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The Role of Consumption in the Communication of Family Identity in Multiracial Adoptive Families

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ABSTRACT

In the past four decades, family structure has shifted away from the traditional family of a same race family complete with a married mother and father and biological. Some disciplines have incorporated these changes into their research, but the marketing discipline has consistently assumed a relatively stable, traditional family structure. Family structures associated with social stigma have seen a rise in prevalence including those characterized by racial diversity, sexual orientation, and adoption. Families facing a stigmatized status in society are the population of interest this paper; specifically we examine the experiences of transracial adoptive families. There are over 2 million adopted children in America, and over 100,000 foster children awaiting adoption. One in four adopted children is of a different race than the adoptive parent(s). Of the over 400,000 internationally adopted children in the U.S., 84% of those are transracial adoptions. Though 47 percent of adults report that they have been “touched” by adoption through being adopted, adopting, or being close to an adoptee or adoptive parents and over one-third of adults have seriously considered adoption, adoptive families nonetheless face social stigma, and transracial and visibly adoptive families are especially susceptible to social stigma. Interactions within the local community can serve to disconfirm family identity of adoptive families. Extant research has identified various strategies used by adoptive families to integrate the visible differences in the family structure into the family identity such as discussion, normalization, and open communication. This study introduces an additional strategy - displaying family through conspicuous consumption. Through the display of family through consumption of products and activities, the family relationships can be communicated in terms of social norms. Semi-structured depth interviews were conducted with adoptive parents who have adopted at least one child of a different race from their own. Participants were recruited through a local network and through snowball sampling. Both parents participated in each interview, which provides a number of benefits for the researcher. The interviews with transracial adoptive families yield several key themes and artifacts that are important in communicating family identity both internally within the family including toys, dolls, books, art, and externally amongst society including visible family activities. Parents who adopt outside their race make a special effort to surround all of their children, adopted and biological, with products that normalize the presence of multiple races within the family. In the external environment, transracial adoptive families seem active in family activities such as bike riding and RV road trips. These activities involve the entire family and are visible to others outside of their family and out in society. Overall, transracial adoptive families engage in the consumption of specific products and activities that facilitate the communication of their family identity. These families engage in this both internally and externally, or privately and publicly. In this pilot study, it seems that the private sphere may be even more important than the public sphere. Though all of the families

have felt stigmatized in public, the communication of family identity seems to be more important privately within the family. Parents have a strong desire for their transracial adopted children to share the family identity and to feel confident in their place in the family and consumption plays a key role in this process.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elise Johansen Harvey earned her PhD in Marketing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in Lincoln, Nebraska and is currently an Assistant Professor of Marketing and Director of Start:ME Northside Microbusiness Accelerator at the University of South Carolina Upstate in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

