

Milk-sharing experiences: Perspective among Malaysian donors and recipient mothers

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Abstract

Background: Shared breastmilk has been a longstanding tradition in many cultures throughout history through wet nursing, cross nursing, and the donation of expressed breastmilk to a milk bank. However, social media has introduced some new dynamics to this practice, making it more visible and accessible; and it is known as milk-sharing. Research on milk sharing is still in its infancy and focused on western perspectives. Therefore, the sociocultural dimensions of milk sharing have not been adequately explored across different settings and cultures.

Purpose: This qualitative study aims at understanding the milk-sharing experiences among donor and recipient mothers in Malaysia.

Methods: We conducted a social media analysis on milk-sharing postings from four Facebook Groups Pages. This was followed by a detailed exploration of individual experiences throughout the milk-sharing journey using a semi-structured, online interview with thirty mothers. Thematic analysis was applied in the data analysis process using ATLAS.ti 9 software.

Results: A total of 252 postings were retrieved from four Facebook Groups Pages. Of these, 151 postings referred to donating milk, 70 referred to requesting milk, and 31 focused on issues related to milk-sharing. Thirty mothers with various milk-sharing experiences were involved in this study. Fifteen donors, six recipients, and nine fell into both categories. The mothers in the study had an average age of 32.9 years and the majority were Malay. In terms of their relationship with the infants, 93.3% were biological mothers with the majority having two to five children. Thematic analysis identified four themes: 1) point of reference, 2) altruism for mutual benefit, 3) faith and 4) challenges and problem-solving methods.

Conclusion: Milk sharing is a personal and sociocultural-bounded practice where mothers negotiate their understanding of the need to breastfeed and the use of donated breastmilk. Despite its specific focus on the Malaysian context, this research offers a complementary understanding of milk sharing within a non-Western framework and transferable to similar sociocultural backgrounds. The findings are important for intercultural nursing and midwifery practice, where nurses can incorporate sociocultural perspectives into breastmilk donation initiatives to increase public acceptance.

Keywords: altruism; Asia; breastfeeding; human milk; social media

Introduction

Technological advances have greatly transformed the traditional practice of wet nursing into modern milk sharing. While wet nursing was commonly practiced among family members or close friends and involved direct breastfeeding, modern milk sharing often takes place between donors and recipients who do not know each other personally. With the widespread use of smartphones and the growing influence of social networking sites such as Facebook, this practice has become more accessible and publicly visible. This evolution challenges earlier understandings that viewed wet nursing

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as a private arrangement limited to family and close friends (Thorley, 2011).

Although milk sharing has sparked debates over safety, quality, and ethics, demand for donor breastmilk continues to rise globally (Vogel, 2011). The limited access to human milk banks in many countries, compounded by strict operational procedures, has led some mothers to seek alternatives such as peer-to-peer milk sharing (Gribble, 2014; McCloskey & Karandikar, 2018; Perrin et al., 2016). Additionally, the existence of active online support groups can significantly influence maternal decision-making and increase participation in milk-sharing activities (Akre et al., 2011).

Despite growing global interest in milk sharing, the literature remains dominated by research rooted in Western perspectives—mainly from the United States, Canada, Australia, and parts of Europe and Turkey (Jamil et al., 2021). These studies provide valuable insights but often overlook the rich cultural, religious, and social complexities that may shape milk-sharing experiences in other settings. This presents a significant gap in the literature and highlights an urgent need for more culturally specific research; especially in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, where breastfeeding and infant feeding practices are deeply intertwined with spiritual and sociocultural values.

Malaysia offers a unique context with its multi-ethnic population and diverse religious traditions, especially Islam, which introduces important religious implications to the practice of using donated milk. For example, the Islamic concept of milk kinship establishes familial bonds between donor and recipient families, thereby affecting issues such as marriage permissibility and legal guardianship (Bensaid, 2021). These religious considerations, alongside traditional customs and evolving maternal norms, make milk-sharing in Malaysia a culturally sensitive and complex practice.

To date, empirical research on milk sharing in Malaysia remains scarce. While historical accounts highlight the normative use of donated breastmilk prior to the introduction of formula (Mohamad et al., 2013), contemporary experiences—particularly those influenced by digital platforms—remain underexplored. Without a clear understanding of how Malaysian mothers navigate milk-sharing in the context of cultural expectations and religious beliefs, healthcare providers and policymakers may struggle to offer appropriate guidance or support.

This qualitative study addresses that gap by examining the milk-sharing experiences among donor and recipient mothers in Malaysia, with a focus on how sociocultural and religious values influence their decisions. The findings contribute to a more inclusive and localized understanding of milk-sharing practices, and they are essential for developing culturally sensitive guidelines and interventions that align with Malaysian mothers'

lived experiences and beliefs. Lessons learned from this practice can also be transferred to the context of breastmilk donation. Understanding how mothers negotiate cultural, religious, and emotional aspects of milk sharing can inform the design of culturally appropriate breastmilk donation systems, improve public acceptance, and support policy development for human milk banking in Malaysia and similar settings.

Materials and Methods

Design

This research used constructivist approach, focusing on mothers in Malaysia who have either donated or received breastmilk through social media. A multiple case study design was chosen to explore diverse milk-sharing experiences among donor and recipient mothers on Facebook, enabling in-depth, contextual comparisons across individual cases. There were two main phases to this study: (1) Phase 1: Analyzed posts from four Facebook Groups Pages related to breastfeeding and milk-sharing. (2) Phase 2: Conducted online interviews with 30 mothers to explore their personal experiences.

Sample and setting

Facebook was selected as the primary platform for this study because modern milk-sharing practices often emerge and operate through online social networks, rather than traditional, face-to-face arrangements. With the limited availability of formal milk banks and growing demand for donor milk, many mothers turn to the internet to find, connect, and communicate with other mothers. In Malaysia, Facebook is the most widely used platform among women of childbearing age.

The researchers decided to target communities of shared interest or Facebook Groups Pages as it corresponded to the research topic as recommended Marks et al. (2017). These support groups were identified using predetermined keywords; "breastfeeding" and "breastmilk donation" in both Malay and English, using the Facebook search engine (See supplementary material 1). These processes resulted in four Facebook Groups Pages that then included as data sources.

For phase two, participants were purposively selected to ensure they had relevant experiences. The inclusion criteria for the mothers were; (1) Malaysian woman, (2) aged more than 18 years old, (3) experience as either a donor mother or a recipient mother, and (4) the donated breastmilk was used for feeding purposes. The exclusion criteria were; (1) unable to speak Malay or English, (2) unreachable via online methods, and (3) the mother had an existing family relationship with the donor/recipient or knew each other before milk sharing took place. Finally, this study recruited 30 informants for data collection.

Ethical consideration

This study was guided by the guideline and protocol given by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subject, Universiti Putra Malaysia (Ref. no: JKEUPM 2019-283). The recruitment and administration were approved by the administrators of selected Facebook Groups Pages. All the ethical aspects have been considered prior to carrying out the research project to preserve privacy and confidentiality.

Data collection

In phase one, a total of 204 breastfeeding and 4 breastmilk donations support groups were identified. These Facebook Groups Pages were then screened based on the criteria; a) breastfeeding and breastmilk donation Facebook Groups Pages, b) play a role as support groups and c) milk-sharing activities exist. As a result, only four Facebook Groups Pages were included in this study. From these, the researchers collected 252 public posts between January and June 2020. These posts were sorted into three categories; offers to donate expressed breastmilk (EBM), requests for EBM and discussions or concerns about milk-sharing.

A total of 32 mothers who met the inclusion criteria were interviewed; however, two were excluded from the final analysis due to poor audio quality. The interviews were conducted via various online platform such as Zoom, Google Meet and WhatsApp video call apps. Each interview lasted between 40 to 90 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate the interview process (See supplementary material 2). The duration of each actual interview ranged from 40 to 90 minutes. All the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The saturation point was achieved at the 25th interview when new data was forming into patterns similar to those of the existing codes. The remaining scheduled interviews were conducted to compare and validate the findings.

Data analysis

In this study, data analysis was carried out in two main stages, based on the two types of information collected: Facebook posts and interviews with mothers. The researchers identified common words and phrases related to milk-sharing, such as "donate," "milk," "eczema," and "location." They were then grouped into categories that represented shared topics. Phase 1 served as a foundation, offering a broad overview of how milk-sharing was discussed and practiced. For the interviews, each conversation with the mothers was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then returned to the participants for checking to ensure everything was accurate.

The data were then analysed using thematic analysis. Analysis started as soon as the data were collected from the first interview to data saturation. The thematic analysis procedure is based on the work of [Braun & Clarke \(2006\)](#). Initial coding was

developed by Researcher 1 and revised based on input from Researcher 2. The coding was further revised based on discussion and consensus within the research team. The postings, interview transcripts, field notes, and reflective journals were used together during data analysis to elucidate how they might connect to answer the research questions.

All the codes identified were collated into subthemes, whereby codes with similar concepts were categorised as subtheme. The initial themes were identified after developing and reviewing the initial codes and subthemes. It was a rigorous process, with researchers moving back and forth between themes and databases until a comprehensive set of themes was created. Finally, we performed a cross-case analysis to compare the themes, sub-themes, and code that emerged from the Facebook page posts with the transcripts of the interviews to explore the similarities, differences, and patterns between the datasets. Results are reported collectively as each dataset complements each other to provide a holistic understanding of milk-sharing experiences. All data was transferred to Atlas.ti software to facilitate data management and provide an auditable data trail.

The purpose of starting with social media data was to gain an initial understanding of the milk-sharing landscape in a natural, unprompted environment, where mothers expressed themselves voluntarily and publicly. By identifying the most frequently discussed issues in Phase 1, the researchers were able to craft a more focused and relevant interview guide for the interviews. For example, if posts commonly mentioned food allergies, transportation difficulties, or religious concerns, these topics were included as prompts during interviews. In this way, Phase 1 acted as a preliminary scoping exercise that highlighted real-world, context-specific issues and allowed Phase 2 to dive deeper into personal experiences with those same themes. The transition from broad, public conversations in Phase 1 to personal, detailed storytelling in Phase 2 ensured that the study captured both the general patterns and individual perspectives of milk-sharing.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies recommended by [Lincoln & Guba \(1986\)](#) were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the study findings. First, data triangulation through the adoption of multiple methods; social media analysis using text mining and semi-structured interviews, and participant mothers with various milk-sharing experiences. Second, the transcription was done by the same researcher who conducted the interviews. This allowed the researcher to become more immersed in the data and achieve better clarity of the context of the interviews. Third, prolonged engagement through serial follow-ups with participant mothers in phase 2 provided the opportunity to build rapport and enhanced their openness to share stories.

Results

In phase one, a total of 252 postings were retrieved from four Facebook Groups Pages in phase 1. Of these, 151 referred to donating milk, 70 referred to requesting milk, and 31 focused on issues related to milk-sharing. Phase two involved a total of 30 mothers were classified according to their experiences with milk sharing. Fifteen donors, six recipients, and nine fell into both categories. Among donors, the number of recipients ranged from one to twenty-four, and among recipients, the number ranged from one to five donors. The majority of the mothers were Malay and of Islamic faith which is generally representative of Malaysian society. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic profiles of the mothers in this study. Through thematic analysis, four major themes were identified that reflect the multifaceted nature of milk-sharing: (1) point of reference, (2) altruism for mutual benefit, (3) faith, and (4) challenges and problem-solving methods.

Theme 1: Point of Reference

This theme captures how Facebook Groups Pages served as initial contact points and informal learning hubs for mothers. Two sub-themes were identified: 1) sources of information about milk sharing and 2) a point for meeting demand and supply.

Sources of information about milk-sharing

Mothers relied on Facebook Groups Pages to gain knowledge about breastfeeding, safe handling of EBM, religious implications of milk-sharing, and ethical considerations. Data from phase 1 identified the codes 'centre' and 'bank', referring to human milk banks which categorised into availability of the milk bank. The codes 'mufti,' and 'fatwa' were then categorised into Islamic legal views on milk sharing practice. Meanwhile 'kinship' and 'mahram' refer to consanguineous relationship is established by feeding a baby with non-biological mothers' milk; from an Islamic perspective. In addition, 'radhaah,' and 'kad' refers to an official record of milk mothers and milk children. The Facebook Groups Pages also contained risk-mitigation recommendations for donors and recipient mothers. The phrase 'health screening' and 'EBM handling' found from phase one were categorised into quality and safety of donated milk where the Facebook Groups Pages also provide a guideline for donor and recipient mothers.

Data from the semi-structured interviews with mothers who had experienced milk sharing revealed that they shared the view that Facebook Groups Pages were highly informative and supportive:

[There are] specific files on milk sharing such as a database, EBM handling, religious views on using non-biological mothers' milk, advice while considering to use donated EBM, and [the] religious implications of milk sharing. It gave me an idea how it works. (Donor, P3)

A point for meeting demand and supply.

This sub-theme elucidates how the process of milk sharing on the Facebook Groups Pages occurred. An in-depth analysis of social media content revealed that the milk-sharing process could be initiated in four ways: using a milk-sharing database, uploading one's own post, referring to existing posts, and seeking help from the administrators of Facebook Groups Pages. Therefore, this platform helped facilitate connections between donors and recipients, especially in urgent or unplanned situations.

The process of finding milk donors or recipient infants was detailed in the mothers' stories. The majority of the mothers in this study explained that for them, the process started by looking at existing posts on the Facebook Group Pages about finding milk donors or recipient babies.

I saw several posts looking for milk mothers and requesting EBM on the Facebook Page. So, I commented on one of the posts. Then another mother replied to my comment, asking if there was any milk. Then we communicated via FB messenger. (Donor, P3)

I saw her [donor's] post looking for a milk child on the Facebook Group Page. So, then I commented on the post. (Donor and recipient, P6)

Theme 2: Altruism for Mutual Benefit

This theme refers to the underlying situations that connect the donor and recipient in milk sharing. The sub-themes include 1) the need for milk sharing and 2) awareness of the importance of breastmilk. This theme reflects the motivations behind milk-sharing, highlighting its mutually beneficial nature.

The need for milk sharing

Donors often had an oversupply of milk and viewed milk-sharing as a way to help others while avoiding waste. Some were motivated by gratitude or empathy toward struggling mothers. Meanwhile, recipients often faced low milk supply, premature births, or medical complications.

In phase one, the codes compiled from text mining included 'full', 'hyperlactation', 'oversupply', and 'reject', indicating donor's perspectives on sharing EBM. On the other hand, the codes 'insufficient', 'enough', 'low', and 'struggle' indicated that the recipients were experiencing a low milk supply while 'premature' and 'NICU' indicated the infant's health condition that needs donated breastmilk. Meanwhile 'engorgement', and 'blocked ducts' were categorised as breastfeeding difficulties.

In phase two, the interview data provided a better understanding from both the donors' and recipients' perspectives of how their situations create reciprocal relationships for mutual benefits.

My child refused direct feed; he rejected the expressed breastmilk too so I kept on pumping until I was pregnant with my second child. I tried giving him again but he rejected so I did not know what to do with all the frozen expressed milk. (Donor, P4)

It began when I gave birth to a premature baby. I gave birth to my son at 28 weeks of gestation. I decided to exclusively breastfeed when he experienced poor weight gain and complications due to [the] long stay in [the] NICU. (Donor and recipient, 16)

Awareness of the importance of breastmilk

Donors and recipient mothers expressed strong awareness of the health benefits of breastmilk and a shared belief in its importance for infant well-being, regardless of biological connection. In phase one, the codes derived from the milk providers' posts constituting the codes includes 'sayang' and 'tak sanggup', which implied disappointment about the inevitability of having to discard EBM stock. On the other hand, the codes generated from the milk requesters' post constitutes the codes includes 'immunity', 'benefit', and 'nutritious', indicating the importance of breastmilk. The word 'best' in the codes refers to breastmilk being regarded as the best nutritional choice for infants; emerged from both types of user-generated content.

The data analysis from phase two provided evidence, whereby mothers reported making their decision while aware of the nutritional value of breastmilk.

I realise the importance of mother's milk and its benefits compared to formula milk. Breastmilk is a better option because it is natural. So why [don't] we donate to other people? The baby also gets the benefits of breastmilk even though [it is] from another mother. (Donor, P6)

A mother's instinct is to want the best. [With] babies, we don't know [if] they might be allergic to cow's milk. So, we choose the natural option, which is breastmilk. (Recipient, P1)

Theme 3: Faith

This theme refers how mothers navigated their understanding of religious teachings while milk sharing. The sub-themes include 1) religious views on the need to breastfeed and 2) religious concerns due to milk sharing. In theme 1 (points of reference), it was reported that Facebook Pages helped mothers to obtain breastfeeding and milk sharing information. This information equipped them with knowledge about breastfeeding from a religious point of view. Thus, all the Muslim mothers in this study were aware of some important religious aspects of milk sharing, including the knowledge that milk sharing is permissible, a consanguineous relationship is established when certain conditions are fulfilled, and this relationship causes the prohibition of marriage between those related through milk kinship.

Religious views on the need to breastfeed

Mothers who had donated their milk supported this practice as they felt it followed religious recommendations, fulfilled the child's rights, and symbolised human kindness. On the other hand, the recipient mothers tended to feel that breastmilk

is a child's right and that a mother must breastfeed her child. All the mothers in this study, including the non-Muslims, emphasised the religious principle concerning the need to breastfeed. Mothers who had donated their milk supported this practice as they felt it followed religious recommendations, fulfilled the child's rights, and symbolised human kindness.

I am aware of the importance of breastfeeding for the health of the child and also the demands in religion. It is a satisfaction to fulfil the responsibility of breastfeeding a child and to help mothers in need to fulfil their responsibilities. (Donor, P19)

In addition, two mothers explained the commandment to find a milk nurse if the mother is unable to breastfeed as also outlined in the Quran.

The child's right to receive breastmilk is for two years, only. The child's mother's sustenance [may] not [be] long enough to breastfeed the child for two years. After all, the rights of these children are already written in the Quran. (Donor, P3)

This study unravels to some extent about the views of other religions on the use of non-biological mothers' milk. P25, a Buddhist who had experienced donating and using donated EBM reported:

I believe all religions teach us to do good to others. In Buddhism, we have been taught about the concepts of loving and kindness. I started my journey as a recipient [and] then I became a donor. It is like doing good in return. I donate my milk because that's one of the ways to do good. I share what we have with others in need. I help mothers who are unable to breastfeed their own children and help babies get the benefits of breastmilk, even if the milk is produced by other mothers. It is still breastmilk and [it] is not the same as formula milk. (Donor and recipient, P25)

Similarly, P13, a Hindu, expressed her views as follows;

In my religion, we are allowed to use milk from other people but the person must not be our own family member. It is associated with helping each other. In this case, we help the baby to get the benefits of breastmilk. (Donor and recipient, P13)

Religious concerns due to milk sharing

Although milk sharing was highly regarded from a religious point of view, mothers also expressed concern about the religious issues surrounding milk sharing. The main concern among Muslim mothers was the concept of milk kinship, which prohibits marriage between children nursed by the same woman. Many took steps to document and inform family members to prevent future complications.

What worries me is I have a milk son and five milk daughters. I worry that they will marry each other. So, as their milk mother, it is my responsibility to ensure that the problem does not occur. (Donor, P15)

What worries me is the milk kinship status. There is a risk [that] milk siblings [will] marry each other. (Recipient, P2)

P25, a non-Muslim, also recognised the religious implications of using milk from a non-biological mother from an Islamic point of view. This awareness made her cautious about donating and receiving milk from Muslim mothers. She expressed her concern as follows:

I was quite surprised when the Malay lady agreed to give her milk. For Chinese, we can donate to anyone regardless of religion. She gave less than five packets so that it [would not] establish a legitimate relationship. (Donor and recipient, P25)

Theme 4: Challenges and Problem-Solving Methods

This theme outlines the difficulties mothers faced and the strategies they used to overcome them. Two sub-themes emerged from the data were 1) logistical issues, and 2) sociocultural perspectives.

Logistical issues

The logistical issues encountered were closely related to the costs incurred when transporting EBM and providing equipment to preserve the quality of EBM during transportation. While conducting phase two of this study, Malaysia was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted people's activities. In Malaysia, the federal government implemented a law that anyone in Malaysia could only travel within a maximum radius of 10 kilometres for essential activities, which significantly affected milk-sharing activities. In phase one, the codes compiled from text mining included 'MCO' and 'PKP' which refers to movement control order. In addition, the codes compiled also included 'delivery', 'courier', and 'transport' to indicate methods of transporting the EBM during pandemic. In phase two, mothers reported that they had to either stop milk sharing or find another solution.

We only got EBM supply until my baby was eight months old because I could not return to my home town due to [the] MCO. (Donor and recipient, P26)

Some mothers in this study, needed to use delivery services to transport the EBM during the MCO. Therefore, they incurred the additional costs of the service charge and the equipment to prevent the EBM from thawing.

I usually used the express bus, but its operations were put on hold during the MCO. [During the MCO] the milk mother sends the EBM by lorry. To be honest, we use any lorry from Nilai to Bangi. We don't care about it, as long as the drivers agree. We bought durable cooler boxes and ice. She [the milk mother] then sprinkles coarse salt to maintain the temperature. (Donor and recipient, P29)

Sociocultural perspective

The sociocultural perspective refers to other people's perceptions, as perceived by the mothers. This included the bottle-feeding culture and any lack of understanding of the use of non-biological mothers' milk from a religious perspective. In phase one, the codes compiled from text mining included 'sceptical,'

and 'condemn' which refer to negative perceptions towards milk-sharing. Despite the views that the use of non-biological mothers' milk was noble and recommended in some spiritual belief systems, this practice was considered to be different from societal norms because bottle feeding remains a cultural norm in Malaysian society. The codes compiled from text mining included 'alternatif' (alternative) 'tukar susu' (infant formula replacement), 'susu soya' (soy milk), and 'susu kambing' (goat milk). These codes were classified as preferable to milk sharing.

Mothers in this study reported encountering negative views about the use of non-biological mothers' milk, particularly from a religious perspective. One-third of the Muslim mothers in this study said that the scepticism about using non-biological mothers' milk arose from a lack of understanding from the perspective of religious beliefs.

People always ask me, 'why should we choose breastmilk over formula milk?' So, I share a lot about these things in breastfeeding and parenting class. From there, we can get feedback from parents, especially new parents and new parents that are expecting. It can be seen from there that there are some people that will be like, 'I'm not going to give the milk or receive the milk from someone I don't know'. They are afraid of them [milk children] getting married unknowingly. So, we can see that people are still afraid of the implications of milk kinship. (Donor, P5)

I cannot force them to accept my decision. I only provide information and assurance. I keep telling them that it [milk kinship] can be managed. I showed them all documents. I want them to know that I don't take this issue for granted. (Donor and recipient, P6)

Discussion

The findings of this study bridge the empirical gap in milk-sharing practices in the Malaysian context. These findings could help healthcare practitioners understand more about the emerging trend of infant feeding practices in Malaysia, while they might also be useful in empowering mothers to make informed decisions that align with their needs and preferences. The research team initially scoped this study through social media analysis of breastfeeding and breastmilk donation via Facebook Pages to gain a preliminary understanding of the mechanism and process of milk sharing. This was followed by a detailed exploration of individual experiences during the milk-sharing journey. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the motivations, beliefs, needs, and experiences that shape the practice of milk sharing and its role in supporting infants' health and well-being.

Participant mothers in this study were predominantly young (age range 25 to 42 years), well-educated and not surprisingly enthusiastic about breastfeeding. These findings are not dissimilar to those of [Banu & Khanom \(2012\)](#) who

propose that maternal age and educational level indirectly influence perceptions and knowledge of breastfeeding. Similar findings from [Gribble \(2014\)](#) and [Perrin et al. \(2016\)](#) that show mothers are fully aware of the value of breastmilk for infants. These results were expected, given the need for expectant mothers to be informed about breastfeeding during perinatal care. The study found that mothers strongly recognised the importance of breastmilk and can relate to religious and scientific recommendations, regardless of their personal religious beliefs.

Today, many people tend to seek information through social media due to its accessibility factor. It is believed that social media has the potential to change people's perceptions of breastfeeding and its practices. Social media platforms can empower breastfeeding mothers by sharing knowledge and experiences ([Wagg et al., 2022](#)). However, the increasing number of social media sites and ever-expanding access to the internet may pose challenges as conflicting, unmoderated, and misleading information is easily disseminated. In the context of milk-sharing practice, mothers need to emphasize on the importance of reliable information from reputable sources. This includes the active involvement of healthcare providers in the discussion and available clear guidelines on milk sharing.

Mothers' awareness of the importance of breastfeeding, coupled with empathy, creates a spirit of altruism. The findings resonated with those from the studies by [Carter et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Perrin et al. \(2016\)](#), where breastmilk was regarded as the gold standard for infant feeding. The strong belief in the value of breastmilk may have resulted from the continuous promotion of breastfeeding. This value also influenced mothers who chose milk sharing instead of donating to a milk bank. Despite the safety measures taken to maintain the quality of donated EBM, some donors believe the pasteurisation process destroys its nutritive contents ([Gribble, 2014](#); [Perrin et al., 2016](#)). This finding was not evident in the present study since Malaysian mothers may be unaware of this because their knowledge appears to be limited to their own reading. In the western countries, there are different views on the quality of breastmilk obtained from milk sharing and human milk banks. [Reyes-Foster and Carter \(2018\)](#) reported how milk sharing has been often misunderstood as breastmilk selling. Thus, breastmilk obtained from milk sharing may be regarded as dangerous and as not meeting the quality requirements compared to milk from a milk bank. Meanwhile, the quality of EBM donated to a milk bank may also be viewed negatively. Such beliefs influenced mothers who chose milk sharing instead of donating to a milk bank. Mothers' awareness could be channelled to breastmilk donation to a human milk bank. This may lead to a supportive environment for milk donation programs in Malaysia, whereby those with milk-sharing experience could become facilitators, using their observations and knowledge to disseminate

information and inculcate awareness.

The current findings suggest that religious views could be both facilitating factors and barriers towards the use of non-biological mothers' milk. It was clear that the spiritual implications of milk sharing were of major concern. Thus, the strategies adopted by the mothers in this study to address religious-related issues demonstrate how they navigated their understanding of spiritual teachings while milk sharing. This indicates that spiritual beliefs regarding the kinship status of milk are still highly respected and taken seriously by mothers. This study provided further evidence of how spiritual understanding can help resolve issues arising from the use of donated breastmilk. Similar sentiments were shared by mothers in another Muslim country, suggesting that a good understanding of spiritual beliefs and certainty is key to acceptance of using donated breastmilk. This is interesting as it may be contrary to previous findings from western research.

In this study, the religious implications of milk sharing were clearly a major concern. This is interesting, as it contrasts with the findings from research conducted in the west. The current findings correlate with those of [Bressler et al. \(2020\)](#), who undertook a study in another faith-based community in the US, and those of [Onat and Karakoc \(2019\)](#), who conducted a study among a Muslim community in Turkey. Similarly, previous research involving a small number of Muslim mothers – the studies by [Gribble \(2013\)](#) and [Thorley \(2011\)](#)–produced the same outcomes. The current findings support previous evidence that religious beliefs could be both a driving factor and a hindrance to the implementation of milk banking and milk donation in Malaysia. However, a deeper understanding and appropriate strategies could address this issue.

Although efforts were made to ensure diversity across ethnicity and religion, the final sample comprised primarily Malay Muslim mothers. This imbalance reflects the demographic composition of the Facebook Groups Pages in Malaysia, where the majority of active participants are Malay and Muslim. Given that Islam places significant emphasis on breastfeeding and milk kinship, Malay Muslim mothers are often more engaged in discussions and practices related to milk-sharing. In addition, cultural norms and religious teachings in the Malay Muslim community tend to position breastmilk donation as both a spiritual and maternal responsibility, which may further contribute to their higher visibility and participation in such spaces. While this distribution limits the ability to generalize findings across all ethnic and religious groups in Malaysia, it provides a deeply contextualized understanding of milk-sharing within the predominant sociocultural group. The inclusion of Indian and Chinese mothers, though limited in number, still offered valuable perspectives that highlighted both shared and unique concerns. Future studies may benefit from targeted recruitment strategies to better capture the experiences of minority groups in this context.

Strength and limitation

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, most participants were Malay and adhered to Islam, which limits the findings to those from similar cultural and religious backgrounds. Recruiting non-Malay participants was challenging due to the reliance on Facebook, which reflected the researcher's social network. Secondly, data were collected only from mothers, excluding other's significant perspectives; particularly those of husbands, who often play a crucial role in decision-making within families. Including their views could have offered deeper insights. Lastly, the use of online platforms posed technological challenges, such as poor internet connections and unfamiliarity with digital tools. Nonetheless, online interviews allowed access to participants across various locations, which was especially advantageous during pandemic restrictions. Despite these limitations, the study had several strengths. The qualitative approach was appropriate for exploring the research questions and was enhanced by the use of multiple data sources; including social media content and semi-structured interviews with mothers-adding to the trustworthiness of the findings. The researcher's identity as a Malay Muslim mother, nurse, and breastfeeding peer counselor provided a unique insider perspective, facilitating empathetic engagement and culturally nuanced understanding within the study context.

Nursing implication

The findings highlight the importance of considering these cultural elements when promoting breastfeeding and breastmilk donation in Malaysia's diverse communities. For healthcare providers, understanding these cultural nuances is key to offering care and support that truly respects mothers' beliefs and preferences. This study also points out the need for clear guidelines and recommendations on milk sharing. While safety issues like donor screening and proper milk handling are important, religious concerns must also be taken into account. Addressing these issues would help ensure that mothers receive informed, respectful, and culturally appropriate feeding support from healthcare providers. Implications for nursing research include the need to further explore culturally specific beliefs and practices surrounding breastfeeding and milk sharing in various communities. Nursing research can also focus on evaluating the effectiveness of culturally sensitive interventions and education strategies in promoting safe milk-sharing and breastmilk donation practices. Additionally, future studies could investigate the role of nurses in supporting informed decision-making and how guidelines can be integrated into nursing practice to provide holistic, respectful care.

Conclusion

This study has shown how mothers come together

through social media platforms like Facebook, navigating both modern challenges and timeless values to ensure that babies receive the best start in life. What stands out most is the powerful sense of empathy and responsibility that drives these mothers. Whether they're donating their milk or seeking it for their children, their decisions are shaped not just by practical needs, but also by spiritual beliefs, cultural expectations, and a strong sense of doing what's right. One important lesson from these experiences is the potential to extend this spirit of giving into more formal systems, like milk banks. By building on mothers' existing awareness and motivations, and by providing clear, culturally respectful guidance, we can encourage more mothers to contribute to milk banks; ensuring that even more babies, especially the most vulnerable, have access to the life-saving benefits of breastmilk.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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