

Happily Ever After? The Portrayal of Adoption in Visual Narrative Media

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Abstract

*Adoption is expanding considerably and with it comes sentiments of happiness, sadness, joy, and everything in between. Visual narrative media, too, has begun to tell the stories of adoptees and adoptive parents. This article examines how adoption is presented in visual narrative media – specifically in the films *Lion*, *Instant Family*, and *Twinstler* – and if these narratives are representative of the real-world nature of adoption. The analyses suggest that the adoption narrative present in each film, though dramatized, is representative of adoption's real-life situations and contexts. Additionally, a stereotype of adoption as being lost and then found was observed in these films, which has the potential to create negative implications for viewers, especially for those who are adoptees.*

I. Introduction

Within visual narrative media, there is always a story that is being told through dialogue, actions, and characters. Though there are many stereotypical narratives within the realm of visual narrative media, there are some narratives that are more subtle. One is the narrative about adoption. There are 1.5 million adoptees who live in the United States (Adoption, n.d.). Each of these adopted individuals has a unique story, yet when these unique stories are looked at collectively, an account begins to develop that reveals a greater narrative at work about adoption.

How often, then, is this adoption narrative a prominent storyline in visual narrative media? More importantly, does this narrative have the ability to be constructed in a way that is not representative of the adoption experiences that experts have observed? The real-life adoption narrative for both parties – adoptees and adoptive parents – is complex in a multitude of ways. This research observes several adoption narratives as depicted in three film genres: drama, comedy, and documentary. It then analyzes the extent of the adoption narrative presented in each film and if it reflects dimensions of adoption that are evident in previous research. This study argues that the adoption narrative as found in visual narrative media mirrors the real-world adoptive experience as chronicled by adoption research.

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II. Literature Review

The scope of literature centering on adoption is extensive and includes perspectives from all players that comprise the adoption triad: the adoptee, the adoptive family, and the biological family. This literature review, however, primarily focuses on two specific adoption narratives: the adoptee adoption narrative and the adoptive parents adoption narrative. These two narratives are made up of many components, which are further explored in this literature review.

Background on adoption

Adoption is now considered to be a lifelong process as opposed to a single act that has a termination, as described by Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley (2003). There are a variety of adoption types carried out today in the United States: domestic adoptions, public adoptions, international adoptions, and transracial adoptions.

When estimating the number of adoptees living in the United States today, Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley (2003) find that estimates vary and include numbers as low as four million to as high as five million. The total number of children in foster care continues to rise and around 20% of these children are usually available for adoption. Several studies have documented high numbers of physical and emotional problems in foster care children, most likely due to prenatal exposure to alcohol and drugs, abuse, and/or neglect, etc. Since the 1950s, the rates of international adoptions have grown consistently. Most international adoptees are of Asian lineage and usually female. China, Russia, Guatemala, South Korea, and Ukraine, in recent years, have been the leading countries in placing the most children in the United States through international adoption (Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003).

Research on Adoptive Children

Some scholars, such as Levy-Shiff, contend that the adoption narrative for adoptees begins with developmental psychology. The experiences adoptees go through as an infant and toddler impact their developmental processes as they age, and inferences can easily be made about how the behaviors and emotions adoptees experience during such growth periods are rooted in these past experiences. According to theorists, several key psychological experiences adoptees face include rejection, separation, and loss, and all three have the ability to lead to psychological disorders later in life (Levy-Shiff, 2001).

For adoptees, loss, especially, is felt on numerous levels and can be a driving emotion in their lives for many years, according to scholars. Loss has the ability to be "covert" and emerges slowly and subtly over time. Loss can also apply to an adoptee's physical losses, such as loss of biological parents and origin, and experiencing loss on these varying levels can create barriers and obstacles for adoptees (Levy-Shiff, 2001).

Similarly, Smit (2002) notes that another fundamental part of the adoptee's journey is feeling grief. The grieving process for an adoptee can start as soon as they are adopted, and it is one that has no definite end. The meaning of their adoption begins to pivot around adolescence because adoptees begin to realize that gaining their adoptive family also means they lost a family as a result. Adoptees often mourn not knowing who they are in their entirety and where their biological parents are.

Some scholars argue that identity formation and growth is the most significant aspect to an adoptee's experiences, outlining the two typical avenues by which individuals choose to pursue adoption: open and closed adoption. An open adoption has no concrete barriers that prevent the adoptee, the adoptive parents, and the biological parents from communicating with one another. Because of this, such openness has the ability to increase adoptees' sense of identity. They, through their open adoption, can be presented with closure and the answers to the questions that may have been a mystery for most of their life (Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006). Adoptees also, quite often, reflect on their past, and this lends itself to further exploration of their identity and growth. By thinking about specific elements of their adoption, adoptees are able to reflect on the unique life they live and what it means for them moving forward. This preoccupation with their adoption also has the potential to shift family dynamics, as adoptees may begin to experience greater emotional detachment and distance from their adoptive families due to feeling overwhelmed (Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2002).

One part of identity formation and growth that is prevalent in international adoptees is that of ethnic identity, as scholars have observed. Ethnicity is part of the ego identity and takes shape when an adoptee

initially lacks understanding or knowledge surrounding his or her ethnicity, but later clearly embrace it. By having pride in where they come from, international adoptees are able to develop positive self-esteem and further appreciate their bicultural identity during the times in which they may find themselves feeling incredibly vulnerable (Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2006).

Levy-Shiff (2001) additionally outlines the role that the adoptive family can play in the adoptee's overall sense of belonging and comfort. When a positive and nurturing family environment exists, it helps to moderate the negative sentiments that come with being adopted. In contrast, a dysfunctional family environment has detrimental effects on an adoptee and can result in maladjustment to his or her new life. By having a family that creates a supportive environment, Levy-Shiff argues, adoptees are able to continue growing emotionally.

Additional scholarship proposes that three adoption identity experiences—being chosen, birthdays, and the adoption triad—create an adoptee's core being and identity. Adoptees commonly feel a sense of pride in being adopted because their adoptive parents chose them. Adoptees, too, consider their birthday to be a celebration that acts as a rite of passage. Though birthdays for some adoptees may represent a time of pondering on where they have come from, others decide to see their birthday as a day that signifies the beginning of another year ahead. Lastly, adoptees often wonder about what contexts within their biological family drove their family to place them up for adoption (Darnell, Johansen, Tavakoli, & Brugnone, 2017). Scholarship also notes that each adoptee experience is unique, and these varied experiences are all legitimate (Lui & Hazler, 2015); and that community with fellow adoptees helps adopted individuals authenticate their own journey and life experiences (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2000).

Research on Adoptive Parents

For choosing to adopt, the adoption narrative begins with the life-changing transition of becoming parents. Adoptive parents often suffer from fewer negative effects on marital quality than the traditional biological parents' experience, because adoptive parents often have longed to become parents over a long period of time. Because adoptive parents, in general, tend to be older and have been married for a longer period of time, they are able to enter this new stage in life with a strong ability to communicate with one another, vast knowledge of coping strategies that could present to be useful, and a firm grasp on financial security (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004).

Adoptive parents do not always receive the family and social support that they desire. Research has found that adoptive parents may even harbor uncertainties about how their extended family members will react to such adoption news. This, in turn, has the ability to make it difficult for such family members to provide assistance and support for adoptive parents in the moments they need it most. When support, assistance, and acceptance is given and provided, there is an overall dynamic of satisfactory familial interactions and experiences (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004).

Adoptive parents also struggle with feelings of isolation due to the lack of peer groups who have similar experiences regarding adoption. When no such groups exist for adoptive parents, they are unable to have authentic connections with individuals who can attest to the similar emotions, situations, and circumstances adoptive parents find themselves in. Additionally, immediate or extended family may not always be accessible to adoptive parents physically. Location has the ability to inhibit adoptive parents from receiving proper support and stability (McKay & Ross, 2010).

Adoptive parenthood sometimes involves facing surprises that are not anticipated or planned. Moyer & Goldberg (2017) emphasize that this trend has been extremely evident in adoptions via the welfare system. Many such potential adoptees are considered "special needs" children, which can include the child displaying emotional, behavioral, developmental, or medical conditions that have either been diagnosed or have gone untreated. As a result, adoptive parents via the welfare system have often reported lower adoption satisfaction, increased levels of stress, and a greater need for services that offer support. These specific parents' adoption narratives are defined by their ability to prepare for, adapt to, and take care of their child's special needs (Moyer & Goldberg, 2017).

Research indicates that parents who raise adopted children at an older age may feel as though they are responsible for addressing problems that originated in their child's previous placement history. In the case of international adoptions, parents may endure stressors such as being unable to determine their child's medical and genealogical history, having distrust in existing records, and having to meet their child's medical, developmental, and educational needs based on their child's prior experiences and history. Additionally, new

parents to adoption may not have the desired experience to effectively negotiate and navigate the ups and downs of adoptive parenting (Bird, Peterson, & Miller, 2002).

Research additionally suggests that adoption greatly alters the social and economic dynamics and functions within a family, and these dynamics have the ability to become stressors. Also, adoptive parents may have concerns about bonding with their adopted child, navigating the pressures of instant parenthood, fearing that their child's biological parents could want their child back, and discerning the best time to disclose their child's adoption to him or her (Bird, Peterson, & Miller, 2002).

A study outlined by Shireman & Johnson (1976) suggests that single parents who have adopted are not unlike couples who adopt, and these individuals, in fact, share many of the same characteristics and lifestyles as these couples. These single parents have a solid emotional maturity and a high capacity to meet frustrations head-on and possess the keen ability to pursue an independent life trajectory without being overly influenced by and concerned with others' views. These single parents, too, hold a diverse range of occupations with various incomes and have the desire to experience the nurturing and rewarding part of life that is parenthood.

III. Methods

In this study, a narrative analysis is used to document the adoption narrative, as it is a “way of examining the role of storytelling in understanding identity and social life” (Wong & Breheny, 2018). This adoption narrative provides a dynamic and unique perspective that contributes greatly to the world of visual storytelling and sheds light on a specific narrative that may go unnoticed or untold. The overall research questions include:

RQ1: How is the adoption narrative presented in visual narrative media?

RQ2: Is this narrative representative of the real-life experiences and situations of adoption?

RQ3: Is there a specific stereotype regarding adoption that visual narrative media depicts, and if so, what is it and what are its implications?

The study analyzes three films, *Lion* (2016), *Instant Family* (2018), and *Twinsters* (2015). These films were chosen because each features, at its forefront, an adoption narrative, whether it is from the perspective of the adoptee(s) or adoptive parents. Additionally, these films were chosen because they each represent a different genre of film.

The research aims to qualitatively examine how the adoption narrative – which has been the focus of much research – in visual narrative media reflects to real-life adoption narratives of adoptees and adoptive parents. In doing so, the narrative analysis asks several thematic and guiding questions: What is the premise or the unified subject or purpose of the story? What is the causal relationship in this story? How does the construction of the narrative direct the audience's interpretation of the situation(s) presented? What are the consequences of such an interpretation? What does the narrative reveal about the individual or individuals' identity? What does the narrative suggest about the values of a particular culture?

Additionally, the narrative analysis addresses primary features evident in any narrative as they pertain to each film: setting, characters, narrator, events, causal relations, audience, and theme. The adoption narratives are examined using a narrative analysis worksheet that contains the thematic and guiding questions and primary features of a narrative. This worksheet was completed during the viewing of each film.

Narrative Analysis of *Lion*

Lion, at its core, is a narrative about a boy who is lost and then found, and this premise is told through the lens of adoption and from the perspective of an adoptee. Saroo lived one life in India as a young boy and orphan, and then, is given another life in Australia with a loving family. While his new life is wonderful, Saroo has a constant desire to answer the questions that plague his mind about his past. The narrative, additionally, addresses the duality adoptees feel when they think about family because they belong to both an adoptive family and a biological family. However, sometimes the yearning adoptees have to know more about their

biological family takes hold of them so firmly that, until they receive the closure they are looking for and are in need of, they may be lost forever and never found.

Though there are many causal and contributing relationships in this narrative, the most identifiable one in *Lion* is the relationship Saroo has with his biological family, specifically with his mother and brother. The memories he has of his mother, in part, inspire Saroo to return to India because he begins to recognize that he longs for closure and to reconnect with his mother so she knows he is safe and happy in his new life. By finally reconnecting with his biological family, Saroo is able to begin accepting his fate of belonging to two families.

Most of *Lion*'s beginning takes place where Saroo's life begins, in India. The narrative is crafted to then transport the audience to Calcutta, the place where Saroo lives as a street child before being taken to an orphanage. In the orphanage, Saroo is still an innocent child; however, it is clear that he begins to realize that the place in which he resides is "very bad" because a fellow orphan tells him. When his adoptive parents, Sue and John, bring him to Australia, Saroo is transported to a new world. Though his home is now in Australia, Saroo realizes a number of years later that he yearns for more. He wants to return back to the place of his past, India.

When assessing this narrative's audience, it is easily a narrative targeted for anyone who wishes to travel on an emotional journey. *Lion* is an all-encompassing story that touches on personal growth, accomplishment, sorrow, and pain that anyone can relate to, adopted or not, but adoptees, specifically, are able to resonate with Saroo's character, because his story and point of view is most understood by this population.

There are many elements of the adoption narrative that are present in the film, however, the majority of the components revolve around an adoptee's experience with his or her identity and growth. Saroo is the narrator and the audience is able to bear witness to his inner conflicts, battles, and struggles with navigating who he is as an Indian-Australian, who he wants to be, and why he wants to reconnect with his birth family.

More than anything, the construction of this narrative reveals the aspects of adoption from the adoptee's perspective, as this narrative addresses the feelings adoptees confront on a day-to-day basis. The uphill battle Saroo struggles with in regards to his adoptee identity in this narrative illustrates that adoptees, though human, have an additional layer to their human experience because they have another life story in addition to the one they are already living. Through this narrative, it is evident that there is more to an adoptee than what meets the eye.

There are, however, traces of how Saroo's adoptive family copes with his desire to reconnect with his biological family. Though Saroo's questions, at times, cause him to feel incredibly pained and fall into an extremely vulnerable and fragile state, his motivation and determination to answer these questions persist, and in the end, the mystery of Saroo's past heals his present.

Narrative Analysis of Instant Family

Because of Pete and Ellie Wagner's strong desire to want to start a family, even though they are quite skeptical about fostering children at first, they are rewarded with three beautiful adoptive children. Their narrative in this film illustrates that families can come together in a multitude of ways, theirs specifically through the foster care system. Additionally, this narrative highlights that even though parenting is not easy, everything parents do for their children is rooted in love and the desire to provide for them. This narrative suggests that parenting biological children is no different than parenting children who have been in foster care; however, these foster children do carry with them more baggage and have potentially faced tumultuous experiences that have affected their ability to trust.

There are many contributing relationships within this narrative that drive its events. The most significant relationship is the one Pete and Ellie develop with their three foster children, Lizzie, Juan, and Lita. Even though this relationship progresses over time, it proves to Pete and Ellie that they are capable of being good foster parents. There are times in Pete and Ellie's relationship with their children, however, when they begin to feel discouraged and unsuccessful as foster parents. The relationship Pete and Ellie create with their foster children eventually leads to Lizzie, Juan, and Lita's adoption.

Pete and Ellie find themselves part of a wonderful support group comprised of additional families who are fostering. It is through this community that Pete and Ellie grow in their confidence as foster parents. Social and communal support in the adoptive parents' life is a crucial element of their adoption narrative. In contrast,

Pete and Ellie receive little to no support from Ellie's family in regards to their decision to foster children, and Ellie's sister even comments that she is happy she and her husband aren't adopting so they can have "their own beautiful children" instead of "rolling the dice of some criminal's kid." Additionally, in this narrative, Pete and Ellie create a positive family environment for Lizzie, Juan, and Lita.

The way in which this narrative is constructed allows its audience to interpret it as a process that has challenges along the way but eventually ends happily. The narrative additionally reveals that, according to Pete and Ellie, what makes adoption successful is that a "cosmic connection" can develop between the adoptive parents and children. This connection doesn't occur overnight, though, and there are moments and times of doubt. Pete and Ellie struggle in this narrative just as much as Lizzie, Juan, and Lita do. The narrative presented in *Instant Family* serves as a reminder that the process of fostering and adoption is not a one-way street and there are multiple perspectives to keep in mind.

The adoptive parents' identity in this narrative reveals that they are very new to parenting and even though they don't understand right away all of the difficulties Lizzie, Juan, and Lita are presented with, they learn over time that it is OK to not know everything and that every aspect of parenting, especially parenting foster children, comes with time and patience. More importantly, it is evident through Pete and Ellie's character development and identity that they are ready to embrace being adoptive parents for the long run regardless of their children's history with the welfare system.

Narrative Analysis of Twinsters

This narrative is largely about becoming complete by identifying the missing pieces of life that one may not even consider to be absent in the first place. Sam and Anaïs are two individuals who are both distinctly similar yet incredibly different. They forge a relationship that will span their lifetimes out of a friendship that was created in a matter of seconds. As twins, they rely on each other after 25 years to learn more about their identity as Korean adoptees. They grow together with the person whom they may never had met had life gone differently. This narrative reveals the beauty in and mystery of life's trajectory and how one instance can change and shape the future. It is early on in this narrative that Sam and Anaïs' relationship becomes solidified, and for the rest of its duration, their relationship is what drives the narrative forward. They can't imagine their lives without one another and recognize that, even though they were separated at birth, they have an unimaginable love for one another.

The relationships Sam and Anaïs have with their Korean foster moms, too, can be considered contributing relationships in this narrative, especially for Anaïs. When she reconnects with Moon Eui Soo, her foster mother, something within Anaïs moves her to feel an overwhelming sense of completeness. Meeting her foster mother heals Anaïs from the brokenness she has felt for so long as a result of her adoption and allows her to see the beauty in where she comes from and what she has been given.

This narrative's setting transitions between Los Angeles and France. Sam is from Los Angeles and Anaïs is from France. However, there is another significant setting in this narrative: Korea. This is the country in which Sam and Anaïs were born and the country that contributes to their physical appearance. It is the country that that they both feel a mysterious connection with and return to. Travelling back to Korea provides Sam and Anaïs with a sense of their origins and backstory and reminds them of their roots, despite the fact that they didn't grow up in Korea for most of their life. More importantly, journeying back allows Sam and Anaïs to face their complicated past and challenges them to find the meaning in and significance of their adoption story.

The element defined in an adoptee's adoption narrative as "preoccupation with adoption" is seen through Sam and Anaïs' desire to want to know more about their past and why they were given up for adoption. Additionally, in this narrative, it seems as though Sam and Anaïs are involved in an open adoption, as they begin to learn more information about their birth mother from various sources. It is evident in this narrative, too, that Anaïs struggles with her identity as an adoptee more so than Sam. Navigating her own adoptee identity is a challenge for her throughout this narrative, and it is not until she meets Sam that parts of Anaïs' adoptee identity begin to fall into place. Both Sam and Anaïs are the wonderful products of a supportive and loving family environment, which grants them two drastically different adoption narrative experiences. Sam views her adoption as something positive, whereas even though Anaïs could not love her family more, she still finds it hard to accept the circumstances surrounding her adoption. Anaïs, specifically, feels emotions of abandonment and grief and even considers the day she was adopted as the beginning of her life. Sam, on the other hand, considers her story of adoption to be a joyful one, in part because of the

surplus of people in her life who have contributed to her happiness and success.

The most significant aspect of Sam and Anaïs' identity within this narrative is that both women have identities that have been influenced by different adoption experiences. Sam is cheerful throughout the film, whereas Anaïs battles a more significant internal struggle that deals with her determining what it means to come from a past that is filled with abandonment and neglect. At the end of the narrative, though, Anaïs reconciles with her ambivalent emotions about being adopted. By returning to Korea and reconnecting with her foster mother, she is provided with a sense of closure to a story she didn't initially want to revisit. Both Sam and Anaïs mature to the point where they want to write a letter to their birthmother. This last portion of the narrative demonstrates that Sam and Anaïs have grown significantly into their identities as Korean adoptees, and it is largely in part due to each other. They are now able to move forward in life as sisters who were once separated at birth but are now reunited and can continue pondering what it means to be a Korean adoptee.

IV. Discussion

First, the basis of this discussion draws on the narrative analyses of each film against the research presented in the literature review. There are multiple features within each narrative that are representative of the existent adoption narrative research.

In the case of *Lion*, character is the feature that is most significant in representing the adoptee's adoption narrative. Saroo's character development visually depicts the struggles and many emotions adoptees face, especially those who are international adoptees, and how overwhelming an adoptee's preoccupation with his or her adoption can be. In more than one instance in this narrative, Saroo confronts sentiments of grief, loss, and confusion regarding his identity and past. Because of this lack of closure he feels, Saroo becomes overly obsessed with his adoption, and his desire to reconnect with his lost family becomes so extreme that it impacts the relationships he has with those in his immediate family. Because he yearns to know more about his family and past and isn't able to, Saroo enters into an internal identity crisis, where he is challenged to face both the identity he was born with – Indian – and the Australian identity that has been a large part of his life. His identity crisis encapsulates, as well, the aspect of the adoption narrative for adoptees that focuses on the ethnic identity.

In the case of *Instant Family*, the most significant features are that of characters and causal relationships. The varying relationships between all of the main characters in this narrative drive the story forward and specifically shed new insight into the lives of parents who adopt through the welfare system. According to research, the adoption narrative for parents who choose to adopt through the welfare system often includes facing unexpected trials and tribulations, largely in part due to the foster children's past in the system. This aspect of the adoption narrative is illustrated through Pete and Ellie's relationship with Lizzie, Juan, and Lita. There are moments in the narrative when Pete and Ellie are confused about how best to handle situations regarding their children, and sometimes these parental stressors grow to be too much. Pete and Ellie's responses to all of these situations illustrate the complexity of the adoptive parents adoption narrative and how children from the welfare system can easily provide foster parents with challenges that call on them to establish skills that create and foster a positive family environment. Additionally, something unique about *Instant Family's* narrative is that real-life statistics are woven into characters' dialogue that reflect the true nature of the foster care system. Karen shares with the foster parents that "over half a million children are in foster care" and the system is "overloaded and doesn't need more children." By incorporating legitimate statistics regarding the state of the foster care system in this narrative, *Instant Family* is still a narrative of fiction but also one that revolves around data.

What is most significant about the narrative presented in *Twinsters* is that it highlights how important it is for adoptees to have a supportive community to foster positive sentiments of belonging. This strongly correlates to the sense of belonging that is fundamental in an adoptee's adoption narrative. Sam and Anaïs are given the gift of each other, and they thrive in one another's presence and grow as Korean adoptees. They realize they both share similar life experiences, even though they have grown up in separate countries, and this creates an inherent adoptee connection that only continues to flourish throughout the course of the narrative. The Korean conference Sam and Anaïs attend together, specifically, is one example of the types

of events that exist for adoptees to expand their communities. When Sam and Anaïs return to Korea for the conference, they also rediscover parts of their pasts because they are able to reconnect with their foster mothers. These interactions describe the open nature of their adoption. By having the chance to interact with them again, the questions Sam and Anaïs have been wondering for so long about their pasts begin to grow clear, and a sense of clarity washes over them. Not only is the importance of openness in adoption to adoptees explored in the literature, it is also a significant plot point in the *Twinsters* narrative that describes an already real-life story.

In each film, the adoption narrative is presented in a way that favors one point of view over another. In *Lion*, Saroo's point of view is favored, which allows for a greater understanding and compassion to develop between Saroo and the audience witnessing his story. In contrast, *Instant Family* heavily favors Pete and Ellie's point of view, as the narrative presented focuses mainly on their transition to parenthood and the obstacles they face and the victories they celebrate. *Instant Family*, however, does include the perspective of the eventual adoptees, Lizzie, Juan, and Lita, but not to the same extent as Pete and Ellie's. When both of these perspectives come together in this narrative, they create a more wholesome picture of what the adoption process looks like from multiple angles, which includes the adoptee and the adoptive parents.

Twinsters is slightly different, as it is a documentary from the start. Instead of being based on true events, like *Lion* and *Instant Family*, this narrative *is* the real story; therefore, it has no fictional elements to it. However, this is not to say that the narrative presented does not include elements of drama. Even in documentaries, drama exists, and there are multiple times in Sam and Anaïs' narrative when they are overcome with emotion. This, in turns, reminds viewers that these people are very much real-life and not characters shaped by screenwriters, and thus, their narrative *should* focus extensively on their point of view. At the same time, *Twinsters* presents a varied adoption narrative, as Sam and Anaïs view their adoption in different ways. So, though *Twinsters* is one cohesive adoption narrative from the adoptee's perspective, it also incorporates an element of varied perspective.

All three of these narratives have one distinct perspective throughout their entirety, and they very much are reflective of the real-life situations of adoption. Saroo's perspective in *Lion* addresses the overall themes of adoptee identity transformation and growth, especially in the form of preoccupation with adoption, experiencing, understanding, and coping with grief and loss, and what it means to navigate an ethnic identity. Pete and Ellie's perspective in *Instant Family* addresses the elements of the adoption narrative for parents that include having a strong marriage, effectively communicating, embracing a strong and supportive social community, and navigating the uncertainties and imbalances of the child welfare system. In *Twinsters*, Sam and Anaïs' perspective touches on the elements of the adoptee adoption narrative that relate to a sense of belonging, closure and acceptance through open adoption, and the ethnic identity.

Some depictions of adoption can have possibly hurtful implications. The visual narrative media observed in this paper create a stereotype regarding adoption involving being lost and then found, both for adoptees and for adoptive parents. In the case of *Lion* and *Twinsters*, Saroo, Sam, and Anaïs, are initially lost because a piece of them is missing. Yet, when Saroo reconnects with his biological mother and sister, and when Sam and Anaïs reconnect with their foster mothers and travel back to Korea, all three find the answers to the missing pieces of their lives that allow for them to become complete. In the case of *Instant Family*, Pete and Ellie are lost in a different way, as they sense a void in their marriage, and they are unsure of how to address it. When confronted with the possibility of fostering, they become found because they are not only able to create something that fills that void, a family, and they also find their calling as adoptive parents. In a similar manner, they also provide a new life for Lizzie, Juan, and Lita who are lost in the endlessness and toxicity of the child welfare system, and so, the children also become found.

While each of these characters became "found" in their own way, the adoption narrative may not manifest itself in this manner for every adoptee and adoptive parent. Some may stay lost forever and not have the opportunity to ever become found. It is possible that this stereotype feeds adoptees with a sense of false hope that they may be able to become "found" too when, in actuality, it is not possible or would take extraordinary effort. Some adoptees and adoptive parents may have narratives that will always be incomplete and comprised of sadness and longing.

The overall findings of this study suggest that the adoption narrative, as found in visual narrative media, mirrors the real-world adoptive experience. Nonetheless, the specific adoption stereotype of being lost and then found that these narratives create does reveal a possible discontinuity within the research, in that not all adoptees may be able to receive closure and acceptance.

V. Conclusion

This paper sought to identify and analyze how the adoption narrative for adoptees and adoptive parents is constructed in visual narrative media and if it is representative of the real-life components of adoption. The narrative analyses of *Lion*, *Instant Family*, and *Twinsters* vary in their own way, but all incorporate similar themes and motifs that center on the adoptee and adoptive parents' adoption experiences. Findings indicate that *Lion* very much emphasizes the setbacks adoptees encounter as they navigate the dual identity of being from one place and living in another, ethnic identity, and the grief, loss, and pain that adoptees often feel. *Instant Family* is a narrative that encompasses the different dimensions of foster care and parenthood, which both eventually lead to adoptive parenthood. *Twinsters* explores elements of the adoption narrative for adoptees that revolve around a sense of belonging, the notion that not all adoptees are the same, acceptance and closure, and ethnic identity.

In all three films, the adoption narrative is often explored extensively through one perspective, whether through the adoptee or adoptive parents. This single perspective has the potential to create a specific stereotype of being lost and then found. This stereotype could have negative consequences for viewers, especially if they are adoptees. They may be encouraged by the stories of Saroo, Pete and Ellie, or Sam and Anais, and not realize that their adoption narrative may not have the same “happily ever after” ending.

Several limitations affected the scope of this research and its findings. The chosen films represent just a small portion of such works; analysis of other films featuring adoption may have brought about different results. In addition, the adoption narrative for biological parents was not explored and could be a focus of future research.

In this study however, it is clear that *Lion*, *Instant Family*, and *Twinsters* incorporate elements of beauty, tragedy, and hope that all contribute to the films' adoption narrative and the adoption narrative for adoptees and adoptive parents as a whole. From what was observed, it can be concluded that when films present an adoption narrative, it often aligns with the real-life situations and experiences of adoption that have been researched thoroughly and that many encounter. At the same time, these adoption narratives will more than likely contain elements of drama, suspense, and romance that are quintessential to any fictional piece. When all of these elements come together, they can create a narrative that is impactful, inspirational, and crucial to the world of visual storytelling.

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