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## From Face-to-Face to Facebook: The Role of Technology and Social Media in Adoptive Family Relationships With Birth Family Members

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study of 77 individuals in 40 couples (same-sex and heterosexual), who had adopted publically, privately, or internationally, examined parents' engagement with their child's birth family via technology (e.g., texting, e-mail, social media) through the lens of the Couple and Family Technology framework (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Parents used three approaches to contact: active, passive, and no contact. Regardless of approach, some parents described concerns about boundaries. Couples were generally in agreement in their perspectives on engaging with birth family via technology. Practitioners must be knowledgeable about management of relationships via technology and help adoptive families set healthy boundaries.

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Melanie glances at her smartphone and sees that she's received a "friend request" on Facebook. After a moment of confusion, she realizes that she has been contacted by her child's birth father, a man she has never met but with whom she has exchanged letters through the adoption agency. She is faced with a decision: Does she accept the friend request or defer to the boundaries established during the initial stages of the adoption?

Melanie's story is becoming increasingly common. Advances in technology and social media have shifted interpersonal communication in adoption away from more "traditional" means of communication (e.g., phones, mailed letters), leaving people like Melanie unsure of how to navigate those changes. In particular, new technology (e.g., the Internet, social media, e-mail, texts) has changed when, how, and how much adoptive and birth families communicate and has raised issues regarding boundaries and contact. For example, inasmuch as the Internet has made it easier to access information about and reach out to people, many adoptive families are now connecting with birth family members with whom they have previously not had contact or, at the very least, possess more information about birth family members, given the ease of searching for them online (Siegel, 2012a).

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Adoptive families may perceive advantages and challenges related to increased access to information about birth family and the increased ability to contact—or be contacted by—birth family. Our study examines adoptive parents' feelings about navigating relationships with birth parents via technology and social media (e.g., e-mail, text messaging, Facebook) and sheds light on the changing nature of relational processes between birth and adoptive families.

Next, we review the major types of adoption (i.e., public domestic, private domestic, international), changes in openness in adoption over the past few decades, and the implications of this shift on birth and adoptive family relationships. Finally, we review advances in technology and address implications for relationships between birth and adoptive families.

## **Types of adoption**

There are three primary paths to adoptive parenthood. One common method of adoption is through the child welfare (foster care) system, which involves the adoption of (often older) children who have been removed from their birth families by the state (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). A second method is domestic private adoption, whereby parents use the services of an agency or search independently for a birth mother interested in adoption and hire an attorney or agency to complete the legal process (American Adoptions, 2015). The children adopted via domestic private adoption are usually infants. A third adoption method is international adoption, or adoption from abroad, which is usually coordinated by an agency that helps parents navigate the legal process (Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2013).

## **Changes in openness in adoption**

Historically, most adoptions, particularly private domestic adoptions, were closed, meaning that birth and adoptive families did not have identifying information about each other. During the 1940s, adoption records started to be sealed (Wolfgram, 2008). Closed adoptions were believed to help protect single birth mothers and adopted children from stigmatization (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Further, some experts asserted that it would be easier for the families to adapt (i.e., for the birth parents to “move on” and for the adoptive families to develop a solid sense of “family”) if they did not have information about each other (see Neil, 2009). Other experts worried that open adoptions—in which information is exchanged or there is some contact between birth and adoptive families—would cause confusion for the children (see Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrich, 1996) or that children would not form strong attachments to their adoptive parents (Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell, & Schmidt, 1985). In many instances, children were not aware that they had been adopted until they were older; some were never told. Children who knew they were adopted but did not know their origins were left with feelings of loss and unanswered questions

(Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). They had no way of searching for or connecting with birth family.

Over the last 20 years, adoptions have become increasingly open, as experts have espoused that openness in adoption may lead to a more realistic portrait of the birth family and higher levels of satisfaction with the relationship and that children who have more knowledge of and communication with birth families may show better adjustment (Brodzinsky, 2006). In turn, research began to document the benefits of open adoption for birth families, adoptive families, and adopted children (Miall & March, 2005). This work has mainly focused on private domestic adoptions and changes in openness arrangements over time (Crea & Barth, 2009) as well as challenges in maintaining relationships between birth and adoptive families (Siegel, 2008).

Openness generally occurs on a continuum, from closed adoptions (characterized by no contact between birth and adoptive families and no identifying information exchanged), to semi-open/mediated adoptions (whereby a lawyer or adoption agency acts as a go-between for the birth and adoptive families), to open adoptions (where identities are known and there is direct contact between the birth and adoptive families; Reamer & Siegel, 2007). Open adoptions vary in the type of information that is exchanged between birth and adoptive families (e.g., letters, pictures, visits) as well as in how long the information is exchanged (some families experience ongoing contact over the child's life; Grotevant et al., 2008).

Research on openness arrangements has provided insight into the nature of contact between adoptive and birth family members. Using data from the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project, a longitudinal study that began in the 1980s, Grotevant et al. (2008) studied contact arrangements between birth mothers and adoptive families. The researchers interviewed adolescents and parents about their post-adoption contact arrangements with birth mothers and found that adoptive adolescents who had contact with their birth mothers, whether indirectly through a mediator or directly, were more satisfied with the level of openness in the relationship than adolescents who did not have contact with their birth mothers. Adolescents in contact with their birth mothers also had a more factual understanding of their birth mothers and what they were like, compared to those with no contact. Notably, almost all youth desired more contact, regardless of how much contact they had. Similarly, a study of adopted young adults' perspectives on open adoption found that they preferred factual understanding of birth family members and access to relationships with them, which they believed would help them to explore and develop their identities (Siegel, 2012b). Thus, there is evidence that relationships with birth families can help to support healthy identity development in adopted youth and young adults.

Using data from the California Long-Range Adoption Study, Frasch, Brooks, and Barth (2000) examined openness in child welfare adoptions. Child welfare adoptions are distinct from private domestic adoptions in that (a) the adopted children are rarely infants and (b) children are placed in foster care prior to being adopted, often because of their birth parents' inability to care for them (e.g., due to

drug use, mental illness, or poverty; Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2002). In their examination of 231 families who had adopted a child via foster care eight years prior, Frasch et al. (2000) found that for most families, openness was a constantly evolving process. Immediately following the adoption, contact between the birth and adoptive families tended to decrease, but years later, contact increased. Notably, in families who did have contact, it was infrequent (1–3 times per year), in part due to adoptive parents' personal discomfort with contact.

Openness in international adoption presents unique challenges compared to domestic adoptions. Some parents who choose international adoptions do so because contact with birth family members is unlikely, and openness in this form of adoption is rare (Baden, Gibbons, Wilson, & McGinnis, 2013; Goldberg, 2012). In their study of U.S. families who had adopted children from the Marshall Islands, Roby, Wyatt, and Pettys (2005) found that while parents embraced the idea of openness, espousing a desire for their child to understand and appreciate their cultural heritage, there were ultimately many barriers to openness. The adoptive parents expressed frustration with the lack of contact with the birth family; as they discovered, maintaining contact was difficult because birth families often did not have post office boxes or phones. Other reasons cited for lack of openness were birth parents' concerns about the perceived need to communicate in English, the cost of mailing packages or international phone calls, and unreliable mail services. Thus, while adoptive parents in the study were open to contact, that contact was unlikely to be maintained. However, in spite of the difficulty that sometimes arises when communicating with birth family members in international adoptions, contact is currently becoming more common due to the ability of birth and adoptive family members to identify and locate each other online (Roby et al., 2005).

### **Changes in access to technology and social media**

During the same time that adoption arrangements were becoming more open in the United States, societal shifts in interpersonal communication were occurring as a result of technological advancements. The Internet was created in the late 1960s but did not reach its potential until the late 1980s. During the 1990s, the Internet shifted from being a tool mostly used by researchers to a tool accessible to almost anyone. Yahoo, the first search engine, was born in 1994, making it easier to search for information (Santa Clara Valley Historical Association, 2008a). A few years later Google made its appearance, developing algorithms that improved searching and organization of web pages (Santa Clara Valley Historical Association, 2008b). At the same time, the cost of accessing this technology became more reasonable. With the introduction of America Online in the early 1990s came chat rooms, e-mail, and instant messenger—all ways of staying in touch and communicating with the millions of people connected to the Internet (AOL Inc., 2015). Another innovation that began in the late 1980s and became popular during the mid-1990s was the forum, a digital bulletin board that allowed users to discuss topics and

exchange messages, forming mini-communities around shared interests (Digital Trends Staff, 2014).

In 2003, MySpace, a social networking website, made its appearance as a development of Friendster and quickly became popular for young adults looking to connect (Digital Trends Staff, 2014). Then, in 2004, Facebook launched as a social networking site for college students, eventually opening up to high school students in 2005 and then to anyone over the age of 13 in 2006. That year, Twitter was launched as a combination social networking/microblogging site (“Twitter milestones,” 2016).

In 2013, the Pew Research Center reported that 73% of adults who have Internet access use social networking sites and 71% of online adults have a Facebook account (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) represent ways for users to interact with each other and to exchange information via pictures or messages. These sites often have age restrictions due to laws established by Congress (O’Keeffe & Clarke Pearson, 2011). Parents are encouraged to evaluate their child’s privacy settings, as well as their own, and educate themselves on the rules of each social media site (Kearney & Millstein, 2013).

The Internet and social media can be a useful tool for managing family relationships and close social ties (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). Through social networking, people receive a wide range of support, including emotional support (advice, information) and companionship (Hampton et al., 2011). Social media is a natural tool for connecting to others, and it has become central in the lives of most people, including youth, who have Internet access.

### **Adoption meets technology and social media: Boundary concerns**

The notion of “boundaries” has always been important in adoption, where boundaries refer to the sometimes-vague limitations of engagement for adoptive and birth family members (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013). Even when adoptive parents support the idea of openness in relationships with birth family members, they face challenges in navigating boundaries and contact (Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Downing, 2011). For example, research has found that, in negotiating the level and type of contact that they will have with birth mothers, adoptive families sometimes experience anxiety about the possibility or perception of the birth mother overstepping her boundaries, while simultaneously wishing to express gratitude to her for placing her child with them. And, even when adoptive parents feel positively toward the birth parents, they still may experience challenges navigating contact and boundaries (e.g., they may desire less, or more, contact than birth parents seem to desire; Goldberg et al., 2011).

Some work suggests that there may be differences across family types (i.e., differences in families based on parental sexual orientation: lesbian mothers, gay fathers, heterosexual parents) with regard to boundaries. Goldberg et al. (2011)

studied 45 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples who had adopted a child through a private agency and that lesbian and gay adoptive parents were more likely to report having contact (ranging from minimal exchanges of information to face-to-face visits) with their child's birth mother during the first year post-placement than were heterosexual adoptive parents. The authors suggest that, given their nontraditional family structure and tendency to embrace expansive definitions of family, lesbian/gay parents may feel less threatened by contact and may more easily establish open adoptions, whereas heterosexual parents may be less open to contact with birth families inasmuch as open adoption may deviate sharply from how they originally envisioned they would build their families. Findings by Brodzinsky and Goldberg (2016) are somewhat consistent with these results; the authors found that gay men who had adopted through the child welfare system were more likely to have current contact with their child's birth family members than heterosexual or lesbian adoptive parents, particularly through texting, face-to-face visits, and phone conversations. However, in a study of 34 lesbian, 32 gay, and 37 heterosexual couples who had open adoption arrangements, Farr and Goldberg (2015) did not find substantial differences by family type in openness dynamics; indeed, most couples were satisfied with the contact and had positive feelings toward the birth mother. The current study builds on these studies to examine—in a sample of lesbian-, gay-, and heterosexual-parent families—the degree to which openness in adoption extends to and is impacted by technology and social media.

Examining the dynamics of adoption openness among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents is important for several reasons. First, these parents may need support as they engage with birth family members, who may be inconsistent in their involvement due to personal challenges and life stressors (e.g., depression, legal problems, incarceration) and who may not be able to follow through with the contact agreement that was made during the adoption process (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014). Second, sexual minority parents may face additional challenges in relationships with birth family members, given that they may fear or contend with stigma associated with their sexual orientation (Goldberg & Smith, 2011). Agencies and professionals who work with adoptive and birth families need to be better informed about the strengths of sexual minority parents, given evidence that they are in fact more likely to be open to ongoing contact with birth family members than heterosexual parents (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016).

Indeed, given the prevalence of technology in the lives of most Americans today, it is inevitable that families who have adopted will be confronted with the possibility of contact with birth family members via technology and social media, raising potential boundary challenges. Recognizing this, Carrie Krueger, a social media expert, recommends that adoptive and birth families discuss boundaries concerning how social media will be used, the rules they will follow regarding posting comments on each other's Facebook walls, and how they will share photos and address one another (Krueger, 2014). Privacy settings offered by social media sites can help

adoptive parents control how much they want to share with birth family members (Fursland, 2010). Some may feel uncomfortable with the birth family knowing personal details about their own lives, whereas others may not want to know details about the personal lives of birth family, particularly if they have made unhealthy decisions (Krueger, 2014).

Adoptive parents not only negotiate their own online relationships with birth family but must also consider the possibility of online contact between their child and birth family. Deborah Siegel (2012b), one of the only scholars whose work touches on adoption and social media, notes that while some parents may feel curious or hopeful about their child's connection to birth parents, others may also feel fear and uncertainty (e.g., they may worry that the contact will be too much for their child to handle or that they will lose their connection with their child). Siegel, in turn, recommends that parents be transparent with their child about the circumstances of their adoption, keeping the lines of communication open.

Thus, the Internet has played a role in the societal trend toward greater openness in adoption, whereby birth and adoptive families have access to each other's personal information. Even when adoptions are "closed," the Internet has made it easier than ever to circumvent barriers established by the adoption agency or judicial system. Notably, adoptive families with agreements for post-adoption contact are more likely to be contacted by the child's birth family (Faulkner & Madden, 2012), which has implications for connections via technology.

Prior research on within-couple differences in satisfaction with birth family contact has focused primarily on heterosexual couples. This work has found that compared to their husbands, heterosexual adoptive mothers tend to express more negative feelings or ambivalence toward ongoing contact with birth family members (Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994; Grotevant, 2000; Roby et al., 2005). Unknown is whether such within-couple discrepancies in adoptive parents' feelings toward birth families extend to contact via technology and social media and whether differences in feelings about contact occur between partners in sexual minority couples.

## **Theoretical framework**

The current study is grounded in a Couple and Family Technology (CFT) framework, synthesizing three perspectives in family science—the family ecology perspective, the structural-functional perspective, and the interaction-constructionist perspective—to dynamically reflect how technology, context, history, stressors, and other factors can influence relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). These three perspectives inform and influence one another (e.g., changes in family structure can affect changes in family processes).

The CFT framework attends to seven ecological influences on the family that affect individual and relational systems (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). The first is *acceptability*. With the introduction of social media, it is now more acceptable than ever to have online relationships. The second ecological influence is

*anonymity*. Users of technology and social media can present themselves in any way they choose and can choose not to identify themselves. The third is *accessibility*. Smartphones, laptops, and tablets make it easy to access the Internet at any time. Accessibility also means that the Internet allows us to be accessed by other users who are both known and unknown. The fourth ecological influence is *affordability*. Electronic devices are increasingly within financial reach for families. The fifth influence is *approximation*. The Internet and other technologies allow for real-time conversations and video, giving information about the other person in ways that former methods of communication, such as letters, cannot approximate. The sixth influence is *accommodation*. The Internet, particularly social media, offers the opportunity for people to portray themselves as one way online, when in reality they may be very different. The final ecological influence is *ambiguity*. Technology and social media can introduce a lack of clarity into relationships. If users are unfamiliar with the technology or do not understand how the other party is using it (e.g., misinterpretation of emoticons), misunderstanding can result. In sum, both the individual and the relationships among individuals are influenced by these ecological elements.

In addition to influencing individual and relational systems, these seven ecological elements affect a relationship's structure and processes (such as the relationship between adoptive parents and birth parents), particularly regarding roles, rules, and boundaries (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Boundaries that used to be in place before the introduction of the Internet and social media are more diffuse, and the new boundaries associated with these technologies might not have been formally agreed upon by both parties (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Role changes naturally happen, as users must monitor the actions of others online, must learn to establish new boundaries, and may even police the behaviors of those around them (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). The role changes prompted by technology can affect the structure and organization of relationships and families (e.g., parenting roles, boundaries; Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). If, for example, a parent is stressed about the possibility of contact by a member of their child's birth family, this anxiety could spill over and affect the dynamics of the adoptive family (e.g., parent might start to monitor the online behavior of their partner, which could negatively impact the relationship). Thus, the CFT framework provides a structure to examine how technology affects the adoptive family and to ascertain its role in initiating, maintaining, and dissolving relationships with birth families.

## Research questions

This study examines adoptive parents' perspectives on and approaches to managing relationships with their child's birth family via technology. Our research questions are as follows (no formal hypotheses are posed due to the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study):

1. How do social media and technology figure into parents' relationships with their child's birth family members (i.e., *acceptability*; Hertlein & Blumer, 2014)? Namely, what kinds of direct contact are adoptive parents engaging in, what approaches to contact do parents describe (i.e., *accessibility*; Hertlein & Blumer, 2014), and to what extent do parents who engage with birth families via technology also engage with them face-to-face (i.e., *approximation*; Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Of the families who did not have direct contact, how many plan to have contact via technology in the future?
2. How do approaches to contact vary based on family structure (i.e., parent sexual orientation) and adoption type (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016; Farr & Goldberg, 2015)?
3. What types of boundary challenges do parents report with respect to managing relationships with the extra complexity of social media and technology, in light of how diffuse boundaries can be around technology and the *ambiguity* it can introduce into relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014)?
4. Given that technology can affect relationship structure, particularly around roles, rules, and boundaries (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014), to what extent do parents within couples share similar perspectives regarding connections with birth family members via technology?

## Method

Data from 77 parents in 40 couples were analyzed (i.e., 28 women in 14 lesbian couples; 22 men in 11 gay male couples; 15 women and 12 men in 15 heterosexual couples [data from 3 heterosexual men were missing]). The sample was derived from a larger longitudinal study focused on the transition to parenthood among couples who had adopted a child through foster care, domestic private adoption, or international adoption (Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007; Goldberg & Smith, 2009). The selection criterion for the current study was that couples must have reported either being in contact with, or having considered contact with, their child's birth family via technology (i.e., the Internet, social media, e-mail, and texts).

## Recruitment and procedures

Participants were recruited to participate in a longitudinal study of the transition to adoptive parenthood; all were first-time parents. Couples were originally recruited during the pre-adoptive period from over 30 adoption agencies throughout the United States. National lesbian/gay organizations were also contacted to facilitate recruitment because same-sex couples may not necessarily be "out" to their adoption agencies or social workers. For the current study, participants were interviewed separately from their partners 4.5 to 5 years post-adoptive placement. On average, the semi-structured interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were

conducted via phone, due to the geographically diverse nature of the sample (24% lived in the Northeast, 18% in the Midwest, 17% on the West Coast, and 14% in the South; 4% lived in Canada).

### **Description of the sample**

Participants' ages ranged from 32.08 to 58.92 years ( $M = 44.19$ ,  $SD = 5.15$ ). The sample was mostly Caucasian ( $n = 69$ ; 89.6%). One participant identified as Latino (1.3%), one as African American (1.3%), and two as multiracial (2.6%); four did not report their race (5.2%). Of the children, 34% were multiracial, 22% were Latino, 22% were Caucasian, 13% were African American, and 9% were Asian. Seventy-seven percent of parents completed transracial adoptions. Participants were financially secure: Mean combined family income was \$123,284 ( $Mdn = \$117,500$ ,  $SD = \$51,939$ ). ANOVA revealed that the average incomes for lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parent families differed significantly,  $F(2, 73) = 8.09$ ,  $p = .001$ , such that gay couples had higher annual family incomes ( $M = \$158,571$ ,  $Mdn = \$150,000$ ,  $SD = \$52,943$ ) than heterosexual couples ( $M = \$110,111$ ,  $Mdn = \$110,000$ ,  $SD = \$53,066$ ) and lesbian couples ( $M = \$108,462$ ,  $Mdn = \$105,000$ ,  $SD = \$35,275$ ). The sample as a whole was more affluent compared to national estimates for same-sex and heterosexual adoptive families, which indicate that the average household incomes for same-sex couples and heterosexual married couples with adopted children are \$102,474 and \$81,900, respectively (Gates et al., 2007). Parents were more educated than the general population: Twelve participants (15.6%) had a PhD/JD/MD, 22 (28.6%) had a master's degree, 25 (32.5%) had a bachelor's degree, five (6.5%) had an associate's degree, seven (9.0%) had some college credit, and five (6.5%) had a high school diploma. One parent (1.3%) did not report his education (See Table 1). ANOVA showed that education did not differ by family type.

The average age of children in the sample was 6.04 years old ( $SD = 1.68$ ; age range = 4.0–11.08 years old); ANOVA showed that child age did not differ by family type. Of the 40 adoptions, 57.1% were private domestic adoptions, 23.4% were public domestic adoptions, and 19.5% were international adoptions. A chi-square test was performed to determine whether there were differences among family types (lesbian-, gay male-, and heterosexual-parent headed) in the type of adoption pursued (public domestic, private domestic, or international); this revealed no significant differences between family type and adoption type. Likewise, chi-square tests showed no differences in adoption type by transracial adoptive status (inracial vs. transracial).

### **Interview questions**

Interviews were conducted by the principal investigator and graduate research assistants and were transcribed verbatim. Identifying information about participants was removed and pseudonyms were assigned. Analysis focused on the following open-ended questions designed to probe parents' perceptions of their relationships with their child's birth family and their thoughts about the use of social media and the

**Table 1.** Demographic data by family type.

	Lesbian Women ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> , or % of <i>n</i> = 28)	Gay Men ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> , or % of <i>n</i> = 22)	Heterosexual Parents ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> , or % of <i>n</i> = 27)	Total Sample ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> , or % of <i>n</i> = 77)
Age (years)	46.58 <sub>a</sub> (5.88)	44.68 <sub>b</sub> (3.29)	41.31 <sub>a,b</sub> (4.23)	44.19 (5.15)
Family income	\$108,462 <sub>a</sub> (\$38,205)	\$158,571 <sub>a,b</sub> (\$52,942)	\$110,111 <sub>b</sub> (\$53,066)	\$123,284 (\$51,939)
White (adults)	96%	82%	89%	90%
White (children)	14%	18%	33%	22%
Child age	6.44 (2.11)	5.47 (0.70)	6.09 (1.67)	6.04 (1.68)
Adoption type				
Public domestic	29%	27%	15%	23%
Private domestic	50%	64%	59%	57%
International	21%	9%	26%	19%
Arrangement with birth family				
No contact	36%	27%	33%	32%
Nonidentifying exchange of photos/letters	21%	9%	11%	14%
Identifying information exchanged	18%	27%	30%	25%
Placement included formal plan for ongoing contact	14%	27%	26%	22%

Note. Education was measured on a scale of 1 to 6 (1 = less than high school education, 2 = high school diploma, 3 = associate's degree/some college, 4 = bachelor's degree, 5 = master's degree, 6 = PhD/JD/MD). Means and frequencies sharing a subscript are significantly different from each other;  $p < .05$ .

Internet in managing these relationships, both currently and in the future: (a) What is your relationship with [child's] birth parents and birth family? (b) How have these relationships changed over time? (c) Have any members of your child's birth family tried to contact you? How did they contact you? To what extent has technology played a role in birth family members contacting you (e.g., blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook, Google searches)? (d) What role does technology play in your relationship with birth family members (e.g., are you Facebook "friends" with any of them; do they read your blog)? To what extent has technological communication been a source of stress, or to what extent has it made communication easier? (e) How do you imagine technology might play a role in your relationships in the future (e.g., do you ever think about the possibility that your child might search for birth family members or vice versa)? To what extent does that concern you?

### Data analysis

Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved looking for patterns in the data with regard to parents' descriptions of their perceptions and experiences related to contact with their child's birth family, particularly contact mediated by technology. The three authors, who were also the coders, began by reading interviews and writing memos about patterns in the data. After reading individual transcripts several times, the authors collaboratively developed initial themes (Charmaz, 2006). As the three authors examined more

interviews, the initial themes were expanded, collapsed, refined, and sharply defined until codes became focused and the coding scheme was clear (Charmaz, 2006). Using the emerging coding scheme, all transcripts were reread multiple times and categorized within the coding system: Each interview was rated by at least two coders. The authors constitute a diverse group of persons with regard to parenting statuses, ensuring that multiple perspectives were represented. We discussed our social positioning and the possible influence of our biases throughout the coding process. Throughout coding, we attended to and drew on concepts from CFT, such as ecological influencers on the family (e.g., *anonymity*, *approximation*, *ambiguity*) and relational structures and processes (e.g., roles, rules, boundaries), attending to whether and how these emerged as prominent in adoptive parents' narratives about birth family contact via technology and social media (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

To verify the reliability of the coding scheme, we calculated intercoder agreement at several points during the coding process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). Intercoder agreement was originally .76 at the start of coding, indicating moderate agreement (number of agreements/number of agreements + disagreements). Disagreements between authors in coding decisions were discussed at weekly meetings, and coding definitions were clarified. Agreement improved to .93 using our final scheme, providing strong support for the final coding scheme.

## Results

We first examine the type of direct contact that couples had with their child's birth family within the last year. Next, we focus on the three approaches to contact via technology that parents described with regard to their child's birth family: active contact, passive contact, and no contact. We then explore the boundary challenges that parents experienced, including concerns about the mental health of birth family and expectations around privacy. Finally, we examine parental (i.e., within-couple) agreement about connections with birth family via technology (see Table 2). Our subheadings were coder-generated. We were attuned to the CFT framework, particularly with regard to ecological influences on the family (e.g., *anonymity*, *approximation*, *ambiguity*), as well as the structure and processes of relationships (e.g., roles, rules, and boundaries) throughout (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

### *Types of direct contact with birth family members*

The use of technology has become an integral, acceptable part of relationships with birth family members (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Reflecting this, most couples (68%) had at least one type of direct contact (e.g., face-to-face contact and/or contact via technology) with their child's birth family within the last year: 34% had contact via mail, 27% had contact via phone, 27% had face-to-face contact, 25% had contact via e-mail, 18% had contact via social networking, and 13% had contact via text message. Importantly, the type of adoption was associated with differences in the likelihood of direct contact: None of the families who had adopted

**Table 2.** Themes endorsed by participants, by family type.

	Lesbian ( <i>n</i> ; % of <i>n</i> = 28)	Gay ( <i>n</i> ; % of <i>n</i> = 22)	Heterosexual Men ( <i>n</i> ; % of <i>n</i> = 12)	Heterosexual Women ( <i>n</i> ; % of <i>n</i> = 15)	Total Sample ( <i>n</i> ; % of <i>n</i> = 77)
Approach to contact					
<i>Active contact</i>	8 (29%)	5 (23%)	4 (33%)	6 (40%)	23 (30%)
Text	1 (4%)	2 (9%)	0 (0%)	2 (13%)	5 (6%)
E-mail	6 (21%)	4 (18%)	2 (17%)	4 (26%)	16 (21%)
Social media	4 (14%)	4 (18%)	3 (25%)	4 (26%)	15 (19%)
Face-to-face	5 (18%)	10 (45%)	2 (17%)	4 (27%)	21 (27%)
Boundary concerns	2 (7%)	3 (14%)	1 (8%)	2 (13%)	8 (10%)
<i>Passive contact</i>	4 (14%)	6 (27%)	0 (0%)	3 (20%)	13 (17%)
Yahoo groups	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7%)	2 (3%)
Social media “tracking”	3 (11%)	6 (27%)	0 (0%)	2 (13%)	11 (14%)
Boundary concerns	3 (11%)	4 (18%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	8 (10%)
<i>No contact</i>	16 (57%)	11 (50%)	8 (67%)	6 (40%)	41 (53%)
Boundary concerns	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)
	Lesbian Couples ( <i>n</i> ; % of <i>n</i> = 14)	Gay Couples ( <i>n</i> ; % of <i>n</i> = 11)	Heterosexual Couples ( <i>n</i> ; % of <i>n</i> = 12)		Total Couples ( <i>n</i> ; % of <i>n</i> = 37)
Parent agreement/disagreement					
Partner and I disagree on contact via technology	3 (21%)	1 (9%)	2 (13%)		6 (16%)

internationally had had contact via technology in the last year. Sixty-three percent of those who had contact via technology also had face-to-face contact in the last year. A chi-square test was performed to determine whether there were any significant differences among family types and adoption arrangement (i.e., formal written agreements between the birth and adoptive family prior to the adoption); no significant differences were found. Chi-square tests were performed comparing face-to-face contact and contact via all other forms of technology (mail, phone, text, e-mail, social networking), which showed that those who had face-to-face contact were more likely to have contact via technology,  $\chi^2(1, n = 75) = 19.75, p < .001$ . Thus, although face-to-face contact does not necessarily mean that families are using technology to stay connected, connection via technology is more likely among families who report face-to-face contact.

### ***Approaches to contact: Active, passive, and no contact via technology***

Parents described three approaches to contact via technology with their child’s birth family: active, passive, and no contact. Active contact was characterized by an exchange of information between the two families, with back-and-forth communication via text, e-mail, or social media. In passive contact, the adoptive family sought out (and sometimes “tracked”) birth family members using social media but did not take the next step of initiating and maintaining direct contact. Some parents engaged in both types of contact. Finally, other families had no contact via technology, although many had contact via letters or phone calls.

### **Active contact**

Twenty-three participants (8 lesbian women: 3 couples, 2 individuals; 5 gay men: 2 couples, 1 individual; 10 heterosexual parents: 4 couples, 2 heterosexual women), or 30% of the sample, reported that they had current active contact with their child's birth family. Active communication included the use of e-mail ( $n = 9$ , 11.7%), social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram;  $n = 7$ , 9.0%), and text messaging ( $n = 5$ , 6.5%). Sarah, a heterosexual mother of a 6-year-old girl who was adopted internationally, originally had no contact with her daughter's foster family but found them by hiring someone in China (whom she met in a Yahoo group) to locate them. She explained that, "without e-mail, we wouldn't have any connection." She hoped to someday also find the birth family—a challenge given that she had no information about them. Likewise, Mark, a gay father of a 5-year-old son who was adopted privately and who reported face-to-face contact, stated: "We are in kind of, mostly, Facebook contact with [birth mother]." Parents used technology to share pictures of the child with the birth family, arrange get-togethers, and keep in touch with birth family members, with both sides actively sharing information. As suggested by the CFT framework, the approximation (i.e., the ability to have real-time conversations and to exchange information) that the Internet allows for gives parents and birth parents the ability to exchange up-to-date information in a way that was not possible via handwritten letters in previous decades (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

### **Passive contact**

Thirteen participants (four lesbian women: one couple, two individuals; six gay men: three couples; three heterosexual women), or 17% of the sample, had passive contact with birth family, whereby there was no direct exchange of information between adoptive and birth families, but the adoptive families "tracked" the birth family via social media or online groups.

One type of passive contact that some parents ( $n = 11$ , 14%) described was social media "stalking," which involved searching for Facebook profiles of birth family members without reaching out to "friend" them. Shelly, a lesbian mother of a 5-year-old daughter adopted privately and who reported face-to-face contact, explained that, "[Birth mother] is not really on Facebook, but we kind of stalk her a little bit. Like, you know, we're kind of curious [about], like, what she's up to." Via Facebook "stalk[ing]," Shelly was able to learn up-to-date information about her daughter's birth mother, while remaining anonymous to her (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Other parents looked up birth family members on Facebook and the Internet and downloaded and saved their information, including photos. This "tracking" served to give parents information about the birth family that they might not have obtained through other means, helping the family to learn more about the details of birth family members' lives (to satisfy personal curiosity and to share with their children), without having to engage with them. Parents were particularly concerned that this information might not always be available (i.e., the

birth family member might increase their privacy settings or disappear from social media), and so they saved pictures—sometimes printing them out to ensure a physical copy—in case this ever happened. Bill, a gay father of a 5-year-old son adopted privately and who reported face-to-face contact, stated, “Parts of me wonder, what if [the birth mother] does disappear at some point? Should I print out pictures from her Facebook page?” Thus, Bill questioned whether he should save pictures now, in case those data became unobtainable. Of note is that this was a concern of Bill’s despite the fact that he was in face-to-face contact with the birth mother, demonstrating how for some parents, information obtained online may appear to represent a tangible and valuable source of data (i.e., a form of insurance of sorts) in the event of total loss of contact. The anonymity of the Internet allows for these parents to save information without ever having to engage with birth families (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

### **No contact**

Forty-one participants (16 lesbian women: 7 couples, 2 individuals; 11 gay men: 5 couples, 1 individual; 14 heterosexual parents: 6 couples, 2 heterosexual men), or 53% of the sample, reported no contact with birth family members via technology; however, all participants had *considered* contact via technology. Some of the participants who had no contact via technology did not have identifying information about the birth family (66% of “no contact” participants), while a minority explained their lack of contact by invoking concerns about boundaries (2% of “no contact” participants; discussed in the next section). Many of the “no contact” participants, though, did have contact with birth family via older media, including letters via an agency or phone calls (32%). For example, Hannah, a lesbian mother of an 8-year-old son adopted via foster care, explained, “Our legal agreement is that ... we send [birth parents] twice a year a letter with some pictures. And, they are supposed to send us letters to the kids at least twice a year.” Samuel, a gay father of a 5-year-old daughter from an open adoption, said, “We correspond and send pictures on occasion. I don’t know—two, three times a year ... we actually print pictures and send a letter.” Some of these parents, then, may have been in possession of enough information about the birth family to initiate contact via the Internet, and yet restrictions established by the adoption agency or due to personal preference were enough to keep families corresponding through more traditional means. These parents may have been concerned about the ambiguity that the Internet can bring to relationships with birth family members, in spite of the accessibility that it could afford them (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

### **Approaches to contact via technology by family type and adoption type**

Of interest was whether approaches to contact with birth family via technology (active, passive, none) differed by family type (lesbian, gay, heterosexual) or adoption type (public domestic, private domestic, international). Chi-square tests

revealed no significant differences in contact via technology by family type, but approaches to contact with birth families via technology did differ by adoption type,  $\chi^2(4, N = 77) = 10.73, p < .05$ . This finding primarily reflects the fact that those who adopted internationally were less likely to have active contact via technology and more likely to have no contact via technology than expected (see Table 3).

### **Contact via technology and its relationship to face-to-face contact**

Of interest is the extent to which parents of adopted children who had active, passive, or no contact via technology also had face-to-face contact with birth family members within the last year. Of the 23 parents who currently reported active contact via technology, 12 (52% of them) reported face-to-face contact within the last year. Of those who engaged in passive contact ( $n = 13$ ), four (31%) had face-to-face contact over the past year. Of the 41 parents who did not have contact via technology, 5 (12%) reported having face-to-face contact. Thus, the extent to which adoptive and birth parents have face-to-face contact does not necessarily determine the extent to which they have contact via technology, but for the majority of parents with both face-to-face contact and contact via technology, that relationship via technology tended to be active.

### **Concerns about boundaries: Intersections with technology**

The Internet, social media, and technology in general create new opportunities and challenges in defining boundaries in adoptive family relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Some parents (18 participants, 23% of the sample: 6 lesbian women: 2 couples, 2 individuals; 7 gay men: 2 couples, 3 individuals; 5 heterosexual parents: 1 couple, 2 women, 1 man) described concerns about boundaries between themselves and birth family members with regard to technology. Of the 18 parents who described boundary concerns, 8 reported active contact via technology, 8 reported passive contact via technology, and 2 reported no contact via technology. A chi-square test was performed to determine whether the distribution in approaches to contact (active, passive, none) differed depending on whether parents had concerns about boundaries. Significant differences were found,  $\chi^2(2, N = 77) = 20.07, p < .001$ , indicating that, not surprisingly,

**Table 3.** Adoption type and type of contact via technology.

Type of Adoption	Type of Contact via Technology			Total ( <i>n</i> )
	Active Contact ( <i>n</i> )	Passive Contact ( <i>n</i> )	No Contact ( <i>n</i> )	
Public domestic	8	2	8	18
Private domestic	15	9	20	44
International	0 <sub>a</sub>	2	13 <sub>b</sub>	15

Note. a = fewer cases than what would be expected;

b = more cases than would be expected.

those who reported no contact via technology were less likely to have boundary concerns than those with contact via technology.

### ***Types of boundary concerns***

Nine parents (four active contact, four passive contact, one no contact) said that their primary concerns regarding contact with birth families via social media or the Internet in general centered on respect for the birth family and concerns for their feelings. “I just feel like I’m somewhat invading [birth mother]’s privacy by doing it [looking up the birth mother on Facebook],” said Robert, a gay father of a 5-year-old son adopted privately who had reported face-to-face contact and who had engaged in passive contact via technology. Those who did have active contact via social media with the birth parents but described such concerns generally stated that they had kept such contact to a minimum out of concern for intruding upon the birth family.

The remainder of parents ( $n = 9$ , 4 active contact, 4 passive contact, 1 no contact) described a different type of concern; namely, they were concerned about the intrusion of birth parents into their own family’s space through technology, a reference to the diffusion of boundaries with the introduction of this technology (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Six of these nine parents stated that they were specifically concerned about their family’s privacy. Kim, a lesbian mother who had adopted her 6-year-old daughter privately and who described no contact via technology explained that she does not “post [child]’s picture anymore, as my profile picture. And I’ve blocked both of [the birth parents] before, I think, they probably even searched me out.” “We don’t want them to know every detail of our lives,” said Erica, a heterosexual mother of a 5-year-old son who was adopted privately and who had active contact. Three of these nine parents expressed concern over the mental health of birth family members, which led them to hesitate to make direct contact via technology (and in fact, none had had face-to-face contact in the last year). In speaking about his 5-year-old son’s birth mother, Tim—a gay father who had adopted his son via foster care and who described active contact—said that she had “a lot of psychological issues and substance abuse issues; it makes her kind of unpredictable and dangerous.” These parents, then, were protective of their children and felt that engaging with birth families via technology might pose a danger to them.

### ***Boundary concerns in the context of different approaches to contact***

Participants who described active contact via technology as well as boundary concerns around the use of technology with birth family members ( $n = 8$ ) were seemingly balancing the convenience of technology with concerns over what was too much contact. Parents seemed to achieve this balance through limiting their connection via technology to texts and e-mails. Carly, a lesbian mother of siblings who were adopted via private domestic adoption, explained, “We do phone calls and e-

mails and send pictures through e-mail, but that's it. That's enough." Keeping technologically mediated communication limited to texts and e-mail gave parents control over what information was made available to birth family, yet still allowed them to take advantage of the convenience and immediacy of exchanges via technology. Parents appreciated the accessibility and accommodation of technology yet were not comfortable with the ambiguity that can accompany it, particularly with regard to social media.

Participants who described passive contact via technology as well as boundary concerns around the use of technology with birth family members ( $n = 8$ ) were seemingly unconcerned about engaging in Facebook "tracking" to follow the lives of birth family members from a distance but were hesitant to engage with them directly via technology. Amelia, a lesbian mother of a 4-year-old son adopted via foster care, explained that "they're blocked [on Facebook]." In her interview, Amelia cited concerns with birth family decisions in explaining why she did not communicate with her child's birth parents via text or e-mail or friend them on Facebook, stating that "they're not real stable. They're still dating people in prison, I'm talking about, like, super rough ... this is like on Facebook, and I'm like, oh my god." Robert, a gay father of a 5-year-old son adopted privately, explained that "[Partner] will look [birth mother] up on Facebook from time to time but we're not friends with her on Facebook. I personally feel like that's a bit of a slippery slope." Parents who expressed concerns about privacy or mental health issues related to birth family members therefore seemed to find the anonymity and/or accessibility associated with the Internet to be difficult or fraught with complications, and, in turn, sought to limit contact by establishing boundaries around the use of social media and technology (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

The remaining two participants who described concerns about boundaries around the use of technology with birth family members were those who reported no contact via technology. Both, however, were in contact with birth family members through other means: Sam, a heterosexual father of a 5-year-old son adopted privately, reported that he had exchanged phone calls with his child's birth family members, and Kim, a lesbian mother to a 6-year-old daughter adopted privately, reported that the birth mother had sent cards in the past. These parents were content with keeping their relationship with their child's birth family members off of the Internet and limiting contact for the time being, preferring clear boundaries rather than ambiguity (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

### ***Parental agreement/disagreement regarding contact via technology***

We examined the extent to which partners within couples reported the same approach to contact via technology with birth family (i.e., both partners reported active, passive, or no contact). Of 14 lesbian couples, 11 (79%) reported the same approach to contact, while 3 (21%) couples differed in their reported contact. Of the 12 heterosexual couples for whom we had data for both partners, 10 (67%)

reported the same approach to contact, while 2 (13%) reported different approaches to contact. Of 11 gay couples, 10 (91%) reported the same approach to contact as their partner, while partners in one couple (9%) reported different approaches. We conducted a chi-square analysis to examine whether patterns of agreement differed across family type; no significant differences were found.

Of the participants who expressed disagreement with their partner on approach to birth family contact, six (8%) participants (one lesbian woman, two gay men, one heterosexual couple, one heterosexual woman) explained their disagreement, whether it was having a relationship through Facebook or the manner and effort that one partner thought should be put into birth family relationships online. For example, Holly, a heterosexual mother of a 5-year-old daughter who was adopted internationally and who had no contact with her daughter's birth family, explained that she was "probably a little more involved, I'm definitely more interested than Patrick is in doing that. And if it weren't for him I probably would have lunged forward by now." In contrast, Patrick, while noting that his wife wanted a relationship with the birth mother, felt like they should take a "let's wait and see what [birth mother] wants approach." Samuel, a gay father of a 5-year-old daughter from an open adoption, was open to communication with his daughter's birth mother via Facebook, whereas his partner Jay was hesitant: "[Birth mother] sent me a friend request, which I haven't accepted. Which is more at Jay's urging than my own." The unclear boundaries that the Internet and technology introduce may be dealt with differently by partners within couples, which could cause relational tensions, changing the process of family relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

## Discussion

This study is the first to examine adoptive parents' thoughts about and experiences with navigating relationships with their children's birth families via technology. At a time when the presence of technology is so ubiquitous in families' lives (Duggan & Smith, 2013), it is essential that adoption professionals and parents understand the potential benefits and drawbacks of managing birth family relationships with text messaging, social media, and the like.

Our first research question concerned the types of approaches that adoptive parents engaged with regard to interacting with birth family members via technology. We found that parents utilized three approaches to contact via technology: active, passive, and no contact.

Some parents expressed perceived benefits of active contact via technology, including the ability to exchange up-to-date photos and, in general, to keep in touch—communication that might not have lasted had it not been for its immediacy and ease. The CFT framework suggests that the approximation given by technology can be beneficial for families who want real-time conversations and who want to exchange information immediately, rather than via letters (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Notably, the use of text messaging and social media to

communicate requires a certain amount of mutual trust between adoptive and birth families. Wariness on either side may interfere with the use of technological communication (Hampton et al., 2011).

About a fifth of families had passive contact via technology with birth family members, “tracking” them through social media and downloading information to save for a later time. It is possible that passive contact via technology could lead to active contact in the future for some families, given that many of these families had open adoption arrangements. However, given that half of the families who used passive tracking described concerns about maintaining boundaries between themselves and the adoptive family, it is possible that the accessibility afforded by technology will continue to be avoided (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Boundaries in today’s high-tech world are more diffuse (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014), which might dissuade some adoptive families from communicating through Facebook, texts, and e-mail. The anonymity and accessibility that the Internet provides, then, offers a way for parents to find and keep information about birth family members relatively easily, without having to identify themselves. Social media allows parents to “keep an eye” on what they are doing, without having to make direct contact—which may seem too overwhelming or emotionally charged at the current time (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

Finally, about half of the adoptive families reported no contact with birth family members via technology, with only a few of these families reporting face-to-face contact with birth family members. These families’ lack of contact in general stemmed from concerns about boundaries or lack of identifying information about birth family members. Thus, many of these families may have been open to future contact (and indeed, many were already in contact via older forms of communication, such as letters and phone calls), particularly as their child grew older and/or had questions about birth family members—but in some cases lacked the basic data needed for searching (e.g., birth parents’ names; place of child’s birth), a scenario that is particularly common among international adoptions (Roby et al., 2005). Importantly, should parents ultimately be able to obtain this basic information, many of the problems that plague internationally adoptive families (e.g., unreliable mail service, translation difficulties; Roby et al., 2005) could become less problematic with the introduction of (increasingly affordable) technology into those relationships (e.g., immediate contact via text messaging and social media; online translation services), suggested by the CFT framework (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

Prior research has suggested some differences by family types in level of contact between birth and adoptive families (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016; Farr & Goldberg, 2015). However, the current study, which focused on contact via technology specifically, found no differences in approach to contact (active, passive, none) among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents. Rather, approach to contact via technology varied more depending on the type of adoption (public domestic, private domestic, or international): Those who adopted internationally were less

likely to have active contact via technology and more likely to have no contact via technology, an extension of prior research in post-adoption contact by adoption type (Faulkner & Madden, 2012). Examining the role of family type in relation to contact revealed that, although sexual minority parents may be more open to contact with birth family members (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016), contact—at least via technology and social media—does not appear to be heavily influenced by family structure, but rather by adoption type. Adoptive parents, particularly those who adopt via foster care or domestic adoption, should be aware of the likelihood of contact via technology and social media.

Our research found that there was not a perfect relationship between face-to-face contact and contact via technology: Some parents who reported contact via technology reported face-to-face contact, whereas others did not. For some parents, technology supports and builds on the face-to-face contact with birth family members, and given that only four parents who had face-to-face contact had passive contact via technology, perhaps open communication takes away the need to “track” birth family members. The CFT framework suggests that online relationships are becoming more acceptable (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014), which may help explain why birth and adoptive families are utilizing technology to supplement their relationships.

Our third research question concerned boundary challenges that parents perceived with birth family members, a theme that was present across all approaches to contact. Approximately 23% of the sample expressed boundary concerns related to contact via technology, which tended to center upon (a) concerns about respecting the privacy of birth family members and (b) concerns about potential intrusion by birth family members into their own private family lives—a finding that echoes the findings of other studies on open adoption (Goldberg et al., 2011; Neil, 2009). Even if there were face-to-face visits between birth and adoptive family members, for many parents, engaging via social media seemed to introduce complexities that they were not necessarily prepared for. As children grow older, it is likely that parents’ concerns and attitudes about boundaries will change, given that parents will not be able to monitor their children as easily as they can when their children are young (Siegel, 2012a).

Our third research question concerned the degree to which parents within couples reported similar approaches to contact via technology. We found that partners within couples were not always consistent in their contact approach that they reported between themselves and their child’s birth family (i.e., active, passive, no contact via technology). Such differences might in part reflect different levels of involvement in managing contact with the birth family (i.e., one parent may be the primary intermediary), or they may reflect fundamental differences between partners in their feelings and opinions about birth family relationships and how much contact they think is appropriate (Goldberg et al., 2011; Grotevant, 2000). The CFT framework would suggest that the boundaries associated with technology may not be formally agreed upon by both members of a couple, leading to

inconsistencies in the approach to contact (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). However, the vast majority of parents were in agreement with their partner about approaches with birth family members, indicating that they were consistent in their approach to adoption openness and that, at least at the current time, were not experiencing conflict regarding the how, what, and when of their family's approach to contact. Professionals working with families should be sensitive to parental disagreement about the level of contact and help parents make joint decisions about how to manage relationships with their child's birth family (Hertlein, 2012).

### ***Limitations and future directions***

This study has several limitations. First, we do not have the perspectives of the birth family, who may also be engaging in "tracking" of adoptive families, who may have boundary concerns of their own, and who, in general, may possess very different perspectives from the adoptive parents in the study. Second, the participants are demographically homogenous, and most are relatively affluent. Although the cost of accessing technology has declined dramatically, these families may have more access than most families; in turn, the type and level of concerns that they expressed may be shaped by their higher access. Last, our study focused on parents of young children. We do not yet have data on how the children in these families handle their relationships with birth family members via technology. Adopted children may want factual information about and a relationship with their birth family (Siegel, 2012a), and as children grow older, parents may increasingly value and support their children's relationships with birth family members (Crea & Barth, 2009). Given that social media platforms are open to children as young as 13 (O'Keefe & Clarke Pearson, 2011) and that more and more children have access to smartphones, tablets, and computers, contact with birth family members is more likely to occur (Adoption STAR, Inc., 2012; Howard, 2012; Krueger, 2014).

### ***Conclusion***

To date, advice from adoption agencies, the legal system, and counselors on managing online relationships between adoptive and birth families is mixed. "Do we 'friend' each other on Facebook?" is a common question for adoptive families. Some experts recommend creating separate Facebook pages just managing adoptive-birth family relationships, to avoid publicizing details of an adoption in a forum that friends, extended family, and colleagues can readily access (Krueger, 2014). Siegel (2012a) recommends creating a special e-mail address for communication with birth family members to use instead of social media. Thus, there are ways to set boundaries with online relationships, even during this time of increasing openness in adoption.

Parents and practitioners should teach children how to have appropriate online relationships with their birth family members. Indeed, practitioners themselves must be well versed in the various ways adoptive and birth family members use technology in their relationships (Hampton et al., 2011; Hertlein & Webster, 2008)

if they are to help families make decisions that are in the best interest of the child (Kearney & Millstein, 2013). Practitioners should also help parents address boundaries between themselves and their child's birth family (even if the parent is in active contact via technology and social media), given that boundaries are a concern for parents regardless of the method of communication.

Reamer and Siegel (2007) list key values to remember in open adoptions, which can be extended to technology and social media: Protect the most vulnerable, maintain fundamental respect and trustworthiness, be honest and truthful, and maintain the autonomy of all parties involved. As children grow older and have their own Internet presence, the role of social media, texting, and online exchanges with birth family members will only become more prevalent. Guidelines such as these can help parents like Melanie—described in the first paragraph of this paper—consider how to respond to an unexpected “friend request” from a child's birth parent.

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