values, rooted in its history as a multicultural immigrant society (Mautner 2011). Social media, particularly Facebook, is widely used in Israel, especially in parenting (Israel Internet Association 2023). Our study focused on a Facebook support group for Israeli parents, called Sane and Rational Parents (S&R). The group was created in March 2014 and had more than 12,000 members at the time of the study. It describes itself as an alternative to groups that deal with problems of parenthood by means of “homeopathy, talismans, energies and communicating with past incarnations”. Addressing the needs of both fathers and mothers, the group is second in size to the largest group on Facebook—Mama Zone, intended for mothers only—and was created as an alternative to that forum. The group is administrated by four parents and consists primarily of Hebrew speakers, with the majority being secular and religious Israeli Jews. It lacks representation from the Arab population in Israel, who typically engage with dedicated groups tailored to the Arab sector. Additionally, there is no representation from the conservative ultra-Orthodox population in Israel, as they tend to ignore digital innovation and typically do not utilize the internet (Shahar et al. 2023). The group was chosen for this study due to its popularity among Israeli parents, attracting a diverse range of mothers and fathers.

#### 3.2. Methodology

This study adopts an ethnographic approach, incorporating qualitative critical content analysis of discourse within the Sane and Rational Parents (S&R) group. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) views language as a form of social practice and argues that the context in which language is used is crucially important. Since CDA originated in the field of linguistics, it is particularly well-suited for analyzing texts and examining the contexts of linguistic interactions (Johnston 2018). The very definition of discourse as a social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a given speech act and the situations, institutions, and social structures in which it takes place. In other words, speech acts both shape and are shaped by these contexts (Wodak and Meyer 2001).

#### 3.3. Data Collection

Data collection was carried out in 2018 and included 118 discussions among parents within the group. Our research involved five months of observation (January to May 2018) to identify recurring themes in group discussions. Each researcher reviewed the posts, identifying key issues. Given the large volume of data, we focused on 10 discussions (out of the 118) from the final month of observation (May 2018), as these were considered representative of the central issues raised throughout the study period. These issues included medical concerns, sleeping problems, potty training, behavior, and nutrition. Posts were selected based on the following criteria: authored by parents of children aged

0–6, and either seeking support or information from other parents on these issues or responding to such requests.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The data were coded by the authors and analyzed independently by three female judges—researchers from the School of Social Work, whose research focuses on parenting and child-rearing, as reflected in social media. The researchers were not members of the group. The analysis proceeded in three stages: Stage 1—posts meeting the inclusion criteria were selected for the corpus and transcribed, including all relevant comments; Stage 2—each judge read the posts in accordance with the principles of CDA, making detailed notes, following which the judges compared their analyses and reached a consensus on the key themes; Stage 3—recurring features were identified across the discussions and used to formulate the study's findings. In the content analysis, we examined both verbal and non-verbal interactions to address the central research question: how does the group categorize in-group issues and members, and how are those who differ categorized as out-group members? For the purpose of this study, the posts were translated from Hebrew to English by a linguistic editor fluent in both languages.

### 3.5. Ethical Issues

This study was conducted following approval from the Ethics Committee of Bar Ilan University, The School of Social Work. The authors' role as researchers was disclosed to the other group admins. To uphold the privacy of group members as far as possible, the ethical guidelines outlined by [Eysenbach and Till \(2001\)](#) for examining internet communities were adhered to. The first principle emphasizes that the group defines itself as open to anyone who wishes to join. Consequently, this study focused on a group categorized as "public" on Facebook rather than "closed". The second principle pertains to the number of members in the group: it can be assumed that in larger groups, members' expectations regarding the privacy of their posts are lower than in smaller groups. The group under examination had over 12,000 members at the time of the study. The third principle concerns the group's rules regarding privacy. In this case, the rules did not explicitly address the privacy of the content. Nevertheless, the researchers contacted the group admin and obtained written informed consent to utilize the posts.

## 4. Results

This study aimed to investigate how a Facebook support group for parents defines its boundaries and evaluates the acceptability of its members. The focus was on how the group manages out-group content and integrates new members, examining the relationships between members and group admins. It is important to note that for the purpose of this analysis, we differentiated between the group managers and its members. Additionally, it is evident that some members hold higher status, most probably due to their seniority in the group and familiarity with its rules, such that there is no homogeneity among the members.

An analysis of the group discourse, including both verbal and non-verbal elements such as emojis, revealed three central themes:

1. Exclusion of participants through rules and emojis.
2. Filtering of posts as a mechanism for defining in-group and out-group boundaries.
3. Division of roles as a tool for distinguishing between those who do and do not belong.

The following pages present representative examples of the way in which each of the themes was expressed in the discourse taking place in the group. The common thread in the three themes is the use of powerful strategies to distinguish between in-group and out-group, as clarified below.

#### 1. Exclusion of participants through rules and emojis

The theme of exclusion is manifest in the group's written rules, which outline criteria for participation and interaction. This exclusion is further reinforced through the use of emojis, which serve as a substitute for more nuanced interpersonal interactions. Emojis

act as a complementary element to the written rules, shaping and regulating discourse within the group. The boundaries of the group were already defined in the description of the group.

*Hello! This is a group designed as a sane alternative to Mama Zone and its like. No homeopathy, talismans, energies, communicating with previous incarnations, theta healing, or charlatanism of any kind. No groundless scares about anything scientific or technological. There is no room in the group for anti-vaccination propaganda. What is here? Support, sharing, and useful advice about everything relating to pregnancy and raising children. You can debate and you can criticize (civilly). Critical thinking is welcome. Experts in all relevant fields (breastfeeding, nutrition, sleep, medicine, education, etc.), whose opinions are based purely on scientific research, are warmly invited to offer advice, but we will not allow self-interested promotional posts (links to a site, business page, etc.).*

This description used linguistic means to frame both what would not be permitted in the group discussion (“No”; “There is no room in the group for”; “We will not allow”), and what could be introduced (“What is here?”; “You can”; “is welcome”; “warmly invited”; “whose opinions are based purely on scientific research”).

The most prominent examples of the group’s difficulties in dealing with out-group discourse appeared in posts relating to the subject regarded from the start as the most problematic: medical issues. Thus, for instance, in the following discussion, the poster tried to obtain ideas from the group about how to help her son, who was frequently ill.

Post

1 Hi! I’m new here 😊

2 So it’s like this—10-month old boy in day care from six months. Sick once a week \*\*no exaggeration\*\*

3 In the winter it was fever-cough-runny nose, now it’s vomiting and diarrhea.

4 Is it sane and rational just to wait for the storm to pass?

5 I don’t want to stick needles into him or anything like that. . . I was thinking more along the lines of Biogaia but the pediatrician said it’s a sham and as a medical student

7 I tend to believe him because there aren’t any studies on the subject 😞. What do you think?

Line 5 began with the words “I don’t want to stick needles into him”, indicating that the poster, although new to the group (“I’m new here”), was well aware of the rules governing its discussion. She may have read the description of the group or seen posts relating to alternative medicine and realized that that was not the place for parents who believe that acupuncture can help children with medical problems. She therefore positioned herself as a mother who accepted the rules, first rejecting the option to “stick needles into him”. She then added that she “was thinking more along the lines of Biogaia” (a form of probiotics). By the way she phrased the idea of giving her child Biogaia, it was clear that she was trying to feel out the group to see whether it was willing to include in the discussion an express reference to what could be construed as a type of alternative medicine. She continued her enquiry by presenting the opinion of conventional medicine: “the pediatrician said it’s a sham”. At the same time, she depicted herself as a rational mother of high social status, stating that she was a “medical student”, and concluded by inviting the group to respond: “What do you think?”. Thus, the poster faced a dilemma, contemplating the actions of sane and rational parents not only in her situation but specifically when dealing with a child prone to frequent illness. The question extended to whether the circumstances warranted considering unconventional medical products.

The linguistic aspect of the post demonstrated the mother’s conflict. In the second half of the post (lines 5–8), her language was hesitant and enquiring (“I was thinking more along the lines of”; “I tend to believe him”; “What do you think?”).

The responses to her post marked the boundaries of the group discourse.

**Commenter 2—Admin: 16 May 18, 8:27 pm**

1 *What helps strengthen the immune system is a well-balanced diet full of the necessary*  
 2 *nutrients, physical exercise, vaccinations, and enough sleep. All the rest mainly*  
 3 *helps line the pockets of the manufacturers of food supplements.*

The admin provided a practical solution to the poster's dilemma, proposing measures to enhance the child's immune system for improved health. Additionally, in response to a question about the group's view on food supplements, the admin set discourse boundaries, stating, "All the rest mainly helps line the pockets of the manufacturers of food supplements", (Line 3) curtailing further discussion on the queried product.

Another way to define the boundaries of the discourse is through the use of emojis, which might be said to substitute for the body language that characterizes face-to-face interactions. This is demonstrated in the following exchange between the author of the above post and other group members.

**Commenter 3: 16 May 2018, 8:30 pm**

1 *Help me understand, acupuncture for a baby!?*

poster (responding to Commenter 3): 16 May 2018, 8:33 pm

1 *A lot of forums are talking about it seriously.* 🙄

Commenter 3: 16 May 2018, 8:42 pm

1 *It sounds like nonsense. Do you have a link to an article?*

poster (responding to Commenter 3): 16 May 2018, 8:45 pm

1 *Of course not. That's why I don't want to go that way. . .*

Commenter 2—Admin (responding to the thread): 16 May 2018, 8:46 pm

1 *God save us from those forums. . .* 🙄🙄

Commenter 4—Moderator (responding to the thread): 17 May 2018, 6:47 am

1 *No. Because acupuncture for adults is great.*

In this episode, Commenter 3 asked for an explanation of the meaning of acupuncture for babies. In response, the poster used language meant to distance herself from the idea. She presented acupuncture for babies as something out-group, "talk" that occurred in out-group forums to which she was not interested in belonging. In order to stress her distinction from those groups, she added an emoji with a raised eyebrow, signifying her skepticism of parents of the "other type", who she knew were out-group to the discourse of the current group and were not allowed to participate in it. The direction the thread took demonstrated how the boundaries of the discourse continued to be marked by the admin and moderators of the group. They asked for scientific proof ("Do you have a link to an article?") and indicated the otherness of the forums she mentioned ("God save us from those forums") and employed an emoji ("🙄🙄") to accentuate these utterances, in this case, the image of a woman raising her hand to her face in a gesture of despair.

In conclusion, this theme illustrates how the group establishes its boundaries through both written rules and the use of emojis. These mechanisms serve a dual purpose: defining the criteria for group membership and regulating the content permissible within the group discourse.

## 2. Filtering Posts as a Mechanism for Defining In-group and Out-group Boundaries

The factor that motivates parents within the group and sustains its social capital is the group's reliance on scientific research in all matters related to childcare, particularly medical issues. In this context, the group employs a powerful mechanism termed "filter-worthy post" to differentiate between content and members that align with its standards and those that do not. This mechanism is instrumental in defining and maintaining the boundaries of what is considered relevant and acceptable within the group.

In the following example, the discourse on alternative medicine was excluded by the use of the term "filter", which determined which posts belonged in the group discussion and which were to be kept out.

Commenter 14: 16 May 2018, 9:36 pm

1 *Another filter-worthy post?*

2 *What's going on here today* 🙄?

*Commenter 13 (responding to Commenter 14): 16 May 2018, 10:01 pm*

*1 After reading more comments, I have to agree. A filter-worthy post.*

*poster (responding to the thread): 16 May 2018, 10:05 pm*

*1 What's a filter-worthy post? Is there something wrong with what I asked?*

*Commenter 13 (responding to poster): 16 May 2018, 10:05 pm*

*1 No. . .with some of the answers*

*poster (responding to Commenter 13): 16 May 2018, 10:06 pm*

*1 Oh, yay 😊*

*Commenter 6 (responding to poster): 17 May 2018, 9:34 am*

*1 A post that causes all the non-S&Rs to rise to the surface, and then they can be*

*2 filtered out with a slotted spoon*

This episode began with Commenter 14 raising a question as to the nature of the discourse the post had generated in the group (a discussion of alternative medicine). She was trying to find out whether it was what she referred to as a “filter-worthy post”, adding “What’s going on here today?”, thus stressing that that was not the first time she had read a post on the subject that day. Commenter 13 confirmed the feelings of Commenter 14, stating “I have to agree” that the post was “filter-worthy”. In response, the poster attempted to understand the meaning of the phrase “filter-worthy post”, while at the same time wondering “is there something wrong with what I asked?”. This section of the episode indicated that prior to this exchange, the poster considered herself as belonging in the group discourse, being a rational mother who met the necessary criteria for membership in the group. Commenter 14’s question unsettled her, as she seemed to be wondering whether something she had said during the discussion indicated that she should not be categorized as belonging to the group. The final comment elucidated the term “filter-worthy post”, stating it referred to a post causing non-S&Rs to surface, allowing their exclusion. The definition revealed the group’s defensive stance against out-group content, particularly related to alternative medicine. The aggressive and contemptuous tone of the definition highlighted the group’s goal of identifying and excluding non-S&R parents.

Aggressiveness toward anyone the group believed was not upholding the rules of the discourse can also be seen in the following exchange on the subject of vaccinations, in which the poster presented his concerns.

*Post*

*1 Hi all. My wife and I are expecting a girl, God willing, and the subject, of*

*2 vaccinations, is already bothering me. There are studies that don't recommend*

*3 vaccinating and those that do.*

*4 I'd be pleased to hear opinions.*

The expectant father, raising a vaccination dilemma for his first child, sought the group’s opinions, expressing concern influenced by conflicting views from studies supporting and opposing vaccination. His phrasing suggested a lack of awareness of the group’s prevailing discourse. Member responses highlighted his unfamiliarity with the collective attitude toward the subject.

The first fifteen comments uniformly rejected the notion of “studies” opposing vaccinations, emphasizing the group’s stance against such scientific perspectives in their discourse. The group maintained that discussions opposing vaccinations should be excluded unless supported by scientific evidence, reflecting their requirement for scientific backing in any discourse on controversial medical issues.

The following episode illustrates additional ways in which the group delineated the boundaries of its discourse.

**Commenter 16: 11 May 2018, 12:29 am**

*1 This is a group of sane and rational parents. Here we vaccinate our children*

*2 without any doubts. Discussions about it in other groups please. . . .*

*Commenter 17 (responding to Commenter 16): 11 May 2018, 12:43 am*

*1 That attitude doesn't help. People convinced not to vaccinate won't be convinced to*

*2 vaccinate, but those who have doubts will run. There's a place for discussion, for*



3 questions, for respect for people who are just starting to scratch at the surface of  
4 parenthood with the million decisions that are still to come. They're hungry for  
5 advice, for someone who will listen to them, and they require patience.

Commenter 16: 11 May 2018, 12:58 am

1 People who have doubts can get all that from "Talking about Vaccinations" which  
2 is designed precisely for that purpose. Here in the group we don't have a  
3 lot of patience for people who are undecided about a life-saving procedure that also  
4 has implications for the rest of society.

Here, Commenter 16 distinguished between "us" (sane and rational parents) and "them" (other groups), requesting that discussions of whether or not to vaccinate children be conducted elsewhere. By doing so, she was, in effect, ejecting the poster from the group by claiming that the very question he raised indicated that he was not sane and rational.

In a subsequent comment in the same thread, she asserted her certainty on vaccination, stating, "People who have doubts can get all that from". She positioned herself as part of the sane and rational group, expressing impatience with the uncertainty on vaccination. She used phrases like "This is a group of" and "Here we vaccinate" to delineate group membership and exclusion, inviting the poster to join a different group accommodating those with doubts.


A further example of the desire to exclude from the group the subject of vaccinations in general, and the poster in particular, can be found in the following episode.

**Commenter 21: 11 May 2018, 1:11 am**

1 The subject of vaccinations appears in the group rules, take note.

Commenter 22: 11 May 2018, 1:29 am

1 You're right. This is our bubble and there's no need to deal with posts of the

2 "different truth  " style.

Commenter 21 directed the poster to the group rules, indicating that they covered the topic of vaccinations. This implied that the poster should review the guidelines to understand what discussion was allowed. In contrast, Commenter 22 expressed solidarity, describing the group as "our bubble". This term conveyed a need to preserve a discourse free from potential disruptions, emphasizing the sense of belonging and shared beliefs within the group. The image of a bubble also suggested a desire to cultivate a uniform identity through group discourse.

The comment below is a further illustration of the group members' attitude to anyone who dared to introduce out-group subjects into the discourse.

**Commenter 23: 11 May 2018, 1:25 am**

1 If you take a look at his page you'll see he's a troll.

Commenter 23 labeled the poster a "troll", implying that his post aimed to provoke arguments and conflict. This designation marked him as unworthy of a response and framed his inquiry as intentionally provocative. Any questioning of a topic unanimously accepted by the group casts the individual as an outsider, possibly with malicious intent.

In conclusion, this theme revealed the group's defensive stance against out-group content, particularly related to alternative medicine. The aggressive and contemptuous tone of the definition highlighted the group's goal of identifying and excluding non-S&R parents. The use of terms such as "posts worth filtering", "distinguishing between them and us", and "troll" collectively delineates the boundaries of group membership.

3. Division of roles as a tool for distinguishing between those who do and do not belong

This theme addresses how social hierarchies within the parent community (such as admins/moderators versus other group members) influence the determination of group membership.

The description of the group as it appears in the rules includes a definition of the roles within it:

*The admin has the right to add members or officials and/or to expel, remove, or block members as she sees fit and/or if they infringe on the group regulations as detailed in this*

*document. Do you think a post or group member does not comply with the rules? Help us maintain the character of our community and report the post or individual. We will look into it and deal with the situation as required.*

Thus, the admin can accept or exclude members “as she sees fit”, while the rest of the group is called upon to help “maintain the character of our community” by reporting any infringement of the rules. This division of roles is also meant to preserve the boundaries of the group discourse, as can be seen in the following thread in which the admin and a moderator responded to the post of Commenter 16, presented in the previous section.

**Commenter 16: 11 May 2018, 12:29 am**

1 *This is a group of sane and rational parents. Here we vaccinate our children  
2 without any doubts. Discussions about it in other groups please.*

Commenter 2—Admin (responding to Commenter 16): 11 May 2018, 1:00 am

1 *A., please don't expel people from the group. That's the job of the admin.*

2 *Thank you.*

Commenter 16 (responding to Commenter 2): 11 May 2018, 6:43 am

1 *It's stated explicitly in the description of the group.*

2 *And I didn't exclude anyone. I referred them to other groups.*

Commenter 2—Admin (responding to Commenter 16): 11 May 2018, 7:25 am

1 *No, the truth is it says there is no room for propaganda against vaccinations. But*

2 *it's nice of you to explain to me what the group is for 😞.*

Commenter 18—Moderator (responding to the thread): 11 May 2018, 8:49 am

1 *It's alright to ask. It's even to be desired. In most cases we'll refer them to “Talking*

2 *about “Vaccinations”, but they're allowed to ask.*

3 *Anti-vaccination propaganda is forbidden, just like any unsupported preaching—*

4 *it's not in line with the rules of the group (reliable, scientifically-based information,*

5 *research, etc.).*

Commenter 16, lacking an official role, sought to establish a strict boundary, asserting no place for the father's question. The admin and moderator intervened, not only clarifying discourse boundaries but also defining group roles and decision-making power. The admin explicitly stated that excluding individuals was solely the admin's responsibility, emphasizing the delineation of group functions. Furthermore, she positioned herself in the more senior role, in effect giving her approval for continuing the discussion despite Commenter 16's belief that it did not belong in the group.

Commenter 16 sought a reassessment from the admin, referencing the group's explicit description to assert alignment with its beliefs. Her use of “explicitly” implied a thorough understanding of the group document. In an apparent effort to soften her stance, she clarified that she did not “exclude” but rather “referred” individuals elsewhere.

In other words, she distanced herself from her exclusionary remarks, framing them as an attempt to guide the father to external information sources. Her apologetic tone suggested a reluctance to engage in conflict with the admin. Perhaps anticipating support from group officials for upholding discourse boundaries, she stepped back when that support did not materialize, deferring to their authority as a regular group member.

Nevertheless, the admin continued to underline the role of the group officials and again put Commenter 16 in her place, saying, “But it's nice of you to explain to me what the group is for 😞”. Although it is impossible to analyze with any confidence the tone of a virtual conversation, the admin's response appeared to be sarcastic. The use of the words “nice of you” could indicate covert condescension, and the words “you” and “me” were markers of her perception of the difference in status between them. Moreover, the emoji she chose could have also testified to her displeasure at Commenter 16's attempt to explain to her the rules of the group she administrated.

## 5. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate how a Facebook support group for parents defines its boundaries and the strategies used to maintain the group's social capital and identity. The social capital of the group is characterized by values of sane and rational parenting, grounded in scientific research. The identity of the group members is shaped by their adherence to these principles, positioning them as parents who prioritize evidence-based practices in raising their young children.

To explore these dynamics, both verbal and non-verbal discourses (including emojis) within the group were analyzed. The findings revealed three primary strategies employed by the group admins to maintain its social capital and identity. First, the group's written rules serve as the gateway to membership and are frequently referenced when violations occur. Emojis were utilized to refine and enhance verbal communication, sometimes even replacing words altogether. Second, power strategies, such as filtering posts, were employed to control the flow of information and reinforce group norms. Finally, the hierarchy of roles within the group was emphasized, contributing to the regulation of behavior and relations.

Based on social capital theory, we argue that the bonding social capital within the studied group—centered on the values of sane and rational parenting—created strong, close-knit ties that developed within a homogeneous community, fostering trust and solidarity among its members. Putnam (2000) asserts that bonding social capital can reinforce existing power structures, as close-knit groups often rely on shared norms, values, and identity to maintain cohesion. In the researched group, a set of rules delineates permissible discussion topics and establishes exclusions. This contractual framework, enforced by admins, moderators, and members alike, excludes any discourse deemed inconsistent with the group's rules. There was no space for parents who introduced topics or perspectives that did not align with the group's defined principles.

In this context, Wellman (2021) highlights the fact that Facebook groups, despite their appearance of egalitarianism, often create power dynamics through both explicit and implicit rules, a finding that aligns with the current research. This perspective emphasizes the role of shared social norms in facilitating coordination and cooperation within groups, alongside sanctions for those who breach these accepted norms (Putnam 2000). One method through which the group excluded certain parents and topics was its strict reliance on science-based research, as specified in the group's rules.

The cognitive dimension of social capital theory encompasses shared representations and meanings, fostering a collective understanding of goals within a social system. In this context, we interpret the group's behavior as a quest for in-group similarity and the perception of common characteristics (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). When a parent's post was suspected of promoting alternative medicine—an act in opposition to the group's norms, as stated in its rules, and potentially harmful to its collective identity—the group required that any recommendation be substantiated by scientific evidence, such as a peer-reviewed paper or study.

Another strategy employed to convey the exclusionary message within the group was the use of emojis, a unique digital tool for expressing emotions and thoughts. These images provided insight into the internal world of the parents. Previous studies suggest that emojis clarify the communicative intent behind linguistic expressions, serving both linguistic and non-linguistic functions, and offering a glimpse into the user's personality (Kaye et al. 2017). Beyond their superficial appeal, emojis can function as a coping strategy and a creative form of expression in the digital world, representing a wide spectrum of emotions (Smith and Rose 2020).

Consequently, the use of emojis offers a subtle glimpse into internal states that may not be explicitly expressed in written text, effectively substituting for gestures, facial expressions, and the tone of voice that would typically be present in face-to-face interactions. In the context of the parents' group, emojis enabled members to express emotions they found difficult to articulate linguistically, to expand the range of feelings they wished to

convey, to emphasize their textual messages, and to reveal personality traits that might not have been apparent from their words alone. For example, a mother who wanted to express her distaste for alternative medicine used an emoji expressing doubt and disbelief, thus reinforcing her words and distancing herself from the practice, positioning herself firmly within the group's shared values.

A powerful strategy that characterized the group was the filtering of posts, typically those suspected of contradicting the group's social identity. Social identity theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups (Turner et al. 1979). In a group setting, individuals who strongly identify with the group may form tighter bonds (bonding social capital) with those they perceive as in-group members, leading to greater trust and cooperation. This can reinforce power dynamics, where members who closely align with the dominant identity hold more influence. It could be argued, however, that members who raise critical questions—despite violating group rules—might contribute to its bridging social capital. Bridging social capital connects individuals across diverse social identities and has the potential to redistribute power by incorporating new voices, ideas, and external networks into the group. Members with bridging social capital may challenge the dominance of the in-group by introducing outside perspectives and broadening the group's identity and resource base.

However, the perceived threat of discourse deviating from the group's established beliefs and values—those governing their behavior as parents—appeared too great. As a result, members were unable to engage in dialogue with dissenting views and chose instead to exclude them (Hogg and Abrams 1988). When the group suspected that out-group discourse might be infiltrating the discussion, members promptly flagged the deviation (McMillan and Chavis 1986) and urged the admins to intervene by halting the discussion or removing the poster who had violated the rules.

Additionally, the group developed digital mechanisms to maintain the unity of discourse and, consequently, the cohesion of the group (Gibbs et al. 2019). These mechanisms included labeling certain parents as “trolls” or “not kosher”, indicating that they did not belong and might even pose a threat to the group's social identity.

The digital exclusion of outsiders from discussions—or from the group altogether—ultimately impairs its ability to serve as a meaningful and influential forum for its members (Ditrich and Sassenberg 2017). This issue is particularly significant for parents of young children who are in the phase of intensive parenting and often seek a sense of belonging and closeness through social media (Egilsson et al. 2021). Faircloth (2023), drawing on research from the sociology of childhood, explains that intensive parenting is rooted in the concept of “infant determinism”—the belief that early childhood experiences have a profound impact on lifelong outcomes. This notion emphasizes children's vulnerability and heightens the perceived importance of the parental role in shaping their future development.

Finally, drawing the hierarchy of roles in the studied group was also used as a strategy for determining the boundaries of in- and out-groups. In the examined Facebook group, admins and moderators were crucial in preserving discourse boundaries. Members recognized this authority and promptly tagged officials when rules were perceived to be violated. Admins and moderators actively defined what was considered acceptable or prohibited in group discussions (Matzat 2009). Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2003) claim that group leaders or moderators hold formal power, as they can set rules, regulate behavior, and enforce penalties for rule-breaking.

In a prior study comparing virtual forums for women undergoing fertility treatments and those choosing childlessness (Yeshua-Katz 2016), moderators were identified as “gatekeepers”, responsible for screening group messages. While both forums aimed to maintain group boundaries, they employed different strategies. In the fertility treatments forum, moderators actively dubbed themselves gatekeepers, extensively screening messages and members. Conversely, in the childless women's forum, moderators viewed members as capable and collaborated by responding as “others” status. In the current study, a middle-ground approach was evident. Members could caution against “others”, but admins and

moderators had the final say, occasionally curbing parents' attempts to manage group discourse. In accordance with Putnam (2000), the actions of group managers can be viewed as motivated by the aspiration to preserve the bonding social capital and identity within the parents' group. This implies that only individuals who align with the group's established procedures can become members. The preservation of bonding social capital and identity consequently enhances the sense of belonging among parents who are part of the group. Moreover, although the current study did not focus on the gender issue, it is interesting to note that the managers of the group mentioned in the discourse analysis are women, who, by virtue of their position at the top of the hierarchy, exerted power over the parents, both fathers and mothers. Theories of power and influence claim that female leaders might leverage different types of power and influence strategies to effectively lead and manage other women, balancing authority with collaboration (Northouse 2021).

## 6. Limitations

For ethical reasons, permission was obtained to observe only a single Facebook group focused on general parenting issues, which limits the representativeness and generalizability of the findings to other parental groups on Facebook. Future research should include discourse analysis in additional parenting groups on Facebook and explore other social media platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok.

While the group addresses a range of child-rearing issues, the analyzed discourse focuses mainly on conventional versus non-conventional medicine, thus confining our conclusions to this area. Given the qualitative nature of this study, we did not draw conclusions about the broader parent population but instead explored shared experiences within this specific Facebook group. The brief examination period also prevented the analysis of broader, evolving processes over time. A longer-term study might have revealed changes in group dynamics and member participation. Additionally, this study's focus on Israeli parents introduces potential cultural nuances that could affect the group discourse, despite the global nature of social media and shared parenting concerns.

## 7. Conclusions

The present study, despite its limitations, highlights how parents in the digital age seek support. It reveals power-based strategies through which a Facebook group of parents reinforces its social capital and identity, as defined by the group's rules. While these strategies enhance the sense of belonging for those who align with these principles, they may alienate those who wish to raise questions. Additionally, this study demonstrates, albeit to a limited extent, how discourse as a social practice involves a dialectical relationship between speech acts and the contexts, institutions, and situations that both shape and are shaped by these acts.

On the practical level, this study's findings provide a platform for health, welfare, and psychology specialists working with parents. It highlights how parents seek support for medical issues related to child-rearing in the digital age and how this support is influenced by rules and power hierarchies. While some of these dynamics are similar to traditional support groups with managers, others differ, such as the use of emojis to convey ideas. This study underscores the fact that traditional face-to-face parent groups remain valuable, both for parents who are less active on social media and for those who wish to express critical opinions not addressed in online groups.

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