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Identity Development in Korean-American Adoptees:

A Content Analysis of Personal Reflections

Charles Rachor

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Abstract

This paper examines Korean-American Adoptees and their identity development through a content analysis of online comments concerning four major themes: Parents and Parenting, Siblings, Self-identity, and Current Events. Using two Facebook groups consisting exclusively of adoptees, examinations were made of positive, neutral, and negative replies to posts about the themes. The findings from this analysis lend credence to previous studies about self-identity, some of the influential factors, and the struggles faced in achieving levels of comfort expressing multiple racial and cultural identities.

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Introduction

In 1955 Harry Holt, an American farmer from Oregon, and his wife adopted eight children from South Korea ("Adoption History", 2000); this was in the wake of the Korean War that ended with an armistice signing in 1953. Since then, 165,364 South Korean children have been adopted overseas, most of those sent to the United States (Bergquist, Vonk, Kim, & Feit, 2007; "Statistics | Intercountry Adoption", 2016). Korean-American Adoptees (KADs) struggle to find social groups that are sympathetic or understand the issues they face, and many have connected online through various messaging boards, websites, and Facebook groups.

There were many factors that lead to so many children being sent overseas. One is that Korea is a culture heavily influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism ("PBS Online: Hidden Korea/Religion", n.d.). Accordingly, the cultural stigmas surrounding these children would be much harsher relative to other societies. Babies born to unmarried Korean women, fathered by American soldiers, would face shame for being of mixed race and being born out of wedlock.

In 2013, the Korean government signed the Hague Adoption Convention. One of the first considerations within the Convention requires a country to consider national solutions first before seeking other countries to send children to ("Pity the Children", 2015). The practice of adoption from Korea still occurs although the numbers have slowed. There was a major spike for about 2 decades from 1970 to 1990 (see Appendix A) where overseas adoptions grew to 8,837 in 1985 alone; for comparison, since 2010 the number has stayed below 1,000 per year.

Transracial adoption, the practice of placing a child of one race or ethnicity with parents of another race or ethnicity, presents unique challenges for the adoptive parents. Some of these challenges center around how parents should incorporate culture, racial identity, and heritage into the child's upbringing. For example: 1) historically, adoptive parents had been advised to raise

their children immersed in the dominant culture. Others did so to avoid alienation with their children (Meyers, 2016). 2) It was reported that other parents who decided to reaffirm their children's racial identity and acknowledge the differences had children much more at ease with their own racial identity and interacting with others of the same group (Bergquist, Vonk, Kim, & Feit, 2007). 3) Some estimates among domestic adoption studies suggest up to 80% children adjusted as well as non-adopted peers; however, the extreme ends of the distribution showed higher rates of psychological problems (Baden, & Javier, 2015).

Four themes were examined in this study. They were: *Parents and Parenting*, *Siblings*, *Self-identity*, and *Current Events*. These four themes were chosen for their relevance in other studies about KADs, and their effect on people during important years of development, especially adolescence. *Parents and Parenting* was chosen to reflect any differences between the way a KAD was raised and the choices they made if raising children of their own, *Siblings* for their crucial impact on an individual throughout a lifetime, *Self-identity* for an introspective look from a KAD view, and *Current Events* for their ability to shape culture and conversations.

Literature Review

Two notable studies dealing specifically with identity development included dissertations by Rienzi (2012) and Knight (2012). Rienzi (2012) researched racial and ethnic identity formation in Korean transracial adoptees raised in the Midwest. Knight (2012) also addressed the same topic, but the population in her study was located across the U.S. Both research studies included the idea of cultural homelessness, meaning KADs raised in a white cultural and ethnic environment would grow up with that mindset while appearing as minorities (Rienzi, 2012; Knight, 2012). Simultaneously, both studies revealed their participants felt discomfort and rejection from any Asian culture, not just Korean. Such feelings stemmed from the participants being raised in a place

where often they were the only person of color in their family, school, or even entire town (Rienzi, 2012; Knight, 2012).

In one study, there were four possible outcomes related to racial identity – with a fifth added for the study in question – Asian-American adolescents could be classified under (Ying, & Lee, 1999). Those five were:

- Separation: rejecting a majority group and accepting one's ethnic group
- Assimilation: accepting a majority group and rejecting one's ethnic group
- Integration: accepting both the majority and ethnic group
- Marginality: rejecting both groups
- Unintegrated: undecided about and defining a relationship with/about both groups

Since many Korean Adoptees (specifically raised in the U.S., not those raised in other countries) grew up with the culturally and ethnically dominant mindset, they are still exploring their racial and biological heritage. Subsequently, as Ying and Lee (1999) described, integration applies to many of the following KAD response.

It was found in another study that college Korean Adoptees discussed things they had in common related to healing and things they found lacking in their lives (Hoffman & Peña, 2013). Time is a factor in the development process; the college students had not fully reached a complete identity during their undergraduate schooling, as is common for many students. Hoffman and Peña (2013) reference three unique identities KADs face – White cultural, Korean racial, and Korean transracial adoptee.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine comments made by KADs in an online space where they could freely express themselves, unhindered by non-KAD opinions. Content analysis

was chosen to gather information that might not be expressed in a traditional study, and the number of KADs within the local geographic region limited the number of possible responses. Membership was gained of two closed Facebook groups, Korean American Adoptees and KAD Real Talk. The first group was larger with 3,979 members at the beginning of the one-week period starting March 5th, 2017 when data collection began. KAD Real Talk only consisted of 182 members at the same time; both groups have crossed 4,000 and 200 members, respectively, since the analysis ended.

The one-week period of March 5 – 12 did not dictate that only comments posted during that period could be used, rather it served as a set timeframe during which any comment was available for study, even comments written previously to March 5th. Many members of both groups use them in an additional social support function, therefore many posts and comments were not of a high-enough relevance to analyze. Additionally, posts are frequently put up that have little to do with any of the themes, such as links to food recipes and YouTube videos featuring Korean singers' performances. On March 5th, a search began for posts with at least 10 pertinent comment responses. Pertinent was defined as thought-out comments over three sentences in length, and not just symbolic emoticons, which could be ambiguous to decipher given that these can be used in an ironic, platitudinal, or facetious manner. 10 comments were used as a threshold to ensure some level of variety in comments and replies, avoiding an "echo-chamber" effect if only five or six comments all agreed with a post.

Each post and comment could potentially contain things that overlapped to different themes and reactions, so a majority grading was used to minimize confusion. If a post was mainly about a sibling, then it was categorized under the *Sibling* theme and if a specific comment was mostly positive, it was measured as such. Lists of commonly used words associated with positive and negative emotions were available if a comment was unclear; this is a technique recommended by

experts (Weber, 1990). Examples of words that might convey negative emotions included: angry, cold, despicable, detrimental, hate, hostile, hurtful, nasty, offensive, pessimistic, quit, reject, rude, terrible, upset, and unwelcome. Examples of positive words included: accepted, accomplish, approve, congratulations, encouraging, exciting, favorable, happy, motivating, optimistic, perfect, positive, proud, success, trusting, welcome, and worthy (see Appendixes B and C).

Beginning with the Korean American Adoptees group, search terms included “sibling(s),” “brother,” and “sister,” to look for posts and comments related to the *Sibling* theme. Similar associated words were used for identifying the other themes; “mom,” “dad,” “parent(s),” and “parenting,” for the theme of *Parents*; “identity,” “self-identity,” “development,” and “influence” were used for the *Identity* theme; and words such as “election,” “politics,” “current,” “immigrant,” “ban,” and “adoption,” were used when searching for things concerning *Current Events*.

No personally identifiable information is revealed; all comments and posts used as examples in the Discussion section are paraphrased, but stay true to the nature of the content. Permission was obtained by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) under the exempt status; to protect individuals’ privacy, only the groups will be referenced when discussing the various themes.

Results

The Facebook group Korean American Adoptees, by nature of its larger member count, yielded the most responses. There were four themes explored: *Siblings*, *Parents/Parenting*, *Identity*, and *Current Events*. In the Korean American Adoptees group, all four themes were found. The *Siblings* theme generated four topical discussions, *Parents/Parenting* another four, *Identity* had the most at ten, and *Identity/Current Events* only had two (see Appendix D). The theme of *Identity* had a range of posts, from a typical introduction post made by new members, where 100%

percent of the responses were positive – a reflection of the welcoming nature of such groups in general and adherence to the group’s own guidelines, to posts about personal topics such as dating Asian-Americans and KADs – where 36.4% of the responses were negative in nature – either from other members recalling bad experiences of their own or reacting in a negative fashion towards the original post. The theme of *Siblings* generated an average of 40.325% positive responses, 53.925% neutral responses and just 4.5% of the responses averaged negatively. The theme of *Parents* was more even; 27.2% positive, 36.925% neutral, and 35.225% negative. Posts centered on *Identity* had an average of 38.25% positive, 38.85% neutral, and 22.91% negative responses, and posts about *Current Events* were mostly ambivalent, with 18.75% positive, 54% neutral, and 20.05% negative (See Appendix E).

KAD Real Talk, the other group results were gathered from, only had responses related to the themes of *Parents* and *Identity/Current Events* (see Appendix F). The *Parents* theme had a single result with 20% positive, 50% neutral, and 30% negative responses. The *Identity/Current Events* theme had 5 results with an average of 11.94% positive, 41.64% neutral, and 46.4% negative responses (See Appendix G).

Discussion

A quantitative approach to the data allowed a range of topics to be captured, but digging into the specifics required an analytical and qualitative approach. One interesting finding is that posts related to *Siblings* in the Korean American Adoptees group was the theme with the lowest number of negative average responses at just 4.5%, relative to the positive and neutral responses within the theme and other themes. There was a consensus that siblings helped KADs growing up, even if the siblings may not have expressed such feelings. One person remarked they grew up knowing they were not alone as an adoptee – that individual had another KAD as a sibling, but the

two were not biologically related. Another person commented that they felt their KAD sibling was the only external link they had to the part of themselves that was Korean. Additionally, another person framed their siblings as something that helped give a sense of commonality growing up when faced with ignorant comments about appearances from others.

Another discovery within the Korean American Adoptees group was about *Self-identity* and how many felt “white-washed.” For example, one person replied how it was offensive when members of their adoptive family asked if they could “imagine mistreatment” people of color might endure, implying the person in question was viewed as white. Another individual commented about how they did not know they were a different race from their adoptive parents until an academic assignment, and yet another person stated that many of their friends were surprised to think of that individual as not white.

One finding was that the theme of *Parents/Parenting* yielded a relatively larger negative reaction, especially in the larger group (see Appendix E). When compared to the other averages of negative reaction percentages, this theme brought up many negative feelings. Not all KADs had a positive experience with their adoptive family. Recently, Adam Crapser, a KAD, was in the national news when it was revealed that he was being deported back to Korea (Domonoske, 2016). This was due to his adoptive parents failing to complete his citizenship papers, and later giving him up to the foster care system. Incidentally, his foster parents have been convicted on abuse charges. Multiple people within the Facebook groups commented about the lack of knowledge concerning family medical history, and had some worrying about what it might mean for their children. Another replied that they did not like the question when it came up on medical forms. A different post was about how negatively a KAD reacted when looking back on how they were raised in a “white-washed” environment. Racial identity was a repeated subject. Some KADs

expressed indifference because at the time they were raised, it was common advice for adoptive parents to assimilate transracial adoptees into the “normal” culture, also at the time, minorities represented a far smaller percentage of the population than now (Huus, 2004; Meyers, 2016).

On the topic of *Current News*, a question was raised in the KAD Real Talk group concerning the label “immigrant.” The responses were quite varied; one individual felt like they did not need to defend their status, another felt like one by default, several thought KADs should not be thought of as immigrants because adoption is not the same as immigration. In a similar vein, others did not feel like immigrants because they had no choice in being adopted.

As political posts go, many shared on the Facebook groups were news links about the Korean President’s scandal, with few reactions or comments. The current American administration provided some reactions, but one that was mostly negative concerned interactions between KADs and those who supported the President. (See Appendixes E and G). It should be noted that while the neutral category for *Current Events* in the Korean American Adoptees group was largest, many of the comments were borderline between a negative personal comment, and a neutral political stance. The comments were recorded as neutral, as they mostly reflected the *Current Events* theme and not the *Identity* theme. Many KADs reflected the feeling that the November 2016 election opened them up to more aggressions – micro and otherwise, from non-Asians. One recently had a conversation with their parents in which it was remarked that racism against Asians was not that bad. Another commented that a concerned friend had called to check on them, for fear of being a victim of racism. One positive outcome was that others had been encouraged by the election to speak with their white friends about race. One commented about how being Asian in America still means relative invisibility. According to Ying and Lee (1999), despite the age of some who made posts and comments in this analysis, few have apparently reached the stage of “achievement” in

which commitment and exploration of one's identity are present. The White cultural, Korean racial, and Korean transracial adoptee identities Hoffman & Peña (2013) profiled were acknowledged by many in both Facebook groups as something they wanted to explore further, even when the profiles were not explicitly labeled.

Limitations

The nature of the content analysis method does not allow for conclusive, statistical statements, or extrapolation to a larger population. Nor would it be possible to find and evaluate statements from every member of each group. Results are from a subset of the users, those who contributed high quality postings, are on Facebook, and chose to post and comment relevant materials, and should be treated as such. 10 comments provided a level of variety, however it was subjective as it disregards posts in which there may be fewer comments.

Each theme was chosen assuming there would be a number of KADs who had experience in that area. However, there may have been KADs who were only children, thus excluding them from any discussions where siblings were concerned. Additionally, there may have been KADs who could relate experiences of their adoptive parents style of child rearing, but if the KADs did not have children themselves, could not relate to parenting. The two themes of self-identity and current events were the only ones broad enough to prompt a possible reaction from everyone in the groups. Some of the themes like *Siblings* returned mostly positive reactions, while others, like *Self-identity*, represented a mix of reactions. The Facebook groups are closely moderated, so some *Current Event* topics were mainly neutral, with fewer positive and negative responses. This means that such moderation minimized the extent to which conversations and postings could broach on sensitive topics. Therefore, future studies should examine non-mediated forum channels, to access

prescient and important topics from marginalized and under-represented populations, who may not openly discuss their fears and concerns.

Conclusion

Multiple studies could stem from these findings. Although intercountry adoptions originating from Korea have slowed down, and may soon be nonexistent, it remains a unique population for different academic fields to learn from including: economics, psychology, sociology, and ethics. As it stands, this analysis reinforces some past studies about the ongoing process of forming a racial identity. It also lends numerical data to the shared experiences within a unique community. KADs open to professional counseling can use this analysis to understand their struggles about self-identity are relatable, their experiences are understood by others.

The issues raised in this analysis parallel some of the current questions our society at large is also facing. These discussions may not be easily or openly discussed presently, but that does not mean data is unavailable or unworthy of further investigation. Future research should endeavor to disseminate data encompassing cultural identity and barriers to accepting diversity, to stimulate open conversation and develop strategies to overcome these obstacles.

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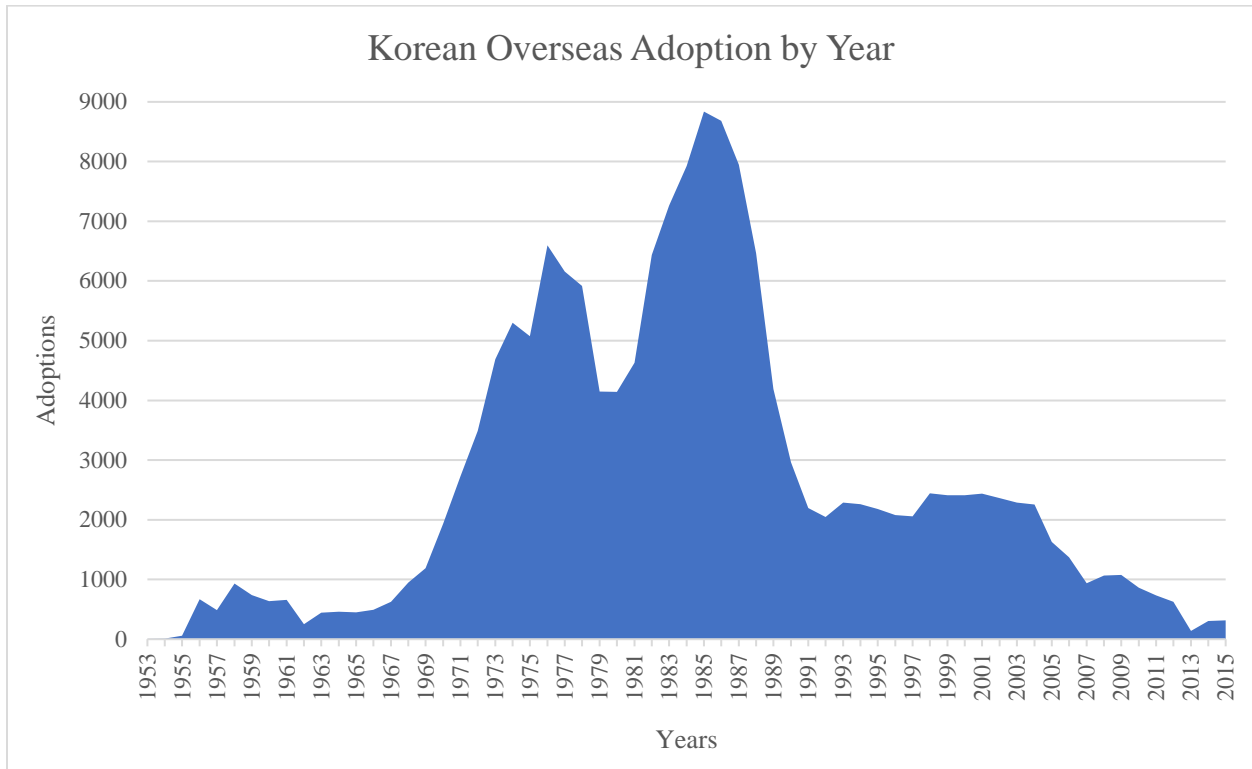
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Appendix A



Korean Overseas Adoption by Year, 1953 – 2015
(Bergquist, Vonk, Kim, & Feit, 2007), and ("Statistics | Intercountry Adoption", 2016)

Appendix B

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| <p>A abysmal adverse alarming angry annoy anxious apathy appalling atrocious awful B bad banal barbed belligerent bemoan beneath boring broken C callous can't clumsy coarse cold cold-hearted collapse confused contradictory contrary corrosive corrupt crazy creepy criminal cruel cry cutting D dead decaying damage damaging dastardly deplorable depressed deprived deformed</p> | <p>D Cont. deny despicable detrimental dirty disease disgusting disheveled dishonest dishonorable dismal distress don't dreadful dreary E enraged eroding evil F fail faulty fear feeble fight filthy foul frighten frightful G gawky ghastly grave greed grim grimace gross grotesque gruesome guilty H haggard hard hard-hearted harmful hate hideous homely horrendous horrible hostile hurt hurtful</p> | <p>I icky ignore ignorant ill immature imperfect impossible inane inelegant infernal injure injurious insane insidious insipid J jealous junky L lose lousy lumpy M malicious mean menacing messy misshapen missing misunderstood moan moldy monstrous N naive nasty naughty negate negative never no nobody nondescript nonsense not noxious O objectionable odious offensive old oppressive</p> | <p>P pain perturb pessimistic petty plain poisonous poor prejudice Q questionable quirky quit R reject renege repellant reptilian repulsive repugnant revenge revolting rocky rotten rude ruthless S sad savage scare scary scream severe shoddy shocking sick sickening sinister slimy smelly sobbing sorry spiteful sticky stinky stormy stressful stuck stupid substandard suspect suspicious</p> | <p>T tense terrible terrifying threatening U ugly undermine unfair unfavorable unhappy unhealthy unjust unlucky unpleasant upset unsatisfactory unsightly untoward unwanted unwelcome unwholesome unwieldy unwise upset V vice vicious vile villainous vindictive W wary weary wicked woeful worthless wound Y yell yucky Z zero</p> |
|--|--|---|---|--|

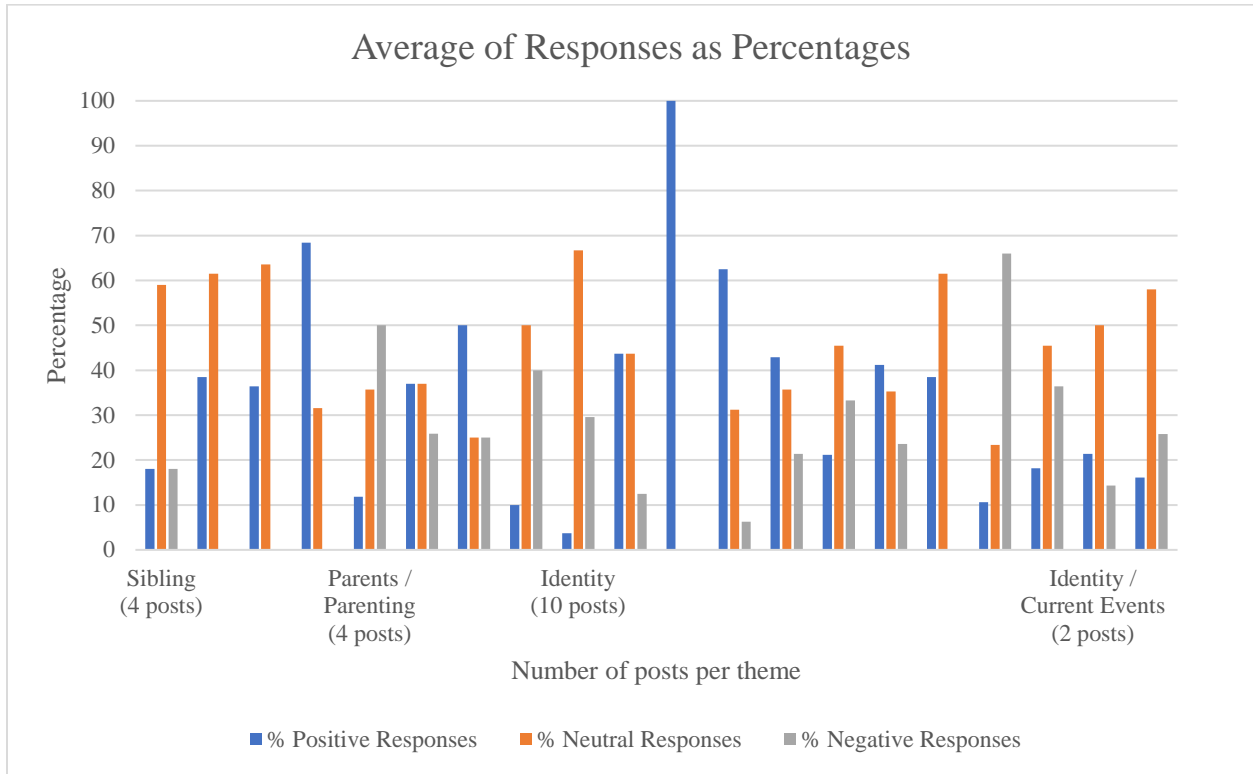
Negative vocabulary words ("Negative Vocabulary Word List", 2016)

Appendix C

| | | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| <p>A absolutely adorable accepted acclaimed accomplish accomplishment achievement action active admire adventure affirmative affluent agree agreeable amazing angelic appealing approve aptitude attractive awesome B beaming beautiful believe beneficial bliss bountiful bounty brave bravo brilliant bubbly C calm celebrated certain champ champion charming cheery choice classic classical clean commend composed congratulation constant</p> | <p>C Cont. cool courageous creative cute D dazzling delight delightful distinguished divine E earnest easy ecstatic effective effervescent efficient effortless electrifying elegant enchanted encouraging endorsed energetic energized engaging enthusiastic essential esteemed ethical excellent exciting exquisite F fabulous fair familiar famous fantastic favorable fetching fine fitting flourishing fortunate free fresh friendly fun funny</p> | <p>G generous genius genuine giving glamorous glowing good gorgeous graceful great green grin growing H handsome happy harmonious healing healthy hearty heavenly honest honorable honored hug I idea ideal imaginative imagine impressive independent innovate innovative instant instantaneous instinctive intuitive intellectual intelligent inventive J jovial joy jubilant K keen kind knowing knowledgeable</p> | <p>L laugh legendary light learned lively lovely lucid lucky luminous M marvelous masterful meaningful merit meritorious miraculous motivating moving N natural nice novel now nurturing nutritious O okay one one-hundred percent open optimistic P paradise perfect phenomenal pleasurable plentiful pleasant poised polished popular positive powerful prepared pretty principled productive progress prominent protected proud</p> | <p>Q quality quick quiet R ready reassuring refined refreshing rejoice reliable remarkable resounding respected restored reward rewarding right robust S safe satisfactory secure seemly simple skilled skillful smile soulful sparkling special spirited spiritual stirring stupendous stunning success successful sunny super superb supporting surprising</p> | <p>T terrific thorough thrilling thriving tops tranquil transforming transformative trusting truthful U unreal unwavering up upbeat upright upstanding V valued vibrant victorious victory vigorous virtuous vital vivacious W wealthy welcome well whole wholesome willing wonderful wondrous worthy wow Y yes yummy Z zeal zealous</p> |
|--|---|--|---|---|--|

Positive vocabulary words ("Positive Words Vocabulary List", 2016)

Appendix D



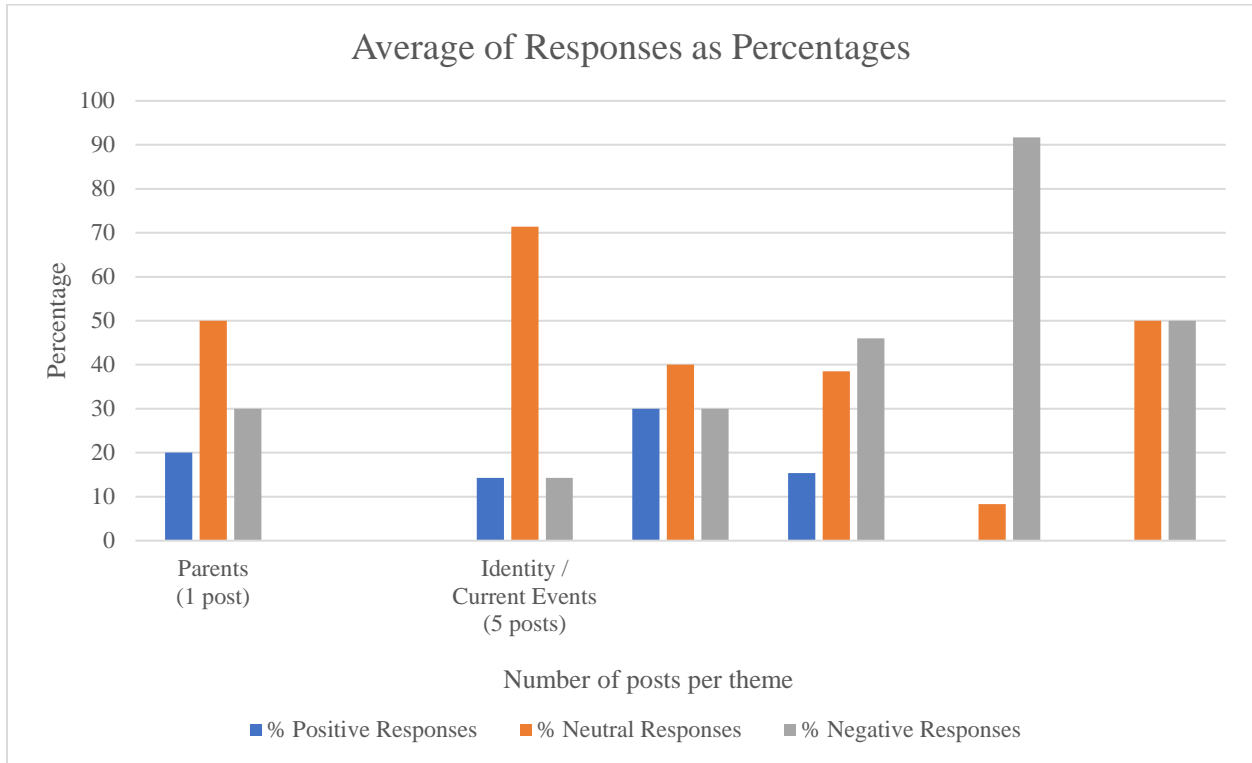
Average of Responses as Percentages from the Korean American Adoptees Facebook group

Appendix E

| Theme | % Positive Responses | % Neutral Responses | % Negative Responses |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Sibling</i> | 18 | 59 | 18 |
| | 38.5 | 61.5 | 0 |
| | 36.4 | 63.6 | 0 |
| | 68.4 | 31.6 | 0 |
| Average | 40.325 | 53.925 | 4.5 |
| <i>Parents / Parenting</i> | 11.8 | 35.7 | 50 |
| | 37 | 37 | 25.9 |
| | 50 | 25 | 25 |
| | 10 | 50 | 40 |
| Average | 27.2 | 36.925 | 35.225 |
| <i>Identity</i> | 3.7 | 66.7 | 29.6 |
| | 43.7 | 43.7 | 12.5 |
| | 100 | 0 | 0 |
| | 62.5 | 31.2 | 6.3 |
| | 42.9 | 35.7 | 21.4 |
| | 21.2 | 45.5 | 33.3 |
| | 41.2 | 35.3 | 23.6 |
| | 38.5 | 61.5 | 0 |
| | 10.6 | 23.4 | 66 |
| | 18.2 | 45.5 | 36.4 |
| Average | 38.25 | 38.85 | 22.91 |
| <i>Identity / Current Events</i> | 21.4 | 50 | 14.3 |
| | 16.1 | 58 | 25.8 |
| Average | 18.75 | 54 | 20.05 |

Average of Responses as Percentages from the Korean American Adoptees Facebook group

Appendix F



Average of Responses as Percentages from the KAD Real Talk Facebook group

Appendix G

| Theme | % Positive Responses | % Neutral Responses | % Negative Responses |
|--|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Parents</i> | 20 | 50 | 30 |
| Average | 20 | 50 | 30 |
| <i>Identity / Current Events</i> | 14.3 | 71.4 | 14.3 |
| | 30 | 40 | 30 |
| | 15.4 | 38.5 | 46 |
| | 0 | 8.3 | 91.7 |
| | 0 | 50 | 50 |
| Average | 11.94 | 41.64 | 46.4 |

Average of Responses as Percentages from the KAD Real Talk Facebook group