Online Profiles of Same-Sex Couples Hoping to Adopt: A Communication Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The number of same-sex couples who are parents has increased dramatically in the last decade (Goldberg & Kinkler 2011). Data from the U.S. Census indicates that approximately 1 in 5 same-sex male couples and 1 in 3 same-sex female couples are raising children (Goldberg & Kinkler, 2011), and many other gays and lesbians are hoping and/or waiting to adopt. This study examines selected online profiles of same-sex couples hoping to adopt. Specifically, I am interested in analyzing how these couples portray themselves online to appeal to pregnant women seeking adoptive families. Same-sex couples must find the means to address the stigmas and stereotypes against gays and lesbians adopting, as well as compete with and stand out from the numerous heterosexual couples also hoping to adopt. This research examines specific communication strategies used by same-sex couples to depict themselves as excellent future parents.

INTRODUCTION

Adoption is a common solution for couples who cannot, or do not wish to conceive children of their own. Couples adopt children of all races, ages, backgrounds and abilities. Scholars doing research in this area have typically analyzed: (1) the profiles and characteristics of the couple hoping to adopt and become parents; (2) the values of the mother and/or father of the child who is to be adopted. What are birth parents looking for in adoptive parents, and how do adoptive couples make themselves appealing to these parents? In this research, my research mentor, Dr. Dennis Patrick and I examine same-sex couples' online adoption profiles, and analyze how the couples portray themselves to mothers who have chosen to put their children up for adoption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although previous research has examined the online profiles of heterosexual couples hoping to adopt (Norwood & Baxter, 2011; Wahl, McBride, & Schrodt, 2005), none has specifically examined the profile of same-sex couples. Norwood and Baxter (2011) hypothesize that gay and lesbian couples hoping to adopt construct profiles to address their status as nontraditional parents. This study examines whether that is the case, and if so, how they make themselves appealing to birth mothers, given the stigmas associated with their family form. This is an important area of research, given the increasing numbers of same-sex couples seeking to adopt and the popularity of online resources available to them.

A traditional couple is typically considered to be a heterosexual, male and female pair. Therefore, "untraditional" parents, such as single and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/sexual, Queer/Questioning) are often considered "unfit." There is a societal assumption that having gay parents is detrimental to a child's development; this belief is founded on the fear the child will grow up to be homosexual. Same-sex couples must overcome social stigmas suggesting they would be unfit parents because of their sexual orientation. Yet, according to Downing, J., Richardson, H., Kinkler, L., & Goldberg, A. (2009), couples adopt children for similar reasons, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Adoptive couples want to help children in need, or to fill the void of not being able to conceive a child biologically. Another negative stereotype confronting lesbians is that they are believed to be less "maternal" than heterosexual women, although lesbians are often nurturing and loving mothers (Paige, 2005). No research exists that proves children raised in same-sex-parented households will grow up to be gay.

It is generally accepted that in order to effectively raise a child, a mother and father figure must be present in the child's life during childhood (Downing, J. et al. 2009). This belief is one of the primary reasons why same-sex couples who would like to adopt children may be rejected as potential parents.

According to Norwood and Baxter (2011), until the 1980s *closed adoptions* were more common, and communication

between adoptive parents and birth parents was discouraged. A *closed adoption* occurs when the adoptive parents and the birth parents do not communicate or remain in contact with each other, and the children may not be aware that they are adopted. Children were often matched with adoptive parents they resembled so they could appear to be biologically related.

Open adoptions may provide a different option. An *open adoption* occurs when children live with and are raised by their adoptive parents, but their birth parents are still active in their lives. This can be achieved through a variety of arrangements. Adoptive parents can make an agreement for the birth parents to visit the child, and pictures may be shared with the birth parent(s). If a child is adopted by a same-sex couple, the child could still have a relationship with his or her birth parents.

In their study, "Making the Decision: Factors Influencing Gay Men's Choice of an Adoption Path," researchers Downing, et al. (2009), indicate that some same-sex couples would prefer to have the birth parent involved in their adopted child's life. Three male couples who were participants in their study stated that when adopting, they preferred an open adoption because they preferred for the child to have a mother figure present (Downing, J. et al. 2009). In the same research, there are indications that some lesbian couples feel the same way about having a father figure for the child (Downing, J., et al. 2009). Despite the stigma against same-sex couples raising children, research has found that when compared to other children living in a heterosexual-parented household, the children who have LGBTQ parents are not disadvantaged (Rimalower, L. & Catey, C., 2009).

Adoption and Technology

With the advancement of technology, more adoption agencies are making potential matches between biological mothers and adoptive parents online. Many biological parents and future adoptive parents find convenience in online adoptions. In such cases, the initial contact and match are made online, but the actual adoption still involves a legal process. Seeking adoption over the Internet reduces the time needed to engage an agency,

and searches can be carried out at a person's leisure. All participants are encouraged to remain honest about aspects of their lifestyle and relationships (Harasim, L., Hiltz, S. R., Teles, L., & Turoff, M., 1995).

Many people also use the Internet as a source of information about the adoption process. McBride et. al (2005) state that the legal adoption process involves many regulations, and may involve lawyers, as well as adoption agencies to satisfy many state regulations. McBride et al., (2005) also list book references and adoption guides to the legal process, and information on how to adjust to post-adoption life.

METHODOLOGY

This paper includes a literature review of previous research on same-sex couples seeking to adopt children. I examine research conducted on the stigmas, barriers, hardships and struggles same-sex couples have faced while undergoing the process of adopting a child. The literature review also examines the use of online resources used by adoption agencies and potential adoptive families. With advances in modern technology, websites are now a common way for families and agencies to introduce themselves to birth mothers seeking to place a child up for adoption.
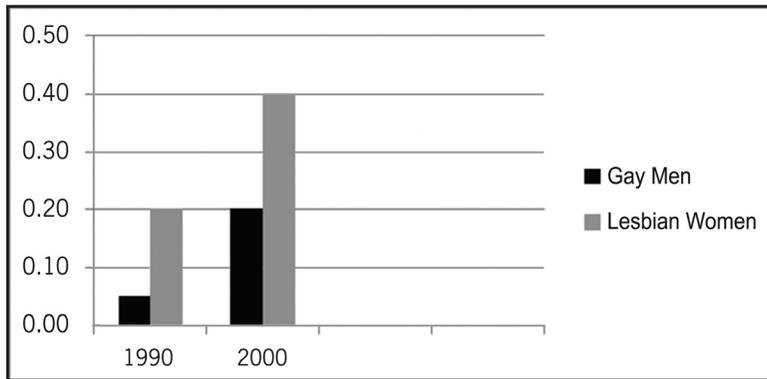
I also conducted a textual analysis of an American adoption agency website, Friends in Adoption. This paper includes a content analysis of profiles of seventeen same-sex couples, with special emphasis on how they present themselves to mothers who are seeking to place a child up for adoption. I compared and contrasted the profiles, examined their texts and photos, and documented the specific descriptions of the subjects.

My research mentor, Dr. Dennis Patrick, also reviewed profiles, acting as a second analyst. We compared our findings and combined them into a category system. Each profile was analyzed for various criteria, including the kinds of photographs, contents of these photos, and whether the profiles included letters to the biological mothers. We noted who was in the photos and where the photos were taken. With the letters and text to the birth mother and texts on the actual profiles, we analyzed what the couple was

saying and how they relayed their message through their choice of words. We described how these couples overcame prejudices against same-sex relationships so they could appear to be the best potential candidates. "Dear-Birth-Mother" letters were also read, and analyzed, to see how the couple portrayed themselves to make the biological parent(s) feel more comfortable with the decision to give their child up for adoption to a couple of the same-sex.

Theoretical Perspectives

The number of same-sex couples who want to adopt is constantly increasing. As stated by J. M. Crawford (1999), "American society has been extremely slow to accept homosexuals as parents" (p. 571), but many same-sex couples are expressing their feelings about wanting to have a family and raise children. As shown in the graph below, The United States Census reported in 1990 that 5% of gay men and 20% of lesbian women were interested in adopting children (as cited in Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011, p. 387). In just ten years, those numbers had increased by 15% for men and 20% for women (Gates & Ost 2004). New research from the 2010 Census reveals that 25% of same-sex couples are currently raising children in the United States (James 2011). Should the numbers continue to increase within the next decade, a substantial number of people within the LGBTQ community will be interested in adopting children.

Table 1. Percentage of Gay Men and Lesbian Women Interested in Adoption, 1990-2000.

Even though the desire to adopt has increased, LGBTQ members have to abide by their state laws which may prevent them from adopting. In the United States, forty-seven of fifty states (94%) permit single LGBTQ parent adoption. Fifteen states (30%) allow second-parent adoption, so that the second member of an LGBTQ couple can legally adopt the first parent's child. Four states (.08%) prohibit all forms of same-sex adoption, and two states (.04%) do not allow second parent adoption.

Barriers, Stigmas, and Discrimination

Even though many LGBTQ adults are willing to adopt, they still face barriers, including state laws, a lack of social support, the myth that heterosexual couples make better parents and the belief that gay men are pedophiles. It is also difficult to find an adoption agency willing to work with LGBTQ clients.

State Laws. Though four states currently prohibit single and joint adoption (Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska and New Hampshire), there are forty-six states where a single LGBTQ parent can adopt. However, laws on second-parent adoption are unclear in sixteen states.

Lack of Social Support. It can be difficult for same-sex couples to find an agency willing to assist them in adopting a child. According to Kinkler (2011), some couples reported that they have encountered both subtle and/or overt discrimination during their attempts to adopt. Even those who join adoption support groups are sometimes made to feel uncomfortable by heterosexual members. A 40-year-old Caucasian lesbian states that

> I think that I am a little more uncomfortable when we're in the classes because I just feel like in the society that we live in, they just look at us and probably don't think that we should even be there… It's just,'Oh yeah, they're the gay couple.' No one has ever said or done anything; it's just something that's there. (Kinkler and Goldberg, 2011, p.395).

Kinkler and Goldberg (2011) stress the need for support groups in all communities, and emphasize how difficult it may be for homosexuals to adopt while living in a predominantly heterosexual society.

According to Ross, Epstein, et. al, (2008) some adoption agencies deliberately prevent LGBTQ people from adopting. Crawford (1999) notes that "American society has been extremely slow to accept homosexuals as parents" (p. 2). Since some people feel that homosexuals are not capable of raising children, gay men and lesbians are faced with continuing challenges to adoption.

In 2012, a study conducted by Goldberg, et. al, which was comprised of 84 foster parents, including some gays and lesbians, revealed some of the challenges foster parents face while adopting and fostering children. Seven gay men and one lesbian woman reported direct or indirect experiences of homophobia from birth parents. In five of the cases, the agency revealed that the biological parents preferred not to place their child with a same-sex couple. In these five cases, the same-sex adoptive parents all kept their sexual orientation private. One adoptive parent admits to hiding his sexual identity and expresses that he feels uneasy about the child's biological father discovering that his son is being raised by a gay couple. Though he does not like having to hide his sexuality, he, along with other LGBTQ adoptive parents, feels the need to remain silent in order to successfully adopt.

Racial Diversity Some same-sex couples would prefer to adopt a child of their own ethnic background. They fear discrimination against the child, and feel a child might feel more comfortable living in a home and community in which he or she is welcome. Goldberg and Kinkler (2011) also found that 5 out of 37 couples felt that less diversity in a community could create problems. One of the participants in this study states that: "If a black person rolls through town everybody knows about it because it's a big hoo-ha, and I wouldn't want [a child] to go through that. It wouldn't make any difference for me, but I don't want them to go through any more stuff than they have to" (p.394).

Online Adoption. In a study conducted by McBride et al. (2005), online adoption profiles were categorized into three different themes: (1) The Suburban Family as Prototype, (2) Online Adoption as Utopia, and (3) Child as Cyber Commodity. Each theme distinctly discusses how a certain online adoption profile communicates its message to viewers.

"The Suburban Family as Prototype" profile includes stories and photographs, provided by the potential adoptive parent, of an idealized life awaiting the child. The photographs often depict white picket fences, pets, friends, neighbors and children. McBride et al. (2005) offer an example of a profile from the website "Adoption Online," in which a heterosexual couple by the name of Katy and Bill write:

> We live in a bi-level home in a small neighborhood full of children. Our house is on a cul-de-sac and backs up to a field with a creek and park. We have a spacious backyard with a playhouse, sandbox and small pool and have many summer picnics and barbecues. For the last three years, we have coordinated the children's Halloween Parade for neighborhood children, which have been great fun for everyone (p. 285).

"Online Adoption As Utopia" profiles are about glorification, a theme most commonly achieved through a person's spirituality. The McBride et. al's 2005 research noted instances of online site users often "praised God" for technology, because it helped bring children to loving parents. They also reported that both biological mothers and potential parents claimed that using online adoption technology made their lives "better." McBride et al. (2005) also report that online technology made the adoption process simpler.

"Child as Cyber Commodity" profiles perceive children as "goods," or "commodities" in the adoption process. McBride et al. (2005) find that such profiles see birth parents as the "goods holders" and potential adoptive parents as "clients" (pp. 284-288) .

Dear-Birth-Mother Letters. A common feature of online adoption profiles is the "Dear Birth Mother" (DMB) letter. Such

letters, written by those seeking to adopt, are designed to help biological mothers feel more comfortable with the people they choose to raise their child (Norwood and Baxter, 2012). Norwood and Baxter write that, "the letters often contain descriptions of each member of the family, stories about the family/couple, and pictures of families and their homes" (p. 202).

Authors of online DBM letters must take into account that their words may be addressed to many mothers. They do not know who will read the letters, so they write the letters according to how they feel the biological mother(s) might respond (Norwood & Baxter, 2011). In Norwood and Baxter's (2011) research, DBM letters were coded into different categories, including the "BM's sacrificial love for child." These letters are designed to reassure the biological mother of their understanding that giving up a child for adoption does not indicate their lack of love for the child. One letter states: "You love your child so deeply that you are willing to share him or her with another family" (p. 206).

METHODOLOGY

My research mentor, Dr. Dennis Patrick, and I conducted a content analysis of seventeen profiles of same-sex couples seeking to adopt children through the website "Friends in Adoption." Of seventeen same-sex profiles, one represented a female couple and sixteen couples were male. Each of these couples revealed qualities about themselves that would make them attractive candidates to raise a child. Six of the couples had already adopted a child, and those children were featured throughout the profiles.

Descriptive Coding

The seventeen same-sex couple profiles on the "Friends in Adoption" website were analyzed for their content. We began by identifying features of the online profiles and coding them, first, by name and profession, then by six specific categories:

1.) Male couple

2.) Female couple

3.) Adopted child in profile – refers to the profiles that included photographs of another adopted child.

4.) Other children in profile –refers to profiles with photographs of children other than previously adopted children, such as relatives or children of close friends.

5.) Photos with family – refers to profiles with photographs of parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents or other extended family, or baby pictures of the potential parents. Photos were often taken during special events, gatherings, holidays, or during leisure activities.

6.) Photos with animals – refers to photographs of pets, "popular" animals such as horses, or wild animals encountered on interesting trips, such as elephants seen during an African safari.

While coding, I analyzed profiles' texts, including DBM letters. I also considered which demonstrated personality traits and personal qualities might be most convincing to birth mothers.

Common characteristics the couples presented about themselves were recorded. We noted that majority, if not all of the couples expressed their participation in specific activities. We categorized these activities into four "Themes:"

1.) *Child Focused:* Child focused, the first theme, focuses on characteristics the couples shared about themselves that primarily centers on the needs of a child.

2.) *Disciplined:* The second theme exemplifies that even though the couples are able to be playful with children, they are still mature enough to handle disciplinary business when necessary.

3.) *Friendly:* This third theme captures the couple's desire to present themselves as approachable and friendly.

4.) *Supportive Family:* The presence of a supportive extended family assists the same-sex parents in coping with stigmas, discrimination and other social and legal barriers.

Names and Job Titles	Female Couple	Male Couple	Adopted Child in profile	Other children in profile	Photos with family	Photos with animals
Amy and Ashley Photographer and Lawyer	✓			✓	✓	✓
Larry and Sam Education and Director of a Social Justice Organization		✓		✓	✓	
Dean, Dalton and Spencer (chlld) State Government Workers		✓	✓		✓	✓
Luca and Andre' Business Owner		✓		✓	✓	
Rob, Russell and Ben (child) Technician		✓		✓	✓	✓
Glen and John Pharmacist and Accountant		✓		✓	✓	
David and Mike Professor and Software Developer		✓				✓
Dana and Brian Insurance and Human Resources Executive		✓		✓	✓	
Robert, Nathan and Virginia (child) Teacher and Television Produces		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Armando, John and Sarah (child) Surgeon and Therapist		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brian and Don Elementary Teachers		✓		✓	✓	✓
Steve and Tom Swimming Instructor and Engineering Manager		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Carson, Steve and Sloane (child) Public Relations		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reid and Todd Health Administrator and Pediatrician		✓		✓	✓	✓
Charlie and Denis Recruiter and Attorney		✓		✓	✓	✓
Brett and Matt Public Relations Consultant and IT Consultant		✓		✓	✓	✓
Joe, Graham and Emily (child) Doctor and Professor		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
TOTALS	1	16	6	15	16	11

Table 2. Content of Same-Sex Adoptive Parent's Profiles, "Friends in Adoption" website, January 2013 and June, 2013 (The table may not accurately reflect the profiles of the couples on the website, as profile content may be changed at the discretion of website clients).

RESULTS

The results of my online coding show that there are many similarities in the features of the same-sex couples on the "Friends in Adoption" website. Table 2. (page 11) shows my coding of six important, common features of the seventeen profiles in this study.

Profile Photographs

Data from Table 2. (Page 11) indicated that 35% of the same-sex couples studied had already adopted a child and were seeking to adopt another. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the same-sex couples had photographs of children on their profiles, and 65% posted photographs of domestic animals, such as cats and dogs, or animals children might enjoy in a sport (horses) or vacation setting (giraffes).

Profile Texts

While coding, we also analyzed the texts presented on the profiles, including Dear-Birth-Mother letters. We also examined the personality traits and qualities the couples held that would make a person a good parent. In all of the profiles, in order to overcome prejudices of their sexuality, each couple focused on positives aspects about themselves, their professional lives and their families.

Profile Themes

The four themes identified above yielded the following results:

Child Focused: Child focused profiles are centered on the needs of the child. Each couple focuses on how much they love children in order to reassure the birth mother that her child will be loved. These couples express how much they enjoy children, and how well they understand children's unique needs. Education is also stressed in these profiles. Having a home that is walking distance from good schools was a popular attribute of the profiles. They also live near, or would be willing to make trips to museums, parks and libraries. Rob, Russell and Ben's profile states that:

Our community is filled with young families, and we are within walking distance to the local elementary school. Each year Santa Claus arrives on the local fire engine to announce the arrival of Christmas Eve, and each summer many members of our town gather on the beach to watch our local fireworks display as we celebrate July 4th. We are fortunate to have met several other families in our community with children Ben's age, and we enjoy regular get-togethers with these newfound friends (Friends in Adoption).

These profiles recalled McBride et. al's statement that some online profiles suggested reflected the "Suburban Family as Prototype."

Disciplined: Even though the couples are able to be playful with children, they must be mature enough to provide a stable environment for their children. All of the couples listed their professional training and employment, even if they work from home. Some explained that their jobs allow them the flexibility to be at home when needed.

Twelve out of the seventeen (71%) profiles', partners introduced and described their other partners to the reader. Three couples introduced themselves, three couples were introduced in third person, and one couple introduced their partner, as well as themselves. The introductions gave a brief synopsis about the person, their job, personality and characteristics. Being calm, a good listener and hardworking were three popular statements on the profiles. It is clear that the couples placed a high value with being able to communicate effectively with a child under any circumstances. Amy describes Ashley in their profile by saying "Ashley is incredibly smart and responsible. … She is calm under pressure and capable in any situation. … With Ashley as a parent, a child will always feel loved and safe (*Friends in Adoption*).

Friendly: Being friendly and approachable is very important. In the profiles, all couples expressed how much they love kids. Larry and Sam's profile states "We work at getting the right balance between being serious, creating opportunities for ourselves, our family and our community, and knowing when to kick back and relax" (*Friends in Adoption*).

Supportive Family: Having a supportive family assists the couples in overcoming stigmas, discrimination and barriers against LGBTQ parents. Every same-sex couple analyzed on *Friends in Adoption* claimed to have a strongly supportive family. Luca and Andre's profile reveals that "Luca's Mom and Dad are anxiously awaiting that special day when they become grandparents!"

Along with the help from family members, same-sex couples also lean on their friends for support. In their profile, Dana and Brian, let the reader know they have support from their families, as well as their friends. They even have friends who are also a same-sex couple who have been successful in adopting a child. They write: "We are blessed to have many close friends, including other same-sex couples like Ron and Guilio, whose own adoption journey has inspired us and who have guided us in this important decision."

Data Analysis

Thirteen couples stated in their profiles that they have family members and friends who already have children with whom they maintain a close relationship. Caring for children that are already in their family can show that they are capable of raising another child. Every couple promised the birth mother that her child would be raised in a safe home filled with love. They promised to make sure the child is presented with as many opportunities as possible, and that education would always come first. In their profile, Carson and Steve stated:

> Our children will have great educations. We both feel that a good education is a solid foundation for all that life brings you. The emphasis will not only be what they learn inside the

classroom but also the many wonderful outside experiences: from traveling and exploring the world, to skipping rocks on a lake, baking pies, or simply sitting together at the dinner table and sharing with one another (Friends in Adoption).

Six of the seventeen couples (35%) had already adopted a child and expressed a desire to adopt another. The profiles introduced the future sibling and emphasized the wide array of activities including travel, music, dance lessons and play dates the adopted child would enjoy.

Almost every profile included a photograph of the home, and many showed photos of the backyard, as well. The majority of these homes were quite opulent, suggesting that the adoptive couple was more than financially stable enough to raise a child. In many ways, these profiles fit the "Suburban Family as Prototype" theme identified in McBride et al.'s 2005 research.

Interestingly, none of the profiles included any open reference to the couples' sexual orientation. Instead, they referred to each other as "my husband," or by their partner's first name. Seven of the profiles analyzed in this research lived in New York; the others either lived elsewhere or did not share that information. A small portion (2-3) of the couples had the ability to speak another language, and two of the partners analyzed in this study were either not born in the United States and/or were not American.

Sixteen couples talked about the stability of their parents' marriage; only one person admitted that his parents were divorced. The ratio of male same-sex couples on the website to female same-sex couples was 17:1. I do not feel that any of these profiles treated children as "Cyber Commodities" (McBride et. al, 2005).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this study must be noted. This study analyzed text and photos from seventeen online adoption profiles of same-sex couples from the website *Friends in Adoption*. Results were pulled from one website, and only LGBTQ couples were ana-

lyzed in this study. Out of the seventeen profiles, only one profile consisted of a female couple. Further research may be needed to help develop a better understanding of different ways same-sex couples make themselves more appealing in their online adoption profiles in comparison to heterosexual couples and other homosexual couples. The lack of economic disparity and racial diversity between the couples is also of note. It would be interesting to investigate how online adoption users' profiles from different races and socio-economic groups differ from those on *Friends in Adoption.*

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