Digital Co-Parenting in a Suburban Neighbourhood: A Netnographic Study of *Whatsapp* Group Communication

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Abstract

Amid the growing integration of digital communication in everyday life, parenting is no longer confined to the private domain of the nuclear family. In many residential settings, particularly in suburban neighborhoods, caregiving has become a collective effort facilitated by digital platforms such as WhatsApp. However, this form of distributed digital parenting remains underexplored, especially within communal cultures like those found in Indonesia. This study aims to explore digital co-parenting practices in a WhatsApp group of residents living in a suburban housing complex in North Sumatra, focusing on the shared supervision of children aged 4–6 who frequently play in communal neighborhood spaces. Conducted from February to March 2025, the research adopted a netnographic approach, collecting data from WhatsApp group conversations, direct observations, and interviews with parents. Thematic analysis was applied and interpreted through the lenses of communities of practice, social capital, and affordance theory. The findings reveal that WhatsApp serves as a key medium for trust-based caregiving, emotional support, and collaborative child supervision. This study contributes to emerging understandings of digital gotong royong in parenting. The article also discusses the study's implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

INTRODUCTION

In an era where communities are increasingly shaped not only by physical proximity but also by digital connection, the familiar adage *it takes a village to raise a child* has begun to take on a new form. This collective approach to caregiving is no longer confined to face-to-face interactions or support from nearby relatives and neighbours Bei, dkk., (2023); Bowlby, dkk., (2011); Tixier, dkk., (2016). Instead, it is increasingly

enacted through digital platforms, where parenting becomes a shared responsibility communicated across screens rather than across fences Banić, dkk., (2024); Lupton, dkk., (2016). The act of caregiving has expanded beyond the physical boundaries of the home and the conventional expectation that raising children is the sole responsibility of individual parents Chalklen, dkk., (2017); Livingstone, dkk., (2018). As digital communication becomes deeply embedded in the everyday rhythms of life, particularly in urban and suburban contexts, parenting is now frequently practiced in semi-private yet socially engaged digital environments, such as neighbourhood *WhatsApp* groups Coleman, dkk., (1989); Hendriati, dkk., (2019); Marshall, dkk., (2001). Within these spaces, acts of supervision, behavioural reminders, emotional reassurance, and informal discipline are collectively performed by members of the community. This shift has given rise to what may be referred to as a digital village, a loosely structured yet responsive network of residents who participate in the monitoring, support, and care of children through short text messages, photographs, and real-time updates Cino, dkk., (2021); Pemberdayaan, dkk., (2025). Rather than weakening social ties, digital communication technologies such as *WhatsApp* are enabling new forms of communal caregiving, allowing parenting to be redefined as a visible, negotiated, and shared practice in contemporary life Di Tullio, dkk., (2025); Tawodzera (2025).

Indeed, among the most prevalent of these platforms, *WhatsApp* becomes the most popular whose accessibility and immediacy have made it a key medium for informal communication in many Southeast Asian neighborhoods Pang, dkk., (2020). In Indonesia, residential *WhatsApp* groups often serve as digital notice boards, emotional support hubs, and parenting coordination centers Suryanada, dkk., (2024); Widiatmika (2019). Yet, while much research has explored WhatsApp's role in school communication Livingstone, dkk., (2020) or digital monitoring within nuclear families Mascheroni (2020); Mascheroni, dkk., (2023), less is known about how such platforms facilitate collective parenting among community members, particularly outside institutional or kinship-based frameworks. Studies on co-parenting generally frame the concept as a post-divorce legal arrangement or formalized childcare practice between two caregivers. However, in this study, co-parenting is reframed as a collective, informal, and community-based practice enacted digitally in everyday life.

Digital co-parenting, as conceptualized here, refers to the shared engagement in child supervision, emotional support, and behavioral monitoring among non-biological caregivers, mediated through digital communication. It expands the notion of parenting beyond legal ties and private settings, and recognizes the communal, negotiated, and relational nature of caregiving in contemporary society. In suburban housing complexes where children freely move across households, and neighbors are partially responsible for one another's wellbeing, *WhatsApp* provides a space where parenting is co-performed, reinforced, and emotionally supported. This study is grounded in three theoretical frameworks that illuminate different dimensions of this phenomenon. First, the theory of communities of practice Lave, dkk., (1991) offers a lens to understand how group members learn, adapt, and internalize social expectations about parenting through ongoing participation in digital interactions. In this framework, residents become participants in a shared social enterprise, caring for children, through which knowledge, trust, and practices are continuously negotiated. Second, social capital theory Putnam (2000) helps explain how trust, reciprocity, and informal norms emerge from repeated social contact, enabling individuals to take on caregiving roles beyond their immediate families. The *WhatsApp* group, in this view, is not merely a communication tool, but a digital infrastructure that fosters bonding capital and collaborative social behavior. Finally, affordance theory Hutchby (2001) provides insight into how the features of *WhatsApp* itself which its synchronicity, visibility, low threshold of engagement that enable specific forms of parenting coordination, moral nudging, and emotional expression. The technology is not neutral; it affords certain social actions while constraining others, shaping how collective caregiving is practiced.

Despite the growing visibility of digital parenting across community platforms, there remains a lack of empirical studies that examine how these practices unfold in local, everyday contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, where informal community systems remain influential. Existing literature often overlooks the subtle negotiations, micro-norms, and emotional labor that characterize digital co-parenting in neighborhood groups. There is thus a need to investigate how trust, responsibility, and care are digitally distributed across households and how social norms about parenting are shaped, challenged, or sustained

through group chat interactions. This study addresses that need by exploring the following research questions, (1) How do residents use *WhatsApp* group communication to practice digital co-parenting and collective child supervision?; (2) What social norms and emotional patterns emerge from these interactions, and how do they shape parenting roles in the community? By situating digital parenting within the social dynamics of suburban communities, and interpreting it through established sociological theories, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how technology is reshaping the communal fabric of care in everyday life.

METODE PENELITIAN

This study employed a netnographic approach, a qualitative research design that adapts traditional ethnographic methods to digital and online environments Asname, dkk., (2024). Netnography enables researchers to observe and interpret naturally occurring interactions within online communities. Unlike conventional ethnography, which requires immersion in a physical field setting, netnography focuses on virtual spaces where cultural and social life unfolds through digital conversations. Given that the parenting practices in this study were largely mediated through *WhatsApp* group interactions, netnography was deemed the most appropriate and responsive design to capture the context, meaning, and dynamics of digital co-parenting as practiced in the community.

The object of this research was the digital communication related to parenting and child supervision within a *WhatsApp* group for residents of a suburban housing complex located in Medan, Indonesia from February to March 2025. The researcher is also a resident of the same complex and a member of the *WhatsApp* group. The group, which consists of approximately 50 participants, includes parents, neighbors, and household members of varying backgrounds. The study took place over the course of one month, during which interactions in the *WhatsApp* group were passively observed and documented. Only conversations related to parenting, child mobility, supervision, emotional response, and caregiving were selected as data. Irrelevant conversations, such as general announcements, promotional messages, or unrelated personal chats were excluded from the analysis to ensure thematic focus. Based on observational logs, parenting-related conversations were more frequent during weekends and national holidays. This pattern likely reflects the increased presence and mobility of children within the neighborhood during days when schools are closed, as children are more likely to visit one another's houses, play outdoors, and engage in communal activities. Consequently, data collection did not occur daily, but was instead concentrated around these high-activity timeframes.

To enhance the validity and richness of the netnographic data, the researcher also employed two complementary data collection methods including semi-structured interviews and direct field observations Creswell (2013). Interviews were conducted with five parents of 4-6 years-age children who had previously initiated or participated in parenting-related conversations in the *WhatsApp* group. These interviews explored their perspectives on collective child supervision, trust among neighbors, and the emotional tone of digital interactions. In addition, the researcher conducted ethnographic field observations during children's play sessions in shared neighborhood spaces, such as the communal park, front yards, and open driveways. Special attention was paid to how children moved from house to house, how parents responded to the presence of non-biological children in their homes, and whether digital communication (messaging the group) accompanied these interactions. The use of these additional data collection methods, such as interviews and live observations that allowed for methodological triangulation, ensuring that interpretations were grounded not only in digital traces but also in embodied behaviors and spoken reflections.

All collected data from *WhatsApp* screenshots, interview transcripts, and fieldnotes were then analyzed thematically. For WhatsApp data, the researcher created an archive of relevant conversations, assigning descriptive codes to segments that reflected child supervision, emotional support, norm negotiation, and trust dynamics. Data were then categorized inductively to generate themes aligned with the research questions. The analytical process followed the interactive model of Miles, dkk., (1994), which includes three core activities, including (1) data reduction (selecting, focusing, simplifying), (2) data display

(organizing and visualizing information), and (3) conclusion drawing/verification (interpreting meanings, testing consistency). Interview and observation data were similarly coded and then mapped onto emerging categories to support or contrast the digital findings. The thematic coding itself was conducted manually and supported by NVivo 12 software to assist with data organization, retrieval, and cross-referencing among WhatsApp transcripts, interviews, and observation notes.

As an interpretive study, the goal of the analysis was not only to describe patterns of communication but also to understand their deeper social meaning. To do this, the researcher engaged with three key social theories as interpretive lenses. First, social capital theory Putnam (2000) was used to explain how trust, reciprocity, and shared norms enabled distributed parenting across households. The theory suggests that community functioning improves when members are bonded by trust and collective concern on the concepts that highly visible in the group's digital behaviors. Second, affordance theory Hutchby (2001) was applied to understand how the features of *WhatsApp* itself enabled specific forms of social action, such as quick updates, emotional check-ins, informal rule-setting without requiring formal systems. Finally, communities of practice Lave, dkk., (1991) offered a framework for understanding how repeated participation in the group fostered shared expectations about parenting and child supervision. These theories were not used to "fit" the data, but to help interpret the nuanced social processes unfolding through everyday chat interactions and neighborhood routines.

The researcher acknowledges her dual role as both an insider (community member and *WhatsApp* participant) and observer. This positionality granted access to authentic, naturalistic data but also required reflexivity and ethical care. The phenomenon of digital co-parenting was not initially expected, but gradually emerged as a unique pattern during daily interactions in the *WhatsApp* group. The researcher had also previously been part of *WhatsApp* groups in other residential complexes, but had not encountered similar collective parenting behaviors elsewhere, which further prompted the decision to investigate this particular community. Also, to protect participants' privacy and maintain ethical standards, all names were anonymized and specific identifying information was removed from quotes. Participants were informed of the nature of the study and their verbal consent was obtained prior to interviews. Observational data were recorded discreetly without intrusion, and the research was conducted with full awareness of the community's informal social norms and sensitivities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore how WhatsApp group communication enables collective child supervision and digital co-parenting among residents of a suburban housing complex. Drawing on a *netnographic* analysis of naturally occurring conversations, several key patterns emerged from the data. These patterns reflect both the everyday practices and implicit norms that govern how members of the community communicate, collaborate, and share responsibilities related to children's safety. The following subsections present the three main themes identified through thematic analysis. These themes are discussed in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks, such as social capital, affordance theory, and communities of practice to illuminate how digital interactions shape parenting practices within the community.

Real-Time Neighbourhood Surveillance

One of the most prominent patterns observed in the *WhatsApp* group was the use of the platform as a tool for real-time child surveillance and coordination among neighbors. Messages frequently appeared when a child was reported missing, unaccounted for, or known to be playing in another house. This theme captures how parents and residents mobilized digital communication to quickly track, locate, and share updates about children's whereabouts within the housing complex. The central idea of this theme is that *WhatsApp* functions as a rapid-response system, replacing or complementing more formal safety infrastructures in suburban residential spaces. In the absence of institutional child monitoring systems, community members relied heavily on the immediacy and accessibility of the group chat.

For instance, a resident once sent the message:
"Bapak/Ibu, anak saya dari tadi belum ketemu. Ada yang lihat Roni main di rumah mana ya?"

Within minutes, another member responded:
"Ada fotonya, bg? Kalau ada nanti aku liatin anak-anak di rumah."

This exchange demonstrates how group members enacted distributed attentiveness, making themselves available to assist in the child-finding process.

Another message read:
"Roni sudah ditemukan. Terima kasih semua bantuannya."

Which followed by several emoji reactions and *Alhamdulillah* replies, indicating emotional relief and shared responsibility.

From a theoretical standpoint, this phenomenon reflects the affordances of *WhatsApp*, its real-time messaging, image sharing, and low communication barriers that enable spontaneous coordination. These features transform the group into a social infrastructure for surveillance and child care. Moreover, this practice aligns with Putnam (2000) social capital theory, in which community trust and shared norms are activated to fulfill common goals in this case, child safety. Rather than operating as isolated nuclear families, residents practice collective vigilance, showing how digital tools sustain relational capital and civic engagement in suburban settings. This is consistent with Skeen, dkk., (2023), who found that *WhatsApp* groups in low-resource communities enhanced caregivers' confidence and responsiveness. Similarly, Cino, dkk., (2021) noted that parent *WhatsApp* groups can create informal systems of responsibility and visibility that reinforce collective norms. Additionally, Tawodzera (2025) observed that *WhatsApp* enabled intergenerational monitoring within families mirrored here at the community level. While those studies focused primarily on parental coordination within families, our study expands this discourse by showing how non-parent residents also engage in child monitoring, suggesting that surveillance is not limited by kinship but embedded in communal routines.

In conclusion, *WhatsApp* enabled community members to respond quickly to situations involving children, transforming casual digital spaces into systems of collective care and safety. This theme highlights how digital infrastructure fills a critical gap in informal child supervision in suburban Indonesia, functioning as a localized, trust-based emergency response system.

Emergent Parenting Norms

Beyond urgent responses, the *WhatsApp* group also became a subtle space where informal parenting norms were shaped and reinforced. These norms did not emerge from explicit rules or institutional authority, nevertheless they evolved organically through daily exchanges, suggestions, reminders, and mutual reinforcement among residents. In this community, *WhatsApp* was not just used to find missing children where it helped construct a shared understanding of what responsible parenting looks like in a collective setting. At the heart of this theme lies a key insight, including parenting responsibilities are negotiated in public digital spaces. Rather than remaining private, the act of caregiving becomes communal which means visible, discussed, and gently regulated by others in the group. For instance, there is one parent stood out:

 "Kalau ada anak tetangga yang belum pulang dari rumah temannya, tolong di-info ke grup atau disuruh pulang ya... agar orang tua nggak kecarian."

No one objected. Instead, several members reacted with emoji and positive affirmations. It was a small message, but one that carried implicit moral weight. It reminded others of a shared duty, not imposed but proposed. Over time, such statements created a kind of informal protocol that if you see a child lingering too long, say something; if your house is a gathering spot, update the group. From this, we begin to see *WhatsApp* functioning not merely as a communication tool, but as a space for *soft regulation*, a concept closely aligned with communities of practice Lave, dkk., (1991). Through ongoing interaction, residents begin to learn from each other what is expected, what is appreciated, and what is silently discouraged. The group becomes a learning environment, where norms are not taught in one go, but absorbed over time. This pattern also echoes affordance theory Hutchby (2001) that *WhatsApp* enables low-risk, asynchronous moral nudges, such as short messages that carry expectation without confrontation. The design of the platform supports non-hierarchical norm-making, empowering everyday users to speak up, suggest, and shape behavior. Our findings are in line with Traeger-Soudry, dkk., (2025) who found that parent *WhatsApp* groups often serve as sites of informal norm construction, where communication reinforces behavioral expectations between school, home, and community. In a similar vein, Burrow (2017) highlights how digital parenting spaces enable micro-negotiations of care and control, especially among parents in loosely connected social networks. However, our study contributes a new perspective that these norms are not only negotiated among parents, but also between parents and non-parent residents, an *auntie*, a neighbor, or even a young adult who does not have children yet. This widens the scope of *who is a caregiver* in the digital village.

To sum up, emergent norms in the *WhatsApp* group show that parenting is no longer an exclusively private task. In this suburban setting, residents collectively establish behavioral expectations about childcare, safety, and communication through casual posts, repeated reminders, and mutual accountability. *WhatsApp* becomes a digital agora, where parenting norms are gently but powerfully co-created.

Trust and Distributed Parenting Roles

Perhaps one of the most striking findings in this study was how trust, something often assumed to be intimate and slow-building, was readily extended and distributed among neighbors through everyday interactions in the *WhatsApp* group. What emerged was a clear pattern of shared parenting, not just in sentiment, but in action. The core idea of this theme is that caregiving responsibilities were fluid, negotiated, and willingly redistributed across households. When a parent could not locate their child, they did not hesitate to ask the group for help. When a neighbor saw unfamiliar children at their home, they updated the group without being asked. And when someone asked for children to be reminded to go home, the request was met with cooperation, not silence. For example, in one interaction, a resident sent:

"Anak-anak ini lagi di rumah A04 ya."

Another followed up:
"Kalau lihat anak Roni, bilang ya disuruh balik ke rumah."

These are not dramatic messages, but they are rich with meaning. They reflect an underlying assumption that it is not only acceptable, but expected, for neighbors to step into light parenting roles to remind, redirect, and report. This would be unlikely without a strong foundation of social trust and mutual understanding. From the perspective of social capital theory Putnam (2000), this trust is a form of bonding capital, a type of social glue that allows individuals to take initiative in others' lives without being perceived as intrusive. What makes this particularly powerful is that such trust was enacted digitally, mediated through short text messages and emojis, rather than face-to-face interaction. At the same time, these interactions also reflect what Lave, dkk., (1991) describes in communities of practice as mutual engagement in a shared enterprise, in this case, keeping the neighborhood's children safe. Through frequent participation in the *WhatsApp* group, residents built not only familiarity but a shared sense of ownership over children's well-being, regardless of biological or legal ties. Our observations are echoed in Skeen, dkk., (2023), who

noted how *WhatsApp*-based interventions in caregiving improved not just child outcomes, but strengthened caregivers' sense of connectedness and responsibility toward others. Similarly, Taipale, dkk., (2018) documented how *WhatsApp* facilitated intergenerational trust in European families. Our study also extends this to horizontal community-level trust across households in a suburban Indonesian context. What differentiates this study is the emphasis on non-parental actors, those who are not legal guardians yet play active, caring roles. For instance, a neighbor without children still felt responsible for informing the group when children were at her house. This expands traditional definitions of parenting and speaks to a broader, more communal model of child-rearing.

In summary, trust in this context was not simply assumed, it was cultivated and performed in small, digital gestures. Through *WhatsApp*, residents of the suburban community enacted a model of parenting that was distributed, collaborative, and deeply embedded in local social ties. In the digital village, care is not bounded by blood, but by presence, attentiveness, and participation.

Emotional Support and Collective Responsiveness

Beyond coordination and norm-setting, the *WhatsApp* group also became a space where emotional presence was quietly but powerfully expressed. In moments of worry, when a child was missing, when parents were searching, the group did not just act logistically, indeed it responded emotionally, offering reassurance, solidarity, and shared relief. This theme highlights how digital spaces can hold affective weight**.**

In this suburban community, *WhatsApp* was not just an efficient tool for tracking children, it was a collective emotional buffer. Members extended not only help, but also care. In one case, after a child who had been *missing* for nearly an hour was finally located, the group was flooded with messages like:

> *"Alhamdulillah, sudah ketemu ya, Bu."*
> *"Barakallah, semoga anak-anak kita selalu dijaga Allah."*
> 🙏 💛 ❤️ (*emoji reactions of relief and support*)

These are not mere niceties. They are small rituals of communal relief, a way of saying that *We were worried too. We care.*

This kind of digital empathy aligns with what scholars describe as affective affordances as the capacity of digital platforms to carry emotional meaning and support Steinert, dkk., (2022). *WhatsApp's* affordance are related to its immediacy, informality, and visibility that make it an ideal medium for this kind of collective responsiveness. From a social capital perspective, these emotional gestures reinforce bonding ties and trust. They signal that the group is not only functional, but emotionally cohesive. In Lave, dkk., (1991) communities of practice, this reflects *shared repertoire*, the repeated ways of expressing care that become part of how the community *does things together*. Moreover, our findings resonate with Livingstone, dkk., (2020), who observed that digital parenting is not only about rules and boundaries, but also about building emotional networks of support. Similarly, Morris (2020) found that digital parenting practices that involved emotional reassurance and communal affirmation increased caregivers' confidence and reduced parental anxiety. What is distinctive in this study is that emotional labor is not confined to the nuclear family, it is distributed across the digital village. Neighbors, often unrelated by blood, express concern, pray for each other's children, and celebrate small victories together. In this way, the *WhatsApp* group becomes not just an information hub, but a space of shared humanity. Therefore, the group's responsiveness to emotional moments reveals that parenting is not only about supervision, but also about being present for one another, in joy and in worry. *WhatsApp* makes this presence visible, felt, and shared, creating a digital care culture that holds the community together, one message at a time.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how *WhatsApp* group communication among residents of a suburban housing complex in Indonesia enables a form of digital co-parenting. Through netnographic analysis, the findings revealed that residents engage in collective child supervision, emotional reassurance, behavioral regulation, and norm negotiation within their everyday digital interactions. These practices represent an emerging model of caregiving that extends beyond conventional family structures and is influenced by the convergence of digital technology, communal trust, and localized parenting culture. Framed through the theoretical perspectives of communities of practice, social capital theory, and affordance theory, this study illustrates that *WhatsApp* serves not only as a medium for communication but also as a form of social infrastructure that facilitates communal caregiving. Within this setting, parenting becomes a collaborative and participatory process, where residents collectively assume responsibility, build affective bonds, and reinforce behavioral expectations. This digitally mediated caregiving revives the spirit of *gotong royong* and redefines parenting as a visible, negotiated, and shared practice embedded in contemporary community life.

The findings of this research have both practical and theoretical implications. On a practical level, they suggest that neighborhood-based digital platforms can enhance child safety, foster trust among residents, and promote accessible collaboration in childrearing. On a theoretical level, the study contributes to existing literature by conceptualizing co-parenting as an informal and community-oriented practice that is facilitated through everyday digital interactions. It expands discussions in media studies, sociology, and parenting research by revealing the ways in which platform affordances intersect with social norms to shape emerging caregiving practices.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The data were drawn from a single *WhatsApp* group within one suburban neighborhood, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the researcher, as a participant-observer, interacted within a specific socio-demographic context. This positionality may have influenced both what was visible in the data and how it was interpreted. Additionally, while the study focused specifically on parenting-related interactions, it may have overlooked broader community dynamics that intersect with digital caregiving. Therefore, future studies could address these limitations by examining a wider range of digital parenting communities, including urban, rural, and transnational contexts. Including children's perspectives would offer a more holistic understanding of how digital co-parenting is experienced and negotiated. Longitudinal approaches could also illuminate how practices of digital caregiving shift over time, especially in response to crises, neighborhood transitions, or changes in local infrastructure. Further inquiry into the roles of gender, class, and digital literacy could deepen our understanding of whose voices shape the norms of digital parenting, and whose voices are excluded.

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