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Chatting Online With My Other Mother

Adoptive family views and experiences of the use of traditional and technological forms of post-adoption contact

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Abstract

Adoption practice has experienced a shift to 'openness' since the 1970s which recognises the importance of the adopted child's connection to their adoptive and birth families. Traditionally, openness includes communication between adopters and their children about adoption and birth family history, and/or direct (face-to-face) or indirect (letterbox) contact between adoptive and birth families with the support and mediation of social workers. However, a new form of technologically mediated contact has emerged that challenges these categories. 'Virtual contact' encompasses a range of post-adoption contact activities, including communication through social networking sites (SNS) (such as Facebook), texting and instant messaging via mobile technologies and emailing between adopted children and birth relatives. Given the seeming ubiquity of these modes of communication in today's society, particularly among young people, there is a feeling of inevitability surrounding virtual contact raising deep concerns for families and adoption practitioners. There is currently little published empirical research addressing this practice issue within adoption. This study explores the impact of communicative technologies on the practice and experience of openness in adoptive families today. An online survey of 101 adoptive parents was conducted, followed by interviews with 10 adoptive parents who had not experienced virtual contact and interviews with 13 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people who had experienced virtual contact. Survey data revealed a new set of technological practices that are emerging, namely that a large proportion of adoptive parents had searched online themselves for their child's birth relatives (63%) and a minority (9%) reported virtual contact in their families, with mixed experiences. A mixed thematic and interpretative phenomenological analysis of interviews highlighted that, traditional methods of contact remain an important feature of openness although complexities are evident. Virtual contact offered some families an alternative method of connection with benefits such as fulfilling adoptee identity needs and creating more personal, family relationships. However, risks existed including the unmediated nature of virtual contact and inappropriate behaviour of birth relatives. The experience of virtual contact was influenced by the characteristics of the adoptive family and individuals in it, the existing relationships between the adoptive and birth family, and the existence of additional challenges within the adoptive family. Findings suggest that empirical lessons learned in relation to traditional methods can lay foundations for the development of good practice concerning technological methods.

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Thank you to my friends and family who don't really know what I've been doing for the last three years, but have supported me all the same! Their names appear throughout the thesis in the form of participant pseudonyms as an acknowledgement of their support.

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“We are the kind of *guinea pig generation* of adoptive parents, because our adopted children have hit adolescence with Facebook”

(Adoptive parent)

Chapter 1: Introduction

When adopting a child five to ten years ago, adoptive parents (and the social workers who supported them) would never have imagined it possible for their child to be in touch with birth relatives via the Internet when they reached teenage years. Communicative technologies, including social media sites such as Facebook, have developed rapidly over the past decade and are becoming an established medium through which personal relationships are maintained. This carries with it opportunities and risks for technology users, and members of adoptive families are no different. However there may be additional concerns within adoption practice due to the unique aspects that define adoptive family life. This study focusses on the development of adoption practice in light of the growth of communicative technologies and the influence this has had on the shift to openness that has occurred since the 1970s.

Adoption creates a unique family centred on the adopted child's connection to two family networks; their birth and adoptive families. Adoptive families face additional challenges related to their unique structure as they support the adopted child to make sense of their adoptive status across their life. This involves varying degrees of 'openness' within the adoptive family and/or between the adoptive and birth families. Openness refers to conversations about the child's connection to two families within the adoptive household and can also refer to ongoing contact between the adoptive and birth families. Traditionally, post-adoption contact is supported and mediated by social work practitioners to ensure complex adoptive relationships are safely maintained. However, the growth of communicative technologies creates a potential for unmediated reconnection with birth relatives online via mediums such as Facebook. As the title of this thesis suggests, 'Chatting online with my other mother', the practice of virtual contact presents the adopted young person with communication with their two families which may require careful support. The debate surrounding the extent to which traditional methods of contact should be maintained and the impact this has on adoptive families, and in particular the adopted child, is still ongoing. Therefore the debate surrounding technological methods of contact is in its infancy and knowledge is lacking about how best to support adoptive families. It is vital that research keeps up with developing trends and practices within this field. This thesis explores the overall research question: how is the use of communicative technologies impacting the practice of openness in adoptive families?

Post-adoption contact is now a common feature of domestic adoption within the UK, where the vast majority (62%) of children have been taken into care for abuse or neglect and the average age of children who are adopted is 3 years 8 months (Department for Education UK, 2013). The UK has been placing children from public care in substantial numbers since the 1970s, but there has been a particular policy focus on increasing numbers and avoiding delays in recent years (Department for Education UK, 2012). This has created a context in which approximately 4000 children are adopted each year within the UK many of whom may be old enough to carry their experiences of the birth family to their new adoptive families. The ideology of openness highlights the importance of maintaining the child's connection to their birth family, but this can be challenging due to the child's complex birth history. To date, post-adoption contact has been conceptualised as direct (face-to-face) and indirect (letterbox) contact, or contact which is mediated by an adoption agency who set boundaries, facilitate the contact, and initiate changes (Henney & Onken, 1998: 46). However, the Internet is changing post-adoption contact and relationships, and a new form of 'virtual contact' has emerged. The term 'virtual contact' was used by Fursland (2010: 20), although the concept is not developed in her guidance produced for the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). Therefore, the term is used and conceptualised in this study and becomes the central defining term to describe the contact between adopted children and their birth relatives using communicative technologies, such as Facebook. Virtual contact encompasses post-adoption contact activities between adopted children and birth relatives via social networking sites, email, video calls, or text messaging. Adoption involves a range of additional tasks outside the realms of 'normal' family life. Adoptive parents must manage the additional needs of the adopted child, such as: the effects of complex or traumatic birth family histories (Neil, 2003), the need to talk openly with their child about their adoption (Brodzinsky, 2005) and often a form of contact with their child's birth family (Parker, 1999). The emergence of technology adds a further dimension to these complex tasks of openness (Adams, 2012). The growth in the use of technology, particularly by children and young people (Livingstone, 2009), has created the potential for online searches and communication. This has caused concern among practitioners and adoptive families as they attempt to manage this phenomenon. Current research is scant on this topic and therefore many gaps exist in our knowledge of the extent to which virtual contact occurs in adoptive families and the family experiences of it. In conjunction with a lack of research, there is also a lack of theoretical background to the emergence of virtual contact. This study aims

to add to the understanding of virtual contact within adoptive families and the wider theoretical and empirical context and argues that the emergence of virtual contact has created a complex interplay of risk and opportunity for adoptive families.

This chapter will outline the context, research problem, and solutions employed in this study in an attempt to fill some knowledge gaps. The context of the research focusses on the shift to openness in adoption, resulting in traditional practices to maintain the child's dual connection to their birth and adoptive families. However the growth in the use of communicative technologies has led to the emergence of the use of technological practices to maintain openness in adoptive families. The focus of the research problem emerges as little is known about the extent to which technological practices are employed by adoptive families and the experiences of this. Therefore, the solution offered by this research is to add to the knowledge base through uncovering the experiences and meanings of openness today in adoptive families, traditionally and technologically, with a sample of 101 adoptive parents who completed an online survey, and interviews with 23 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people.

1.1 The context: Openness in Adoption

Before I discuss the nature of adoption practice today, it is first necessary to define what is meant by 'adoption'. Von Korff, Grotevant, Koh and Samek (2010) define adoption as the legal transfer of the care and custody of a child from the birth family to the adoptive family. Since the mid-1970s (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998) adoption has experienced a shift in practice from the 'clean break' approach of breaking old birth family relationships and forming new adoptive family relationships, to maintaining openness and acknowledging the dual connection of the child to two families (Howe & Feast, 2000). Research into the damaging nature of closed adoptions has led to the ideological and practical shift to openness. Research has highlighted difficulties arising from closed adoptions for all members of the adoption triangle including: difficulties for adoptees in making sense of their history and identity (Triseliotis, 1973), adoptive parents not being able to resolve their fears about their child's birth family (Raynor, 1980), and the ongoing grief and feelings of loss that remain for birth parents (Howe, Sawbridge & Hinings, 1992). The shift to openness has also been influenced by the changing nature of adoption practice, particularly in the UK. Practice changes have involved a shift from the voluntary relinquishment of infants in a closed system, to the adoption of older children from the care system and the

maintenance of openness between the adoptive and birth families (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013).

Openness has been defined as:

> "a spectrum involving differing degrees and modes of contact and communication between adoptive family members and a child's birth mother" (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998: 2)

However, due to the more complex nature of adoptions of older children from care, a more appropriate description of openness within modern adoption may be that offered by Reitz and Watson (1992: 11):

> "We define 'adoption' as a means of providing some children with security and meeting their developmental needs by legally transferring ongoing parental responsibilities from their birth parents to their adoptive parents; recognising that in so doing we have created a new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child, who is shared by both. In adoption, as in marriage, the new legal family relationship does not signal the absolute end of one family and the beginning of another, nor does it sever the psychological tie to an earlier family. Rather, it expands the family boundaries of all those who are involved".

The expansion of family boundaries creates a family network that connects the child to their birth and adoptive families. Reitz and Watson's (1992) definition also highlights the complexity of this connection and the maintenance of this throughout the child's life.

The shift to openness in adoption means that adoptive families are typically required to maintain some contact with the birth family (Parker, 1999; Neil, Cossar, Jones, Lorgelly & Young, 2011). To date, this post-adoption contact has been conceptualised as direct (face-to-face), indirect (letterbox), or contact which is mediated by an adoption agency who set boundaries, facilitate the contact, and initiate changes (Henney & Onken, 1998: 46). In addition to this adoptive parents are required to facilitate open conversations with their child about their adoption to maintain communicative openness within the adoptive family and with the birth family (Brodzinsky, 2005). These tasks of openness have been defined as '*traditional open practices'* in this study as they are 'traditional' in the sense that they have developed from the original shift to openness. This research focusses on the

emergence of *'technological open practices'* that are defined in this study as those that are emerging within the context of the growth of communicative technologies.

The political history in the UK regarding the shift to openness and the maintenance of post-adoption contact is outlined below, and highlights the ongoing debates surrounding the nature, purpose, and impact of contact:

- Adoption Act 1976: no legal duty to promote contact, but adoptees could obtain their birth records when they reached the age of 18 years.
- Children Act 1989: once a child had been freed for adoption, birth relatives had to apply to the court for a contact order. If adoptive parents were in agreement, contact was maintained through trust rather than a court order.
- Adoption Act 2002: the first piece of legislation that made the demand that contact with the child's birth relatives must be considered, but there is no duty to promote contact. However, the value of relationships with birth relatives and other relevant people in the child's life must be considered. Adoption agencies are also obliged to offer support to all parties regarding post-adoption contact.
- Government consultation on contact 2012 (DfE, 2012a): the Coalition government invited comments on their proposals to tighten regulations surrounding contact and to add the option of a presumption of no contact with the adoption order. However, this latter proposal did not receive support, nevertheless it highlights the current political thought regarding the sometimes damaging nature of contact for the child. The government is due to make legislative restrictive changes regarding contact including a clear focus on the needs of the child. This consultation made reference to the government's awareness of virtual contact but states "this paper does not cover the development and impact of social media" (DfE, 2012a: 5). This is disappointing considering the current importance of this practice to adoptive families and practitioners.
- Children & Families Bill 2013: following the consultation regarding contact, the government added Clause 8 into the Children and Families Bill to prohibit contact with named individuals that pose a risk, but adding support for continuing contact with siblings. The UK Parliament (2013) issued a statement discussing Clause 8 and stressed the importance of outlining the purpose of contact within practice. Within this statement they recognised that 'unauthorised contact' through social media was evident in consultation responses. Responses focussed on risk and the

> Parliamentary statement argued that contact through social media could jeopardise the stability of placements. It was recommended that this risk was most effectively managed through practice responses rather that legislative changes and through communicative openness between adoptive parents and their children.

The political evolution of openness now supports an ethos within adoption practice to consider the importance of maintaining adoptive and birth family connections. However, the recent government consultation suggests that the longstanding positive development of openness is now being questioned, particularly with the emergence of communicative technologies. There has been a recent expansion of interest in and research on children's use of communication technology, such as social networking sites. The seminal EU Kids Online Project (see for example, Livingstone & Bober 2004; Livingstone, 2009; Livingstone, Olafsson, & Staksrud, 2011; Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig & Olafsson, 2011a) reported that 88% of children aged 13- to 16-years and 43% of children aged 9- to 12-years in the UK have their own social networking profile. To this end, it is now argued that the use of communicative technologies is becoming embedded in the everyday lives of children and young people (Livingstone et al., 2011a).

While most parents have concerns at some time about their children's use of communication technology, issues of access and privacy may be particularly salient for adoptive parents. Adoption involves a range of additional tasks outside the realms of parenting typically experienced in birth families, particularly if children have experienced abuse or neglect before they were adopted. While the importance of openness is recognised, especially for older adopted children (Parker, 1999), adoptive parents may find contact with birth relatives difficult due to the child's pathway to care and the potentially different needs of siblings within the same family (Jones & Hackett, 2007). These complexities may be compounded by the influence of communicative technologies on post-adoption contact.

1.2 The problem: The emergence of virtual contact

The coinciding development of openness within adoption practice and the growth in the use of communicative technologies in wider society, has led to the potential for a new form of 'virtual contact' between adopted children and their birth relatives. The term encompasses a range of post-adoption contact activities including communication through social networking sites between adopted children and birth relatives, and particularly

Facebook in this sample. The growth in the use of technology, particularly by children and young people (Livingstone, 2009), has created the potential for online searches and communication. This has caused concern among practitioners and adoptive families as they attempt to manage this phenomenon. Current research is scant on this topic and therefore many gaps exist in our knowledge of the extent to which virtual contact occurs in adoptive families and the impact this has. In conjunction with a lack of research, there is also a lack of theoretical background to the emergence of virtual contact. This study aims to add to the understanding of virtual contact within adoptive families and the wider theoretical and empirical context

Current practice and media responses to the emergence of this contact have also focussed on the risks that virtual contact can create, whilst acknowledging potential benefits. However, guidance has been based mainly on anecdotal evidence (Whitesel & Howard, 2013). Practice literature has been produced in the UK as an effort to respond to the use of technology in adoptive family life (Adams, 2012; Fursland, 2010; Hammond & Cooper, 2013; Morrison, 2012), whilst policy guidance is lacking. Although the collection of empirical studies focussing on the experience of virtual contact is small, there have been several key studies that suggest a complex interplay of risk and opportunity. To date the main research available has been undertaken in the USA by the Donaldson Adoption Institute (Howard, 2012; Whitesel & Howard, 2013) and in the UK through existing longitudinal research investigating the long term outcomes of contact (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013). Although this research is valuable and has begun to shed some light on the experiences of technology in adoptive families, several gaps in the knowledge surrounding virtual contact remain.

Adoption agencies play a central role in managing and supporting post-adoption contact arrangements (Neil et al., 2011), but they may well be unaware of contact that occurs online. Adoptive and birth family members use technology to fulfil needs of information, communication, or reunification (Neil, Beek, & Ward, 2013). Technology can also facilitate a range of other adoption-related activities online, including searching for birth relatives and information, providing online communities of support for members of the adoption kinship network (adoptive parents, adoptees and birth relatives), and allowing individuals to observe one another on social networking sites without making contact (Whitesel & Howard, 2013). The complex histories and ongoing needs of children (Jones & Hackett, 2007), the chaotic lives of birth relatives (Neil, 2007), and the lack of

emotional maturity of adopted children (Neil et al., 2011) can create challenges for adoptive parents supporting contact, especially the unknown nature of virtual contact. Adoptive parents may need to consider the risks of communication technology use more carefully than their birth counterparts, as their adopted children may face additional challenges associated with their early experiences of neglect or abuse with birth families (Brodzinsky, 1987). However, the emergence of virtual contact can also present opportunities for the adoptive kinship network. Authors have noted the 'window of opportunity' that communicative technologies present for adopted young people to communicate through a medium that they use in their everyday lives (Hammond & Cooper, 2013). Others have noted the value of communicative technologies to facilitate contact between the adoptive and birth family (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013; Whitesel & Howard, 2013).

Due to the shifts in adoption practice there is an increased complexity to adoptive family life which demands more of the modern adoptive parent (Howe, 1996). However, as a result of the evolution of adoption practice, the experiences of adoptive families today may not mirror the experiences of families tomorrow (Howe, 1996), including knowing how the current emergence of communicative technologies as a contact tool will impact the parenting tasks of adopters. Howe (1996: 1) argued that "the changing nature of adoption has always mirrored the changing nature of society. Adoption, its meaning and practice never stand still". Thus, it is possible to predict changes in adoption practice and learn from wider societal trends. The growth in the use of communicative technologies to maintain relationships, particularly by children and young people, is something that is becoming embedded in modern family life. Adoptive families are no different. Therefore it is not surprising that communicative technologies are being utilised as a contact method between the adoptive and birth family.

The debate surrounding the risks and benefits of more traditional methods of post-adoption contact is still ongoing (Triseliotis, 2010) and the use of technology as a contact method must be included in this debate to ensure empirical evidence is collated on the impact of this development on adoptive and birth families. The recognition that virtual contact, in the same way as traditional methods of contact, is not suitable for all families and children but can work well for some, allows practice to respond effectively and support those families who are most vulnerable to the risks involved. However, we currently do not have enough

evidence to know how to support adoptive families effectively in the wake of the emergence of virtual contact.

1.3 The solution: Researching adoptive family experiences of virtual contact

The emergence of virtual contact and the use of communicative technologies in adoptive families have attracted practice attention and concern over the last five years. Empirically, research is beginning to understand the impact of this changing practice. However, many gaps in the knowledge surrounding the impact of virtual contact on adoptive families remain. It is important to establish the best ways to support individuals to ensure they are protected from the risks and are able to benefit from the opportunities available. The overall aim and research problem is to investigate the impact of communicative technologies on the practice of openness in adoptive families. The empirical research that has emerged to date does not pay due consideration to the relationship between the occurrence of virtual contact and wider factors such as traditional contact arrangements, family demography, and adoptive parent characteristics and reactions. The practice literature is mainly based on anecdotal evidence and it is therefore vital to compare this to empirical data and the 'real' experiences of virtual contact within adoptive families. The service-user experience is important to create concrete practice recommendations grounded in real-life examples.

Due to the under-researched nature of the use of technological open practices in adoptive families, this topic is also lacking a comprehensive literature review bringing together ideas from the adoption and sociological literature. Therefore a critical review of literature will highlight gaps in the knowledge of adoption research and attempt to fill these discrepancies with information about the wider use of communicative technologies amongst children and young people. Epistemologically this research takes an interpretive stance, with the aim to uncover the meanings behind the experiences of openness in adoptive families. Whilst also being aware of the fact that the meanings are embedded in the relationships and interactions with other family members and influenced by internal and external structures (constructivism). The research employed a mixed methods design due to the dual aspect of the epistemological approach. The research design provides:

- A quantitative snapshot of the extent of virtual contact incidences in adoptive families using an online survey of 101 adoptive parents.

- Interpretative phenomenological and thematic analysis of opinions and experiences of virtual contact through interviews with 23 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people.

The findings present an analysis of the nature of openness in adoptive families today, comparing traditional and technological open practices. As a result, practice recommendations are made based on family experiences. Following the analysis of findings, a reconceptualisation of openness is offered to incorporate traditional and technological open practices into the tasks of adoptive family life. Conclusions are drawn that suggest that although technology presents new tasks for the adoptive kinship network, traditional practices are still maintained and the meanings behind openness remain.

1.4 Original Contribution

The originality of this research can simply be stated through its attempt to fill the many gaps in the knowledge that surround the recent emergence of virtual contact. However, this research also covers new ground in other areas outside only the research topic. In particular, the central focus of this research is the emergence of virtual contact. The only other study to have solely focussed on this was undertaken in the USA by Whitesel and Howard (2013). Empirical knowledge that has emerged in the UK, whilst valuable, has stemmed from studies that were investigating the impact of contact on adoptive families more generally (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Neil, Beek &Ward, 2013). Therefore, this study has placed virtual contact at the centre of the investigation, leading to in depth analyses of individual and family experiences. Furthermore, the contextualisation of the experiences of virtual contact in relation to influencing factors has been explored, including: family background, the parent-child relationship with a focus on parental mind-mindedness, communicative openness in the adoptive family, the attitudes to virtual contact and technological open practices that surround it, and the level of parental satisfaction. This focus on virtual contact allows for specific conclusions about the factors that influence and mediate the experiences of this emerging form of communication and what this means for wider post-adoption contact practices.

1.5 Terminology

This section defines the terms and concepts used in this thesis to ensure clarity. At the time the research began, practice attention was focussed on the use of Facebook by adoptive families (Fursland, 2010). However, communicative technologies develop quickly and

trends of social media use change. During the research, interest in new social media emerged such as Instagram and Twitter. Despite this, the use of Facebook persisted as the main medium in this sample of adoptive parents and adoptees.

The following terms are used throughout the thesis and are defined below:

- *Adoption/Adoptive Kinship Network* = adopted child, adoptive parents, siblings and extended family members, birth parents, birth siblings and extended birth relatives (Grotevant, McRoy & van Dulmen, 1998: 173).
- *Adoption agency* = refers to the professionals who facilitated the adoption and/or provide ongoing support to the adoptive kinship network.
- *Communicative/communication technologies* = refer to technologies that facilitate communication between individuals, including social networking sites (such as Facebook), emailing, video calls, and text messaging.
- *Virtual contact* = encompasses post-adoption contact activities between adopted children and birth relatives using communicative technologies such as social networking sites, email, video calls, or text messaging.
- *Technological open practices* = refers to practices that maintain openness within the adoptive kinship network associated with the recent growth in the use of communicative technologies in family life, namely: virtual contact, adoptive parent and adoptee online searching for information regarding birth relatives (and vice versa), and conversations about adoption specific e-safety.
- *Traditional open practices* = refers to practices that maintain openness within the adoptive kinship network associated with the original shift to openness from the 1970s, namely: acknowledging the child's dual connection to the adoptive and birth families, communicative openness (in particular the communication between the adoptive parents and the child about adoption related issues), and mediated post-adoption contact (indirect and direct).

1.6 Structure of the thesis

Following this brief introduction, I begin by describing the context of the research in more detail through a critical review of the literature leading into the research questions for this study. The methodology, methods, and research design are then outlined to explain how the research questions were addressed. The remaining chapters focus on addressing the aims of the research and are structured as follows:

- To establish the extent to which virtual contact has become a feature of post-adoption contact *(Chapter 5: Findings - The practice of openness in adoptive families today);*
- To determine associations between psychological factors and the experience of virtual contact *(Chapter 6: Findings - The individual factors that relate to parent perceptions of virtual contact);*
- To gain an understanding of the impact of communicative technologies on the practice of openness in adoptive families *(Chapter 7: Findings - A qualitative exploration of the impact of technology on openness);*
- To explore the benefits and risks of virtual contact and develop understanding of the meanings that are attached to this contact *(Chapter 8: Findings - Qualitative Accounts of Virtual Contact);*
- To identify strategies and support services needed to manage virtual contact that minimise risk and increase resilience *(Chapter 8: Findings - Qualitative Accounts of Virtual Contact),* and;
- To translate findings into concrete policy and practice recommendations *(Chapters 9 & 10: Argument Chapter and Conclusions).*

Chapter 2: Changes in Adoption Practice and the Shift to Openness

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the key focus of this study is to explore the changing nature of openness and adoption practice in light of advances in communicative technologies, such as social media and instant messaging. The following two chapters situate the emergence of 'virtual contact' in the context of empirical and theoretical shifts in the field of adoption and the growth in the use of communicative technologies in family life. This chapter discusses the development of adoption practice since the 1970s that has led to the promotion of openness within adoptive families. I define what openness is and what this means for adoptive families, and question the success of this ideology in its current form. The following chapter discusses the growing use of communicative technologies within family life and in particular the use of media, such as social networking sites, by children and young people. The specific concerns that adoptive parents may have with regards to their children using these technologies is considered due to additional vulnerabilities adopted children may face. A combination of the shift to openness in adoption and the growing use of communicative technologies in family life has led to the emergence of virtual contact in adoptive families. The limited knowledge that surrounds this emerging phenomenon will be explored and the potential factors that may influence the experience of virtual contact are considered. I finally highlight the gaps in knowledge that exist and outline the research questions that aim to address these gaps in certain ways.

Adoption practice today is underpinned by an ideology of 'openness' whereby the maintenance of post-adoption contact is expected for many children. This ideology has developed since the 1970s alongside changes in adoption practice that have seen an increase in older children adopted from the public care system with complex birth family histories. The most up to date figures show that the majority (62%) of children adopted in the UK have previously been taken into care as a result of abuse or neglect, with the average age of adoption being 3 years 8 months (Department for Education UK, 2013). Given this average age at adoption, many adopted children will have accumulated a history of experiences and relationships with birth relatives that necessitates the adoption being open. These developments are now recognised in policy documents within the UK, where adoption professionals have a duty to consider ongoing contact for each child based on the Adoption and Children Act 2002. However, as Logan (2009) argues, there is little

guidance for practitioners about *how* to consider contact. For example, how much contact, in what form, and with whom? Therefore the debate surrounding the success of post-adoption contact continues.

Although 'openness' has been defined in various ways by researchers and practitioners (Logan, 2009), the first chapter outlined the definition to be used in this study. The definition of openness by Reitz and Watson (1992: 11) states that adoption creates:

> "a new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child, who is shared by both…it expands the family boundaries of all those who are involved".

Openness exists along a continuum with respect to the frequency of contact, the dynamic nature of contact being subject to change, and the relationships maintained (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998: 2). Grotevant and McRoy (1998: 2-3) outlined three different types of adoption along the continuum of openness. *Confidential* adoptions do not include ongoing contact between the adoptive and birth families, with only minimal information shared and never directly. *Mediated* adoptions include non-identifying information being shared via an adoption agency and can include letters or infrequent meetings. *Fully disclosed* adoptions involve direct communication and disclosure of identifying information between parties, such as direct meetings, telephone calls, letters sent directly, with contact methods sometimes used with extended family members.

Neil et al. (2011) describe the tasks of openness as a 'spectrum' of open practices, including contact, life story work, and the adoption contact register. Within this spectrum exist three ideological and practical tasks that must be recognised within the adoptive kinship network: the *dual connection* of the adopted child to their adoptive and birth families, the *communicative openness* within the adoptive family about adoption-related issues, and the *structural openness* that facilitates contact between the birth and adoptive families.

2.1 Dual connection

The connection of the adopted child to two separate families involves 'kinship work' by adoptive parents to ensure that the child maintains a link to their birth family whilst feeling secure in their adoptive family (Jones & Hackett, 2011). Linked to the shift to openness in adoption, Jones and Hackett (2012: 287) outlined several tasks within adoptive family life

that require a rethinking of the way in which adoptive family life and kinship is defined through the dual connection of the child. The tasks can include: face-to-face meetings and telephone contact between adoptees, adopters and birth relatives; the exchange of gifts and written communications between adoptive and birth families, searching out birth relatives when adoptees reach adulthood, adoption-related conversations between adopters and adoptees; and the careful safekeeping of objects related to the birth family such as jewellery, photographs and other treasured possessions. The tasks outlined fall into two categories: prescribed open practices (e.g., contact) and practices within the private realm of the family (e.g., adoption conversations) (Jones & Hackett, 2012). A significant feature of the adoptive family is integrating these public and private practices into day-to-day family life (Jones & Hackett, 2012: 287). Sociological theory focussing on the family has shifted from viewing the family as a fixed structure to one that is fluid, created, and renegotiated over time (Smart, 2007; Finch & Mason, 1993). As Crank (2002: 98) states, "adoption rearranges family boundaries in a way that ties together the birth family and the adoptive family and complicates the narratives of those involved for the rest of their lives".

Further, Grotevant and Von Korff (2011) argue that the openness that has been created in adoption through the acknowledgement of the child's dual connection has blurred the boundaries of adoptive and biological parenthood. This dual connection creates a unique family network that is different from 'normal' biological family life. Kirk (1964) argues that this difference must be acknowledged for each member of the adoptive kinship network to empathise with the 'shared fate' of loss that they all experience. The recognition that birth parents, and in particular the birth mother, continue to be present in the minds of adoptees (Howe, 1996: 4) must be remembered. This psychological presence must be acknowledged through open conversations about adoption-related issues within the adoptive family, and the physical presence is something that may be considered through the maintenance of post-adoption contact arrangements.

2.2 Communicative openness

David Brodzinsky (2005) defines 'communicative openness' as adoptive parents being open to consider the meanings of adoption for themselves and their child, be willing to talk to them about this, and to promote and facilitate conversations. Further, he highlights three levels of openness: intrapersonal (self-exploration), intrafamilial (communicative openness in adoptive family), and interfamilial (exploration and communication between adoptive and birth families). Brodzinsky (2005) differentiated between communicative and

structural openness, with the latter referring to the interfamilial contact arrangements between adoptive and birth relatives. He further argued that the quality of communicative openness may be more important to the adopted child's identity development than contact itself, and should be maintained whether there is contact or not (Brodzinsky, 2005). Further research evidence also points to the importance of communicative openness. Von Korff and Grotevant (2011), used data to highlight this from Waves 2 (adolescence) and 3 (emerging adulthood) of the Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP) which is a longitudinal study exploring variations in openness in the USA since the 1980s with a sample of 720 individuals including adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth relatives. The data used in 2011 included interviews with adoptees and adoptive parents in 184 families, and reported that communicative openness played a direct role in adoptive children's identity development, mediating the association between actual contact and identity formation. Von Korff and Grotevant (2011) argued that conversations help adoptees to organise and make sense of their adoptive identity and the meaning of adoption in their lives. Neil, Beek and Ward (2013) proposed that contact was associated with the development of a cohesive identity. However, the adoptive parents played a key role in the facilitation of identity development through scaffolding their child's adoptive narratives (Neil et al., 2013). Research suggests that the level of comfort with adoption-related conversations can vary between adoptive families (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Beckett et al., 2008). Therefore it is also deemed important to maintain contact with birth relatives for many adopted children.

2.3 Structural Openness: Post-adoption contact

Post-adoption contact traditionally incorporates direct (face-to-face) and indirect (letterbox) methods. The majority of post-adoption contact is maintained through letterbox arrangements involving mediated written exchanges between the adoptive and birth relatives (Neil, 2002; 2009). Contact can *sustain* or *build* relationships (Neil, 2002a). Therefore the purpose of contact will determine how frequent it is. For example, contact used to answer questions and build a child's identity could be less frequent than contact used to sustain relationships.

It is now recognised that it is important to maintain contact and existing relationships for some children, particularly those placed at an older age (Fratter, Rowe, Sapsford & Thoburn, 1991; Parker, 1999; Frasch, Brooks & Barth, 2000; Neil et al., 2011), and most adopted children now have ongoing contact with their birth family (Neil, 2000). It is still

commonly quoted that at least 70% of adopted children will have post-adoption contact with the birth relatives in the UK (Parker, 1999). However, due to the fact that figures regarding the extent of post-adoption contact are not routinely collected, MacDonald and McSherry (2011) state that it is unclear how many families agree to and maintain contact, as figures range from 7% (Thoburn, 2004) to 75% (Lowe et al., 1999; McSherry et al., 2008). There is also a wide variation in studies regarding the frequency, intensity, and nature of contact (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011) and the research design used to collect data (Logan, 2009).

Parker (1999) argued that contact can affect members of the adoption triangle differently and this can change over time. Grotevant, Ross, Marchel and McRoy (1999: 239) suggest that this involves an ongoing renegotiation of arrangements, particularly between adults, which they describe as like a 'successful dance'. Theoretically, contact has been described as "a complex dance in which the roles and needs of the participants change over time, affecting the kinship network as a whole' (Grotevant, Perry & McRoy, 2005: 182). Further, Neil and Howe (2004) argue that contact is a dynamic and transactional process. In addition, Neil et al., (2013) suggest that contact be purposeful, individualised, and relationship-based to ensure it meets the needs of all members of the adoption kinship network.

Despite the complex nature of the 'dance', Jones (2013) argues that research points to a consensus that openness in adoption is a positive development. However, the private or public management of contact is still contested. Although public policy currently defines how contact should take place, and adoption agencies often mediate it, the actual practice of contact creates private family relationships (Jones & Hackett, 2012). These relationships are often difficult to manage, due to inherent complexities within the notion of dual connection. For example, the chaotic lives of birth relatives (Neil, 2007) can lead to adoptive parents having to manage the potential risks posed by the birth family. The idea of risk and family are contradictory terms (Jones & Hackett, 2012), and highlight the changing construction of kinship within adoptive families. The complexity of both communicative and structural openness has created contradictory research outcomes contributing to the ongoing debate regarding the success of openness.

2.4 Evaluating the success of openness

There is a general consensus that communicative openness is a positive aspect of adoptive family life (Brodzinsky, 2005; Neil et al., 2013; Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). In contrast, the debate surrounding post-adoption contact is unresolved. The importance of contact is recognised, particularly for older adopted children (Parker, 1999). However, contact cannot be assumed always to be in the best interests of the child (Neil et al., 2011) and the complexities of these practices must be recognised (Jones, 2013). Adoptive parents may find the task of contact difficult due to additional sensitivities they must consider, including the child's pathway to care and the potentially different needs of siblings within the same family (Jones & Hackett, 2007). It has been argued that adoption agencies in their role as mediators are crucial to manage and support post-adoption contact arrangements (Neil et al., 2011).

Practice rightly purports that post-adoption contact be in the best interests of the child (Neil et al., 2011). Adopted children often report satisfaction with mediated contact and any dissatisfaction seems to be associated with wanting increased contact (Thomas, Beckford, Lowe & Murch, 1999; Macaskill, 2002). Research has identified certain benefits for children in maintaining contact with birth relatives: (a) they are able to continue having relationships with birth relatives with whom they have an attachment (Slade, 2002), (b) contact can reassure the child that birth relatives are safe (Macaskill, 2002; Smith & Logan, 2004), (c) contact can help the child to understand their background and reasons for their adoption (Thoburn, 2004), and (d) contact can help to resolve identity issues due to the provision of information and reduce feelings of self-blame by an increase in understanding of birth family difficulties (Fratter, 1996). Of key importance to adopted children is the provision of information gained through contact (Fratter, 1996; Macaskill, 2002; Neil et al., 2011).

However, there can also be several risks inherent in contact arrangements for some children. Children who have a history of neglect or abuse can be unsettled or even re-traumatised by contact (Macaskill, 2002; Howe & Steele, 2004; Smith & Logan, 2004). The quality of contact can also be affected by the difficult or inappropriate behaviour of birth relatives (Macaskill, 2002). Past relationships with birth relatives may not be maintained due to the often infrequent nature of contact, and therefore birth relatives and children may not be able to relate to one another anymore (Neil, 2002a). Although the needs of the child should be central and paramount to contact decisions, other parties in the

network can also be affected by and influence the contact experience (Neil & Howe, 2004, Neil et al., 2011). Cossar and Neil (2013) argue that contact not only continues pre-existing relationships, it can change these relationships and create new ones, involving a negotiation of family boundaries. Contact in itself sends a message about which birth family relationships are valued and who is a family member (Cossar & Neil, 2013).

As Macaskill (2002: 74) argued, the "positive aspects of contact [are] usually complexly interlinked with negative aspects". Therefore, the complexity of the contact 'dance' occurs within adoptive kinship networks and can change over time. Table 1 outlines the knowledge we have through selected empirical research regarding the benefits and challenges of openness, including communicative openness and post-adoption contact. This table highlights the controversy that still surrounds openness and the debate that continues.

Table 1: Existing empirical knowledge surrounding the benefits and challenges of openness

Benefits	**Challenges**
Communicative openness • A strong indicator of positive adoptee adjustment, higher self-esteem, and fewer behavioural problems (Brodzinsky, 2006). • Can build trust between adoptive parents and their adopted child (Kohler, Grotevant & McRoy, 2002). • Adoptees who experienced more communicative openness about adoption did not experience split loyalties and could manage the dual relationships involved in contact (Richardson, Davey & Swint, 2013: 370). • Can aid the development of a positive adoptive identity (Howe & Feast, 2000). • Open conversations can also act as a resource in adulthood for adoptees, especially during search and reunion (Petta & Steed, 2005).	*Communicative openness* • Adoptive parents can underestimate the difficulty their adopted children have talking about their adoption and communication can vary between families and also within the family with different siblings (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Beckett et al., 2008). • Children and parents often differ about the level of communication in the family (Brodzinsky, 2006). • Adoptive parents can struggle to meet the level of communicative openness recommended by professionals (Howe & Feast, 2000).
Post-adoption contact • Contact has been associated with placement stability (Barth & Berry, 1988; Ryburn, 1998,1999). • Contact can aid attachment in the early stages of placement (Fratter, 1996). • For the adopted child, contact can maintain relationships with siblings (Fratter et al., 1991), provide reassurance about the wellbeing of birth relatives (Macaskill, 2002), and allows them to explore identity	*Post-adoption contact* • There can be differing desires about contact and boundary issues between adoptive and birth families (Macaskill, 2002; Siegel & Smith, 2012) • Adoptive parents and birth relatives can find it difficult to collaborate and their needs can sometimes overshadow the needs of the child (Grotevant et al., 1999). • In relation to the methods of contact used, letterbox contact has been reported to be

issues (Hoopes, 1990; Grotevant, 1997; Macaskill, 2002). • For adoptive parents, contact provides more positive attitudes towards their child's birth relatives and greater empathy for their child and birth relatives (Neil, 2003). Contact can also increase their sense of entitlement to the child (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998) and reduce fears of the birth relatives (Berry, 1991; Neil, 2009). Adopters also gain a greater understanding of their child's background (Macaskill, 2002). • For birth relatives, contact can help them to accept the adoption (Macaskill, 2002), and reduce feelings of loss and guilt (Raynor, 1980). • Contact can enable higher levels of communicative openness and improved relationships between adopted children and their adoptive parents (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Brodzinsky, 2006; Neil, 2009; Grotevant et al., 2011). • Contact can be a resource to adoptee, adoptive parents, and birth relatives by providing information and understanding, role clarity and understanding dual connection, and relationships (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013: 281).	complex and does not maintain genuine communication and relationships (Logan, 1999; Neil, 2009). Direct contact with birth relatives who were involved in the child's abusive pathway to care, can bring back painful memories for the child, and in some cases re-traumatise them (Macaskill, 2002). • Child distress following contact was caused by: contact too soon after placement, too frequent contact, and a negative relationship between adults (Macaskill, 2002). • Mediated methods of contact have been criticised as not allowing 'family-like' relationships and interactions (Jones & Hackett, 2012)

Empirical evidence has highlighted the benefits of contact for many children. However, the difficulties encountered are often related to the sensitive and complex relationships within the adoption kinship network. The negotiation of relationships post-adoption will involve the task of 'emotional distance regulation', which is defined as "navigating the dimension of closeness-distance in these relationships" (Grotevant, 2009: 295). Over a period of time, due to emotional distance regulation and other interpersonal processes, members of the adoption kinship network negotiate a level of contact that suits all (Grotevant, 2009). Adopter motivation to maintain contact is influenced by their ability to see the benefits of contact for their child. However, problems can occur when contact is not equally advantageous (Smith & Logan, 2004).

Using the theoretical framework of Boss (1988), Fravel, McRoy, and Grotevant (2000: 425) define 'boundary ambiguity' as "a condition that exists when an individual's physical and psychological presence in the family are incongruent, thereby increasing the likelihood that the family members may have difficulty determining whether that person is inside or outside the family". Boundary ambiguity in adoptive families is mediated by the physical

and psychological presence of birth mothers in everyday family life (Fravel et al., 2000). The psychological presence of the birth mother increases with openness, and is highest in fully-disclosed adoptions where birth mothers must face the reality of their new role in their child's life (Fravel et al., 2000). Positive attitudes of adoptive parents and relationships with birth relatives provide continuity to the child and allow them to manage the existence of 'two families' more easily (Macaskill, 2002: 116). In the 'close relationships model' (Kelley et al., 1983), it is argued that a 'comfort zone' is created through interaction and information seeking whereby relationships between strangers are established. However, unique to the adoption situation are power asymmetries and agency involvement in contact (Grotevant, McRoy & van Dulmen, 1998: 174). When interactions and relationships are positive, individuals will risk more contact outside of their comfort zone in the future (Grotevant, 2009). Grotevant et al. (1998: 178) outlined key factors that increase or decrease openness and the level of contact in the adoptive kinship network (Table 2).

Table 2: Factors that increase and decrease openness (Grotevant, McRoy & van Dulmen, 1998)

Factors that increase openness	Factors that decrease openness
• Adoptive and birth family's mutual concern for the child's wellbeing • Emergence of satisfying relationships • Unimpeded flow of communication	• Increased geographical distance • Differences in lifestyle and incompatibility • Friends/relatives who discouraged contact • Change in birth mother's situation (e.g. marriage) • Inability to negotiate an agreed comfort zone of contact • Adoptive parents feeling that contact was stressful for the child • Agency intermediaries not keeping contact up to everyone's satisfaction

Despite the increase or decrease of openness over time, certain qualities within the adoptive kinship network will ensure that the experience of openness is positive and meets the needs of each member. Siegel and Smith (2012) identified a range of opportunities and challenges regarding openness in their survey of 100 adoption agencies offering infant adoptions in the USA. They argue that the following four factors can lead to strong open adoptions and relationships:

- A *shared understanding* of what openness is: child-centred focus, understanding benefits of openness and moving beyond fear, openness does not erase feelings of loss, and importance of role clarity.
- *Foundational relationship qualities*: empathy, respect, honesty and trust and, commitment to maintaining the connection.
- *Self-determination* from all parties in shaping open relationships: ability to set boundaries and adaptability of relationships.
- *Collaborative communication* in planning contact and discussing needs and feelings: planning and the availability of support services. (Siegel & Smith, 2012: 24).

The dynamics of the adoptive kinship network evolve over time, mainly due to the entrance and exit of members (Grotevant, 2009). However, Grotevant (2009: 308) argues that openness is still a new enough development that there is no 'relationship template' or an idea of what relationships are 'supposed' to look like in the adoptive kinship network. For example, when the adoptee gains more control over contact and their relationships with birth relatives in adolescence, they must decide the level of closeness they should have with their birth family without the mediation of their adoptive parents (Grotevant, 2009).

A recent study highlights the complexities involved in the maintenance of openness and contact. MacDonald and McSherry's (2011) study, including interviews with 20 sets of adoptive parents from the Northern Ireland Care Pathways and Outcomes Study, explored parent views about contact and talking to their child about adoption. The study found that although adoptive parents talked sensitively to their child about adoption, complexities were evident, and all forms of contact were thought to be emotionally and practically burdensome. Adopters in MacDonald and McSherry's (2011) study were aware of their child's changing developmental needs regarding contact. However, they lacked the interfamilial communication with the birth family to be able to informally make the changes needed, and there were no formal mechanisms to be able to respond to their child's changing needs either. This highlights potential limits of openness in its current form in its ability to meet the needs of all adopted children and their families.

2.5 Questioning the suitability of traditional methods of openness

This chapter has outlined ways in which traditional open practices can have a beneficial impact on the adoption kinship network. However, the evidence suggests that openness

often presents complexities and challenges. I therefore argue that there is a need to question the suitability of current methods of openness in their ability to maintain relationships, address identity issues for the adopted child, and have positive outcomes for all concerned. Triseliotis (2010) argues that the debate surrounding the merits of contact is still ongoing and there is no standardised measure against which to evaluate the risks and benefits of contact. It seems that there are inherent problems for many families in their quest to maintain the child's dual connection. As Macaskill (2002) argued the positives of contact and openness are interlinked with negative aspects and risks.

The 'complex dance' (Grotevant et al., 2005: 182) that is involved through maintaining post-adoption contact creates challenges for the adoption kinship network. The challenges are particularly evident when considering the ability of current methods to meet the purpose of acknowledging and sustaining the adoptee's dual connection. Smith and Logan (2004) have argued that traditional methods of contact may not sufficiently facilitate the ongoing exchange of information and maintenance of relationships. This is highlighted in the literature surrounding search and reunion, and the 'information gaps' in knowledge about birth family history that exist when the adoptee reaches adulthood (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009). This may be due to certain limitations of traditional methods. Sinclair, Baker, Wilson and Gibbs (2005) have highlighted that contact is often not extended to wider birth family members and previous foster carers, and suggest that this is often a lost opportunity for adopted children. Therefore the relationships that are important to the child may not be maintained. In addition the methods themselves have been criticised. Over a decade ago, Swanton (2002: 129) argued that letter-writing, the method used in the majority of contact cases, is not a 'modern-day skill'. Letterbox, often viewed as the easier end of the contact spectrum, can be challenging (Sales, 2002). Whereas, face-to-face contact can feel unnatural. Therefore it is important to engage in activities that children currently enjoy, for example communicative technologies. Neil (2002a) argued that when developing contact arrangements between the birth relatives and the adopted child it may be useful to learn from established family models of interaction and how the child usually interacts with family members. This would ensure that public contact practices can be integrated into the private realm of the family.

The infrequent and formal nature of contact arrangements make it difficult to create interactions that can be defined as 'family practices' that require an everyday element (Morgan, 1996). Contact is an artificial meeting, with private displays often played out in

public settings with individuals that are unprepared (Slade, 2002). The 'strangeness' of the contact event itself can limit the development of family relationships and achieving closeness is difficult when interaction is limited to the contact event itself (Cossar & Neil, 2013). The nature of post-adoption contact often means that it is fairly infrequent, creating a lack of family intimacy on a day-to-day basis and a lack of current information and knowledge about birth relatives (Jones & Hackett, 2012: 291). Virtual contact may provide a way to normalise birth family relationships for some adoptive families and add an everyday element to contact, although the risks of this contact would need to be considered. In terms of developing the personal characteristics necessary for the maintenance of successful adoption kinship relationships, the formality of current contact arrangements does not facilitate the closeness necessary. As Neil and Howe (2004: 253) argued, "the more people know about each other, the greater their understanding, tolerance and compassion is likely to be". In order to develop empathic qualities and the ability to consider the perspectives of others (Neil, 2003), trusting relationships must develop which can be difficult through infrequent and formal contact arrangements.

The negative impact of contact on individuals within the adoption kinship network must also be considered. Of vital importance is the potential traumatising nature of contact for some adopted children with certain birth relatives (Macaskill, 2002). Children are often not listened to regarding their feelings about contact (Macaskill, 2002) and therefore it is not surprising that contact can sometimes be problematic for them. There is a certain pressure put on adoptive parents with the responsibility held in their role as 'kin keepers' (Grotevant, 2009). Adoptive parents find all methods of contact and openness challenging to some extent (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011) which can cause stress in their role as parents leading to problematic relationships with their child. Despite the stress that can be caused, adoptive parents often facilitate contact for the benefit of the child (Smith & Logan, 2004). When openness was a new and untested idea, adoptive parents were still prepared to support this despite any worries or concerns (Swanton, 2002). Therefore, the emergence of virtual contact could be one that is also managed and incorporated into the private practices of family life.

We are still learning about the impact of traditional open practices on the adoption kinship network and the debate about the risks and benefits continues. In the meantime, some adoption kinship networks are moving on to use technological methods, such as social networking sites to maintain openness. Macaskill's (2002) study of 76 adoptive and foster

care families of 106 children involved in face-to-face contact, is based on the premise that the voices of those closely involved in the contact itself are significant. These voices can be used to extend professional knowledge surrounding contact that, Macaskill (2002) argued, is still in an 'embryonic' stage. A decade on, we are still learning about the longer term outcomes of contact and the way it impacts adoptive families. We know that contact will not be appropriate for all adopted children and their families, and planning must be made on an individual basis to avoid a 'one size fits all' policy surrounding contact arrangements (Neil et al., 2011). Moreover, the traditional methods of post-adoption contact appear somewhat outdated in the Internet age, where communication is increasingly facilitated via technology. The next chapter discusses the use of communication technology in family life and its potential impact on adoptive families and contact.

Chapter 3: The Growth of Virtual Communication in Family Life

The research conducted for this thesis comes at a time of great expansion in the use of and research interest into virtual communication, specifically children's use of social networking sites. The seminal EU Kids Online Project (see for example, Livingstone & Bober 2004; Livingstone 2009; Livingstone et al. 2011; 2011a) investigated the use of technology by children and young people across Europe, providing information on what children do online. Within the EU Kids Online Project, Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, and Olafsson (2010) interviewed a sample of 1,032 nine to 16-year-olds in the UK who use the Internet, and one of their parents/carers, to try to answer this question. Compared to the European average, more UK children go online at school (91% vs. 63%), at home (95% vs. 87%), and when 'out and about' (21% vs. 9%). Half of UK children go online via a mobile device and 70% go online daily. UK children are among the youngest in Europe with regards to the first time they used the Internet, with an average age of 8 years. In addition, Livingstone et al. (2011) discovered that 88% of children aged 13 to 16 years and 43% of children aged 9 to 12 years in the UK have their own social networking profile, with 87% of social networking site users preferring Facebook. To this end, it is now argued that the use of communicative technologies is becoming embedded in the everyday lives of children and young people (Livingstone et al., 2011a).

The influential Byron Review in the UK (2008) entitled *Safer Children in a Digital World* has shaped current policy and guidance surrounding E-Safety. Byron suggested that online risk centres on inappropriate content, contact, and conduct. This framework of risk is one that is applied to the practice of virtual contact in the analysis of data in this study. When thinking about virtual contact the three concepts of risk can be defined as, sensitive information found online (content), risky and unmediated virtual contact (contact), and inappropriate behaviour by birth relatives online (conduct). With reference to social networking sites, 26% of social network users in Europe have a public profile, meaning that anyone can view their information, risking their privacy (Livingstone et al., 2011a). Findings by the EU Kids Online project suggest that parents are concerned about their child's Internet safety (Livingstone, Olafsson, O'Neill, & Donoso, 2012). In particular, Livingstone and Haddon (2009) found that parents are most worried about their child seeing sexual or violent content online, being a victim of online grooming, getting information about self-harm, becoming isolated, and giving out personal information.

Livingstone and Haddon (2009) also found that parents are more worried about girls and younger children. In order to try to protect their children from online risk, parents employ a variety of strategies, including rules and restrictions, social approaches such as talking to their child, and technical methods such as filters (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). However, Duerager and Livingstone (2012) argue that restrictive parental controls on their child's Internet use may reduce risk but also reduce online opportunities. Therefore they suggest that 'active mediation' by parents is the most appropriate method, involving talking to their child about the Internet, sharing online experiences with them, and encouraging them to explore. This not only reduces risk and harm, but also increases the online opportunities for children and young people. The majority of parents are confident that they can help their child deal with online risk (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011a). This may be due to the fact that as many parents as children are now online, and parents who are online themselves are less worried about their children (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). However, children may still overtake their parents in terms of the range of their online activities, and the knowledge and skills they possess (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009).

Despite the potential risks, children and young people also experience opportunities online, including education, communication, and participation (Livingstone & Bober, 2004). The Internet affords children and young people the ability to exercise greater agency (James & Prout, 1997) and have more control in their social and communicative activities. Research suggests that the use of virtual communication can serve a purpose in the formation of identity, particularly in adolescence where this is a vital stage of development (Erikson, 1963; 1968). Livingstone et al. (2011) found that 50% of 11- to 16-year-olds find it easier to be themselves online. Children and young people also often find support online in the form of peer relationships, and online interactions serve as a place to air adolescent concerns and exchange identity information with peers (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Livingstone (2013) provides a useful discussion of the interplay between risk and opportunity, and points to the fact that the same act can result in a potentially harmful or positive experience (e.g., making a 'friend' on Facebook). However, it has been argued that it is not necessarily beneficial to protect children from all online risk. E-safety guidance argues that the empowerment of children and young people is vital to allow them to take 'calculated risks' online, learn how to respond and cope, and therefore build resilience (Livingstone, 2013). As Byron argues, "children and young people need to be empowered to keep themselves safe…Children will be children – pushing boundaries and

taking risks. At a public swimming pool we have gates, put up signs, have lifeguards and shallow ends, but we also teach children how to swim" (Byron, 2008: 2). Due to the unmediated nature of virtual contact and consequently the lack of support it entails, adopted children may need to be taught how to 'swim' through the new technological context of openness. As Neil et al., (2013) argue adopted children need to be supported to develop their own realistic expectations of virtual contact.

Byron (2008) thus proposes that empowerment is the best way to keep children and young people safe online, and ensure they build resilience to be able to cope with online risks. An obvious way to do this is to educate children and young people about online safety management techniques (Livingstone, O'Neill & McLaughlin, 2011). However, Prensky (2001) argues that adults, 'digital immigrants', often lack the digital skills to support and educate young people, 'digital natives'. This digital divide will not only apply to parents but also policy makers, child protection officers, social workers, and school teachers. The existence of a digital divide, in whatever degree, must be reduced if parents and practitioners are able to support children and young people to be safe online, as children's agency, and therefore digital literacy, may not be as high as their 'digital native' status affords them as suggested by findings in the EU Kids Online Project (see Livingstone & Brake, 2010). Some children, especially those who are younger, still lack the digital skills to keep themselves safe online (Livingstone et al., 2010). The Internet is a 'many-to-many' network making it difficult to exercise control at a particular point (Byron, 2008). It will therefore often fall to the family to manage the risks associated with this platform of communication.

3.1 Adoptive families and virtual communication

In addition to the traditional forms of post-adoption contact discussed in Chapter 2, a new form of 'virtual contact' has emerged in adoptive families (Fursland, 2010: 20). While traditional forms of post-adoption contact are transparent and managed by adoption agencies and adoptive parents, virtual contact with birth relatives can be covert. The extent to which birth relatives are physically present in the adoptive family's life is dependent on the amount of ongoing contact that is sustained. Even if no contact is maintained, adoptees may decide to search and reconnect with birth relatives in late adolescence or early adulthood (Howe & Feast, 2000). Today, technological open practices have extended the openness that is possible. Due to the elements of openness and contact, the adoptive kinship network will have to negotiate the level of closeness of relationships (Grotevant,

2009), and the roles and boundaries within the network (Fravel, McRoy & Grotevant, 2000). The dynamic nature of openness and the changing needs of the adopted child mean that this process of negotiation will be in a state of continual evolution over the life course of the adoptive family (Logan & Smith, 2004; Neil & Howe, 2004).

Adoptive parents may need to consider the risks of online use more carefully than their birth counterparts, as their adopted children face additional challenges (Brodzinsky, 1987). Given that the vast majority of adopted children in the UK have experienced abuse or neglect, adoptive parents may thus have legitimate concerns about their child being contacted by birth relatives. Evidence points to a link between online and offline vulnerability (Bradbrook et al., 2008; Byron, 2008). Byron (2008) suggests that increased online vulnerability is linked to offline characteristics, such as being from abusive or unstable homes, and having low self-esteem or mental health problems. Children adopted from care are a particularly vulnerable group due to the experience of trauma in their birth family (Neil et al., 2011). If adopted children and young people are considered to be vulnerable offline, they may therefore be more vulnerable online and find risks more upsetting (Livingstone et al., 2011a). These children and young people may also have fewer online skills due to the fact that adoptees are often more immature than their non-adopted counterparts (Macaskill, 2002), and therefore may not be able to keep themselves safe (Livingstone et al., 2011a; Morrison, 2012).

With respect to the positive impact of the Internet usage in forging one's identity, adopted children and young people may find the task of identity development particularly challenging. Schofield and Beek (2006) argue that adopted children need to maintain a connection to their birth family, but also be able to belong in the adoptive family. Further, adoptive identity issues can arise due to the disconnection from birth relatives and a potential lack of background information (Grotevant, 1997; Hoopes, 1990). Using Erikson's life-cycle model, Brodzinsky, Schechter and Marantz Henig (1992: 15-16) outlined the specific tasks associated with the adolescent stage for an adoptee, and argue that the question of 'who am I?' has two additional parts for an adoptee; why they are adopted and who they are in relation to adoption. These additional questions lead to: further exploration of what it means to be adopted, trying to connect their identity to adoption, coping with loss, coping with physical (and maybe racial) differences to their adoptive family, and considering the possibility of searching for birth relatives (Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

In their study involving interviews with 153 adopted adolescents, Wrobel and Dillon (2009) argue that curiosity is a natural part of every child's personality, however, adopted children's dual connection to their adoptive and birth families provides a unique experience that captures their curiosity. Using the ideas of Loewenstein (1994), Wrobel and Dillon (2009) argue that the adopted adolescent's curiosity is driven by information gaps in their history. Loewenstein (1994) argues that the 'information gap' is the difference between what a person's knows and what they would like to know, leading to exploratory activity to fulfil their curiosity.

As the child reaches adolescence and begins the process of identity formation, they may require more information than they have already accessed to process their adoptive identity. The amount of information required is individual to the child's history and the amount of contact that has been sustained over the years to provide information (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009). However, due to the adoptee's dual connection, the birth family will still need to be integrated into the child's sense of self and family (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009). The action taken to fulfil curiosity is based on the individual's perception of the information gap and the ability to obtain the information. Therefore "the removal of barriers to information may allow the adopted person to focus on the information gap leading to action" (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009: 221). However, Wrobel and Dillon (2009) argue that contact with birth relatives alone does not satisfy adopted adolescents' curiosity, and communicative openness with adoptive parents is needed as more contact can actually lead to more curiosity rather than fulfilling it. They found that greater openness in the adoptive family reduced the level of curiosity. Finally, Wrobel and Dillon (2009) highlighted the dynamic and cyclical nature of curiosity, moving from one answered question to the next unanswered one on a complex journey of identity development.

In their recent review of the literature surrounding adoptive identity development, Grotevant and Von Korff (2011) argue that too much evidence focusses on the information gaps present in an adopted person's identity. The authors propose that identity development is more than a search for information, but is rather a construction of one's story and the meanings attached to it. The construction of adoptee identity is bound in the social context of their adoption (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). In the case of adoption from public care a specific set of identity questions are raised:

- Where does the child fit?
- Who are his or her parents?
- How does one develop a clear sense of self when being moved between placements?
- How does a child maintain contact with birth relatives who are not considered harmful to the child, such as siblings or grandparents?
- How does this contact contribute to the child's emerging sense of identity?
- How does the child reconcile his or her relationship with abusive or neglectful parents whose rights have been terminated? (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011: 588)

Within Western social contexts the model of the nuclear family means the adoptee is also reminded about the primacy of biological relationships and 'blood ties' (Schneider, 1980; Wegar, 1997). Alongside the influencing existence of the social context, adoptive identity is also developed with the relational context of the adoptive family and involves negotiating factors, such as the level of communicative openness, the parent–child relationship, and the level parental empathy (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011).

In their search for identity, adoptees may decide to search for their 'second family tree' (Feast & Philpot, 2003: 85). Brodzinsky et al. (1992) argue that in the development of identity in adolescence, adoptees must deal with a 'phantom' birth family that they may know little about. One of the tasks of adolescence is gaining independence and moving away from family towards peers. Brodzinsky et al. (1992) ask how it is possible for adoptees to move away from two families when they may not know much about one of them? They argue that as an adopted adolescent manages to move away from their adoptive family, they may begin to idealise the birth family. This can lead to psychological and activated searching for birth family history and individuals (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Of course, technological media, such as social networking sites, now offer adopted adolescents an ideal, easily-accessible tool to find information, explore their identity, and potentially regain a connection to birth relatives online.

3.2 Existing knowledge regarding search and reunion

Research surrounding adoptee search and reunion focuses on adult adoptees with historically closed adoptions. Although this form of searching is very different from online searching within open adoptions, lessons can be learned. Searching becomes of particular importance during adolescence, when the adoptee tries to make sense of their dual

connection (Schechter & Bertocci, 1990). Pacheco and Eme (1993: 58) found that in the majority of cases, the desire to search for birth relatives was not due to dissatisfaction with their adoptive family or adoptive parents, but rather was a 'function' of being adopted itself. The search has been described as a process of change and adjustment by Howe and Feast (2000). Brodzinsky et al. (1992) argue that every adoptee goes through an intrapsychic search in relation to their curiosity about why they were adopted and fulfilling their sense of identity. However, they suggested that only 30-40% will actually physically search for birth relatives. Searching for information does not always satisfy curiosity and can therefore lead to contact and reunion (Smith & Logan, 2004). The level of support for each adoptee will vary, as some will prefer to be in control of their search and others will need support and guidance (Feast & Philpot, 2003).

Many adoptees think about birth relatives more during adolescence when they are grappling with the identity question of 'Who am I?' (Feast & Philpot, 2003). The activation of the search for identity can only be carried out when they reach the age of 18 and have access to their birth records. The key motivation highlighted through research is curiosity about physical and psychological identity information on birth relatives (McWhinnie, 1967; Triseliotis, 1973; Howe & Feast, 2000). Triseliotis, Feast, and Kyle (2005) outlined the key questions that adopted people are seeking to answer through the search and reunion process:

- What is my biological and social history?
- What are my roots?
- Who do I look like?
- Who am I?
- Why was I given up for adoption and was I wanted and loved by my birth family?

The main reasons for searching, centred around identity and curiosity, remain static but can change as the social context changes (Triseliotis et al., 2005). For example, the context can change with regard to the shift to openness more generally, open records, and now the potential to use communicative technologies.

The purpose and outcomes of search and reunion are based on the needs of the individual searcher (Feast & Philpot, 2003), some may want information, others the start of an ongoing relationship. Howe and Feast (2000: 175) argue that "the search for identity is

primary. The emergence of a relationship with the birth relative is a secondary achievement", and may or may not last after reunion. McWhinnie (1994) distinguishes between the social and emotional identity provided by the adoptive family and the genealogical identity provided by the birth family. The importance of adoptive parent support when searching (Feast & Philpot, 2003) has been highlighted. Triseliotis et al. (2005) found that even when adoptive parents were supportive of their child's search, they still had certain fears, such as their child getting hurt or the loss of their child's love. It has been argued that adoptive parents have the least to gain from the search and reunion process, and their feelings are influenced by the level of control they perceive to have (Triseliotis et al., 2005). However, the fears that adoptive parents had anticipated at the start of the search and reunion process only became a reality in a minority of cases (Triseliotis et al., 2005).

When trying to measure the success of search and reunion, Pacheco and Eme (1993) found that 'success' had many dimensions, including overall satisfaction, the relationship with the birth family, and the relationship with the adoptive family. Despite the fact that stresses were evident in searches, every adoptee would do it again due to the feeling that the 'puzzle had been solved', even in negative cases (Pacheco & Eme, 1993: 60). The key element to solving the puzzle was fulfilling information needs and seeing someone with similar physical traits (Pacheco & Eme, 1993). However, even if the puzzle is solved, dissatisfaction can be caused by unrealistic expectations (Pacheco & Eme, 1993). Despite high levels of satisfaction in searches, complexities are evident. For example, satisfaction is much more likely if the adoptee has initiated the search themselves, as 'out of the blue' contact from birth relatives can cause a mixture of emotions, such as surprise, excitement, shock, curiosity, and anxiety (Feast & Philpot, 2003: 42). If the search process results in contact and reunion, the adoptee then has to manage new relationships, which involves: integrating birth relatives into their lives, considering frequency of contact, who should be seen and when, and whether both families should meet and try to build a relationship (Feast & Philpot, 2003: 69). This introduces new feelings and perspectives that need to be considered and will involve the renegotiation of family boundaries.

In their review of the literature surrounding search and reunion, Muller and Perry (2001) found that an estimated 50% of adoptees would search for their birth records based on the research findings they audited. However they argue that this may be a conservative estimate as it does not include those who search by other means. The estimate also does

not tell us whether the search will result in contact or a lasting relationship with birth relatives. Muller and Perry (2001) argue that the number of adoptees who do search has increased in the years leading up to their review due to a change in public attitude towards openness and the legal facilitation of access to their birth records. Finally, they argue against the use of theoretical models that attempt to explain the motivations to search in terms of normal development, pathological, or social reasons. Rather, a combination of factors and meanings may contribute to the desire to search, and a multitude of barriers and facilitators may enable or prohibit the search, including access to information and fear of upsetting their adoptive parents. A new facilitator to the search process is the use of communicative technologies by adoptees and birth relatives.

3.3 Virtual contact in adoptive families

The debate that continues with regard to traditional methods of contact is only just beginning in terms of the emergence of virtual contact. The knowledge we have so far about the extent to which virtual contact is becoming a feature of post-adoption contact is scant. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of virtual contact has caused concern amongst practitioners and adoptive parents (Fursland, 2010). One potential influence of this anxiety is the way in which the national media has portrayed this form of contact, with a focus on the risks involved. The following are examples of headlines that have appeared in national newspapers covering the issue of virtual contact:

- 'Adopted children face anguish as birth parents stalk them on Facebook' (The Guardian, Macdonald, 2010)
- 'Mother gets shock of her life after adopted son finds her on Facebook' (The Telegraph, Ensor, 2011)
- 'Facebook allows natural parents to track down adopted children, charities warn' (The Telegraph, Anonymous, 2012)

MacDonald and McSherry (2013) argue that adoptive parents are anxious about the emergence of virtual contact. This anxiety may go hand in hand with the parental concern about technology use by their children more generally. Livingstone (2009) highlighted that parents often experience a disproportionate level of anxiety to the actual threats. This is exacerbated by "the speed of Internet development with adults' struggling to keep up, the cultural fear of the new, with media coverage framing this as an unmanageable threat to

child safety, and the novelty of a reverse generational gap with the child as 'expert'" (Livingstone, 2009: 151).

Livingstone's (2009) discussion of anxiety points to two elements that could be linked to adoptive parent fear of virtual contact: a *lack of control* and a *fear of the unknown*. The importance of control over contact arrangements for the satisfaction of adoptive parents has been highlighted with reference to traditional open practices (Barth & Berry, 1988; Smith & Logan, 2004; Dunbar et al., 2006; Neil et al., 2013). The lack of control is also related to the 'digital divide' between the skills held by children and their parents (Prensky, 2001). The fear of the unknown is linked to a lack of knowledge about the impact of virtual contact. A lack of knowledge between individuals within the adoption kinship network has been highlighted as problematic with regard to traditional open practices. Grotevant and McRoy (1998) found a statistically significant negative relationship between openness and adopter anxiety that the birth relatives may reclaim the child. For example, they found that parents were less worried when they had ongoing face-to-face contact with birth relatives. Adopters who had fairly closed adoptions had based their fear on perceptions and media stories, whereas contact provided personal knowledge. Verrier (1993) argued that the search and reunion process has been described as emotionally charged for everybody, with fear as a key theme—the fear of second abandonment for the child, fear of rejection for the birth mother, and fear of losing her child for the adoptive mother:

> "One thing every adoptive mother knows in her heart is that her child's reuniting with her birth mother will change forever their relationship to one another. That's the unknown. That's what makes it so scary. We are all at the mercy of powerful feelings, which only those who have experienced the same events can truly know" (Verrier, 1993: 129).

When people are worried about something, it is difficult to think rationally about the particular issue. Therefore, the more adoptive parents are supported to understand issues that surround contact, the more likely they will be to be able to make sense of unfamiliar circumstances (Neil, 2002a).

3.3.1 Current practice responses and empirical evidence

The political history in the UK regarding the shift to openness outlined in Chapter 1 highlights the ongoing debates surrounding the nature, purpose, and impact of contact. The

recent recognition in the Government consultation of 2012 and the Children and Families Bill 2013 that virtual contact is occurring suggests that the longstanding positive development of openness is now being questioned, particularly with the emergence of communicative technologies. While legislation has been quick to acknowledge the possibilities surrounding virtual contact in adoptive families, there is a lack of evidence to support these political decisions and to guide practice to support adoptive families. Current practice and media responses to the emergence of virtual contact have focussed on the risks, whilst acknowledging potential benefits. However, guidance has been based mainly on anecdotal evidence (Whitesel & Howard, 2013).

Practice literature has been produced in the UK as an effort to respond to the use of technology in adoptive family life, whilst policy guidance is still lacking. To begin with, it is argued that all adopters need to be prepared for the potential occurrence of virtual contact, and practice needs to develop to keep up with these changes (Fursland, 2010). Adams (2012) argued that contact plans need to incorporate virtual contact, whether through utilisation or restriction, from the beginning of placement. Morrison (2012) stated that technological practices are an extension of the fundamental shift to openness that occurred decades ago. Therefore, adoptive parents must accept these changes and recognise the potential importance of searching and reunion online for their adopted children, balancing the risks and benefits that emerge (Morrison, 2012).

Several authors refer to the opportunity for the use of technology to enhance communication, openness, and trust, not just as a method of contact with birth relatives, but also between adoptive parents and their children (Fursland, 2010; Morrison, 2012; Hammond & Cooper, 2013). Hammond and Cooper (2013: 8) argued that the embedded nature of technology in children and young people's lives offers a "window of opportunity" for practitioners and adoptive parents to enter their world and communicate with young people through "digital life story work". The opportunities outlined by some practice guidance suggest that communicative technologies could be utilised as a legitimate contact method or extension of openness. Borrowing from the USA, it can be seen how communicative technologies have become a legitimate contact method in the form of "Virtual Visitation" in divorce proceedings (Flango, 2003; Welsh, 2008). Virtual visitation allows for creative and closer contact in the form of video conferencing between the non-custodial parent and child (Welsh, 2008), and also allows for safe contact at a

distance for more sensitive cases involving domestic abuse (Flango, 2003; Morrison, 2009).

Empirical research into the occurrence and experiences of virtual contact in adoption is scant. However, there have been several key studies that suggest a complex interplay of risk *and* opportunity. To date, the main research available has been undertaken in the USA by the Donaldson Adoption Institute (Howard, 2012; Whitesel & Howard, 2013). In particular, Whitesel and Howard's (2013: 72) survey of over 2,000 adoptive parents, adoptees, birth relatives, and professionals found that for all parties, the benefits of the Internet outweigh the challenges, and that the Internet is now a part of adoptive family life. The connective power of the Internet and social media and the ability it gives for parties of the adoption triad to maintain contact was of particular importance to respondents (Whitesel & Howard, 2013). They argue that technology allows adoptees to gain control over the contact situation and to connect with birth relatives at a distance. Further, Whitesel and Howard highlight that adoptive and birth family members were able to utilise technology positively and manage it effectively. The authors note the non-probability sampling method as a limitation of their study. In addition, most adoptees in Whitesel and Howard's study were adults, so these findings do not relate to the issue of virtual contact that occurs prior to 18 years when the child remains in the adoptive home. The sample also features historic adoptions and therefore may mirror traditional adoptions involving relinquishment rather than from public care as in the UK.

MacDonald and McSherry's (2013) study, involving interviews with 31 adoptive parents in Northern Ireland, identified several risks, including the child not being emotionally ready for virtual contact and the loss of control over contact for adoptive parents. Adoptive parents also pointed to the vulnerabilities of adopted children, who may be easily-led by the negative influence of the birth family, particularly when they had a lack of information about their past. However the adopted children in the study, who were all approached online by older siblings, responded positively to virtual contact (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013), suggesting that members of the adoption triad may react differently and experience risks and benefits in unique ways. In conclusion, MacDonald and McSherry (2013) highlighted the notion of "constrained parenthood", whereby adoptive parents face a paradox of their child possessing the digital, but the not the emotional skills to reconnect, making it difficult for parents to provide support.

Authors involved in two current seminal longitudinal studies, Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel & Ayers-Lopez, 2013) and Contact After Adoption Study (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013), exploring the long term impact of contact and other factors on adoptive family life have acknowledged the emergence of the use of technological open practices amongst their cohorts of adoptive and birth families since their studies began. Grotevant et al. (2013: 193) have now included technological methods within their definition of contact, including email and Skype and suggest that "contact between adoptive and birth families is becoming more common across all types of adoption, accelerated by social media and new technologies" (ibid: 197).

Elsbeth Neil and colleagues (2013) have recently reported the findings of Wave 3 of the longitudinal 'Contact After Adoption Study' that began in 1996. This third stage revisited 87 adopted young people aged 14 to 21 years and explored the impact of contact on their lives and the lives of their adoptive parents and birth relatives in adolescence and emerging adulthood. They discovered that alongside the more traditional contact methods explored in Waves 1 and 2, participants were also using technological methods. Adoptive and birth family members use technology to fulfil needs of information, communication or reunification. In the report of Wave 3, the authors discuss the perspectives on technological methods of adoptive parents, adopted young people, and birth relatives in turn.

Some adoptive parents had searched on Google and Facebook for birth relatives due to anxiety or the fact that there had been no contact for a long time. Adoptive parents were supportive of virtual contact that was felt to be an extension of existing relationships with birth relatives. In these cases, they gave control to the adoptee and felt that it offered an easy and non-pressured connection. If they considered their children to be vulnerable, parents preferred to monitor the contact. However, even in positive cases, parents felt that this contact added an extra sensitive issue into their lives. This contact also presented challenges for some young people, including raising painful issues, the immediacy of the communication, and receiving overly emotional messages from birth relatives. It was important that adoptive parents were there to support their child. A small number of adoptive parents communicated with birth relatives directly to keep informed of birth family changes. For some families online communication was used to organise a reunion with a birth relative and provided a way to get to know each other before face-to-face contact. However, Facebook allowed vulnerable adolescents to reunite with birth relatives immediately without counselling and professional advice.

Adopted young people who had searched for birth relatives were aware of the risks and benefits of making contact in this way. Most young people who used technology did so to communicate with birth relatives, mostly through Facebook, and felt that this was a normal way to keep in touch, provided an ongoing link, allowed the sharing of more personal feelings, and kept them up to date with wider birth family news. Of key importance was the supportive, open relationship with their adoptive parents. Most young people who reunited with birth relatives were in an unsettled period of adolescence and searches were 'feelings driven' and impulsive. Adopted young people endorsed the use of contact methods that were familiar to them.

Some birth relatives observed the children online as a replacement of contact that had ceased. If contact was maintained online, birth relatives sent friendly, supportive messages quite infrequently and were able to maintain appropriate roles in the child's life without interfering.

Neil et al. (2013) remind us that it is important to remember that some do not use social networking sites in relation to adoption. Some adoptive parents would support the use of social networking sites in the future and questioned the suitability of letterbox contact, especially for young people to stay in touch with siblings. The authors argue that the meditating factors that influence whether virtual contact will be a positive or negative experience are similar to the lessons we have already learned with regard to traditional open practices:

> "That is, that young people benefit from the support of their adoptive parents and a general climate of openness within the adoptive family. Birth relative acceptance and understanding of roles and boundaries are also important" (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013: 244).

This 'climate of openness' reduces the risks of virtual contact for adopted young people. In particular, virtual contact was more likely to be positive when it was used to extend existing relationships and contact and was supported by adoptive parents. However, when it was used in an unplanned or unexpected way and when adoptive parents were not aware, virtual contact was more likely to be negative (Neil et al., 2013). Neil, Beek, and Ward (2013) suggest that the experience of virtual contact is mediated by the purpose of the contact itself. This may be linked to findings from earlier research by Neil (2003) who found that birth relatives were able to accept the reality of their child's adoptive status and

their new role in the child's life when they had face-to-face contact with the child. Therefore, virtual contact that develops from existing contact may not require the emotional work needed to negotiate emotional distance regulation in the adoptive kinship network. However, the positive messages received from this research may not be universal, as the sample had a plan for ongoing contact and therefore included participants who were involved in open practices already and may have had a chance to negotiate effective boundaries within the adoptive kinship network.

Further studies have also recognised the impact of the use of communicative technologies on the adoption field. Macaskill (2002) found the use of mobile telephones facilitated unplanned contact and was associated with the risks of contact. Macaskill (2002) also discusses the importance of the Internet in providing ongoing information and a network of support for adoptive parents, highlighting that the Internet has been infiltrating into adoption practice for over a decade. More recently, Siegel (2012) conducted interviews with eleven young adult adoptees about their experiences of growing up in open adoptions. She found that the young adults had often taken control of the maintenance of openness in their family and nine were doing so using technological methods, including Facebook, email, and text messaging. Siegel summarised the adoptee message from this study as follows:

> "Listen to us. Do not decide for us. Be there to guide and support us as we find our own way. Help us recalibrate contact, expanding it and pulling back from it as we need. Do not cut us off forever from our birth families. Do not make us wait until age 18 to find out who we are, where we came from, or to get answers to our questions" (Siegel, 2012: 139).

The empirical data suggests that technological methods are being used by adoptive families and are becoming a part of the way in which openness is maintained. A unique feature of technology is the empowering nature it has for adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth relatives to take the management of openness completely into their own hands. A theoretical paper by Simpson (2013) highlights the risks associated with 'unregulated' contact online, whilst arguing that this risky practice can have positive and negative outcomes. Within fostering practice, Dodsworth et al. (2013) studied the introduction of computer-mediated communication between social workers and foster carers to increase support and the flow of information in three local authorities in England. The authors found that although technological methods were familiar and acceptable to foster carers,

they acted as a supplement to, rather than replacement of, more traditional methods of support that were still valued. Smith (2012), an adoptee herself, reviewed comments by adoptees on seven Facebook support groups in Australia, USA, and the UK with a collective membership of 4,800 people. Smith found that adoptees valued the support from people in a similar situation who understand adoption issues. Although adoptees recognised some potential dangers of searching for birth relatives online, they also balanced this with benefits such as ease and speed.

The focus of research that investigates the value of contact is the impact that it has on the adopted child. However, as Neil et al. (2011: 19) argue

> "Contact in itself is neither good nor bad. What is important is the extent to which it promotes or impedes the child's capacity to address the psychological challenges of adoption. The needs of the child must be considered paramount when decisions are made about contact, but they cannot be adequately assessed in isolation from the adults involved".

In light of this statement, it is necessary to consider the potential influence of the adoptive parents on the child's experience of contact, and in particular emerging technological practices.

3.4 Parenting factors that may influence the experience of virtual contact

Although the needs of the child should be central and paramount to contact decisions, other parties in the network can also be affected by and influence the contact experience (Neil & Howe, 2004). In particular, research has highlighted the importance of the adoptive parent in the successful maintenance of openness (Macaskill, 2002, Grotevant, 2009). The additional issues that are raised through adoption are likely to have a lifelong impact on the adoptee, and they are therefore likely to require support from their adoptive parents (Neil, 2003). Neil (2003) suggests that some adopters possess existing values and attitudes to enable them to manage the additional tasks of adoption. This has been described as an 'openness of attitude' by Fratter (1996) which includes an inclusive approach to contact. In order to provide understanding and support, adoptive parents are faced with the tasks of *empathy for their child*, including their curiosity and feelings of loss, and *empathy for their child's birth relatives*, including recognising their need for information and understanding current and past difficulties (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Neil, 2003).

Von Korff (2008) stresses the importance of the role of adoptive parents in the narrative building of adoptee identity. Adoptive parents must facilitate interactions that are 'emotionally meaningful' to their child in order for them to successfully build a narrative identity, for example contact and communicative openness (Von Korff, 2008). Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, and Gonzalez (2011) recently found through their study of 190 adoptive families, that contact and communicative openness did not predict adolescent externalising behaviour. This is contrary to wider research that has found that adoptees display higher levels of externalising behaviours than non-adoptees (Grotevant et al., 2011). However, they did find that family satisfaction with contact did predict externalising behaviour in adolescent adoptees. This highlights the importance of the support of adoptive family members, particularly adoptive parents, to the success of contact.

On the other hand, the additional parenting tasks associated with openness can be challenging. When discussing parental satisfaction, Smith and Logan (2004) distinguish between parental comfort and personal comfort. Parental comfort refers to feeling that their child is settled, whereas personal comfort refers to feelings of security in their parenting role (Smith & Logan, 2004: 98).This can be linked to the argument that adoptive parents often partake in contact arrangements that they may be uncomfortable with for the benefit of their child (Smith & Logan, 2004), where parental comfort may be higher than personal comfort. The construction of parenthood in the legal fiction of adoption, leads to the ideology that "the phenomenology of parenthood is intrinsically characterised by a sense of ownership and control" (Smith & Logan, 2004: 105). Smith and Logan (2004) report that 83% of adoptive parents spontaneously reported that ownership and control were important to them. However, this construction of parenthood can also create a sense of family belonging, and if adopters experienced parental and personal comfort, this can actually serve to facilitate direct contact (Smith & Logan, 2004). Therefore, the ability to manage successful contact and to have a mutually beneficial experience may be linked to the way in which family members define family and their identity. Unresolved issues surrounding these factors may lead to problematic contact.

This section has outlined the variety of tasks an adopter must take on in their role as an adoptive parent. There is a suggestion that they carry the main burden of responsibility with regards to the maintenance of openness in the adoption kinship network, with this burden being extended with the emergence of technological practices. These additional

tasks can lead to parenting stress and can create challenges for adoptive parents, which may influence their ability to fulfil their role as 'kin keepers' (Grotevant, 2009).

3.4.1 Parenting Stress

Although parenting can be a rewarding journey, the daily tasks of parenthood and child behaviour can cause confusion and irritation (Crnic & Low, 2002) causing varying levels of parenting stress. Parenting stress can be defined as the psychological distress caused by the parenting role in relation to a particular child, including dealing with difficult child behaviour and dysfunctional parent-child relationships (Abidin, 1995). Parenting stress is influenced by a variety of factors that cause individual differences in the levels reported. These factors are incorporated into a range of contextual, child and parent influences (Crnic & Low, 2002). Despite differences in levels of parenting stress, it is common amongst all parents and as Normaguchi and Milkie (2003) suggest, that as with satisfaction, stress is just part of parenthood and contributes to the 'costs and rewards of children'. However, adoptive parents can experience additional causes of stress that Bird, Peterson and Miller (2002: 215) define as 'adoptive strains' that can be described as "more enduring, chronic or recurrent problems and conflicts that adoptive parents face on a routine basis that can result in increased feelings of distress". Kirk (1964) argued that the transition to adoptive parenthood is more stressful than that for biological parents due to reasons such as: dealing with infertility, uncertainty of the adoption process and intrusive evaluations, and a lack of peer support. Pearlin (1989) defined 'adoptive strains' as the secondary stressors to the primary stressor of adoption itself (Pearlin, 1989), and involves the daily, routine challenges of adoptive family life. These include: bonding with the child after instant parenthood, facing future developmental or mental health issues of the child, financial costs, fear that birthparents will reclaim the child, and knowing when and how to talk to their child about adoption. Bird et al. (2002) found that parents who reported greater distress also felt less in control of their life circumstances. This lack of control can be highlighted for adoptive parents due to the additional birth family relationships they must integrate into their own family.

One particular 'adoptive strain' that is of interest to this study is the onset of adolescence. Adolescence is a time of physical and psychological changes. For adopted children this time also presents additional challenges including: integrating their adoption into their identity, and some may start searching for their origins with their new cognitive ability (Brodzinsky, Smith & Brodzinsky, 1998). Adoptive parenthood is then characterised by

the parenting challenges of adoption *and* adolescence (Sanchez-Sandoval & Palacios, 2012: 1283). Child behavioural difficulties have been found to be a key predictor of parenting stress in adoption studies (Mainemer & Gilman, 1992; Mainemer, Gilman & Ames, 1998; Rosenthal et al., 1991; Smith & Howard, 1991) which can be exacerbated in adolescence. The adolescents' characteristics are more stressful for their parents but their own positive perception of parenting can reduce stress levels due to the way in which they respond and cope (Sanchez-Sandoval & Palacios, 2012).

Despite experiencing additional stressors, adoptive parents tended to be more positive about family life and parenthood in Levy-Schiff, Goldschmidt and Har-Even's (1991) study of the transition to adoptive parenthood. It has been argued that adoptive parents possess a range of coping skills and protective factors (Sanchez-Sandoval & Palacios, 2012). However, not all parents will possess these skills. Therefore the importance of studying parenting stress in adoptive families is highlighted by the finding of Mainemer et al., (1998) that there is a link between parenting stress and disruption. Factors influencing the stress levels of adoptive parents need to be identified so targeted support services can be developed and 'at risk' families can be supported early.

Sources of parenting stress, for example problematic contact, can hinder the adoptive parent's ability for reflective functioning (Fonagy, 1999, cited by Neil, 2003). Therefore this will hinder their ability to consider the perspective of their child regarding contact arrangements, which could have an impact on the quality of the parent-child relationship. This has been considered through the research of Elizabeth Meins and colleagues and their exploration of the concept of 'mind-mindedness'.

3.4.2 Mind-mindedness

Parent-child interactions and relationships are an important factor in the success of family life. The importance of adoptive parent-child relationships has particularly been recognised within adoption research (Kirk, 1964; 1985; Quinton et al., 1998; Howe, 1996; Triseliotis et al., 2005). One factor of the relationships between parents and their children that has been found to be protective, is the way in which parents perceive and represent their child. Parental representations of their child have been measured using the concept of 'mind-mindedness'. Mind-mindedness can be defined as:

> "the caregiver's willingness or ability to read the child's behaviour with reference to the likely internal states that might be governing it" (Meins & Fernyhough, 2010).

Mind-mindedness is explained as the mother's ability to treat her child as an individual and recognise the thoughts and emotions behind the child's behaviour (Meins, 1997), and is measured in terms of parents' tendency to describe their children with reference to mental characteristics (Meins, Fernyhough, Russell & Clark-Carter, 1998). This idea is a response to a gap in the attachment literature and argues that parents need not only to be sensitive but to respond appropriately to their child (Meins, 1999). Over the past decade, Meins and colleagues have been gathering evidence regarding the significance of moving away from talking merely about the importance the biological satisfaction by the primary caregiver of an infant's needs, to understanding the underlying thoughts and processes of the infant themselves. Further, studies have shown a link between the three constructs of mind-mindedness, sensitivity (the mother's capacity to perceive the infant's cues and to respond to the cues promptly and appropriately) and the security of infant attachment (Lundy, 2003, cited by Laranjo, Bernier & Meins, 2008; Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley & Tuckey, 2001; Meins et al., 2012). Due to the positive relationship between the three constructs, Meins (1999) argued that mind-mindedness should facilitate maternal sensitivity and lead to attachment security.

The concept of mind-mindedness can be linked to the established ideas of attachment within the adoption field. Walker (2008: 51) argues that substitute carers for children need to possess a reflective function in their behaviour, particularly "the ability to think flexibly about thought and feelings in others and oneself. It includes efforts to tease out the internal reasons and meaning behind behaviour, both in self and others". This can be directly linked to a need for substitute carers and adopters to possess the ability to reflectively interpret their child's needs, in other words, be mind-minded. "If sensitive, mind-mindedness by the carer helps bring about a secure, balanced, mentalising, and reflective child, 'controlling' children who defend themselves by not engaging with their carer's mind, miss out on a whole range of key developmental experiences" (Howe, 2003: 267). In particular, Meins et al. (1998: 21) argue that there is a key relationship between parent mind-mindedness and the development of children's symbolic and mentalising abilities.

The concept of mind-mindedness was further developed by Demers, Bernier, Tarabulsy and Provost (2010) who not only measured the extent to which parents can be described as

'mind-minded', but also the valence of the perceptions of their children. There are individual differences in the levels and experiences of parenting stress in this and wider samples. Mind-mindedness may help to explain these variations by establishing the ways in which parents develop representations, descriptions and perceptions of their children and how this mediates the level of stress they experience as parents. A recent study by McMahon and Meins (2012) found that mothers who expressed a more mind-minded description of their child reported lower parenting stress. Mothers who are more mind-minded seek to understand the reasons behind a child's difficult behaviour and see all behaviour as meaningful (McMahon & Meins, 2012). McMahon and Meins (2012) suggest that mind-mindedness can act as a protective factor towards parenting stress, as parents who are able to understand the underlying intentions and thoughts behind their child's behaviour are more likely to be able to make sense of it and represent the behaviour positively. Demers et al. (2010) and McMahon and Meins (2012) both found that the use of negative descriptions of the child is positively associated with parenting stress.

Attachment refers to the bond between a child and their caregiver who is sensitive and responsive to their needs (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment is widely referred to in the field of adoption and is seen to: promote the bond between adoptive parents and the child, help the child to deal with the loss of birth attachment figures and recognise the negative impact of discontinuity of attachment figures on the development of the child (Rosenfeld et al., 1997). Further, Schofield and Beek (2006) state that attachment provides a framework for making sense of children's challenging behaviours and for supporting caregivers in caring for such children. Research in adoption has not tended to recognise the value of studying mind-mindedness within adoptive families. There have however been a number of studies that have identified the importance of parent sensitivity and the representations of their child.

Walker (2008: 51) argues that substitute carers for children need to possess a reflective function in their behaviour, particularly "the ability to think flexibly about thought and feelings in others and oneself. It includes efforts to tease out the internal reasons and meaning behind behaviour, both in self and others". Protective factors relating to the success of contact have been reported to include: a very young age at placement, secure parent-child relationships and a lack of behavioural or emotional developmental issues (Neil & Howe, 2004). Of key importance here are parent-child relationships, as Neil et al. (2011) argue there is a link between parent attitudes and the success of contact. To expand

further, Howe and Steele (2004) state that in order for relationships to be protective there is a need for parents to respond sensitively and be emotionally available in order to help their child build resilience. Quinton et al., (1998) reported that low 'parental responsiveness' resulted in instability in placements. One of the reasons for this is due to the fact that adopted children often face additional behavioural and emotional challenges that adoptive parents need to understand and respond to appropriately. This incorporates several psychological tasks for adoptive parents to manage.

Neil (2003) provides a discussion about the psychological tasks of adoptive parents specifically when managing post-adoption contact, those being: reflective functioning, recognising shared fate, and openness of attitude. She describes the importance of these tasks as follows:

> "Parents who are interested in the content of the mind of their child are likely to imagine how their child might think and feel about situations and will recognise that the child's thoughts, desires and beliefs may differ from their own. In the adoptive family, the child's view of adoption will be of interest to the reflective parent. Thinking about the child's perspective of adoption and recognising that it may be different to their own view, such parents are in a good position to meet their child's needs in managing feelings of loss and establishing a coherent sense of personal identity…Such empathic understanding of the child's needs could provide adopters with a framework for understanding why contact with birth relatives may be useful to the child, this understanding providing the motivation to enter into, and work at, contact arrangements" (Neil, 2003: 9).

Neil's discussion of the importance of 'empathic understanding' highlights the way in which mind-mindedness is a useful way of measuring this through the mental representations of the child. If the psychological tasks are achieved, adoptive parents will be able to provide a *scaffold* (Bruner, 1983, cited by Neil, 2003: 9) for their child's ability to manage complex contact arrangements.

In addition to the interpersonal characteristics that are necessary to ensure the success of openness, the complexities involved often require the support of an external adoption agency.

3.5 Mediated contact: Support services

It has been suggested that agencies play a crucial role in determining and mediating contact arrangements (Neil et al., 2011: 15). Henney and Onken (1998: 46) argued that the role of a mediating agency in contact arrangements is essential to set boundaries, facilitate, educate, help individuals to understand the value of contact, counsel, and to make any changes needed. In addition, there is a need for safeguarding through firm boundaries of who? what? when? where? and how? (Macaskill, 2002: 139) which can be outlined via mediating agencies. However, agency control in contact arrangements varies, from maintaining complete control to believing that family members are in the best position to make decisions (Henney & Onken, 1998). Therefore the level of support required for each adoption kinship network will vary, not only between families, but also within the same family over time. If contact arrangements are not reviewed, they can be frozen at a particular time in the child's development (Macaskill, 2002) and therefore be unsuitable for their current needs. Consequently, there is a need for ongoing support for adoptive families, as it is difficult to prepare adoptive parents for the tasks of adoption fully prior to placement (Quinton, Rushton, Dance & Mayes, 1997). The adopted child's perspective is also important, and they may wish to express their preference with regards to which relatives they have contact with, the venue, the activities, and the rules (Macaskill, 2002: 115). Only one third of children in Macaskill's (2002: 137) study felt that they had been consulted about their wishes regarding contact and often felt powerless to make any changes. It is likely that all families will require support at some point in the placement, as a lack of support, particularly when specific support is needed, is indicative of parental dissatisfaction (Nelson, 1985).

In order to support families effectively in light of technological changes to openness, it is necessary to address the gaps that remain in our knowledge of the adoptive family experiences of virtual contact.

3.6 Summary and Research Questions

This and the previous chapter have outlined the empirical and theoretical context of this research study. The ideology of openness that underpins adoption practice today stemmed from changes in patterns of adoption, with an increase of children adopted from the public care system at an older age, and the negative impact of closed adoptions on adoptees and birth relatives. Openness incorporates acknowledgement of the adopted child's dual

connection to their birth and adoptive families, communicative openness, and structural openness in the form of post-adoption contact. The research evidence presented, particularly surrounding contact, portrays a complex picture regarding the success of openness. Despite providing benefits for all members of the adoption kinship network, openness can present challenges. I therefore questioned the suitability of openness in its current form to meet the needs of all adopted children and their families. Traditional methods of contact (indirect and direct) for example, can be limited in their potential to promote family-like relationships due to the mediated and infrequent nature in which they are maintained. Therefore, the question was posed as to whether technological methods could add an alternative or additional strand to traditional methods of openness. The development of communicative technologies presents risks and opportunities for children and young people. However, adoptive parents may have additional concerns due to the vulnerabilities their adopted children may have in relation to their birth family experiences. The emergence of technological practices of openness also extends the parenting tasks that are needed to support successful contact. The coinciding development of an open ideology in adoption and communicative technologies in wider society, has led to the emergence of the use of technological methods, including virtual contact, to maintain openness within the adoption kinship network. This has received great practice attention due to the risks involved with unmediated contact between adopted children and their birth relatives. Research evidence is beginning to respond to this emerging practice, finding that there are risks involved but that this has also been a positive development for some adoptive families. Despite recent valuable research in this field, gaps still remain in our evidence base surrounding the emergence of virtual contact.

The guidance and research referred to points to the interplay of risk and opportunity that the Internet and communicative technologies introduce to adoptive families. There is also a suggestion that individual members of the adoptive triad may experience these risks and opportunities in different ways. Due to the anecdotal evidence informing practice literature in the UK, several gaps in the knowledge emerge as to the actual experiences of adoptive families and how they may be influenced by the emergence of communicative technologies.

The empirical research described above does not pay due consideration to the relation between the occurrence of virtual contact and wider factors such as mediated contact arrangements, family demography, and adoptive parent reactions. The only study to have

focussed on the emergence of virtual contact was carried out in the USA by Whitesel and Howard (2013). Although this study is valuable, there are difficulties related to comparing their sample of infant adoptions to those from the public care system in the UK. Studies within the UK have also made valuable contributions (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Neil et al., 2013). However the findings related to virtual contact have emerged through the study of contact more generally. Therefore, the research does not focus on the emergence of virtual contact and the factors that may influence this. Finally, the samples used were recruited for the original studies and not for the purpose of exploring virtual contact. Practice and empirical data have focussed on the actions of adopted young people and birth relatives online, not paying due attention to the technological practices of adoptive parents in the UK. Neil et al.'s (2013) study did highlight the practice of adoptive parents searching online for information related to the birth family. However, their study involved people who were already in traditional contact, so we don't know the extent to which adoptive parents in general seek information about birth relatives.

The practice literature is mainly based on anecdotal evidence and it is therefore vital to compare this to empirical data and the 'real' experiences of virtual contact within adoptive families. The main gaps in our knowledge surrounding virtual contact are as follows:

- The extent to which knowledge of traditional open practices can be applied to technological practices.
- The current views of adoptive families regarding their experiences of and opinions regarding the suitability of traditional open practices.
- Adoptive parent responses to their children's use of communicative technologies.
- The additional parenting tasks that may be involved in virtual contact.
- The relation between traditional methods of openness and the emerging practice of virtual contact.
- The factors that may influence the success of virtual contact.
- The support required for adoptive families to manage virtual contact.

In light of the gaps in knowledge that have been highlighted in this literature review, the following research questions have emerged:

- How common is virtual contact amongst adoptive families and how is virtual contact perceived by adoptive family members?

- What individual factors relate to parent perceptions of virtual contact?
- How is technology changing the open practices in adoptive families?
- How is virtual contact experienced by adoptive parents and adopted young people?
- Does adoption practice need to change to respond to the impact of technology?

The following chapter outlines the mixed methodology chosen to explore these issues. The methodology chapter includes a critical evaluation of the methods chosen and the challenges encountered. There is also a consideration of the ethical issues involved in social scientific research involving human participants, and specific sensitive issues that arise when conducting research with adoptive family members.

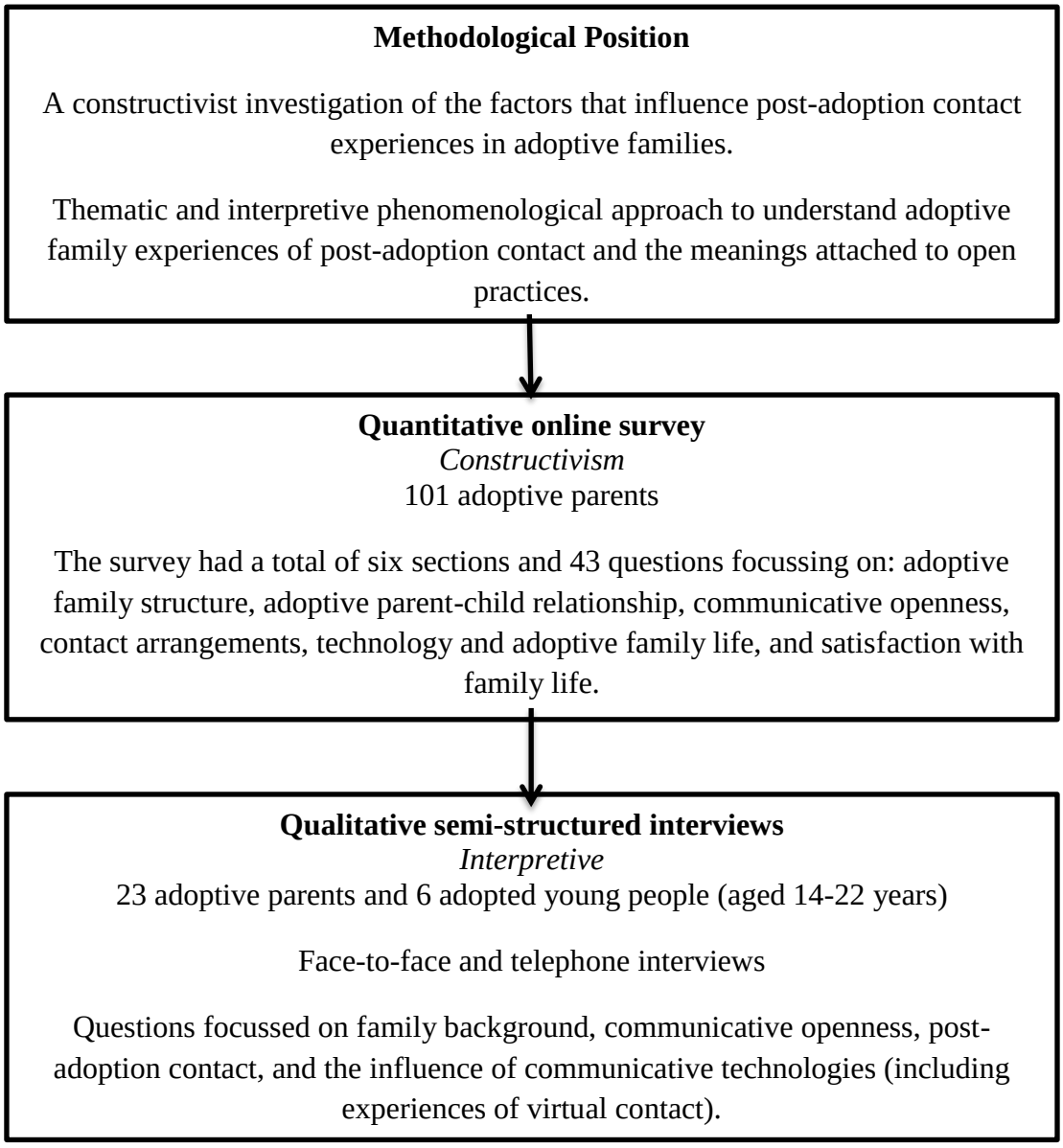
Chapter 4: Methodology, Methods, and Research Design

The overall aim and research problem is to investigate the impact of communicative technologies on the practice of openness in adoptive families. This chapter will discuss the methodological and philosophical position adopted in this research, the research methods chosen in relation to this position, and the implementation of the research design. Epistemologically, I have taken an interpretive stance with the aim to uncover the meanings behind the experiences of openness in adoptive families. In addition I am also aware of the constructivist position that meanings are embedded in the relationships and interactions with other family members and influenced by internal and external structures (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). This presents two key ideas of my approach: meanings and interactions. Therefore the research design employed includes semi-structured interviews to allow for an in depth exploration of adoptive parent and adoptee accounts focussing on traditional and technological open practices. In conjunction with qualitative inquiry, quantitative methods situate the meanings in the context of wider factors and consider the construction of family experiences. Therefore an online survey was carried out in order to gather adoptive parent opinion of openness and family demographic factors.

In recent years debates surrounding methodologies in the social sciences have focussed on: questioning the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy (Asberg, Hummerdal & Dekker, 2011; Cooper, Glaesser, Gomm & Hammersley, 2012; Lin, 1998), methodological pluralism (Bryman, 2006), the validity of interpretive inquiry (Sandberg, 2005), the use of technological modes of research including online surveys and telephone interviews (Holt, 2010; Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury, 2013), the participation of children and young people in research (James & Prout, 1997; Christensen & James, 2000; Qvortrup, Corsaro & Honig, 2011), and the ethical intensification of research (Haggerty, 2004). Each of these debates is important for this study and will be discussed in turn, with the stance taken for this study in each debate highlighted. Analysis of quantitative data using the statistical package SPSS will present contextual information about the research problem including influencing factors, before the analysis of qualitative data completes a rich exploration of the research questions. My approach to qualitative analysis, Thematic analysis with Interpretive Phenomenological elements, will lead me to an descriptive and interpretative account of the unique and shared meanings and experiences of adoptive families. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is particularly suited to this research as it is useful for

unexplored areas of study with little theoretical base, to gather idiographic accounts of virtual contact (Smith 2004). All research involves careful consideration of ethical issues that may arise. However, due to the complex nature of adoptive family relationships and the sensitive focus of the research topic, adoption specific issues are also discussed. Figure 1 summarises the methodological approach and the research design that was employed.

Figure 1: Summary of the methodological approach and research design



4.1 Methodology

Epistemologically this research falls within the interpretivist tradition and in particular follows phenomenological thinking (Husserl, 1965; Schutz, 1967), seeking to understand the individual's personal experience of the world and the meanings attached to those

experiences. Ontologically this research produces knowledge that is subjective, with the researcher seeking to understand the meanings of people's experiences of the world that are subject to change and therefore there is no single truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The views of participants are deemed to produce valid knowledge that can be used to form overall themes and ideas about the topic under study and therefore create an inductive approach to knowledge. Overall, this study sought the individual's subjective report of the topic under examination from their point of view. The approach is therefore exploratory, with no original hypothesis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As the emergence of virtual contact is a new phenomenon with little empirical evidence about its impact in adoptive family life, the exploratory emphasis of IPA suits this topic of study.

Due to the lack of concrete knowledge in the area of virtual contact, an inductive approach will attempt to create tangible recommendations for wider practice from the small sample of adoptive families. The aim is to find understanding not rational facts (Dilthey, cited by Walliman, 2005). Adoption is a widely accepted family form across the world, however the way in which the adoption process is experienced and ultimately adoptive family life is an extremely personal affair. The investigation of everyday family practices and relationships within adoptive families will go some way to understanding the meanings of post-adoption contact for individual family members, and within a phenomenological stance will attempt to gain understanding of individual and family experiences through interpretation. However, interpretation is always culturally specific (Delanty, 2005), and therefore this cultural context needs to be understood through quantitative inquiry, including family structure, adoption history, and technological use within the family. Constructivist methods search for the meanings research stakeholders (e.g. adoptive family members) construct with consideration of the societal context within which those meanings are constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Ideologically, constructivism highlights an interdependence between the person and society (Bartlett, 1958). Traditionally, constructivism is associated with qualitative methods (Appleton, King & Chinn, 1997). However, I have adopted constructivist ideas in relation to quantitative inquiry in this study to understand how the meanings of virtual contact are constructed in adoptive families and how this is influenced by the context of family life. Therefore this study employed a mixed methods approach to produce a dual focussed data set aiming to understand the meanings that adoptive family members attach to the experience of virtual contact and situate these meanings in the context of wider family and individual factors.

In summary, this research sought adoptive family experiences of post-adoption contact and the impact of technology on this. An interpretive approach allowed for an understanding of the meanings behind these experiences to be gathered to form a picture of private family practices surrounding openness. A constructivist approach to quantitative inquiry investigated the factors that can influence the experience of openness.

4.1.1 Adoption specific methodological issues

Researching adoption presents specific methodological issues that should be considered. The topic of adoption focusses on complex family relationships within the adoption kinship network. Therefore, literature that discusses research with families more generally can help to understand some of the issues that are presented with adoptive families. Family research presents additional challenges due to the complex and intimate nature of family relationships. Therefore it is likely that dissonant findings will emerge amongst family members (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003). Perlesz and Lindsay (2003) argue that methodological triangulation can allow researchers to consider the family context and complexities through interpretation of multiple data. A mixed methods approach was employed through this research to gather multiple perspectives in different forms. Quantitative data in this study has helped to interpret the sometimes complex qualitative accounts of family life.

With a focus on adoption, Grotevant (2000: 52) has argued that one of the key issues that emerges when researching openness is the level of analysis that is taken; with a focus on the individual, dyadic relationships, the family, or the adoption kinship network as a whole. Openness can also be considered in three ways, by structure, process, and meaning (Grotevant, 2000: 63). In relation to this study there has been an attempt to understand openness from the analytical level of meaning with a focus on individual, idiographic accounts. These meanings have then been applied through analysis by considering what these concepts of openness may mean for the wider adoptive family. However the lack of birth relative accounts means that this study cannot consider the adoption kinship network as a whole. Due to the overall aim and research problem being to investigate the impact of communicative technologies on the practice of openness in adoptive families, this study has paid attention to the three constructs of openness. The *structure* of openness has been investigated through the survey and the situating of traditional and technological open practices in the context of influencing factors. The *process* of openness has been addressed through adoptive parent definitions of openness in the survey and the way in which

openness is practised in adoptive families. Finally, the *meanings* of openness have been uncovered through in-depth interviews with adoptive parents and adopted young people.

One aim of this study is to translate personal narratives and survey findings into tangible evidence that can be used to make recommendations for policy and practice. This study will aim to identify good practice to manage risk and identify positive experiences that can be utilised. Evidence-based practice is advocated by many writers (for example, Howard, McMullen & Pollio, 2003; McNeece & Thyer, 2004; Mullen, Bledsoe, Bellamy & Francois, 2007), and the recommendations made will use the ideas that centre around the use of valid, reliable, and relevant research. However, it has been argued that evidence-based practice is too narrow for complex social processes and reverting back to the constructivist key argument, there is a need to consider individual influencing factors, such as family, social context, and values (Barratt, 2003) when making recommendations. An action-oriented approach is important to ensure the voices and experiences of adoptive family members are heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This research involved working closely with two host agencies which allowed the research to move beyond evidence based practice to 'practice-based evidence' that engages all stakeholders that produce practice, engaging with service users, and advocating on their behalf in an empowering manner (Ferguson, 2003). 'Practice-based evidence' broadens the approach of 'Evidence-based practice' (EBP) which typically uses quantitative methods, to include qualitative inquiry of professional and service-user experiences (Ferguson, 2003). Ferguson (2003) argues that this allows research to highlight 'best practice' in a critical fashion to develop knowledge and practice competencies, rather than an EBP deficit approach investigating what doesn't work well. In order to incorporate this approach into this research, key workers in each agency acted as advisors to the research and were involved in the design and ensuring sensitivity and ethical responsibility. With reference to medical research, Murphy, Spiegal and Kinmonth (1992) highlight the importance of negotiations with gatekeepers and the usefulness of developing a sense of 'collective ownership' to enhance the quality of the project and data collected. To this end, the host agencies were given a sense of ownership through their involvement in the project and also through dissemination of results to inform their service users. Hence, incorporating a collective ownership of the research through collaboration.

Social work education and practice now recognise the importance of gathering the views of service users to feed back into the development of the field (Kemshall & Littlechild, 2000).

The experiences of all members of adoptive families are important and may contain similarities and differences across and within families themselves, which may suggest a range of required support needs. However, power relationships exist between agencies and vulnerable groups, with an assumption that service users need assistance and are reliant on services (Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2006). Agencies also act as gatekeepers, maintaining the power dynamics and removing autonomy of participants to decide to take part separately from the agency. The use of an online survey removes this bias slightly, through the participant self-completion design and allowing participants the choice to take part.

Power relationships are also evident within private institutions, such as the family, and can cloud assumptions about childhood and serve to maintain adult power status (Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000). Parental responsibility tends to be prioritised in law and policy over the individual agency of the child (James & James, 2004). The democratisation of family life (Giddens, 1992) thesis suggests that family life is more complex than this and relationships are based on autonomy, negotiation, and equality. It would be useful, in light of above power relationships, to reconceptualise how the child is viewed and shift this from a legal, minor actor to a social, family member (James & James, 2004). This is particularly appropriate when considering young people as 'youthful experts' (Livingstone, 2009) in relation to technology and internet use. Therefore adoptee accounts are considered in the same way as adult accounts and are analysed as valid voices surrounding the experience of openness in family life.

This section has outlined the methodological assumptions of this study and also the specific issues that were considered in the design of the research due to the focus on adoption. The following section discusses the debates that surround research methods in the social sciences in order to discuss the research design that was chosen with reference to the interpretivist and constructivist philosophical stances.

4.2 Methods

The methodological approach of this study influenced the choice of methods utilised. As outlined earlier, semi-structured interviews were used to allow for a focussed in-depth inquiry into participant experiences of post-adoption contact. To ensure the constructivist elements of family experiences are uncovered, factors that may influence post-adoption contact experiences were explored through an online survey. Before the research design is

outlined, I will first discuss the methodological debates that currently exist that have also influenced the methods employed in this study.

4.2.1 The quantitative/qualitative dichotomy

The choice of qualitative and quantitative methods has long polarised social scientists, as researchers often choose one approach or the other. However, this dichotomy has been questioned as the debate grows surrounding the merits of both approaches and the outdated divide between the two approaches (Asberg, Hummerdal & Dekker, 2011; Cooper, Glaesser, Gomm & Hammersley, 2012). Lin (1998) suggests that a combination of positivist and interpretivist methods are appropriate in qualitative research. Positivist research seeks causal relationships, whereas interpretivist methods seek to understand causal mechanisms (Lin, 1998). It is important to incorporate both approaches into answering research questions to ensure that general patterns emerge through positivist methods, and contextual factors are highlighted through interpretive methods.

Research often focuses on the analysis of risk and probable outcomes as a way to reduce uncertainty about the consequences of certain actions, such as Ericson and Haggerty (1997). However, Reddy (1996) criticises this approach and argues that risk cannot reduce uncertainty due to the reliance on probabilities and probable outcomes rather than certain outcomes. With reference to the emphasis of risk in social work practice, Parton (1998) is critical and suggests that risks cannot be quantified, and exist in the way in which practice defines them. Therefore, risk factors can point to general trends that can help to direct practice to certain predictive characteristics. However, these trends may not predict the outcomes for each individual child and family (Mullender, 1999; Smith & Logan, 2004). Fraser, Galinsky and Richman (1999) argue that there is no single pathway that leads to or predicts a particular social problem. Despite this, risk factors can suggest pathways that are more likely to lead to a particular phenomenon occurring (Fraser et al., 1999). Therefore, we need to look at risk factors but also, "qualitative features of human interaction that may not have been captured through research methodologies and which reflect the particular situational, experiential and personal characteristics of children, adopters and birth relatives who are brought together by post-adoption contact" (Smith & Logan, 2004: 182). This research has embraced the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure that trends and outcomes are explored.

4.2.2 Methodological pluralism

Bryman (2006) highlights the recent shift to the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods. 'Methodological pluralism' can be defined as an acceptance of a variety of methods and recognition that methods are part of a larger research whole (Payne, Williams & Chamberlain, 2004). However, Bryman (2006) argues that researchers do not always justify their mixed methods approach. Therefore it is important to be explicit about the reasons behind the original approach and to be aware of unexpected outcomes. To focus on this study, the justifications for the use of quantitative and qualitative methods resonate with Bryman's (2006) ideas of 'completeness', 'diversity of views', and 'sampling'. 'Completeness' refers to providing a more comprehensive account through mixed methods. Gathering a 'diversity of views' was possible through the use of mixed methods, and a diversity of response through uncovering the relationships between variables in the survey and revealing the meanings behind these relationships through interview accounts. And finally, the quantitative survey served as a 'sampling' method for the qualitative participants. However through the analysis of data, unexpected outcomes of the mixed methods approach emerged. These included the 'illustration' that interview data provided to the quantitative findings of the survey, particularly through the use of case studies in this thesis. A 'process' approach allowed the quantitative methods to uncover structures and the qualitative methods to provide a sense of the processes behind these structures.

4.2.3 The validity of interpretive inquiry

The approaches outlined above share an epistemological aim to maintain recipient subjectivity whilst also maintaining a level of objectivity (Schwandt, 2000) through rigorous analysis and production of themes. Despite this, an issue of non-generalisability arises through the interpretivist position, due to the highly subjective and individual accounts (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). Furthermore, it is important to be reflexive as a researcher to be aware of any bias that may influence the interpretation of participant accounts and external factors including the influence of gender, culture, class, and power. Reflexivity is vital to be aware of the fact that knowledge will also be limited to the methods used (Delanty, 2005) and the researcher influence (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Interpretive phenomenological research searches for themes and paradigms, which suggests consistency between participant responses. Although, it is also important to consider any fluctuations between accounts to understand the way in which people make sense of the complexities of their lives (Conroy, 2003). Advocates of the interpretive

tradition suggest that methods that seek an objective truth cannot understand the complexities of human life (Sandberg, 2005). Sandberg (2005) argued that to overcome this positivist limitation, interpretivists use phenomenological ideas in search of human lived experience and therefore are able to investigate unexplored questions. However, critics argue that the non-objective knowledge produced by interpretivist inquiry cannot be justified. In answer to this, Sandberg's (2005) approaches to maintaining validity are outlined below and the ways in which these approaches were developed in this study are highlighted in parentheses:

- *Communicative validity*: ensure there is an understanding between the researcher and participant about what the research is about. Interpretation must be based on a relationship between parts and the whole. (Participants gave fully informed consent to the research. Interpretations of idiographic accounts have been drawn together to represent overall themes).
- *Pragmatic validity*: validate claims through concrete examples and in practice. (Family cases are used throughout the analysis to illustrate concrete examples, findings are situated in the existing knowledge of the field, and considerations for practice are made).
- *Transgressive validity*: research reflexivity is important to ensure taken-for-granted frameworks are questioned. (I consider my position and potential influence on the study later in this chapter).
- *Reliability as interpretive awareness*: researchers must demonstrate how they have checked their interpretations and dealt with subjectivity. (This is considered in the 'reflexive researcher' section of this chapter).

4.2.4 The use of technological modes of research

Methodological literature has traditionally advised against the suitability of the use of the telephone for qualitative interviewing (Irvine, 2011; Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury, 2013). Irvine (2011) compared telephone and face-to-face interviews, and found that telephone interviews tended to be shorter and contain less detail. However, the personal reflections of researchers and participants with experience of telephone interviews suggest a more nuanced picture (Irvine et al., 2013). The benefits of telephone interviews have been identified as offering time and cost efficiency and anonymity for participants (Irvine et al., 2013), particularly when discussing sensitive issues (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). The striking difference between telephone and face-to-face interviews is a lack of a visual

encounter, which it has been argued, can make it difficult to build rapport with the participant (Irvine et al., 2013) and difficulties in ensuring appropriate responses from the researcher (Holt, 2010). However, Holt (2010) argued that telephone interviews could offer a valid alternative to face-to-face interviews due to the increased availability of participants and the ability to focus on the text due to the lack of contextual data. Further, Holt (2010) argues that participants who are subject to the 'professional gaze', for example from social workers, may prefer a telephone interview that does not mirror professional questions. The data produced through telephone interviews can be richer due to the lack of visual encounter and the need for both researcher and participant to articulate everything clearly (Holt, 2010). The telephone interview can also provide the participant with more control over the research process through greater convenience and the ability to control the privacy of the interview, for example from family members (Holt, 2010). It is important to offer choice to participants and allow them to choose which type of interview mode they would feel most comfortable with based on their skills regarding social encounters in everyday life (Holt, 2010).

In this study, participants were given the choice to take part in an interview face-to-face or over the telephone giving them control over the interview experience. I did find that the interviews conducted via the telephone were shorter, however this was due to the focus on the interview questions and an absence of more conversational interaction that existed face-to-face. The data collected via both methods was equally as rich and provided in-depth understandings of participant experiences.

4.2.5 The participation of children and young people in research

Since the late 1980s, national and international legislation has recognised the importance of children and young people's participation in research to ensure their views are heard regarding matters that affect them (Children Act, 1989; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). There is a growing body of literature to support both the technical feasibility and epistemological desirability of seeking children's perspectives directly from the child (James & Prout, 1997; Christensen & James, 2000) and pioneering methods have emerged to ensure that children are not excluded from such research. However, a tension remains surrounding the recognition of children as 'knowing subjects' whilst also ensuring their protection (Balen, Blyth, Fraser, Horrocks & Manby, 2006).

The New Social Studies of Childhood (Qvortrup, Corsaro & Honig, 2011) calls for a change in the way we perceive childhood and youth and has led to an emphasis on the competence of children and a recognition of children as being able to participate fully in the research process (Noble-Carr, 2006). Children and young people have views and ideas about their own lives that must be gathered and understood to uphold the right for children to be consulted about issues and services that affect their lives (Sinclair Taylor, 2000). Adoptees are consumers of adoption services alongside their parents, therefore it is valuable to get their perceptions (Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000). Epistemologically, this is important as the reality experienced by young people cannot be understood through assumption or by proxy through parental accounts (Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000). Therefore, informed consent must be sought from the young person themselves to ensure they fully understand short and long-term implications (Lindsay, 2000; Masson, 2000) (as will be discussed in the 'Ethical considerations' section). Further, confidentiality should be upheld for young people with information not being passed to parents (Masson, 1995). However the same degree of confidentiality cannot be guaranteed as with adults due to ethical issues of disclosure and child protection (Masson, 1995; Roberts, 2003) (as will be discussed in the 'Ethical considerations' section).

Research that listens to the voices of children in care has increased in recent years due to the ethical responsibility to ensure that their voices are not silenced (Holland, 2009). Although these children can be classed as vulnerable and the research topics discussed are often highly sensitive, it is important to seek their views as they may offer different perspectives to the adults (for example parents, carers, and social workers) who have previously spoken for them and influenced practice (Holland, 2009). 'Child standpoint' allows the researcher to see the world from the child's point of view and to understand the 'actuality' of the child's life (Balen et al., 2006). It is also important to move beyond 'familialisation' processes that define the child as dependent on the family, to individualisation that sees the child as an individual actor within the family (Balen et al., 2006). Echoed in the literature surrounding young people's relationships (Marshall & Stenner, 1997) and in E-safety guidance (Byron, 2008) is the importance of empowerment and the ability for self-regulation.

4.2.6 The ethical intensification of research

Although the argument surrounding child and youth participation in research focusses on the positive outcomes of the empowerment of such participants, practice may not have

caught up with this thinking. The growing ethical intensification and formalisation of the research process (Haggerty, 2004) has made it difficult to access child and youth participants. In particular access to child participants is not in their control, but rather is often controlled by gatekeepers. 'Gatekeepers' can be defined as adults who can limit or control a researcher's access to child participants (Coyne, 2010), such as parents, teachers, or social workers. Gatekeepers can be necessary to ensure child safety, however they can also hinder a child's opportunity to be heard (Coyne, 2010). In particular, this has led to the under-representation of vulnerable children in research, as vulnerability can be seen as the same as incompetence (Coyne, 2010). In this study there were significantly fewer adopted young people who participated than their adoptive parents. This was due to their parents acting as gatekeepers and in many cases not asking their children to take part due to fears that the research may have upset or harmed them. This was explained as being due to their heightened vulnerability due to ongoing additional needs related to their adoption and was probably necessary in many cases. However, it is unclear how many adoptees were denied the opportunity to take part in the research. This is a sampling limitation that must be considered in this study.

This section has discussed the methodological debates that have influenced the choice of methods and the issues to take into consideration. Underlying all methodological choices are the ethical values that must be adhered to in order to ensure the safety of participants and the integrity of the research process.

4.3 Ethical considerations

As with all social scientific research, this study comes with several ethical issues that need to be addressed and remembered throughout the study. Bryman (2008: 118-124) highlights the main ethical issues to consider including: whether there is harm to participants, a lack of informed consent, an invasion of privacy, and whether deception is involved. Further issues, outlined by Broom (2006: 152), include that research is designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality, and that confidentiality of participants is upheld with research being independent and unbiased. Each of the above issues were considered throughout the research design. In particular, detailed information sheets and consent forms were created for both quantitative and qualitative stages of the research and in the latter, the information sheets were tailored for adoptive parents (see Appendix C) and adopted young people (see Appendix E). The survey was piloted with two adoptive parents and the interview design was closely discussed with practitioners in the host adoption

agencies, DFW Adoption and Scottish Adoption[1], before being used in the research to ensure suitability and sensitivity. This allowed for the anticipation of issues of sensitivity, comprehension and confusion (Walliman, 2005) and allowed for the suitability of survey questions to be tested first. Suggestions for improvement were made and fully taken on board, producing a more sensitive and reliable survey. Only very minor changes to both methods were required following the pilot stage surrounding clarity and sensitivity of questions and ensuring participants had options to add 'other' answers to multiple choice survey questions.

Issues surrounding sensitive topics need to be considered at every stage particularly the consequences and implications for participants (Lee, 1993). This includes the fact that these topics are often laden with emotion, there are limits to inquiry due to cultural boundaries surrounding participants holding sensitive information (such as family boundaries), and the personal nature of the data exposed. It is therefore vital that participants are not able to be identified in reports (Lee, 1993). The prescribed notions of ethical approval cannot always be applied, for example, confidentiality cannot always be maintained (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2007) and nor would this be desirable in incidences of disclosure by a young person surrounding harm they are experiencing. Breaking confidentiality when participants disclose that they are subject to or at risk of harm carries with it a moral duty (Wiles, Charles, Crow & Heath, 2006). This study did not see any disclosures of harm, but it was ensured that support was in place via the adoption agencies should this have occurred. The above issues centre around participant protection, however it is also important to consider empowering mechanisms. The rights to participation for all adoption triangle members and the potential positive experience for participants due to recognition (Honneth, 2001) should be acknowledged, thereby giving voice to the vulnerable and normally silenced to uncover masked perspectives (Greene, 1994). To manage authenticity of voices here, the interpretation of data followed from transcriptions *sic erat scriptum* or as spoken so as to not impose my own interpretation onto accounts.

In particular, as a sensitive topic, adoption carries specific ethical concerns. They include: the impact of the research on the adoptive kinship network, the potential for discomfort or distress when talking about adoption issues, the privacy of family members, research with young people, the impact on adoption agency (resources, reputation), and the vital importance of available during and post-study support. The research addressed potentially

[1] Both agencies wanted to be named and associated with this research and gave their permission.

distressing topics due to the sensitive nature of the area of discussion. Therefore participants were given the right to withdraw at any time, to refuse to answer any questions and were offered agency support if needed (although no participants required this). The resources of the host adoption agencies were protected through their involvement in the research process and their ability to have an input through 'collective ownership'. Confidentiality of participants was respected throughout the whole process, from anonymity of responses and secure storage of data. This confidentiality is particularly important in this area as adoptive families are often characterised by a complex network of relationships that need to be maintained, restricted or protected. The impact of the research on the adoptive kinship network was controlled by the adoptive parents in their role as 'gatekeepers'. Overall, many practices of adoption involve balancing the competing rights among the adoption triangle, particularly surrounding information (Freundlich & Phillips, 2000). Social workers, and researchers alike, should pertain to the 'protection of the most vulnerable' (Reamer & Siegel, 1990: 17) and in each case this will be the child.

Research with young people poses some specific concerns. Of particular importance is the difficulty of gaining proxy informed consent from parents, whilst at the same time ensuring that the children themselves are meaningfully included in the decision making process (Lindsay, 2000, cited in Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). To overcome this, proxy consent was gained from parents but the interview was only conducted once the research had been fully explained and understood by the adoptees themselves through a specifically designed information document and consent form (see Appendix E). The notion of 'Gillick competence' states that a person aged 18 years and below can be considered able to participate in research if they are deemed capable of fully understanding the research process (Balen et al., 2006). To this end, child assent or agreement to participate in the research is considered necessary even if parental consent is also needed (Balen et al., 2006). An ethical consideration does not have to be one which is designed to protect participants. As researchers, we can also hold an ethical duty or responsibility to represent participants' views accurately and in a reliable way. When researching with potentially vulnerable groups, research can also give participants a chance to be heard, and in this research there is an aim to 'giving voice' to young people and paying particular attention to their diversity of experience, the authenticity of their opinions, and giving them active participation in the research (James, 2007: 261). It is now recognised that children have specific rights and they should be consulted in practices that impact on them (Greig &

Taylor, 1999). A parallel to the upheld discourse in adoption practice that centres around the best interests of the child (DfE, 2011).

The ethical considerations described take into account more prescribed general issues and specific adoption issues. But of key importance is to carry ethical practice throughout the whole research process (Gabb, 2010). When carrying out research with families researchers often follow the feminist idea of an 'ethic of care', including due consideration to the intrusion in private family life and vulnerabilities (Gabb, 2010). Some argue that asking sensitive questions can cause distress for the participants. However, Gabb (2010) argues that the participant is not put at risk when they are asked to recall life events. In order to ensure participants have the correct support after the research, contact details of an external support worker should be readily available (Gabb, 2010). Family anonymity is easy to protect through the usual confidentiality procedures and use of pseudonyms. However it is more difficult to ensure individual anonymity from other family members (Gabb, 2010). In this case, the task of ensuring that adoptee and adoptive parent accounts remain concealed from one another. This was difficult in this sample due to the small number of adoptees who have taken part and therefore it could be fairly easy for adoptive parents to identify their child's voice. Certain words or phrases that may have identified the family are changed, however any other important factors that may contribute to interpretations were retained, for example child age (Gabb, 2010). Talking about the intimate details of family life is bound to be emotional and not always positive. However, family members can find the process cathartic (Gabb, 2010). It is important that the researcher responds appropriately to these stories through listening empathically and not providing any judgements or advice (Gabb, 2010).

Not only are researchers required to consider the ethical issues on entering the research site and conducting the research, they must also pay due attention to the sensitivities involved when leaving the research field (Reeves, 2010). This is particularly important when the participants have disclosed sensitive information. Therefore the participants need to be reassured about confidentiality and that their data will be treated with respect (Reeves, 2010). In this study it was ensured that participants could contact me once the research had finished. Contact details were available in the information sheets for the survey and interviews. After the interviews, following the in-depth nature of the discussions surrounding sensitive issues, participants were emailed to ensure they were happy with the process and to check if they had any questions or required support once they had had a few

days to reflect on the process. No issues arose. The host adoption agencies and interview participants were sent a summary report and research briefing to inform them of the outcomes of the research. Adoptive parents were asked to share the findings with their adopted children as I did not have contact details for them due to the parents' role as gatekeepers. I can only hope that the adoptees who participated were able to read the reports. The host agencies also posted the report on their websites as a way to disseminate the findings further.

Leaving the research field particularly made me reflect on my role as researcher and the potential impact I had had on the lives of the participants and adoption agencies involved.

4.3.1 Reflexive researcher

Reflexivity in the research process ensures that the validity of the research is questioned and any potential biases are explained. When carrying out research with families, the researcher can develop a vested interest in the personal lives of the family and feel a responsibility to participants (Gabb, 2010). However, this must not interfere with the academic validity of the research. A way to negotiate this tension is to ensure that 'responsible knowing' is upheld to maintain the integrity of the data through advancing the meanings behind family lives (Gabb, 2010). Gabb (2010) argues that the 'messiness' of family life should be maintained to accurately represent everyday family life. I certainly felt a vested interest in the families that participated in the research due to the sensitivity of the topics discussed and how open families were with their personal stories. I therefore felt responsible to ensure their stories were accurately reflected in the way that they were told. However, I was also responsible as an academic researcher to critically consider the hidden meanings behind family stories and draw upon some of the 'messiness' in their accounts. In order to strike a balance I have ensured that participant voices have remained through heavy use of verbatim quotations and family case studies, and the complexities of adoptive family life have also been maintained through a mixed thematic and IPA approach.

In addition to the participants, I also felt a vested interest to the host agencies that have worked closely with me throughout the research project. Despite the fact that they have supported my decisions as a researcher and generously allowed the freedom for me to carry out the research in my way, I personally felt responsible to them and have tried to produce research that is both academically and practically valuable. Therefore, I have

ensured that the analysis focussed on academic integrity but allowed for practice recommendations to be made. Further, as Leech (2002: 665) argues:

> "In an interview, what you already know is as important as what you want to know. What you want to know determines which questions you will ask. What you already know will determine how you ask them".

Leech's argument highlights the importance of recognising the influence of previous knowledge on the design of the research, which brings into question the inductive nature of this study. The knowledge held about traditional methods of openness may have influenced the types of questions asked about, for example, contact, communicative openness, and parenting stress. However, due to the lack of knowledge surrounding virtual contact, I can be fairly confident that the knowledge produced through this study was done so inductively.

Finally, my pathway to this research must be considered. I joined this project on a Durham Doctoral Studentship which meant that the outline and overall research aims were already designed. I used this outline to implement the exploration of the research topic. Although I was influenced by the topic area, I identified the research questions, created the research design, and carried out data collection and analysis. Despite the potential biases outlined in this reflexive section, the research design that was employed was successful in collecting valuable data and allowing in depth analysis. The research design will now be described, including a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses.

4.4 Research Design

A mixed research strategy was employed to add 'completeness' to the research (Bryman, 2008) and allowed for a more comprehensive investigation of the topic due to the use of mixed methodology. In essence this was done through an online survey of adoptive parents and interviews with adopters and adopted young people. The research design was employed to address the research questions and the way in which this was done is outlined below:

- How common is virtual contact amongst adoptive families and how is virtual contact perceived by adoptive family members? *(Survey)*
- What individual factors relate to parent perceptions of virtual contact?*(Survey)*
- How is technology changing the open practices in adoptive families? *(Interviews)*

- How is virtual contact experienced by adoptive parents and adopted young people? *(Interviews)*
- Does adoption practice need to change to respond to the impact of technology? *(Interviews)*

The following two sections describe the design of the survey and interviews broadly. A more specific description of the questions employed and the participant samples is given in the relevant findings chapters.

4.4.1 Survey

The process of designing the survey began with the research questions that the survey was designed to measure in order to decide on the individual and family factors that were important. In particular it was important to situate virtual contact in the wider context of adoptive family life and the experience of openness. Based on the literature review and findings of wider research, several factors emerged as being linked to the experience of openness including: parent-child relationships, communicative openness, the maintenance of post-adoption contact, and parenting stress. Therefore, questions surrounding the experience of virtual contact were situated in the context of the aforementioned factors. In order to capture the information needed about these factors and to answer the research questions, specific measures were adapted and designed for this study. These measures are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 where the results of these measures are also reported, and include a measure of mind-mindedness, communicative openness, parental communicative technology score, and parenting stress scores.

A pilot study was carried out with two adoptive parents in order to test the suitability of the online survey, and in particular the measures designed for this study. Following the piloting stage of the survey only minor changes were needed based on pilot participant recommendations. The changes were based on the need to allow more flexibility for participants when answering questions by adding the option to provide an 'other' response to multiple choice questions (e.g. Question 23, see Appendix A). In addition the wording of the question surrounding the occurrence of virtual contact was changed in order to ensure that all respondents would understand what was meant by 'virtual contact'. Therefore this term was not used directly, but rather a definition was devised in collaboration with pilot participants and an example of Facebook used to exemplify this type of communication (see the introduction to the section 'Technology and Adoptive

Family Life' from Question 28 in the survey in Appendix A). Finally, with a focus on testing the measures I designed, pilot participants were able to easily understand the communicative openness scale and questions surrounding parent opinion of communicative technologies. However, the 'Satisfaction With Adoptive Family Life' measure required the addition of a 'not applicable' option alongside the Likert scale of agreement. This was due in particular to the statement 'I am happy with the support my partner provides' as one pilot participant was a single parent and therefore this was not applicable to them. This was an important stage of the research process to ensure that the survey was not only sensitive and comprehensive, but also able to incorporate the nuanced experiences of adoptive family life.

An online survey of 101 adoptive parents was chosen to provide a quantitative snapshot of the impact of communicative technologies, such as social media, on adoptive families and the contact they maintain with birth relatives. Quantitative analysis also allowed for the exploration of the relationship between certain structural and family factors and the occurrence of virtual contact, including: the child's age at placement, the existing contact arrangements, and the attitudes of adoptive parents. A variety of question types were used including Likert scale responses (on a scale of 1-5), multiple response questions, and dichotomous questions. More detail about these questions can be found in appendix A with the full copy of the survey and in the findings Chapters 5 and 6 preceding the discussion of data.

The survey had a total of six sections and 43 questions focussing on: adoptive family structure, adoptive parent-child relationships, communicative openness, contact arrangements, technology and adoptive family life, and satisfaction with family life. All participants remain anonymous in this study and responses are presented as an aggregate. Practically, an online survey (using Bristol Online Surveys) was chosen to provide a wider reach, higher response rates, potentially more frankness by participants due to increased anonymity of researcher and researched, ease of distribution and convenience for participants, and collation of results (Hewson & Laurent, 2008). The survey of adoptive parents was a computer self-administered questionnaire (CASQ), allowing answers to be immediately stored on a database, a reduction of error due to on screen completion prompts, and an increased sense of privacy. However the ethical issue of ensuring informed consent online arises (Vehovar & Manfreda, 2008) and the need for extra clarity when explaining the research and provision of contact details. The survey fits broadly into

the quantitative research tradition using closed and scale questions. However, a level of interpretevism is also incorporated through the use of open questions to grasp meanings in the survey through qualitative questions (Bryman, 2008).

The survey is an attempt to quantify and operationalize important themes, attitudes, and experiences with adoptive family life. This may simplify the complexity of family experiences, but the aim of this exercise is to provide a snapshot of adoptive parental attitudes to the emerging phenomenon of virtual contact before exploring the meanings behind this snapshot in the interviews. Another key purpose of the survey is to explore relationships between different aspects of family life. In this respect, a level of relativism was applied to the analysis to investigate whether differentiating factors can be gleaned to determine how families experience post-adoption contact differently, and specifically virtual contact, why contact is successfully maintained in some families and not others, and how individual family members experience contact differently. From this it was possible to define certain 'risk' or determining factors that may predict the success of contact, the likelihood of virtual contact occurring, and subsequently the success of in-family management of this use of technology.

4.4.2 Interviews

The interviews with adoptive parents and adopted young people aimed to explore the qualitative meanings attached to the experiences of openness in adoptive families today. The majority of interviews were carried out via the telephone (23 out of 29) after participants were given a choice of this method or meeting face-to-face. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours for parents and approximately 30-45 minutes for adoptees. The usual method of data collection suited to IPA is the semi-structured interview (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The semi-structured interviews allowed for a focus on the research questions but also for flexibility to allow stories to emerge with new perspectives on the phenomenon. The interview schedule included broad questions allowing the participant to direct the course of the interview and to avoid the imposition of the researcher's understanding or framing of the topic on participant accounts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This flexibility allows the interviewer to change the questions, or the order of them, in light of participant responses and to probe interesting areas which arise (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The interview schedule focussed on the following areas: adoptive family background, communicative openness, post-adoption contact experiences, family use of communicative technologies, opinion or experience of virtual contact, and

thoughts about future contact and support needs (see Appendix D and E). The main questions were deliberately broad to allow flexibility, and prompt questions were used if participants needed clarification. By creating an interview schedule in advance it is possible to think about the areas the interview will cover and to plan for any difficulties and sensitivities that may arise (Smith & Osborn, 2003). However, the interviewer should intervene as little as possible to allow participant accounts to be as close to their thoughts about the topic area as possible (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The original design planned to recruit interview participants from the online survey alone. As you can see from the survey (see Appendix A), participants were asked if they would be willing to take part in an interview following completion of the survey. I specifically asked for participants who had children aged 11-18 years who had experienced virtual contact to consider taking part in an interview. It was then hoped that I would be able to sample 10 adoptive families to interview including adoptive parents and adoptees, and to recruit birth relatives connected to each adoptive family through the adoptive parents. This would have resulted in interviews with ten adoptive triangles featuring perspectives from each member of the triad. However, in practice this sampling technique did not yield the sample originally intended. This was due to the fact that a number of parents (n=10) expressed an interest in the interview even if they hadn't experienced virtual contact. I therefore felt an ethical responsibility to facilitate these interviews to give participants the opportunity to be heard. This in fact gathered in depth data regarding the use of traditional methods of openness and uncovered adoptive parent concerns and fears regarding virtual contact. This added a valuable element to the data analysis as it allowed for different perspectives and experiences to emerge and to compare opinion of virtual contact to the reality of its occurrence. There were only a small number of adoptive parents who had experienced virtual contact who decided to take part in an interview following completion of the survey (n=3). This may have been due to the fact that the adoptive parents who had experienced virtual contact were still dealing with 'live issues'. Therefore, an additional sampling technique was employed to increase the numbers of interviewees who had experienced virtual contact. The host adoption agency, Scottish Adoption, contacted a number of their adoptive parents (n=8) who were known to have experienced virtual contact to take part in an interview. However, an issue of sampling bias must be noted as the participants who were recruited via the adoption agency were known to practitioners due to them reporting the virtual contact in their family and asking for support. Therefore their accounts may not be representative of wider families and may represent a more

negative picture of virtual contact. I also found it impossible to recruit birth relatives in this sample. As even in cases where virtual contact was working well, adoptive parents were reluctant to contact birth relatives to inform them of the study in order to not 'rock the boat'. Therefore, the absence of birth relative perspectives should be considered in this study and the lack of opportunity for their voice to be heard in this instance. This is also true for adopted young people, as most adoptive parents refused to allow their child to take part in the study either. As noted earlier, the live issues that the families were dealing with were often deemed too sensitive to allow further research intrusion. Despite the lack of birth relative perspectives, the inclusion of adoptive parent and adoptee voices can uncover important meanings regarding the practice of openness in adoptive families. As MacDonald and McSherry (2011: 13) argue "the welfare of the adopted child is inextricably linked with the welfare of their adoptive parents, it is useful to understand the impact of openness on adopters". Therefore the relationship between adopters and their children and a comparison of their accounts can provide a valuable understanding of openness in adoption today.

Despite the sampling challenges, I was able to recruit a suitable sample to fulfil and Thematic and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Brocki and Wearden (2006) state that sample sizes in IPA studies range from one to thirty. 29 people were interviewed in total, including 23 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people. Mothers represented the majority of adoptive parents in the interviews, despite me not aiming to recruit more mothers than fathers. This sampling issue was also found by Howe (1996: 7) who stated that even in the minority of cases where the adoptive father was also interviewed, the adoptive mother "was the major informant". The total number of interviewees has been separated into two categories to differentiate those who have and have not experienced virtual contact. This differentiation will appear throughout the analysis:

- No Virtual contact group (No VC group): 10 adoptive mothers who had not reported the experience of virtual contact in their family. All adopters from this group were recruited from the survey and therefore have complete data, in the sense of quantitative and qualitative accounts.
- Virtual contact group (VC group): 11 cases in which virtual contact had occurred in their family and includes 13 adoptive parents (10 adoptive mothers and 3 adoptive fathers, with two couples interviewed together) and 6 adoptees from 4 of the 11 families (3 siblings, 4 boys and 2 girls, aged 14-22 years). Two of the adoptees

interviewed are 18 years or above which makes them adult respondents (see Appendix F, family 13). However, they had experienced virtual contact within the same family context as their 16 year old sibling and I therefore thought it was important to keep their views. Due to the small number of virtual contact respondents in the survey (and the fact that not all of them wanted to participate in an interview) recruitment of VC participants moved beyond the survey to ensure a comparable sample to No VC parents. The recruitment of the 11 cases is outlined below:

- 3 from the survey
- 8 cases directed by adoption agency or by an adoptive parent announcement on an online forum

4.4.3 Data Analysis

4.4.3a Survey

The analysis of survey data was carried out using SPSS to assist with descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate levels of analyses. The survey analysis has presented a snapshot of the ways in which openness is practised in a sample of 101 adoptive parents and their families. In particular, I focussed my analysis on the emerging practice of virtual contact, situating the occurrence of this in the context of wider structural and individual factors. The relationship between factors was statistically tested to highlight significant associations. I developed several measures in the survey (Communicative Openness score, Parental Communicative Technology Score , and the Satisfaction with Adoptive Family Life Scale). The validity of these measures was tested and deemed satisfactory. The analysis highlighted some incomplete data in the survey responses, and therefore missing data was coded appropriately and has been acknowledged in the survey chapters.

4.4.3b Interviews

My approach to qualitative analysis led to an interpretative account of the unique and shared meanings and experiences of adoptive families. I set out to complete a purely Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis due to the fact that this is particularly suited to this research as it is useful for unexplored areas of study with little theoretical basis, to gather idiographic accounts of virtual contact. However, in practice the qualitative analysis includes a mixture of thematic and IPA data. I have explained this in more detail in Chapter 7 (7.1.1 Reflecting on the Analytical process). In essence this was due to the

higher number of interview participants that were recruited than intended, as the participants who had not experienced virtual contact were not originally sought (as explained on page 72). Therefore, the level of depth required in IPA was not always achieved. I have, however, maintained an element of IPA through the use of family case studies in Chapter 8 to ensure the idiographic family phenomenological meanings are interpreted. Therefore the principles of IPA will now be discussed.

Rigorous and systematic analysis has been carried out to produce distinctions and commonalities, creating key themes supported by verbatim quotations. IPA is now an established methodological technique within the field of psychology that aims to learn about the respondent's psychological world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It involves a two-stage approach to analysis: interpretation and phenomenology or as Smith (2004) describes it a 'double hermeneutic', uncovering and interpreting meanings (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty & Hendry, 2011). The characteristic features of IPA are described by Smith (2004) as idiographic, inductive and interrogative. The idiographic nature of this approach highlights the value of a detailed case study, to gather in depth accounts of individual responses to a situation and to also see connections between different aspects of an individual account (Smith, 2004: 42). It further allows for cross comparison between cases. Throughout the thesis, family stories are used as illustrative examples of the way in which virtual contact has been experienced. Further, cases have been used to highlight the analytical themes and to compare family stories and experiences. This ensured that the analysis was grounded in the approaches of 'practice-based evidence' by using service-user experiences to highlight areas of 'best practice'. This is particularly evident in the comparison of two family cases in which one had a positive and one had a negative experience of virtual contact, allowing for factors to be identified that may support the maintenance of positive virtual contact. Care has been taken to protect the anonymity of participants in the production of the family cases, by not associating participants with a specific adoption agency and by disguising any identifying features of family stories. Being an inductive approach, IPA employs flexible techniques to allow for emerging themes through analysis and therefore IPA research starts with broad research questions rather than hypotheses (Smith, 2004: 43). As an interrogative approach to analysis it is important to link analysis with existing research and literature (Smith, 2004). In this case, existing literature was used to frame the research questions and highlight gaps in the knowledge base that this study aims to fill. The literature is also used to contextualise and interrogate the findings in the Argument chapter (Chapter 9).

In terms of analysis, generally a smaller, concise number of themes points to an in depth analysis and leads to reduction and engagement with data (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In practice, a larger number of themes were produced due to the variety of opinions and experiences surrounding virtual contact. This did create challenges in achieving the required level of depth and interpretation. Analysis is a cyclical process with several stages, including first impressions of the text, preliminary identification of themes, clustering the themes and creating a summary table of master themes (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). This process is repeated for each case and the themes compared to produce subordinate and superordinate (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Once themes are identified it is necessary to look for connections between them to create a theoretical ordering (Smith & Osborn, 2003: 70) and begin to make interpretative sense of the themes using the three levels of interpretation outlined above by Smith (2004). Through analysis one needs to identify recurring patterns and also new issues that emerge from case to case. Due to the verbatim transcriptions that are created, all aspects of the text are analysed and interpreted. Through this approach, detailed, in depth, interpretative accounts are produced (Smith & Osborn, 2003). As a result of the idiographic nature, and therefore small sample sizes, of this analytical approach, it is argued that generalisability is not the aim. Rather, Smith et al. (2009) argue for 'theoretical generalisability' whereby the researcher can assess the applicability of findings with reference to wider knowledge in the area. In order to test the validity of my analysis it would be necessary to cross-validate my findings using further research and additional researcher perspectives. However, I have been able to achieve 'theoretical generalisability' by comparing my analysis to existing literature throughout the findings chapters and in depth in the argument chapter.

IPA aims to understand the topic under study from the perspective of participants, but to also critically examine and question participant accounts. Through analysis I have been able to extract the key themes relevant to this area of research and to interpret the meanings behind individual accounts using family case studies. As an emerging topic of interest, there is a lack of knowledge surrounding the experience of virtual contact in adoptive families. Therefore the use of IPA allows for an inductive approach to my research questions. The unique, individual family stories have been maintained to uncover phenomenological accounts alongside common themes to interpret the shared understandings of technology use amongst adoptive family members. The common understandings then lead to a framework of key themes that can be used to direct future

research and practice recommendations, and leads to a reconceptualisation of openness in the final chapters.

4.4.4 Audit trail

This section will outline exactly how the research occurred in order to view the research design 'in practice':

- October 2011: I began the Durham Doctoral Studentship and designed the research in the first year of the project.
- January 2012: I began to try to recruit a local authority to assist with the research.
- November 2012: after failing to secure local authority help, a voluntary adoption agency (Scottish Adoption) agreed to help with the research.
- January 2013: the survey was posted online.
- May 2013: the survey closed.
- June – October 2013: interviews were conducted with adoptive parents and adopted young people.
- October 2013 onwards: analysis and writing process.

4.4.5 Evaluation: Strengths and limitations of the research design

In order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the research design it is necessary to consider the quality of the data collected to address the research questions. The research design uncovered answers to the research questions despite some limitations. From the start of the research, due consideration has been paid to the ethical issues involved in researching this topic. The survey created data that presented a snapshot of the extent to which virtual contact is becoming a feature of post-adoption contact and outlined several influencing factors. The interviews provided an in-depth look at the experiences of traditional and technological methods of openness, whilst also producing participant recommendations for practice. The research design followed the methodological position of the research to allow for constructivist presentation of quantitative factors influencing the experiences of post-adoption contact and a qualitative analysis of the underlying meanings. A rigorous analysis of the data produced from the mixed methods design will be presented in the following chapters.

There are several limitations that must also be considered. To date, research into adoption is dominated by the views of adoptive parents (Grotevant, 2000). Evidence surrounding the

views of birth relatives with regards to contact is sparse (Neil, 2003a). Unfortunately, this research has continued the trends highlighted by Grotevant and Neil. Although the views of adoptive parents and adoptees are important, without the perspectives of birth relatives it is impossible to have a complete picture of the emerging practice of virtual contact. Gabb (2010) found that there was a lack of uniformity in the data collected in her research with 10 families as not all members of the family were willing to participate as was intended in the original research design. This made the analysis of data challenging. The original aim of the thesis was to gather the perspectives of adoptive parents, adopted young people *and* birth relatives belonging to the same adoption triads. However this proved to be an impossible task for this piece of research. The adopted young people for each of the eleven families could not always be interviewed due to the adoptive parents acting as gatekeepers. The five adoptive parents who decided that they were uncomfortable with their child taking part was often due to the fact that they were dealing with 'live' issues. That is, they were in the middle of managing virtual contact rather than being able to look at it retrospectively. They therefore felt that taking part in research may be disruptive to the child. This is understandable and unfortunate at the same time. It obviously meant that some adoptees were not given the opportunity to have a voice in this research, but their adoptive parents' opinions must be respected as research suggests that they are best placed to inform decisions about their child and know them best (Henney & Onken, 1998). Finally, the sampling methods used have potentially created bias in the findings of this study. The self-selecting nature of the survey sample, and the purposive sampling of interview participants who had experienced virtual contact make it difficult to confidently generalise results.

4.5 Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodology, methods, research design, and data analysis techniques employed in this study. The overall philosophical stance I adopted in this research is interpretive, with a focus on discovering the meanings behind openness in adoptive families considering the emergence of virtual contact. The research also considers the constructivist focus on the influence of internal and external structures and factors on individual experiences. I used a mixed methods approach to answer the research questions that emerged from the literature review, carrying out an online survey of 101 adoptive parents and interviews with 23 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people. Although I faced unexpected challenges in the implementation of my research design, I was able to

collect rich data that will be presented in the following four chapters, two of which focus on the survey findings and two on the interview data:

- Chapter 5: Findings - The practice of openness in adoptive families today
- Chapter 6: Findings - The individual factors that relate to parent perceptions of virtual contact
- Chapter 7: Findings - A qualitative exploration of the impact of technology on openness
- Chapter 8: Findings - Qualitative Accounts of Virtual Contact

Chapter 5: Findings – The practice of openness in adoptive families today

I now shift the focus of the thesis to the findings of my research and analysis of data. This chapter draws upon survey data to begin to explore the ways in which communicative technologies are impacting on the practices of openness in adoptive families. The chapter concludes with a summary of the quantitative findings that address the following research question:

- How common is virtual contact amongst adoptive families and how is virtual contact perceived by adoptive family members?

As Chapter 2 highlighted, research has not yet provided empirical data on the extent to which virtual contact occurs in adoptive families or factors that may relate to its occurrence. Exploring these issues was the main aim of the study reported in this chapter. Specifically, this study investigated (a) how common virtual contact is in adoptive families in the UK, (b) who typically initiated the virtual contact, and (c) whether virtual contact was more common in families who were already in traditional forms of contact with birth relatives.

With regard to the incidence of virtual contact in the UK, the present study investigated contact between the adoptive child and birth relatives, but also asked adoptive parents about whether they had searched online for their child's birth family, and if they had acted upon any information about birth relatives that they had found online. The present study investigated whether there was evidence for the media portrayal of virtual contact as something that occurred unexpectedly. If Neil et al.'s (2013) findings that virtual contact was more positive when it was used to extend existing contact arrangements hold true, then one might expect virtual contact to be more likely to occur in families who already have contact arrangements in place than in families with no such arrangements, or at least be more likely to be positive. These issues were investigated using an online survey of adoptive parents.

5.1 Method

5.1.1 Participants

The online survey of adoptive parents closed on the 31st May 2013 with 106 respondents. Five parents who completed the survey had children who were aged 18 or over, and so their data were excluded. The analysis will focus on data gathered from adoptive parents with dependent adopted children (aged 17 years and below). The five excluded cases include parents of adopted adults who have a different legal position to their dependent adoptee counterparts. This is due to the fact that they can legally access their birth records and contact birth relatives in this way. They hold a different level of power than younger adoptees and therefore their experience of virtual contact may be different. Although the experiences of adult adoptees are important, they are outside the remit of this study.

The sample used in the analyses consisted of 101 adoptive parents (86% mothers, n=87). The age of respondents ranged from 30-67 years of age with a mean of 44.8 years (SD=6.82). The majority of respondents were married (83%, n=84) and most had one (51%, n=52) or two (36%, n=37) adopted children. Family structure differed, although most respondents reported no biological children in the family (73%, n=74). The age range at which children were adopted was birth to age 9, with the average age at adoption 36.81 months (SD=27.55), and 75% (n=76) of children being adopted by age 4. At the time of the study, children's ages ranged from less than 1 year to 17 years of age with a mean child age of 8 years (SD=4.67). Due to the focus on communicative technology use, and the age at which children are officially meant to start using social networking sites at age 13 years, I have also broken down the child age range into those 13 years and above (21%, n=21) and those 12 years and below (79%, n=80). Adoptions had lasted between zero and sixteen years (mean 5.26 years, SD=4.21). In terms of their child's pathway to care, the key reasons reported were neglect (61%, n=62), family dysfunction (42%, n=42), and domestic violence (33%, n=33). 76% (n=77) of participants maintained post-adoption contact with the birth family, with 31% (n=31) maintaining direct (face-to-face) contact and 71% (n=72) letterbox contact.

Participants were opportunity sampled and no incentive was offered for participation. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Durham University and the participating adoption agencies, and was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the British Sociological Association (2002).

5.1.2 Procedure

A link to an online questionnaire was circulated to adoptive parents via several channels: advertisements on the social media pages of the host adoption agency (Scottish Adoption), direct approach to participants by the adoption agency via email, a national adoption charity message board, and word of mouth between adopters. When participants clicked the link to the study they were directed to an invitation to participate page, which included information regarding their right to withdraw, the confidentiality of their data, and contact details for further information. If participants clicked through to the next page they had decided to participate and would be giving their informed consent to do so. Participants then received instructions on how to complete the survey, before clicking through to the main body of the survey questions. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and parents with more than one adopted child were instructed to answer with reference to the oldest adopted child. Questions were optional due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

A full copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A. It should be noted that not all data have been presented that were collected from the survey questions due to the focus of the research questions. In addition, the small sample sizes mean that there has been a focus on descriptive statistics rather than an inferential analysis of related factors to virtual contact. The survey questions that the analysis in this chapter focuses on will now be outlined.

Parents first completed questions on adoptive family structure and background information on themselves, their adopted child, their child's pathway to adoption, and contact arrangements. The categories for the reasons the child entered the care system (neglect, family stress, low income, family dysfunction, parent's illness, domestic violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse, child's disability, absent parenting, and socially unacceptable behaviour) were informed by the national statistics of children looked after in England and Wales (DfE, 2013). Finally, parents were asked to report their level of satisfaction with support services on a Likert scale of five from: 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neutral', 'agree', to 'strongly agree'.

The next section of the questionnaire dealt with contact arrangements. Parents provided information on the forms of contact typically used. Parents were asked whether their family maintains post-adoption contact, and if so to define the method(s) used.

Parents were asked whether they had searched online for their adoptive child's birth relative(s), and if they knew whether their adopted child had similarly searched online. The

remaining questions of the section focussed on the occurrence of virtual contact and only included responses from those parents who reported virtual contact. Parents were then asked five questions about virtual contact with birth families: (a) had virtual contact occurred in their family, (b) if contact had occurred, was it wanted or unwanted, (c) if contact had occurred, was it expected or unexpected, (d) whether the adopted child or a birth relative initiated the contact, and (e) whether the contact was still happening, a one-off occurrence, or they did not know whether contact was still occurring. Parents were also asked whether virtual contact had changed existing contact arrangement with birth relatives, and if so, to indicate how contact had changed. Parents were asked about their and their child's feelings about virtual contact and also how they, as parents, reacted. Finally, parents reported on (a) the perceived impact of virtual contact on family life (child's school achievements, family relationships and overall family life), and (b) the support they felt would be useful in helping them to manage virtual contact.

5.2 Results

5.2.1 Occurrence of virtual contact

In the sample as a whole, 63% (n=64) of parents had searched online for their adopted children's birth relatives, of those parents 61% (n= 39) had found the person they had been looking for, and 5% (n=5) had followed up the search online with attempted contact. With respect to adopted children's online searching, 11% (n=11) of parents reported that their children had searched for a birth relative, with 64% (n=7) of these children finding the person, and 50% (n=4) following up searching with attempted contact.

In the sample as a whole, 9% (n=9) of families reported having experienced virtual contact with birth relatives. The following section will look at the nine cases of virtual contact in more detail to descriptively explore whether any patterns can be observed in families who have experienced this type of contact.

5.2.2 Experiences of virtual contact

Due to the small number of virtual contact cases, the experiences of this method of contact have been considered in the form of nine descriptive case studies. Table 3 displays this analysis. The data have been taken from answers to the following questions in the survey (see Appendix A for full survey) in order of column appearance in Table 3:

- Q9: Child age in years
- Q19: 'The main methods of contact we currently use are…'
- Q29: 'I have looked up my child's birth relatives on a site such as Facebook' (Yes/No)
- Q30: 'My child has searched for their birth relatives on a site such as Facebook' (Yes/No)
- Q33: 'The [virtual] contact was initiated from…' (a birth relative to the child/child to a birth relative)
- Q34: 'The [virtual] contact is…' (Still happening/Was a one-off occurrence/Don't know)
- Q32 & 32a: 'Was the [virtual] contact…' (Wanted/Unwanted or Expected/Unexpected)
- Q35: 'When I found out my child had been contacted using technology, I felt…' (Worried/ Unsure of what to do/Scared/Happy for my child/OK/Other)
- Q36:'When my child experienced this contact using technology, they felt…' (Worried/Unsure of what to do/Did not want to tell you/Scared/Happy to be in contact with birth relatives/OK/Other).

Table 3: Virtual contact survey cases

Child age (years)	Contact method	Parent search?	Child search?	Initiation	Ongoing?	Expected?	Wanted?	Parent feeling	Child feeling
17	Direct, Letter	No	Yes	Child	One-off	Yes	Yes	OK	Mixed emotions
17	Direct, letter, SNS	Yes	Yes	Child	Yes	Yes	No	Worried unsure scared	Scared happy
15	Direct, letter, phone, email, SNS, text	No	No	Birth relative	Don't know	No	No	Worried unsure	OK
15	Direct, phone, SNS, text	No	Yes	Child	Yes	Yes	Yes	Happy for child OK	Happy OK
15	Direct, letter, email, SNS, text	Yes	Don't Know	Child	Yes	Yes	Yes	Happy for child	Did not want to tell parent
13	Direct, SNS	Yes	No	Birth relative	Yes	Yes	Yes	Happy for child	Happy
12	Direct, letter, SNS, text	Yes	Yes	Birth relative	Yes	No	Yes	Happy for child	Happy
11	Letter	Yes	No	Birth relative	One-off	No	No	Annoyed	Too young to know
10	None	Yes	Yes	Birth relative	Don't know	No	No	Worried	Scared

Table 3 displays the ways in which virtual contact was experienced, who initiated the contact, and how family members reacted. As shown in Table 3, six out of nine cases of virtual contact involved children who were 13 years and above, and all children who had experienced virtual contact were over 10 years of age. When child age is taken into account, the percentage of families experiencing virtual contact were as follows: 29% (n=6) of families with children aged 13 years and above compared to 4% (n=3) of families with children aged 12 years and below.

Four out of nine cases of virtual contact were initiated from the child to the birth relative and all of these children were 13 years and above. Of the remaining five cases initiated by the birth relative, four were described as being 'unexpected', three of which were experienced by children under the age of 13 years. In seven of the nine families where virtual contact occurred, there was also direct contact with birth relatives. In five of the nine families, virtual contacted was wanted, and in these cases, all but one of the children were over 13 years of age.

With regard to reactions to the virtual contact in the nine families, four parents reported negative feelings towards the virtual contact, four were happy about the virtual contact, and one parent felt OK about it. Turning to children's reported reactions, four parents thought that their child felt positively about being in contact with their birth relatives via virtual contact, two thought that their children were OK with the virtual contact, and two reported that their children felt worried or scared as a result of the virtual contact.

In addition to data presented in Table 3, parents were asked how they responded to virtual contact (*Q37: When I found out my child had been contacted through technology, my reaction was*…); six parents now gave their child the freedom to continue this contact and two now supervise it. Of the nine parents who reported virtual contact occurring, six stated that it had changed existing contact arrangements (in response to *Q38: The use of technology as a form of contact has changed the existing contact arrangements in my family*, and *Q39: If Yes, the contact arrangements have changed in the following way*…); with three parents stating that contact with birth families had increased, in two cases contact had decreased or ceased, and one parent did not know the precise way in which contact had changed.

5.2.3 Perceived Impact of Virtual Contact on Family Life

Data on the perceived impact of virtual contact on family life are presented in Table 4. A minority of parents (between 1 and 3) felt that virtual impact had had a negative impact on their children's academic performance, relationships with friends, the adoptive parent–child relationship, and the child's relationships with birth relatives.

Table 4: The perceived impact of virtual contact on adoptive family life

Virtual contact's impact on family life	Frequency (n)
My child's school achievements	
Negatively	2
Not at all	5
Positively	1
My child's relationship with friends	
Negatively	3
Not at all	4
Positively	2
My child's relationship with me	
Negatively	1
Not at all	6
Positively	2
My child's relationship with their birth family	
Negatively	3
Not at all	3
Positively	4
Our overall family life	
Negatively	2
Not at all	5
Positively	2

5.2.4 Support Needs for Virtual Contact

Parents who had experienced virtual contact stated that they required support in the following areas: managing the actual practice of virtual contact in their family (n=3), knowledge about virtual contact (n=4), and technical skills involved in using technological media (n=1). In respondents with experience of virtual contact, four of the nine reported that they were satisfied with support services (agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement *Q14: I am satisfied with the adoption support services I have received since adopting my child*).

5.3 Discussion: How common is virtual contact amongst adoptive families and how is virtual contact perceived by adoptive family members?

The aim of this chapter has been to consider the extent to which virtual contact has become a feature of post-adoption contact through the findings of an online survey of 101 adoptive parents. In so doing, several developments have emerged that suggest changes in the open practices of adoptive families due to the use of communicative technologies, namely that a large proportion of adoptive parents had searched online for birth relatives (63%) and a minority of families had experienced virtual contact (9%). However, due to the small proportion of cases, concrete conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the wider occurrence of virtual contact. Therefore it has not been possible to produce inferential statistics with regard to factors that may be related to virtual contact. This is due to the importance of considering the 'power' of the data in producing statistically significant results in relation

to the sample size (Cohen, 1992). Therefore this chapter has focussed on descriptive data and highlighted several interesting patterns that will be explored in more detail through interview data.

First, in relation to the occurrence of virtual contact, adoptive parent online searching emerged as the dominant activity using technological methods. Only a minority of parents reported that their adopted children had searched online and subsequently experienced virtual contact. However, this is based on adoptive parent knowledge of child searching. In addition, this study included children below and above the age of 13 years. Therefore, future research is needed that focuses on the use of technology by children over the age of 13 years and allows their voices to be heard. Chapters 7 and 8 will include the voices of some young people, however more knowledge about their use and experiences of technology in adoptive families is needed.

Secondly, this chapter presented data surrounding the experiences of virtual contact through nine small case studies. The importance of child age was highlighted once again, as when age was taken into account the proportion of children over 13 years who had experienced virtual contact increased. Children who were above the age of 13 years were also reported to take more control of the virtual contact situation through initiating the contact themselves. The fact that older children in this sample took control of their contact and initiated it themselves may allow for support and preparation to be in place prior to the search. However, unexpected contact could potentially be traumatic for young children. More research is needed to investigate this further with relation to this increase in power to the child and their ability to take control of their contact arrangements, and the impact this has on the child and the wider adoptive kinship network.

Although four parents described negative feelings about virtual contact, the majority either gave their child the freedom to continue the contact or supported them to do so. Therefore, despite virtual contact being challenging for some, most parents did allow virtual contact to continue. This highlights the argument that adoptive parents often partake in contact for the benefit of their child even if they are uncomfortable with it (Smith & Logan, 2004) and are able to incorporate technological open practices into their family. However, not all parents could do this. Therefore adoptive parents could need support to understand this issue further to be able to feel comfortable with its occurrence and their ability to manage it. The majority of virtual contact respondents also maintained direct contact. Again, more research is needed to explore the relationship between these two contact methods and

whether technological methods are used to extend relationships maintained through traditional contact. This relationship will be considered in relation to interview data in Chapters 7 and 8.

The data presented in Table 3 suggest that adoptive parent online searching is not a definite response to virtual contact as not all parents had searched for birth relatives in these cases. Those parents who had not searched reacted positively to the virtual contact, as did their children. Therefore the reasons for adoptive parent searching will be explored in relation to interview data to explore whether this activity is related to parent anxiety and when virtual contact is working well they may not feel it necessary to control the contact situation. In five cases the virtual contact was ongoing at the time of survey completion, suggesting that virtual contact can become a method of ongoing contact rather than just an information-finding tool. In two cases, adoptive parents did not know whether the contact was ongoing which hints at 'constrained parenthood' (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013) and a lack of control over the virtual contact highlighted by this lack of knowledge.

Thirdly, the perceived impact of virtual contact was explored. A minority of parents felt that virtual contact had a negative impact on various aspects of adoptive family life. This suggests that virtual contact is something which is manageable and has become part of the maintenance of openness in adoptive families today. The lower proportions of negative impact of virtual contact, support the ideas that in practice this type of contact does not have a damaging effect on all families to justify the levels of anxiety. Stories do emerge in the interviews that suggest the potential catastrophic nature of virtual contact, but as do the family management and coping strategies.

Lastly, this chapter considered the support needs that have emerged in relation to virtual contact. Support needs focussed on the adoption-specific risks and opportunities the Internet affords, rather than the more general use of technology by children and young people. However, only 34% of professionals had received training about the Internet and adoption in Whitesel and Howard's (2013) study, suggesting that the support may not be available. The support needs of virtual contact respondents outlined here suggest a need to review existing services to incorporate specific virtual contact services. This will be considered in more detail in relation to qualitative data, considering how adoptive parents would like the support to be delivered. The support needs of children will be explored through the perceptions of their parents and the views of adopted young people themselves in the interview analysis.

The analysis suggests that adoption is experiencing a transition from the sole use of traditional open practices to the incorporation of technological practices. Due to the small number of virtual contact cases, there is no suggestion that technological open practices are replacing traditional ones, but rather they exist and relate to one another at the same time. Therefore, it seems necessary to reconceptualise the term 'openness' to include these technological changes and to think about the potential additional open tasks for adoptive families. The need for this reconceptualisation that has emerged through survey data will be developed in the following three findings chapters, resulting in a redefinition of openness that follows the analysis. For now the survey findings have pointed to several key ways in which 'openness' may need to be reconceptualised. Structurally, the post-adoption contact arrangements that are available to adoptive families have been extended to include virtual contact. A further technological practice has also developed in the form of online searching for information and birth relatives, particularly by adoptive parents.

Overall, the 'spectrum' of open practices proposed by Neil et al. (2011) needs to be redefined to incorporate the technological practices outlined. Survey data suggest that communicative technologies are changing the open practices in adoptive families. However, it is unclear whether the meanings of openness are also changing. Morrison (2012) has suggested that communicative technologies can be considered as methods of change rather than ideological changes, as the shift to openness happened decades ago. However, the potential phenomenological or ideological impact of technological open practices on individual members of adoptive families will be considered with reference to interview data. In addition, the survey data represents adoptive parent opinions and therefore data regarding the experiences of adopted young people are based on the perceptions of their parents and should therefore be interpreted with caution. Data referring to the occurrence of virtual contact only includes the data of a small minority of adoptive parents (n=9). Therefore inferences made about the impact of experiencing virtual contact on adoptive families must be treated with caution. This survey data will be supplemented by interview data in chapters 7 and 8.

The emergence of virtual contact is one that must be soundly incorporated into our definitions and practices of openness and post-adoption contact, to develop an updated 'spectrum' of openness (Neil et al., 2011). The recognition that virtual contact, in the same way as traditional methods of contact, is not suitable for all families and children but can work well for some allows practice to respond effectively and support those families who

are most vulnerable to the risks involved. Preparation and ongoing support for adoptive parents could serve to reduce their anxiety, limit or support the act of parent online searching and support parents when virtual contact causes a shift of control into the hands of their adopted children. Further exploration using the research directions developed would inform practitioners and adoptive families on the best ways to include the extended practices of virtual contact into their family lives and to respond effectively to the risks *and* opportunities available.

Neil and Howe (2004) argue that contact is likely to progress smoothly and be most successful when the child is placed at a younger age, there is a secure parent-child relationship and the child's emotional and behavioural development is progressing. Following the investigation of family and structural factors that impact on the experiences of openness in the adoptive families in this sample, it is important to raise the question of whether or not individual, psychological factors play a role in virtual contact and responses to it. The sample included a majority of adoptive mothers. Due to the fact that literature has suggested that adoptive mothers are generally the 'kin keepers' within the adoptive kinship network (Grotevant, 2009), it is necessary to investigate how parental psychological characteristics may influence and mediate the experience of virtual contact in the adoptive family. The following chapter explores the impact of the parent-child relationship, parent opinion of virtual contact, parent communicative openness scores, and parent satisfaction levels.

Chapter 6: Findings – The individual factors that relate to parent perceptions of virtual contact

This chapter continues the quantitative analysis of survey data. This chapter addresses the overall research question:

- What individual factors relate to parent perceptions of virtual contact?

The sub-questions addressed in this chapter are:

- Does direct experience of virtual contact relate to parental opinions of communication technology?
- Does experience of virtual contact relate to parents' communicative openness and perceived satisfaction with family life?
- Does reported communicative openness or satisfaction with family life relate to adoptive parents' perceptions of communication technologies?
- Do parents' representations of their children relate to their experience of virtual contact and views on communication technology?
- Do parents' representations of their children relate to communicative openness and satisfaction with family life?
- Does child age moderate any observed relations?

The results reported in Chapter 5 showed that very few adoptive families (9 out of 101) reported using technological methods to contact birth relatives, whereas almost two-thirds (64 out of 101) of adoptive parents reported searching online for their children's birth relatives. However, the previous chapter did not consider how the characteristics of adoptive parents and families related to the experience of virtual contact, or to adoptive parents' views about communication technologies. These questions are the focus of Chapter 6. Specifically, the study reported in this chapter investigated how communicative openness, satisfaction with family life, parents' communication technology views/expertise, and parents' representations of their children (mind-mindedness) related to parents' experience of virtual contact and their communication technology views/expertise.

Brodzinsky (2005) argued that communicative openness, defined as adoptive parents being open to consider the meanings of adoption for themselves and their child and to promote and facilitate conversations, may be more important than contact itself to the adopted child's identity development, and should be maintained whether there is contact or not. With the growth of social media, the avenues via which such conversations and contact can be promoted and facilitated have expanded considerably. It may be that parents who adopt more communicative openness in family life will feel more positively toward communication technology and the possibilities of communicating with birth families in this way. The study reported in this chapter thus investigated how reported communicative openness related to parents' views about communication technologies.

The perception that results from media coverage of virtual contact suggests that its occurrence inevitably has a negative impact on adoptive family life, but as the results reported in Chapter 5 show, a minority of parents (4 out of 9) reported a negative reaction to experiencing virtual contact. The study reported in this chapter investigated the potential impact of virtual contact on the quality of adoptive family life by assessing parents' reported satisfaction. This study also explored the relation between parents' communication technology views and their reported satisfaction with family life. It may be that parents who are more anxious about and less competent in using communication technologies will report lower levels of satisfaction. Alternatively, perceived satisfaction with family life may be unrelated to parents' communication technology views.

In order to investigate these relations with reported satisfaction with family life, a new measure was designed specifically for adoptive families. Existing standardised measures, such as the Satisfaction With Family Life Scale (Diener et al, 1985) and the Parenting Stress Index (PSI) (Loyd & Abidin, 1985), do not capture the specific and unique stresses that adoptive families experience or 'adoptive strains' (Bird, Peterson & Miller, 2002: 215). There are also limitations in current research on parenting stress in adoption due to: the focus on early stages of placement and adoption adjustment, the use of parents involved in more difficult adoptions, and adoptive parents of young children (Sanchez-Sandoval & Palacios, 2012). There has also been a focus on the short-term 'adoptive strains' (Bird et al., 2002) rather than the long-term stress that can be linked to adoptive parenthood which Kirk (1964) discusses in terms of a 'role handicap'. Studies have highlighted higher levels of parenting stress in adoptive families than biological families (Kirk, 1964; Pearlin, 1989; Peterson & Miller, 2002), but have not measured the potential

reasons for the differences in stress levels. Therefore the measure designed for this study aims to address some of these problems by the inclusion of parents with children aged 0 to 17 years with a focus on parenthood from placement adjustment to adolescence. Parents were also not chosen on the basis of a difficult adoption, and questions were designed to incorporate the experience of adoption as a whole alongside more specific questions, for example associated with the adoption process.

Sources of parenting stress, for example problematic contact, can hinder the adoptive parent's ability for reflective functioning (Fonagy, 1999, cited by Neil, 2003), hindering their ability to consider the perspective of their child regarding contact arrangements. However, if adoptive parents are able to take their children's perspective and needs into account, they will be able to provide a *scaffold* (Bruner, 1983, cited by Neil, 2003: 9) for their child's management of complex contact arrangements. Kirk (1964) highlighted the negative impact of an 'insistence of difference' on parents' coping style and the parent-child relationship.

One factor that may facilitate parents' ability to consider their adoptive child's perspective is parental 'mind-mindedness' (Meins, 1997), defined as the tendency to treat the child as an individual with a mind of their own. From preschool age onwards, mind-mindedness is assessed in terms of the extent to which parents spontaneously focus on mental and emotional characteristics when given an open-ended invitation to describe their child. Previous research has assessed mind-mindedness in biological families and reported positive associations with various child and parent outcomes. For example, parental mind-mindedness is positively associated with secure parent–child attachment (Meins et al., 1998) and children's ability to understand other people's thoughts and feelings (Lundy, 2013; Meins et al., 1998), and is negatively associated with parenting stress (McMahon & Meins, 2012). McMahon and Meins (2012) argued that parents who are more mind-mindedness are better able to understand the intentions and motivations underlying their children's behaviour, making them less likely to perceive behaviour as irritating and thus mitigating against parenting stress.

The study reported in this chapter is the first to investigate mind-mindedness in adoptive parents and to explore whether mind-mindedness relates to adoptive family practices. The first aim to this end was to establish whether the existing mind-mindedness coding scheme was suitable for assessing mind-mindedness in adoptive parents. Meins et al.'s (1998) original scheme assigns the child descriptions to one of four categories—mental,

behavioural, physical, and general—and Meins et al. (2008) added an additional self-referential category to code descriptions that reflected the describer's perspective on the person being described (e.g., "he makes me smile"). However, it may be the case that additional categories need to be added to account for the ways in which adoptive parents describe their children. In particular, I was interested in the degree to which adoptive parents described their child in terms of their pre-adoption experiences and how this related to their mind-mindedness. It may be that representing one's child with reference to their care history and experiences before they were adopted will be negatively related to describing the child in terms of their current mental and emotional characteristics.

How might parents' experience of virtual contact relate to their tendency to describe their children in mind-minded ways or with reference to their pre-adoption experiences? Experiencing virtual contact may relate to parents being more likely to represent their children in terms of their desires, emotions, and motivations because such contact may prompt parents to consider what is in the best interest of their child, but it may also relate to parents being more likely to focus on the child's pre-adoption experiences with the birth family. The study reported in this chapter thus investigated how experience of virtual contact related to parents' descriptions of their children.

I also explored whether parents' descriptions of their children related to parents' views about communication technology. It may be that being more mind-minded and therefore more likely to consider the child's perspective will make parents feel more positively about communication technology. Conversely, focusing on pre-adoption experiences when describing the child may make parents feel less positively about communication technologies due to greater anxiety about the birth family and the greater possibilities for contact with birth relatives that communication technologies afford. Of course, the age of the child may well moderate any observed relations. For example, relations may only be seen with regard to older children who are likely to be using communication technologies. The study reported in this chapter thus explored whether the pattern of findings differed for older versus younger children.

The use of communicative technologies amongst children above and below the age of 10 years differed. In the group of children below the age of 10 years (n=63), 94% (n=59) of parents stated that their child did not regularly use social networking sites (by disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement '*My child regularly uses sites such as Facebook'*), with 2% (n=1) of parents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement and

5% (n=3) responding neutrally. 97% (n=60) stated that there children were not competent on social networking sites (by disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement '*My child is competent on sites such as Facebook'*), with 2% (n=1) of parents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement and 2% (n=1) responding neutrally. 97% (n=61) of parents stated that their child had not searched online for birth relatives. Only one parent (2%) stated that there child had searched online for birth relatives and one (2%) did not know if this had occurred.

In the group of children above the age of 10 years (n=38), 42% (n=16) of parents stated that their child regularly used social networking sites (by agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement '*My child regularly uses sites such as Facebook'*), with 53% (n=20) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, with 5% [n=2] responding neutrally to the statement. 42% (n=16) of parents stated that the child was competent on social networking sites (by agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement '*My child is competent on sites such as Facebook*'), with 50% (n=19) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (with 8% [n=3] responding neutrally to the statement). 26% (n=10) of parents with children 10 years and above stated that their child had searched online for their birth relatives, with 24% (n=9) not knowing if this had occurred (50% [n=19] stated that their child had not searched online for birth relatives).

Due to the differences in the use of communication technologies amongst younger and older children (above and below the age of 10 years) and the fact that all adoptees were aged 10 and above who have experienced virtual contact, it is important to look at these differences in more detail. Therefore the age of 10 has been used to investigate the effect of child age.

The study reported in this chapter also sought to investigate how adoptive parents' descriptions of their children related to reported adoptive family functioning. With regard to communicative openness, one could argue that parents who are more mind-minded will recognise their children's desires to know about their birth family history, and will thus be more open. However, one could equally argue that being mind-minded might not relate to communicative openness due to the fact that adoptive parents who are likely to take their child's perspective may judge that the child will not benefit from knowledge about their birth family or care history. The same arguments can be made regarding parents' tendency to describe their child with reference to pre-adoption experiences. Once again, the adoptive child's age is likely to play a crucial role, and it may be that relations between parents'

descriptions of their children and communicative openness will differ as a function of children's age.

Turning to parents' satisfaction with family life, if the same relation holds for adoptive and biological families, one would expect to replicate McMahon and Meins' (2012) finding of a negative association between mind-mindedness and parenting stress/dissatisfaction. However, there are reasons to believe that the relation will be different in adoptive families. For example, adoptive parents who are more mind-minded and are highly aware of their children's needs and desires will be more likely to recognise that their child will be curious about their birth family and may wish to contact birth relatives. This may lead to adoptive parents feeling less satisfied with family life due to the potential risks involved in virtual contact. A tendency to focus on pre-adoption experiences when describing their children may be associated with lower levels of satisfaction with family life due to the fact that these factors, rather than the child's own characteristics, are most prominent in the parent's representation of the child. As was the case for the factors discussed above, the age of the child is likely to moderate any relations between parents' descriptions of their children and reported satisfaction with family life.

6.1 Method

6.1.1 Participants

This chapter reports data from the same survey as described in Chapter 5. Therefore the sample of adoptive parents is the same (see p. 81).

6.1.2 Procedure

A copy of the full survey can be found in Appendix A. This chapter will focus on the questions that gathered data on communicative openness, parental perceptions of communicative technology, the parent-child relationship measures using the concept of 'mind-mindedness', and parenting stress.

6.1.2a Communicative openness

The measure of communicative openness was an adaptation of Brodzinsky's (2003) 14-item self-report scale. The original measure was designed for adopted children to report on the way their parents communicate with them, including statements such as: 'My parents are uncomfortable when I ask questions about my birth parents' and 'My parents make it very easy for me to ask questions about my adoption or about my birth parents'. In the

adaption for the study reported here, the items were reworded to indicate the parent's perspective. Some of Brodzinsky's original items were not adapted as they were specifically related to the child's perspective and could not be answered by parents. For example, 'My parents are good listeners when it comes to my thoughts and feelings about being adopted' and 'I have many thoughts and feelings about being adopted or about my birth parents which I cannot share with my mother and father'. The items in the adapted measure were:

a. I talk to my child on a regular basis about his/her adoption
b. I bring up my child's adoption without them asking about it
c. My child talks to me about their adoption
d. My child asks me questions about their adoption
e. I feel comfortable/happy talking about adoption with my child
f. My child talks to me about any concerns relating to their adoption
g. I communicate with my child's birth parents/birth relatives about the adoption

Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with potential communicative openness scores ranging between 7 and 35. Higher scores indicate greater communicative openness. This score was calculated by asking adoptive parents to state their agreement to statements as follows: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5). Internal reliability of the communicative openness measure was acceptable, Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$.

6.1.2b Parental Communicative Technology Score

Parents completed 10 questions on 'Technology and Adoptive Family Life' (outlined below) responding to each question on a 5-point Likert scale:

a. I have heard about this type of contact happening within adoptive families
b. I am worried about this type of contact happening in my family (reverse coded)
c. I am a regular user on sites such as Facebook
d. I feel competent on sites such as Facebook
e. My child regularly uses sites such as Facebook
f. My child is competent on sites such as Facebook
g. I would feel comfortable with my child having contact through technology with member(s) of their birth family

h. I think there could be benefits involved with the use of technology as a method of contact

i. I think there could be risks involved with the use of technology as a method of contact (reverse coded)

j. My child would feel comfortable having contact through technology with member(s) of their birth family

Scores on the questions were summed to give a total parental communicative technology score ranging from 10 to 50. This score was calculated by asking adoptive parents to state their agreement to statements as follows: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5). Higher scores indicate more knowledge, expertise, and positive views on use of communicative technologies. The internal reliability of the scale was acceptable, Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$.

6.1.2c Mind-mindedness

Adoptive parents were given the following statement in the online survey:

> *"Think about your child. Please tell us a little about your child in the box below, writing the first things that come into your head. There are no right or wrong answers. You are free to write as much or as little as you wish".*

This was an adaptation of the 'Describe your child' measure used by Meins et al. (1998) to measure mind-mindedness in biological parents with children of pre-school age and older. The way in which this measure is designed means that the respondents are not aware of what the measure is actually assessing. The opaque nature of the measure produces parent responses that are less likely to be influenced by social desirability (McMahon & Meins, 2012). Parents' descriptions were divided into discrete descriptions that could be single words, phrases, or sentences.

Meins and colleagues' (Meins et al.,1998, 2008) coding scheme was used to code parents' descriptions into one of five exclusive and exhaustive categories into which descriptions were placed: *Mental* – any references to the child's intellect, cognitions, personality, or emotions, *Behavioural* – any references to behavioural characteristics and social relationships and interactions with other people, *Physical* – references to physical appearance, age, position in the family, *General* – any descriptions that did not fit into the above categories, including value judgements (e.g., lovely, nice), and *Self-referential* – any

description that referenced the parent's perspective (e.g., 'he's hard work', 'I wouldn't be without her').

With regard to descriptions that focused on children's pre-adoption experiences, 48 of the 98 parents who provided descriptions of their children included at least one such description. Thus a new *Placement* category was created to account for these descriptions. Note that such descriptions were originally coded in the General category in the original coding scheme. Therefore the same number of comments was still coded as they would have been in the original coding scheme. However the comments were coded across six instead of five categories. Parents received scores for mental and placement descriptions expressed as the proportion of the total number of descriptions to control for amount written. Higher scores for the mental category indicate greater mind-mindedness.

Descriptions were coded by the author, blind to all other data. A randomly selected 25% of descriptions was coded for a second time by Professor Elizabeth Meins who was also blind to all other data; inter-rater reliability was excellent, $\kappa=0.86$.

6.1.2d Satisfaction with Adoptive Family Life

Parents completed the 'Satisfaction with Adoptive Family Life' scale that was designed for this study. This scale contains 15 items, each of which is rated on a 5-point Likert Scale - strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5):

a. I am happy with my family life

b. I find being a parent stressful

c. I think parenting an adopted child is more stressful than parenting a biological child

d. I think parenting an adopted child is more rewarding than parenting a biological child

e. Our family has experienced stress related to the adoption process (prior to child being placed)

f. Our family has experienced stress related to the adoption placement (since child was placed)

g. We overcome problems as a family

h. I am happy with the support my partner provides

i. I am happy with the support my friends provide

j. I am happy with the support my adoption agency provides

k. Our child has settled within our family

l. I know what to do if we have any adoption related problems

m. I have someone to talk to who understands my feelings about adoption

n. We experience no greater stress than a family with no adopted children would experience

o. Adoption is everything I hoped it would be

Potential scores ranged from 15 to 75. Items b, c, d, e, and f were reverse coded, so that higher scores indicated greater satisfaction. Internal reliability for the scale was acceptable, Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$.

6.2 Results

6.2.1 Descriptive statistics and Preliminary Analyses

There were missing data for each measure as there were incomplete responses from a minority of parents out of the sample of 101. The completion rates were as follows: Communicative openness (n=98), Parental Communicative technology Score (n=97), mind-mindedness (n=98), and Satisfaction with Adoptive family Life (n=92). Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables in relation to overall scores for all participants, participants who reported virtual contact and participants who did not report virtual contact.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of survey measures

Measure (max. score)	*Overall Mean*	*SD*	*Range*	*VC mean*	*SD*	*Range*	*No VC mean*	*SD*	*Range*
Communicative openness (35)	24.31	4.76	10-25	25.11	4.19	20-32	24.22	4.83	10-35
Parental Communicative Technology Score (50)	23.65	6.27	12-41	31.33	7.58	16-41	22.86	5.60	12-36
Mind-mindedness index (1)	.32	.22	0-1	.40	.23	0-.67	.32	.22	0-1
Placement descriptions (1)	.13	.20	0-.83	.16	.30	0-.83	.12	.17	0-.67
Parental satisfaction (75)	50.88	9.15	26-71	43.56	11.57	26-65	51.67	8.56	34-71

The children in families who had experienced virtual contact were older (M = 12.00, SD = 5.98) than those in families who had not experienced virtual contact (M = 7.66, SD = 4.37), $t(99) = 2.75$, $p = .007$.

Children's age was positively correlated with communicative openness, $r(96) = .50$, $p < .001$, and communication technology scores, $r(95) = .36$, $p < .001$, and was negatively correlated with satisfaction with adoptive family life, $r(90) = -.40$, $p < .001$, and placement descriptions, $r(96) = -.26$, $p = .009$. Children's age was unrelated to mental descriptions, $r(96) = .19$, $p = .059$.

6.2.2 Relation between Experience of Virtual Contact and Opinions on Communication Technologies

Table 5 shows the mean communication technology scores for parents who had and had not experienced virtual contact. The groups' scores were compared using an independent samples t test; although the sizes of the groups were different, Levene's test for equality of variances was non-significant, $F = 0.66$, $p = .417$, showing that the test is valid despite the different group sizes. Parents who had experienced virtual contact achieved higher scores than those who had not experienced virtual contact, $t(95) = 4.18$, $p < .001$.

Given the relations with child age, the analysis was rerun adding age as a covariate. Controlling for child age, parents who had experienced virtual contact achieved higher scores than those who had not experienced virtual contact, $F(1, 94) = 11.18$, $p < .001$. Parents with direct experience of virtual contact thus reported greater expertise in communication technology for themselves and their children and held more positive views about communication technology that their counterparts with no direct experience, and this effect was independent of children's ages.

6.2.3 Relation between Experience of Virtual Contact and Parents' Communicative Openness and Perceived Satisfaction with Adoptive Family Life

Table 5 also shows the mean communicative openness and perceived satisfaction with adoptive family life scores for the virtual contact and no virtual contact groups. Differences between the groups were compared using independent samples t tests; once again, Levene's test for equality of variances for both variables were non-significant (Fs < 0.58, $p = .448$). The groups did not differ on communicative openness, $t(96) = 0.53$, $p = .597$. This null finding was maintained when child age was controlled, $F(1, 95) = 0.83$, $p = .365$.

With respect to satisfaction with family life, parents who had not experienced virtual contact reported higher levels than parents who had experienced virtual contact, $t(90) = 2.61$, $p = .011$. However, when child age was controlled, the difference between the groups was reduced to a non-significant trend, $F(1, 89) = 3.20$, $p = .077$.

6.2.3 Relations between Communicative Openness, Satisfaction with Family Life and Perception of Communication Technologies

Relations between communicative openness, satisfaction with family life and parents' views about communication technology were investigated using correlational analyses. Parents' communication technology scores were positively correlated with communicative openness, $r(92) = .35$, $p = .001$, but were unrelated to satisfaction with family life, $r(87) = -.14$, $p = .187$. Satisfaction and communicative openness scores were unrelated, $r(87) = .03$, $p = .782$.

Looking at these relations separately in parents whose children were under and over age 10 (n= 63 and 38 respectively), the relations were the same as for the whole group in children under and over 10, apart from the positive correlation between communication technology and communicative openness, which held in the under 10 group, $r(57) = .31$, $p = .018$, but not in the over 10 group, $r(33) = .09$, $p = .612$.

6.2.4 Parents' Descriptions of their Children

First, relations between mental and placement description scores were investigated using correlational analyses. Mental and placement descriptions scores were negatively correlated, $r(96) = -.56$, $p < .001$.

Next, the relation between experience of virtual contact and child descriptions were investigated. Table 5 shows the mean mental and placement description scores for parents who had and had not experienced virtual contact (expressed as the proportion of the total number of comments). Group differences were investigated using independent samples t tests. Levene's test was non-significant for mental description scores, $F = 0.00$, $p = .994$, but was significant for placement description scores, $F = 4.33$, $p = .040$. The t value with equal variances not assumed is thus reported for placement description data. The virtual contact and no virtual contact groups did not differ on mental description, $t(96) = 1.14$, $p = .268$, or placements descriptions, $t(8.543) = 0.40$, $p = .701$. Controlling for child age did not alter the relation between experience of virtual contact and parent descriptions, with

non-significant effects of virtual contact for both mental descriptions, $F(1, 95) = 0.39$. $p = .39$, and placement descriptions, $F(1, 95) = 0.91$, $p = .342$.

Relations between the child description variables and communication technology, communicative openness, and reported satisfaction with family life were investigated using correlational analyses. In the group as a whole, mental description scores were unrelated to communication technology, communicative openness, and satisfaction scores (rs < .13, ps > .213). Placement descriptions were also unrelated to technology, communicative openness, and satisfaction scores (rs < -.15, ps > .139).

These correlations were run separately for the under and above 10 age groups. The null findings remained for the under 10 group, but in the over 10 group, communication technology scores were positively correlated with mental descriptions, $r(31) = .36$, $p = .038$, and negatively correlated with placement descriptions, $r(31) = -.44$, $p = .010$.

6.3 Discussion: What individual factors relate to parent perceptions of virtual contact?

The first aim of the study reported in this chapter was to investigate how experience of virtual contact related to parents' views about communication technology, communicative openness, satisfaction with family life, and descriptions of their children. Parents who had experienced virtual contact reported more expertise in communication technology for themselves and their children and were more positive about the uses of communication technology than parents who had not experienced virtual contact. Extending Chapter 5's finding that a minority of parents reported negative reactions to the experience of virtual contact, the results of this chapter show that experiencing virtual contact is associated with more positive views on and expertise in communication technology. However, it is not possible to establish any direction of cause and effect on the basis of these concurrent data. It may be that parents who feel that they and their children have expertise in communication technology and are positive about its use are more likely to experience and support virtual contact. Conversely, experiencing virtual contact may have prompted parents to increase expertise and consider the potential benefits of communication technology. Nevertheless, the results of the study reported in this chapter fail to support the media portrayal of virtual contact leading to a mistrust or ban of communication technology.

Parents' expertise in and positive views toward communication technology were positively correlated with communicative openness in families with children under age 10, but there was no relation between these variables in children aged 10 and over. The moderating effect of age for this relation is interesting. It may be that communicative openness is associated with more expertise and positive views on communication technology specifically in the younger group because the children are not yet old enough to engage with communication technology independently. Being open about the child's adoption and birth family may therefore be perceived to have fewer potential consequences with regard to contacting birth relatives via communication technology in this group.

The findings reported in this chapter also investigated how experience of virtual contact related to communicative openness and satisfaction with adoptive family life. Parents who had and had not experienced virtual contact did not differ with respect to reported communicative openness, but parents who had experienced virtual contact reported lower levels of satisfaction. However, the group difference in reported satisfaction appears to be accounted for by the fact that child age was negatively correlated with reported satisfaction with adoptive family life and children were older in families that had experienced virtual contact. When age was controlled, there was no significant difference in reported satisfaction between the groups. The decrease in satisfaction with family life as a function of increasing child age is likely to be due to the rise in difficulties in family functioning that are typically associated with adolescence. However, the findings reported in this chapter highlight that it may be necessary for parents to consider their child's use of communicative technologies before they reach adolescence due to the increase in the use of these technologies from age 10 years onwards.

In order to investigate how experience of virtual contact related to parents' descriptions of their children, the study reported in this chapter first established whether Meins et al.'s (1998, 2008) coding scheme was suitable for coding adoptive parents' descriptions of their children. Almost half of the adoptive parents mentioned pre-adoption experiences when describing their children, and so a new placement category was created to account for these descriptions that were coded in the general category of the original coding scheme. Placement descriptions were found to be negatively correlated with mental descriptions, suggesting that a tendency to focus on pre-adoption experiences made parents less likely to represent their children in terms of their current mental and emotional states. With regard to relations between experience of virtual contact and child descriptions, there was no

relation with parents' tendency to describe their children with reference to mental characteristics or their pre-adoption experiences. These null findings suggest that virtual contact with birth relatives is not associated with parents being more likely either to take their child's perspective and represent their thoughts and feelings or represent the child in terms of their pre-adoption experiences.

Finally, this chapter investigated how parents' descriptions of their children related to their views on communication technology, communicative openness, and satisfaction with family life. Regardless of the child's age, mental and placement descriptions were unrelated to communicative openness and satisfaction with family life. Parents' representations of their children therefore do not appear to relate to their tendency to be open about the adoption or feel satisfied with family life. The null finding for the relation between mental descriptions and satisfaction is somewhat at odds with the negative association between mental descriptions and parenting stress reported by McMahon and Meins (2012) in biological families. However, as discussed in the Introduction to this chapter, there are reasons to believe that the same pattern of findings will not hold in adoptive families due to the fact that taking an adoptive child's perspective will require the parent to recognise the child's likely desire to search for birth relatives and the potential negative impact this may have on adoptive family life.

Parents' communication technology scores were positively correlated with mental child descriptions and negatively correlated with placement descriptions in the older but not younger group. These relations suggest that, in children who are old enough to be likely to be using communication technology, representing one's child in terms of their mental and emotional states rather than in terms of their pre-adoption experiences is related to more positive views about communication technology.

There are a number of practice implications of the findings of the study reported in this chapter. First, the associations between child descriptions and parents' communication technology scores highlight a positive relation between parents' understanding of their child's desires and intentions and their views of their child's and their own competence in and the benefits of using communication technology. This finding is in line with Neil's (2003: 25) proposal that "adopters who had a high capacity to take the perspective of others were more likely to view contact positively and maintain or increase such contact over time, even in situations where contact presented significant challenges". Second, the observed negative relation between placement and mental descriptions can be linked to

Brodzinsky's (1987) notion of 'insistence of difference', in which difficulties emerge when parents adopt this coping pattern by emphasising the unique nature of adoption and the differences of adoptive families to biological ones, and often blame this for any problems within their family. A focus on the placement and adoption in parent descriptions could indicate a perceived distance in the parent–child relationship or a feeling that the child is not integrated into the family. Parents need to be encouraged to make more mind-minded representations of their child as an individual rather than an outcome of an adoption process. Identifying levels of mind-mindedness in adopters could serve as a useful measure to assess whether adoptive parents are able to consider the needs of their child appropriately and whether they need further support to do so, particularly if new challenges are presented through virtual contact. In addition, Neil (2003) suggests that considering the empathy of adoptive parents in the assessment and preparation stages of adoption is vital. She argues that assessment could include asking adopters to reflect on their own histories, the needs of adopted children, and the complex reasons why children are adopted. It is argued that adoption agencies can be influential in instilling these empathic qualities in adoptive parents.

In summary, this chapter has explored how experience of virtual contact and views about communication technology relate to reported adoptive family functioning and to adoptive parents' representations of their children. However, the survey findings provide only a snapshot of adoptive family life and virtual contact. In order to explore these relations in greater depth, the following chapters report on a series of interviews conducted with adoptive parents and adopted children who have had direct experience of virtual contact and adoptive parents who are considering the potential occurrence of virtual contact in the future. Chapters 7 and 8 thus explore the ways in which the Internet is changing open practices within adoptive families. An ongoing discussion of the reconceptualisation of openness will be made, drawing upon the ideas of Neil et al. (2011) and the ways the 'spectrum' of open practices may need to be updated.

Chapter 7: Findings - A Qualitative Exploration of the Impact of Technology on Openness

This chapter moves on to consider the qualitative data gathered from interviews with adoptive parents and adopted young people and addresses the following research question:

- How is technology changing the open practices in adoptive families?

The quantitative findings suggest that the use of the Internet, and in particular social media, within adoptive families is changing the way family life is experienced, relationships are formed and maintained, and open practices are developed. Survey data highlighted the traditional and technological practices that now define openness within adoptive family life, such as: the maintenance of direct and indirect contact, communicative openness, and technological practices including parent online searching and virtual contact. In summary, survey data suggested that the Internet is changing the experiences of adoptive family life in various ways. As suggested, this points to a need to reconceptualise what is meant by the term 'open' for adoptive families in the Internet age, with an integration of traditional and technological practices. A qualitative analysis of adoptive parent and adoptee perspectives is presented over the next two chapters. Firstly, the changing experiences and meanings of openness in light of technological developments will be explored, focussing on traditional methods of indirect and direct post-adoption contact. Technology introduces additional considerations for adoptive parents in the maintenance of openness. This chapter also explores adoptive parent opinions of technological open practices and the actions they take through searching online themselves for information about their child's birth family. In Chapter 8, adoptive parent and adopted young people's experiences of virtual contact will be discussed and their recommendations for practice are outlined.

7.1 Procedure

The same semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix D) was used for each adoptive parent interviewed, apart from a focus on virtual contact for those who had experienced it. The interview questions focussed on the themes of: dual connection, communicative openness, post-adoption contact, views on and experiences of communicative technologies, and support needs. The analysis presented in this chapter and Chapter 8 does not focus on the themes of dual connection and communicative openness. Following the analysis of the

quantitative data, it became apparent that technology was infiltrating the practice of contact, therefore this was the focus of the interview analysis.

Each section in the interview schedule included a key question and several prompts. This allowed the semi-structured design to guide the topic of discussion but also gave adoptive parents the power to direct the flow of the conversation based on their unique experiences. The analysis of adoptive parent interviews in this chapter focusses on the key interview questions of:

- What contact arrangements do you have in place?
- What are your opinions about the use of technology to make contact with birth family members?
- Can you tell me about the use of technology in your family?

The semi-structured interview schedule for adopted young people had questions within the same themes as their adoptive parents (see Appendix E). The key questions addressed in this chapter are:

- Can you tell me a little about your birth family? Do you have contact with them?

The accounts of adoptive parents and adopted young people are used across the two interview analysis chapters. The voices of the adopted young people are deemed as important as those of their parents and are therefore presented alongside adult opinions. This is unless stated otherwise, for example in the section focussing on adoptive parent online searching.

The sample of participants referred to in this and the following chapter consists of 29 adoptive parents and adoptees broken down as follows: 10 adoptive mothers who have not experienced virtual contact, and 13 adoptive parents (10 adoptive mothers and 3 adoptive fathers, with two couples interviewed together) and 6 adoptees (4 boys and 2 girls, aged 14-22 years) from eleven families who have experienced virtual contact. The sample is detailed and outlined in the methodology chapter. Please refer to the brief description of participants in parenthesis after quotations, including pseudonym name, participant number, family position, and if the participant has experienced virtual contact this is indicated with the abbreviation (VC). Where multiple family members have been

interviewed this is illustrated by a number and a letter, e.g. 13a is an adoptee whose parent is participant 13. For more detail please refer to the participant profiles in Appendix F by using the corresponding participant numbers.

Table 6: Summary of interview themes exploring the impact of technology on open practices

Superordinate theme	***Master theme***	***Description***
Post-adoption contact	Motivations	Adopters: empathy for child and/or birth relatives, or feeling obligated due to agency pressure. Adoptees: keeping dual connection alive, maintaining relationships with birth relatives, building identity, and answering questions.
	Indirect contact	Positive: adoptive family members treasured letters and enjoyed personal nature. Negative: unreliability of birth relatives and formality of arrangements.
	Direct contact	Positive: providing reassurance for adoptee, maintaining relationships, and positive adult relationships. Negative: inappropriate behaviour by birth relatives and the risk they pose to the child.
	Influencing factors	Judgement of birth relatives and adult relationships, significance of birth relationships to child, the formality of the arrangement, and the risks involved.
Views on technological open practices	Risk/benefits	A risk/benefit analysis highlights an adoptive parent focus on risk, with those not experiencing virtual contact developing a fear of the unknown.
	Control	A comparison of the level of control held by adoptive triad members through traditional and technological open practices. The main shift seems to be a lack of state control through technological practices.
Adoptive parent online searching	Reasons for searching	Key response: 'Forewarned is forearmed'.
	Action after search	Linked to the reason for searching. Key actions included, sharing information found with child, continuing to monitor birth relatives and blocking birth relatives through child's online account.

Using adoptive family experiences, it is important to question the appropriateness of openness for each family. As discussed earlier, Neil et al., (2011) propose that openness incorporates a 'spectrum' of practices and tasks for adoptive families. Open practices cannot be assumed to be a positive development for all families and individual members of adoptive families. Therefore what follows is a critical discussion of the ways traditional practices of openness are experienced by adoptive families in positive and negative ways, thinking about the ways adoptive families manage these practices, and the ways in which technology is changing these experiences. Of key importance are the meanings of participant experiences and opinions, which have been interpreted under master themes that emerged inductively from the data. The superordinate categories focus on participant meanings of post-adoption contact, views on technological practices, and adoptive parent online searching (see Table 6).

7.1.1 Reflecting on the Analytical Process

As outlined in the methodology chapter, I intended to conduct a purely Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the data. However, on reflection the resulting analyses did not follow the principles of IPA strictly. This was in part as a result of the unexpected outcomes of my sampling strategy. The use of the survey to recruit interview participants actually produced a sample of ten adoptive parents who had not experienced virtual contact. This meant that the qualitative sample was larger than originally intended. Due to this it was difficult to achieve the level of interpretive depth required through IPA. The presentation of findings that follows is actually a mixture of IPA and thematic analyses. Although complexities and nuances emerged in individual cases, clear themes did emerge with regards to the perceptions of virtual contact. IPA also seeks to produce themes, however the depth of interpretation of individual experiences under these themes is not always achieved and the discussion of themes follows the more descriptive process of thematic analysis. Therefore what follows in Chapters 7 and 8 is a thematic analysis of common opinions and experiences of virtual contact, whilst still maintaining the idiographic focus of IPA. In particular the latter is achieved through the heavy use of verbatim quotations and family case studies in Chapter 8. Although this isn't how I set out to conduct the analysis, it has allowed for the general and the specific to emerge. The thematic analysis allows for general experiences of virtual contact to emerge and allows for themes to be mapped as in Table 6. This allows for a descriptive level of depth to uncover the various aspects of the contact experience, be that traditional or technological. IPA adds depth to this analysis and focuses in on a small number of cases to interpret the

ways in which virtual contact is experienced on a more personal level and to ask questions such as: why did a particular family experience contact in this way?

It became clear that the analysis was following a more thematic route due to the number of themes that were emerging. When cross-analysing participant accounts, as required through IPA to generate themes (Smith & Eatough, 2006), similar perspectives surrounding the challenges and benefits of the use of technology in adoptive family life emerged. On reflection, this may be due to there being too many participants to carry out a pure and meaningful IPA analysis as a result of the sampling technique. As Smith (2004: 42) notes "it is only possible to do the detailed, nuanced analysis associated with IPA on a small sample. Many studies have a sample of 5-10". This would have been achieved if the original sampling plan had been followed and ten cases of virtual contact focussed upon. However, the principles of IPA that have been maintained have added a depth and richness to the analysis and allowed for comparisons to be made on an individual level in Chapter 8 where family stories are compared in the form of case studies. This has maintained the IPA commitment to the case (Smith, 2004: 51). When reflecting on the progress of IPA in 2004 Smith stated: "most IPA so far has been at the thematic level, illustrated with verbatim extracts, but there is scope for pushing further" (Smith, 2004: 51). On reflection, my analysis did remain on a 'thematic level' for the most part, which may have had something to do with the recruitment of the sample and the resulting analytical process and creation of themes.

My analysis initially followed an IPA approach as the analysis is connected to the principles of phenomenology, with attention paid to a person's direct experience and story (Smith, 2004). Therefore the presentation of data conforms to this as I have included verbatim quotations to illustrate discussions and highlight the unique perceptions of virtual contact. In addition family case studies have been used in Chapter 8 to ensure that participant stories and the meanings behind them are maintained. Smith (2004) has argued that the case is central to IPA inquiry to ensure that idiographic accounts are used to form the basis of analysis. Alongside maintaining sensitivity to unique stories (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), IPA also intends to illustrate more general themes through cross-case analysis (Smith & Eatough, 2006). The process of analysis involved reading each interview transcript to highlight the unique perceptions and case studies that appear throughout the following two chapters. Following this, shared experiences and themes were discovered through cross-analysing individual family cases. Data is presented within themed sections,

however each theme is discussed with reference to individual perceptions and cross-case comparisons. In this sense, IPA allows for unique perspectives *and* shared experiences to be reported (Smith, 2004). However, the analysis lacks the level of interpretative depth which makes up the other side of the 'double hermeneutic' (Smith, 2004: 40).

The analysis became more thematic in relation to the level of interpretative depth as the number of participants included in the qualitative stage of the study (n=29) produced a large number of themes. This resulted in descriptive depth in the discussion of themes and recognising patterns across individual experiences (Aronson, 1995; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Therefore, the number of participants meant that more than one participant had an experience that could be matched to a particular theme. This process of matching participants to the theme mirrors the principles of thematic analysis (Aronson, 1995). Despite this not being the original intention, it has been a useful exercise as the thematic analysis has allowed for the collective experiences of traditional and technological contact to be highlighted. This unintended dual process of phenomenological perceptions and collective experiences has allowed for idiographic accounts to be supplemented by general themes. Therefore, when it comes to making practice recommendations this study has been able to have more generalised implications whilst allowing the individual voices of service-users to be heard. Overall, the process of theme production was inductive in line with IPA when studying an emerging topic. Therefore, despite the lower level of interpretation, the themes emerged inductively from the data and represent the perceptions and experiences of the adoptive parents and adopted young who took part in this study.

7.2 Findings and Discussion

What follows is a presentation of the analysis of interview data from adoptive parents and adopted young people to explore the ways in which communicative technologies may be influencing the maintenance of post-adoption contact. The analysis in this chapter followed the principles of thematic analysis more closely than those of IPA. This is due to the fact that patterns were identified in relation to the common experiences of traditional methods of contact, views on technological open practices and the practice of parent online searching. The idiographic principle of IPA has been maintained due to the use of individual quotations and experiences. However the level of analysis is descriptive through the process of matching the individual experiences to the overarching theme. Therefore this chapter presents the general opinions of adoptive parents and adopted young people,

with more depth achieved in the case study analysis in chapter 8. The experiences of traditional methods of indirect and direct contact are first outlined to understand the current ways in which relationships are maintained between adoptive and birth families, before considering how technology may be changing views on contact.

7.3 Traditional methods of post-adoption contact

For many families, the tasks of openness extend to the maintenance of contact with birth relatives. This involves lifelong psychological challenges for the adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 1987). The survey found that 76% of adoptive parents maintained a form of contact with their child's birth family, comparable to the commonly quoted 70% found by Parker (1999). The fact that the majority of adoptive parents maintain a form of post-adoption contact suggests the existence of strong motivations to do so. Why is it that so many adoptive families maintain contact and how are these reasons defined by adoptive parents and adoptees?

7.3.1 Participant motivations to maintain contact

Adoptive parents described the reasons that they maintained contact with birth family members. Despite contact arrangements differing between families (as can be seen in the participant profiles in Appendix F), several key themes recurred throughout the sample. Three main motivations for maintaining contact emerged that were outlined by several parents being: child needs, empathy for birth relatives, and fulfilling an obligation.

The best interests of the child emerged as a key reason for several parents to continue contact. Mary discusses the importance of accepting her children's connection to the birth family as part of who they are and contact fulfilling the role of maintaining this identity. She also explains how contact can allow her children to explore the range of this side of their identity and to express to them that she accepts this as part of their being:

"I think I want to give the children a wide a possible range of their own self-worth or their own being as I possibly can…This is who they are" (Mary, participant 1, adoptive mother).

Charlotte considers the importance of birth family relationships when her son reaches adulthood and therefore wants to ensure the continuity of birth family ties through contact. This can make relationships with birth relatives more 'family like' (Jones & Hackett, 2012):

"When [my son] is an adult he would probably have a relationship with them, alongside the relationship that he has with us. And that's the best way of making sure that that happened and it would be to keep the information coming, and keep him updated, keep them updated, so that it wasn't just a big surprise at the end" (Charlotte, participant 21, adoptive mother, VC).

Charlotte and Mary's accounts focus on the needs of their children. Furthermore some adopters also displayed empathy towards the birth relatives. Sue empathises with her daughter's birth mother and understands that she will need a level of reassurance which contact can provide:

"Well, the birth mother does need to know her daughter's being looked after" (Sue, participant 17, adoptive mother, VC).

However, some parents felt pressured by their adoption agency to maintain contact with birth relatives. This theme was echoed by Josie who describes her reasons for maintaining contact as fulfilling an obligation:

"It's making sure we've done our bit…I accept that they have links and I want to make sure that it's not my fault if that link gets broken" (Josie, participant 7, adoptive mother).

Adopted young people also discussed the reasons for maintaining contact and the importance of this for them. They focussed on identity and curiosity, answering questions about their past and birth family, and the importance of maintaining relationships. Peter links the importance and motivation for contact to the centrality of his birth relatives to his identity. He feels that he would be incomplete without the maintenance of contact and therefore his argument highlights the importance of ongoing information to the resolution of identity conflicts (Fratter, 1996):

*"**Do you think it's important to have contact?***

Well, yeah, I do, 'cause they're obviously a part of me, and I can't take them away 'cause that would be taking away part of me. So, I think it's really important to be able to speak to them, you know, one way or another. I don't actually care what way it is, but as long as I am having contact with them that's fine by me" (Peter, participant 21a, adoptee aged 16, VC).

Despite all adoptees experiencing virtual contact to some degree, they all highlighted the desire to extend contact in some way. This was either by contacting other birth relatives and/or finding out more information about certain aspects of their birth family history. This is linked to research that suggests that adoptees mainly display dissatisfaction about contact through their want to have more of it (Thomas et al., 1999; Macaskill, 2002). Lee currently has contact with his birth grandmother, uncles, and cousins. However, he would like to reunite with his birth mother and meet his birth father for the first time. He describes his motivations for this as being linked to curiosity and wanting more genealogical information. Lee suggests here that there are certain unknowns and ambiguities to his genealogical past, a reason that has been linked to a desire to search (Krueger & Hanna, 1997):

"I would like to know my birth mum and given the chance, if she wants to meet up, I'd meet her…I would like to meet up with him [birth father], it would be nice to see which side of the family I inherited my genes from. Mostly for curiosity really…mostly to see what's what and who's who" (Lee, participant 13a, adoptee aged 18, VC).

It will now be considered whether the method of traditional contact influences the experience and satisfaction with contact. First, indirect contact is discussed and in particular the causes of dissatisfaction with this method are highlighted.

7.3.2 Indirect contact

Indirect or letterbox contact was the most common method used in adoptive families in this sample, with 71% of parents reporting the use of this method. Despite this also being the most commonly reported contact method in wider research (Neil, 2002; 2009), letterbox contact seemed to cause dissatisfaction amongst adoptive parents and adoptees. Therefore, there is a suggestion that letterbox can be a complex form of contact to maintain. Research suggests that letterbox can be successful by providing information and reassurance about the birth relative's wellbeing for the adopted child (Neil et al, 2011). However, problems can also arise as letterbox contact has been reported to be complex and does not maintain genuine communication and relationships (Logan, 1999; Neil, 2009).

A common problem with indirect contact was the one-way nature of it due to the lack of response from birth relatives, which has been mirrored in wider research (Logan, 1999; Neil, 2009). Katie describes her annoyance at making the effort to maintain letterbox contact and this not being reciprocated by the birth family members involved. This is

particularly difficult due to the disappointment of her children and helping them to understand why the birth family have not maintained contact:

"I find it quite annoying that we do all the things that we're supposed to do, you know we send the Christmas cards and the information sheet and nothing comes back and then you have to help the children deal with that" (Katie, participant 3, adoptive mother).

Andrea links her dissatisfaction to a lack of preparation about the method of letterbox contact itself. She describes how she did not know how to write a meaningful and appropriate letter whilst at the same time maintaining confidentiality. Andrea describes how her letters would include 'platitudes' due to this, which suggests an 'unfamily-like' nature to this contact (Jones & Hackett, 2012):

"Nobody knew how to do this, you know…and we kept being told, 'Tell them things which are general and non-identifying'. But it's very difficult then because you end up writing kind of platitudes" (Andrea, participant 20, adoptive mother, VC).

A few respondents began to question the suitability of letterbox as a method of contact given the current growth in the use of technology. Diane argues that her son does not 'treasure' the letters they have received from birth family due to the outdated nature of the method of contact. Hammond and Cooper (2013) suggest that the growth in the use of communicative technologies by children and young people is an opportunity for adoption practice to adapt and reach adopted teenagers through methods they are familiar with. Therefore, the use of letters may not be a skill or method that adoptees can relate to, and may even be one that adopters now struggle with:

"I think letters, quite honestly, at this day and age are probably too old fashioned. It wasn't immediate enough for him. He didn't seem to treasure any of it. I don't even think that he would know where the letters are in the house. So I think the Letterbox bit didn't matter" (Diane, participant 11, adoptive mother, VC).

Diane's views were mirrored by Steven, an adoptee, who states that letters make contact too formal, again linking to the 'unfamily-like' nature contact can have (Jones & Hackett, 2012). Steven values more direct methods of contact and in this case he is referring to social media:

"If it was sent through a letter, it'd be more of a formal thing rather than just being able to talk to them" (Steven, participant 16a, adoptee aged 15, VC).

Despite indirect contact causing difficulties and dissatisfaction, some seemed to cherish the personal nature of letters. Lee valued the personal nature of letters and meaning attached to them and felt that letters added an element of truth and trust. This was in connection to his conversations about the value of virtual contact and his feeling that letters are more likely to be truthful than online methods. This can be linked to literature that suggests that people are not always truthful online (Suler, 2004):

"Something where you can read their writing and know that that's their own words…if you hand write it in a letter and send it over you know that's their handwriting and you know that that's them and they sincerely mean it" (Lee, participant 13a, adoptee aged 18, VC).

Finally, the longevity of letters was highlighted as a particular value by Mary. She sees letters as artefacts that can be used in the future if contact were to cease and can forever be a link to the birth family for the children:

"Whatever happens, because you know awful things can happen, people die suddenly or people decide they don't want anything more to do with the children, you know anything could happen but they will always have those letters. So I think it is important" (Mary, participant 1, adoptive mother).

Although letterbox contact can cause dissatisfaction through birth relatives not responding, a lack of preparation, and the potentially outdated nature of letters within the era of communicative technologies, it can also be valued by families. Therefore there is evidence to suggest that traditional methods of contact are still important and will be maintained by families.

7.3.3 Direct contact

A significantly smaller proportion of adoptive parents reported the maintenance of direct, face-to-face contact in their family (31%). However, interview participants described many positive experiences of this form of contact. The reasons for this satisfaction included: reassurance for the child, continuing relationships and updating information, and positive adult relationships. These positive elements of direct contact have also been mirrored in wider research. For example, research suggests that direct contact can provide more information for the adopted child (Ryburn, 1995). However this method of contact can be problematic as direct contact with birth relatives who were involved in the child's abusive pathway to care can bring back painful memories for the child, and in some cases re-

traumatise them (Macaskill, 2002). In addition the quality of the interaction with birth relatives during contact meetings may be poor (Neil et al., 2011).

Direct contact can offer reassurance to adopted children about the safety of birth relatives. Joan discusses the importance of this for her children through contact with their birth mother, and the ongoing information that direct contact can provide:

"I think they still need to see her sometimes, it's about knowing that she's safe and a little bit of knowing what's going on in her life from their point of view" (Joan, participant 2, adoptive mother).

The following extract from Jenny outlines a variety of reasons leading to the satisfaction and success of direct contact with her adoptive son's birth mother and half-brother. Firstly, Jenny states the value of a positive adult relationship with the birth mother due to her son being her foster child prior to adoption and there being higher levels of contact. This relationship has allowed Jenny to build a sense of empathy toward the birth mother and an understanding of the losses she has experienced. The judgement she has of the birth mother also influences her satisfaction, due to the birth mother's actions towards her son and the lack of threat she poses. The importance of adult relationships for the success of contact has also been recognised in wider research (Grotevant et al., 1999; Macaskill, 2002; Neil, 2009). Secondly, the information provided through direct contact and the relationship built has provided reality and avoided fantasy. Lastly, the contact has reduced the feelings of rejection for her son as the effort the birth mother makes to maintain contact provides an element of care. Overall, Jenny's motivations to maintain direct contact point to the argument that adopters' positive experiences of contact can result in greater empathy for their child and birth relatives (Etter, 1993; Gross, 1993; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Neil, 2003a, 2009):

"Why is it that you have maintained this contact?

Partly because I knew his mum because he was my foster child, so she used to visit him here. So I got to know her. I knew she was absolutely no threat to him whatsoever…And I think it's nice for her, 'cause, you know, she's lost so much, but she still keeps that link with him. And from his point of view there's lots of advantages: he's realised gradually over the years why she can't look after him. And he's never built up this fantasy picture of this person, because he knows what she's like. And also, if anybody ever says to him, "Well, your mum gave you up. She doesn't love you. She didn't want you," he can say,

"Well, she comes and sees me once a year, so she obviously does care about me." So it also gives him a bit of comeback if anybody says anything to him about it" (Jenny, participant 8, adoptive mother).

In contrast, direct contact can also be damaging if the birth relatives involved were connected to the pathway to care of the adoptees. In this case, Joyce describes the traumatising nature of contact due to the fact that the older siblings were involved in the ritual abuse of her children. This was re-traumatising for all children, as displayed through reactive behaviour before and during contact. The nature of the siblings' relationship in this case is described as being like strangers. Therefore the quality of relationships must be considered and the potential for family-like relationships to be developed (Jones & Hackett, 2012):

"The face-to-face contact we did for the first three years with older sisters…the reason why it was stopped…is that it was hugely re-traumatising for our children. But we later found out that it was very traumatising as well for these older sisters…literally trembling and wetting themselves before going; all of those things. And when they were together, it was like strangers meeting, and they would freeze. And actually, it was slightly different to strangers meeting because they will play with strangers at the park, but my two wouldn't do that with these older girls, they would just completely freeze" (Joyce, participant 5, adoptive mother).

The experiences of direct contact described in this section point to the complicated nature of maintaining contact even if the adoptive parents and adopted child are satisfied with the level of contact. The benefits of direct contact include: providing reassurance and information for the adopted child, maintaining relationships, and developing a positive adult relationship. However, negatively, direct contact can have an 'unfamily-like' (Jones & Hackett, 2012) quality to it or even re-traumatise adopted children. The experiences of indirect and direct contact are influenced by factors that can create a positive or negative contact arrangement.

7.3.4 Influencing factors

Participants identified a variety of factors that can influence the success and experience of contact, whether that is indirect or direct. Adoptive parents focussed on the judgement of birth relatives and their relationship to them. Adoptees focussed on the importance of birth family ties and the problem with the formal nature of contact.

The success of face-to-face contact was often determined by the judgement of the birth relative involved, by adoptive parents, or the disruption contact with them could cause. Adoptive parents can feel threatened by their child's contact with birth relatives in terms of their security in their role as parents. Hanna describes her negative opinion of the prospect of contact with her children's birth mother and the disruption this could cause in her family life. Hanna feels that the presence of the 'other mother' (Howe, 1996: 129) would cause additional problems. Hanna is displaying low levels of personal comfort (Smith & Logan, 2004) with the thought of contact with the birth mother, rather than considering her parental comfort of this contact for her children:

"I wouldn't want direct contact with the birth mother if I could avoid it… I have enough problems, like a normal family, with my children without having a second mother involved. So personally, from my point of view, I think it'd be ridiculous having direct contact with her" (Hanna, participant 18, adoptive mother, VC).

The levels of personal and parental comfort were influenced by the particular birth relative involved in contact. Katie describes how her personal and parental comfort would be compromised through contact with the birth mother and birth uncle, however the risk is considered to be lessened if they were to have contact with elderly relatives. Therefore the risk posed by birth relatives is an important factor to the success and comfort with contact:

"I wouldn't mind her having contact with her auntie who's quite elderly, she's in her late 70s I would think and she's, this is quite 'non-PC', but is quite normal. So you know I wouldn't have a problem with her meeting up with her but I really wouldn't want her to have contact with her mum or her brother. Because they are just not the sort of people who you would want your child to have a lot of contact with" (Katie, participant 3, adoptive mother).

Alongside the judgement of birth relatives and the risk posed through contact with them, adoptive parents also considered their relationship with adult birth relatives as important to the success of contact. Wider research has pointed to the facilitative nature of positive adult relationships with regards to the success of contact and the comfort of adoptees (Grotevant et al., 1999). Sharon describes how supportive her children's maternal grandmother has been towards her and her role as the children's adoptive mother. Describing the grandmother as her 'mother-in-law' suggests the 'family-like' and connected nature of their relationship, as she is considered part of the extended family:

*"**Have you always been happy with the contact?***

It's been brilliant, it's been absolutely brilliant! As I say she's been supportive towards me, she's like the best mother-in-law I could imagine" (Sharon, participant 13, adoptive mother, VC).

Adoptees pointed to the need to consider important relationships and wider birth family. Nicola argues that contact with birth relatives should only be banned if risk is proportionate and it is necessary for the protection of adopted children. Nicola's use of emotive language highlights the importance of birth family connections to her and the damaging nature of cutting ties with the birth family if it is possible to maintain a relationship:

"Don't take them away from somebody unless they need to be taken away from them. Unless they're a threat to the person don't take them away because it will hurt them and break their heart" (Nicola, participant 13b, adoptee aged 16, VC).

However, there can also be several risks inherent in contact arrangements for some children. Children who have a history of neglect or abuse can be unsettled or even re-traumatised by contact (Macaskill, 2002; Howe & Steele, 2004; Smith & Logan, 2004). The quality of contact can also be affected by the difficult or inappropriate behaviour of birth relatives (Macaskill, 2002). Past relationships with birth relatives may not be maintained due to the often infrequent nature of contact, and therefore birth relatives and children may not be able to relate to one another anymore (Neil, 2002a). The potential risks of contact must be considered as influencing factors that can hinder the success of continuing contact with birth relatives. In particular the last point regarding the often formal nature of mediated contact was highlighted by several adoptees. David felt particularly strongly about this point and the label of 'contact' to describe ongoing birth family relationships. David thought that the way in which contact is managed and mediated does not capture the birth family relationships that are possible. The prescribed open practices (e.g. contact) often contradict the practices within the private realm of the family (Jones & Hackett, 2012: 287). The nature of contact in David's family was managed privately, and he felt that this allowed the relationships to continue in a normal 'family-like' way:

"The problem is that you call it 'contact' and you make it so…you know, if you set it in stone it's like calling a relationship a 'relationship' before it is a relationship you're too

busy naming it as something and making it that you have to see each other and you have to set it up and you have to make time for her and no you just do it when you're not busy and when you would go and see family that live far away" (David, participant 13c, adoptee aged 22, VC).

This section has outlined several influencing factors that contribute to the success of contact. A key theme that has emerged is the importance of relationships and the potential of traditional open practices to facilitate the child's connection to the birth family. Certain limitations have also been highlighted through adoptive parent and adoptee accounts that suggest that traditional practices are not always successful and beneficial for all parties. However, the voices we have heard in this section point to the ongoing importance of traditional post-adoption contact suggesting that technology is not replacing existing methods.

The chapter that follows will consider the potentials and limitations of developments in technological open practices. In particular it will be considered whether technological practices can address some of the limitations of current practices and the ways in which developments may add to or bring new problems to the practice of 'openness' in adoption. To continue with this chapter, the complexities that are evident in the maintenance of contact using traditional methods create challenges for adoptive parents when supporting their adopted children. Therefore the addition of technological practices may create additional anxiety and complexity. The following sections consider how adoptive parents are responding to these changes.

7.4 Views on technological open practices

The survey data highlighted several ways in which technology may be changing adoptive family experiences of openness. The remaining sections of this chapter consider the personal opinions and reactions to these changes of adoptive parents in the role as 'kin keepers'.

7.4.1 Risk/benefit analysis

The use of social media and other forms of technology as a form of contact between adopted children and their birth relatives has received much attention by the media and practitioners. This is also true of adoptive parents, who have strong and varied opinions about virtual contact. Table 7 outlines a thematic risk/benefit analysis of virtual contact from the perspective of adoptive parents.

Table 7: A risk/benefit analysis of participant opinion of virtual contact

Benefit/risk analysis	Category	Participant opinion
Benefits	Satisfy curiosity	*I think if I wasn't in touch with them [siblings], I think there'd be a lot more questions I'd be asking my birth parents. But with them, it sort of explains quite a lot (16a adoptee)*
	Identity	*I always think where your roots are, it's really important that you know, because it's a sensitive issue to the here and now, to know where you come from (16)*
	Useful tool	*Now Facebook is ideal, it's fantastic for them because they're all over the place. The adopted siblings groups and my family's sibling groups are in touch (15)* *It's easier because it's quicker and you can, like you don't have to wait three or four days for a reply (16a adoptee)*
	Prepare for contact	*I think it might be useful for him to know before actually going to meet them. So I think technology can help in that sense, make contact easier, face-to-face contact (4)*
Risks	Privacy	*Because that's what that technology allows you to do. It gives you that window into other people's lives (14a)*
	Availability/Immediacy	*It's not like it's in one place and you can go away from it, it's everywhere. It's in your pocket, it's on the train – it's everywhere you go. So there's just no escaping it (5)*
	Lack of control	*I think a lot of adoptive parents fear that their child may end up…not that their child will make contact with the birth family but that they will make unregulated contact that you wouldn't be able to support them through (3)*
	Child vulnerability	*She hadn't got a clue of how to keep herself safe (12)*
	Birth relative risk	*I knew she [birth mother] wasn't safe for us to be around but I didn't know entirely exactly what she had done until I had…until she had contacted me on Facebook (20a adoptee)*
	Information finding	*My worry would be that birthmum would want to post all about her life, her life being good or her life being bad, and it's just too much personal information for a child to be able to take on board (1)*
	Lack of preparation	*When our daughter was placed with us, Facebook didn't exist and nobody could have foreseen it (19)*

As the risk/benefit analysis highlights, many adoptive parents focussed on the risks involved in virtual contact; adoptees were also able to identify the risks involved. Due to the small number of respondents having experienced virtual contact, the risks discussed could be linked to a *fear of the unknown*. Wider literature surrounding search and reunion

can help to explain the fear felt by respondents. Pacheco and Eme (1993) found that although most adoptive parents are supportive of their adopted child's need to search, certain fears also remain. Fear exists surrounding the potential for the search and reunion to have a negative effect on the adoptee and their relationship to their child, and the risk that the birth family may threaten the adoptive child. Petta and Steed (2005) identified further fears that adoptive parents have regarding their adopted child's search: that they will be judged negatively as a parent, concern that they may lose their child, and potentially revisiting feelings of loss concerning their own infertility. In cases where fear existed, adopters often supported their child's search in a practical sense (Petta & Steed, 2005). This can also be linked to a need to regain some control over the contact situation. The fear of adoptive parents was often unfounded in the reality of the search and reunion process, however, with this often being a positive experience for all parties (Howe & Feast, 2001; Howe & Feast, 2003; Triseliotis et al., 2005). The experience was dependent on whether the expectations of the relationship had been met, rather than whether the search led to ongoing contact or not (Affleck & Steed, 2001).

Nancy Verrier argues that searching can be emotionally charged for everybody with fear being a key theme: fear of second abandonment for child, fear of rejection for birth mother, and fear of losing her child for the adoptive mother (Verrier, 1993: 123). As an adoptive mother herself, Verrier expands to consider the fears that surround search and reunion for the adoptive mother:

> "One thing every adoptive mother knows in her heart is that her child's reuniting with her birth mother will change forever their relationship to one another. That's the unknown. That's what makes it so scary. We are all at the mercy of powerful feelings, which only those who have experienced the same events can truly know" (Verrier, 1993: 129).

As the survey data highlighted, adoptive parents who had experienced virtual contact were more likely to feel positively about their child's use of technology. Grotevant and McRoy (1998) found a statistically significant relationship between openness and adopter anxiety that the birth relatives may reclaim the child. For example, they found that parents were less worried when they had ongoing direct contact with birth relatives. Adopters who had fairly closed adoptions had based their fear on perceptions and media stories, whereas contact provided personal knowledge. The stories heard by adoptive parents in this study did influence their perception of virtual contact. Stories were found through news

coverage, by word of mouth, and interestingly via social media itself on adoption support forums. They each paint a negative picture about the way virtual contact is affecting adoptive families. Josie makes direct reference to the stories she has heard in the formation of her opinion of virtual contact and states that the thought of it makes her 'cold'. This suggests a great level of fear and risk from Josie:

"It makes me cold. I've heard a few stories" (Josie, participant 7, adoptive mother).

The stories heard have contributed to a feeling of inevitability about virtual contact occurrence, with adoptive parents often believing that this type of contact *will* happen at some point. As Verrier (1993: 131) suggested, most parents believe their children will search one day. Josie describes how she almost expects her daughter to realise she can make contact with her birth relatives online:

"I wouldn't be surprised at her if at some point she would realise that she could find out something" (Josie, participant 7, adoptive mother).

The feeling of inevitability may be linked to adoptive parents feeling a lack of control over contact arrangements online. Barth and Berry (1988) found a link between an adoptive parent's satisfaction of contact and their feelings of control over it. The section that follows outlines a comparison of the control held in traditional and technological open practices and the meanings attached to these practices as a result.

7.4.2 Control

A key distinction in the experiences of traditional and technologically mediated methods of contact and openness expressed by adoptive parents is in the level of control and power held by adoptive family members. Adoptive parents described their experiences and opinions of both methods, attaching different meanings to their accounts depending on the level of control they held themselves, that which their children held, and the birth relatives held.

Traditional contact experiences were described as the adoptive parent(s) and/or the state holding the control. However, this tended to be thought of as being in the best interests of the child, with the child often consulted about their opinions and needs. Birth relatives did not seem to hold much (if any) power in these situations. Child control was described as increasing with age, but with adoptive parents hoping to still be involved. These patterns are highlighted when looking at extracts from interview data.

The suggestion that parents felt that they held overall control in traditional contact arrangements is evident in the following extract from Joan who seems relieved that there was no obligation in the adoption order to maintain contact. Smith and Logan (2004) found that 87% of adoptive parents did not want contact to be imposed or regulated by a court order. Due to the lack of legal obligation, Joan was able to maintain control and discretion as to whether or not contact was to continue:

"Once the adoption order was through, there was nothing in the adoption order about contact which I think was maybe good. But we always said it was at our discretion" (Joan, participant 2, adoptive mother).

Discussion of contact in the future pointed to the idea that adopted children would gain control and power in the arrangements. This involved the idea of children reaching the age of 18 and being legally able to access their birth records. It also involved traditional and technological methods before that age. Mary talked at length of her thoughts about future contact and her involvement in it. She explains how she thinks that control will be handed from herself to her children as they get older. Despite this, Mary describes how she would like to maintain some involvement in her children's future contact to ensure that she is there to support them:

"My 15 year old she'll be 16 next year and really it's up to her…I think there'll always be that ongoing conversation but I think I'll tend to withdraw a bit from it and hand it over to them at some point… I hope they will deal with that and do it while I am still here but we'll just have to wait and see what happens" (Mary, participant 1, adoptive mother).

Technological methods of contact were often perceived in a negative way by adoptive parents who had not experienced virtual contact, with a lack of adult control (being adoptive parents and/or the state) being stated as a key reason for this. These methods of contact were thought to remove control from the adoptive parent and the state to the child and birth relatives who then are thought to hold the power. Adoptive parents did try to maintain control through searching online themselves (to be discussed further in the next superordinate theme) and through e-safety techniques. There is a link here to the preference by adoptive parents for traditional methods of contact to be able to support their child and maintain some control. However, some adoptive parents who had experienced virtual contact could see the positives of their child gaining control over their contact

arrangements. Some also valued the in-family management of contact rather than state intervention, which was particularly felt by adoptees.

Diane, an adoptive mother who described a positive experience of virtual contact between her 19 year old adopted son and his siblings, discusses the shift in control due to her son's age and the supportive role she now fulfils in the contact. The sibling contact is now informally managed by the siblings themselves via technology, and Diane seems accepting of this and describes this as a natural progression and her changing role in the maintenance of openness in her family:

"*Younger children…you've got more control over what they're doing, but once they get to teenagers it's the same as anything else…you've just got to talk to them about it, and say, you know 'what will you do if this happens?'*" (Diane, participant 11, adoptive mother, VC).

Brodzinsky (2005) argued that adoptive parents must be emotionally attuned to their adopted child if they are to achieve the tasks of communicative openness. This study has found that adoptive parents display greater mind-mindedness when their child was old enough to have their own social networking site (13 years) or if they had experienced virtual contact. Therefore, technological conversations may be incorporated in the tasks of communicative openness, including those described by Diane above. Andrea describes how, despite virtual contact having a negative impact on her daughters, she has let her children control the contact. Andrea sees this as an extension of the more traditional tasks of openness with the same goal of the 'integration' of her children's dual connection into their sense of self:

"I've let the girls kind of take a lead on it…it's taken it away from being the adults that are in charge.. But somehow, at the end of the day, the job is still the same in terms of helping them integrate in different parts of themselves. So it's how do we do that in these new circumstances, really" (Andrea, participant 20, adoptive mother, VC).

Through Lee's (aged 18) description it is clear that he feels in control of his contact arrangements and knows that he would like contact to continue. He currently uses a mixture of traditional and technological methods of contact, enabling him to stay in contact with a range of relatives in which he includes adoptive and birth family members:

"I'm thinking of the future and we're all going to stay in contact. I don't ever plan on breaking contact with my nana or my uncles. I wouldn't break contact with my adopted family either" (Lee, participant 13a, adoptee aged 18, VC).

This section has highlighted the importance of power relationships and control in contact arrangements. I have outlined key differences in the perceived level of control held by different stakeholders in the practices of traditional compared to technologically mediated methods. The level of positivity and satisfaction for contact from the perspective of adoptive parents seemed to be higher for more traditional methods of contact where they could maintain more control. However, respondents who had experienced virtual contact were able to see the benefits of the shift in control. The main shift in control between traditional and technological methods of openness seems to be a shift away from state intervention. This causes concern for some adoptive parents. However technology also allows for in-family management of open practices including, parent online searching and virtual contact. Therefore, it cannot be concluded whether the shift is positive or negative but rather that the risks and opportunities for each family must be considered.

7.5 Adoptive parent online searching

The difficulty for adoptive parents to maintain control of virtual contact has led to some parents trying to maintain an element of control by utilising communicative technologies. Survey data highlighted that 63% of adoptive parents had searched online for birth relatives. The occurrence of virtual contact did not influence whether adoptive parents had searched online, therefore the voices of adoptive parents will be considered together rather than based on their contact experiences. This section considers the reasons why adoptive parents chose to search and the actions they took once they had.

7.5.1 Reasons for searching: "Forewarned is forearmed"

The overwhelming reason expressed by parent searchers is highlighted by the quotation in the title of this section. Parents described the function of searching online as a means to prepare themselves for the potential of virtual contact. The benefit of online searching most cited in Whitesel and Howard's (2013: 59) study was that "adoptive parents felt armed by such information". In this study, Lauren wanted to get 'ahead of the game' as she felt that it was inevitable that her son would search. By searching, Lauren felt that she would have the updated knowledge and information to be able to support him. Lauren's son was also

displaying difficult behaviours at the time and therefore the occurrence of virtual contact would have had a much greater negative impact:

"I think it was, from my point of view, I wanted to be ahead of the game because I thought he'd do it. I thought he'd do it on Facebook, you know…I wanted to be able to prepare him for it; I didn't want it to all be a great big shock. And I just thought, 'Forewarned is forearmed' and, you know, I want to help him through it. I didn't want him to do it on his own… your biggest fear is that they'll discover something that you don't know. And he was a nightmare; he was a complete nightmare at the time" (Lauren, participant 4, adoptive mother).

Joyce describes the potential presence of birth relatives online as a key reason to allow or disallow her son to go on Facebook. Therefore her search online involved an assessment of the risk in terms of which birth relatives were accessible and what her son would find if he searched himself:

"On Facebook there are, as part of deciding whether [son] would go on it, we decided that we would see whether birth family were on it, because we needed to be really aware of what risk there was, and some of birth family are on Facebook" (Joyce, participant 5, adoptive mother).

Jenny describes her dissatisfaction of the letterbox contact that she had maintained for ten years without a response from the birth relatives. Therefore her search online was to fill the gap that had been left by unfulfilled contact. Locating her son's birth father online ensured that she could answer her son's questions by contacting him directly on Facebook:

"I used to send a very brief letter every year… Never got anything back at all in 10 years… I had asked a few questions, because [son] has asked quite a few questions, and nothing came back, so I thought, 'I'm not doing it anymore, because I'm not getting anything back and if anything urgent happens I've seen his Facebook profile, so I could contact him that way'"(Jenny, participant 8, adoptive mother).

The reasons for searching online mainly fell into the following categories: preparation, assessment of risk, and information finding. However, some adoptive parents, like Jenny, considered contacting the birth relatives directly or had already done so. Those parents who had contacted birth relatives did so due to the occurrence of virtual contact as a means of becoming involved in the contact or in an attempt to control the virtual contact.

Adoptive parents talked openly about their reasons for searching online and generally had their child's interest at heart. The accounts of the adoptive parents who took part in interviews discussed how easy it seemed to be to locate birth relatives online or the information they required, which was echoed in the survey data with 61% of adoptive parents finding who they were looking for. In addition, adoptive parents had also searched for their own children online to see how easy it would be for birth relatives to find them. Cheryl explains how easy it was for her to find her son online, displaying the ease that birth relatives would also experience. The immediacy of her search surprised Cheryl and the level of information that could be found. This translated into concern about the potential of virtual contact:

"I put his name in; I put the sport, and just see if anything comes up. But that was quite a surprise to me when I first did, because I just thought, 'Oh, let's see' and, you know, immediately there was the name of the school and everything. So I think that's a concern, that aspect of technology" (Cheryl, participant 9, adoptive mother).

Once parents had searched online, the actions they took varied. The following section explores whether adoptive parents continue to utilise the technology after the initial search.

7.5.2 Action after search

Once parents had searched online, the information found and their subsequent actions varied, often depending on the original reason for searching. For example, if a parent searched as a means of assessing the risk in terms of birth relatives being online, seeing whether they were online or not may be sufficient. However, if adoptive parents are looking to monitor this risk, the search online may continue. Once parents had searched, some shared the information they had found with their child, some continued to monitor birth relatives, and others blocked birth relatives on their child's social media account. Natasha, has made online searching a regular occurrence to monitor birth relative presence online. As a result of this ongoing practice, Natasha has extended her open conversations to her children to include the potential of virtual contact in her family:

"I have always kept an eye on Facebook just to see if any birth family members are popping up anywhere, and they're not. We are in the process of starting to talk to both our boys about the possibility of unsolicited contact via Facebook… Literally, as we speak, we're in the middle of talking about to them about that" (Natasha, participant 10, adoptive mother).

Due to her dissatisfaction with the lack of response through letterbox contact with her son's birth father, Jenny has used her online searching to take the updating of information into her own hands. She has done this by looking up information about the paternal side of her son's family, and through this search she discovered photographs of other birth siblings to show her son. She also discusses the potential to use Facebook further to contact the birth father if necessary:

"I've looked up his dad and his dad's family. Yeah. I got some photographs, 'cause he's got other children…Downloaded, isn't it? Downloaded from Facebook to show [son]. I just showed him the pictures, you know. 'This is your half-brother and your half-sister', just so that he'd know, really" (Jenny, participant 8, adoptive mother).

Joan used her search as an Internet safety approach as she blocked birth family members from her daughters account once she had discovered them:

"I had a quick look to see whether the birthmum was on Facebook and she is…I blocked her and anybody else I could find with the same name…I'm conscious that there's also a wider family there that could want contact" (Joan, participant 2, adoptive mother).

This section discussed the practice of adoptive parent online searching and has pointed to some complexities involved. This is vital when thinking about whether practice needs to respond to this and in what ways. The reasons for searching, the information found, and the actions taken need to be considered. This chapter has considered the ongoing maintenance of traditional methods of contact, adoptive parents' opinions of virtual contact, and the utilisation of technology by adoptive parents through online searches. This chapter concludes with a consideration of the ways in which the data presented points to the changing nature of openness through technology.

7.6 Discussion: How is technology changing the open practices in adoptive families?

This chapter has explored the ways in which communicative technologies are influencing the practice of openness in adoptive families. In particular, interview data has pointed to the ongoing importance of traditional methods of indirect and direct contact. However, the growth of communicative technologies has sparked passionate opinions about the emergence of virtual contact. A fear of the unknown has developed amongst adoptive parents who have not experienced virtual contact, and a reactive and preparatory adoptive parent practice of online searching has developed.

The motivations for maintaining post-adoption contact differed between adoptive parents and their adopted children. Adopters maintained and facilitated contact due to empathy for their child and/or the birth relatives. However, some also felt obliged due to agency agreements or the need to maintain contact through fear of blame for lost connections by their child in the future. Adoptees focussed on their dual connection in terms of maintaining birth family relationships, building their identity and answering questions.

Interview accounts revealed elements of satisfaction with direct contact, including: providing reassurance for adoptees, maintaining relationships, and positive adult relationships. However, challenges were also discussed, including problematic behaviour displayed by birth relatives and the risk posed due to their involvement in a child's pathway to care. Indirect contact was thought to be problematic in certain ways, including the unreliability of birth relatives and formality of arrangements. However, it was also beneficial and some adoptive parents and adoptees treasured letters and enjoyed the personal nature of this contact. Therefore the interview data suggests that each method can be advantageous or problematic, and that experiences are complex.

Certain influencing factors that affected the success of contact emerged: the judgement of birth relatives and adult relationships, the significance of relationships to the child, the formal nature of contact, and the risks involved. The growth of communicative technologies has the potential to add to the complexity of maintaining traditional methods of contact and the challenges faced by adoptive parents in their task as 'kin keepers' (Grotevant, 2009).

Adoptive parent views about virtual contact focussed on risks, including: the immediacy and lack of support, the risk posed by the birth relative, and any negative information found online. However they were also able to identify potential benefits, including: addressing identity needs and questions of adoptees, an opportunity to prepare for further contact at a safe distance, and to address information needs and curiosity. The level of positivity and satisfaction for contact from the perspective of adoptive parents seemed to be higher for more traditional methods of contact where they could maintain more control. However, respondents who had experienced virtual contact were able to see the benefits of the shift in control. The main shift in control between traditional and technological methods of openness seems to be a shift away from state intervention. This causes concern for some adoptive parents. However technology also allows for in-family management of open practices including parent online searching and virtual contact.

The practice of adoptive parent online searching fulfilled the aims of preparation, monitoring birth relatives, and information finding with one adoptive parent stating "forewarned is forearmed". Once parents had searched, some shared the information they had found with their child, some continued to monitor birth relatives, and others blocked birth relatives on their child's social media account.

In some cases, there seems to be limits to the extent to which traditional practices can meet the identity needs of adopted adolescents. Therefore, there were suggestions that technological practices are emerging to supplement and extend traditional openness, including: virtual contact, parent online searching, and information searching and sharing online. The influence of technology began to emerge in interviews when considering the experiences of more traditional methods, suggesting that the two sets of practices may be inextricably linked in the meanings of openness which is a dynamic and evolutionary process (Logan, 1996; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Lowe et al., 1999; Neil, 2002a).

The impact of technology on open practices will be considered in the next chapter in detail, particularly the structural impact on contact arrangements in the form of virtual contact. The nuanced experiences of this contact emerge throughout the next chapter, and highlight the risks and opportunities of technological open practices. Although opportunities and positive experiences are outlined, many more risks emerged. More complex contact situations often require more support (Neil et al., 2011) and therefore it is important to consider the risks that may be inherent in the emergence of technological practices.

Chapter 8: Findings - Qualitative Accounts of Virtual Contact

This chapter focusses on the final two research questions:

- How is virtual contact experienced by adoptive parents and adopted young people?
- Does adoption practice need to change to respond to the impact of technology?

The previous chapter outlined the ways in which families experience traditional methods of contact. The findings suggest that this can be complex. However, adoptive parents and adoptees also described positive aspects of these practices. Therefore, the maintenance of traditional contact is ongoing despite technological ones emerging in this sample. Survey data highlighted several ways in which openness may be changing and developing through technology, through adoptive parent searching and the occurrence of virtual contact. Chapter 7 outlined the motivations leading to online searching by adoptive parents, driven by their fear of birth relative contact via technological platforms. The importance of preparation emerged as the overriding reason to turn to the Internet to search for information. This chapter will explore what happens beyond preparation when virtual contact occurs, based on adoptive parent and adoptee accounts. Prior to the presentation of interview data, the survey data will be briefly revisited to outline the quantitative knowledge of virtual contact in this study.

A minority of adopters reported virtual contact (9%), with half of this contact being initiated by birth relatives, and half by adopted children themselves. However, children who were over the age of 13 years were more likely to approach birth relatives and the virtual contact was more likely to be ongoing. There was a mixture of positive and negative experiences. Those who experienced virtual contact often managed this within the family, with the child continuing contact independently or with parental support. The impact of virtual contact on family life was not overwhelmingly negative. Support service needs identified by participants included support for all parties and including knowledge of virtual contact and the management of it within families in preparation groups. It seems that adoptive parents require support based on the adoption specific risks involved with virtual contact rather than the more practical e-safety strategies. Levels of mind-mindedness were higher when adoptive parents had experienced virtual contact, therefore these parents were more able to see their child as an individual and possess more positive views of technology and be more competent online themselves.

The experience of virtual contact for adoptive families involves a complex interplay of risk and opportunity. Despite this, the positive parental reactions to virtual contact in the small number of cases reported, suggest that parents are able to incorporate the new technological practices into the open tasks in their family. Practice and media representations of virtual contact focus on risk, and in turn adoptive parent opinion is dominated by anxiety (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013). Findings suggest that anxiety is present, however parents are also able to: identify the potential benefits of virtual contact, utilise technology themselves to search for birth relatives online, manage risks effectively when virtual contact occurs, and to also support their adopted children to continue virtual contact positively where appropriate.

This chapter will consider the ways in which the technological practices outlined in the survey data may be changing the meanings and experiences of openness within adoptive families. Interview data will be drawn upon to uncover some of these meanings and an interpretive phenomenological analysis of case studies will illustrate family stories to bring the experiences of technological open practices to life. The superordinate categories that structure this chapter are: virtual contact occurrence and support needs.

8.1 Procedure

The analysis presented in this chapter used data collected from the semi-structured interview schedule outlined in Appendix D which was used with all parents. The first superordinate theme, 'virtual contact', presents data only from participants who experienced virtual contact (13 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people from 11 families). Included in this analysis are family case studies that appear throughout this chapter to illustrate family experiences of virtual contact (outlined as family 11-21 in Appendix F). Due to the criticism that practice knowledge surrounding virtual contact is currently based on anecdotal evidence (Whitesel & Howard, 2013) these stories add real evidence about the way this contact is experienced. The inclusion of the family stories has been discussed with the host adoption agency, who agreed that they were an important addition to the analysis and felt that as long as it was not clear which agency the participants were affiliated to, their anonymity would be maintained. The second superordinate theme, 'support needs', uses data from the whole sample of adoptive parents and adoptees (23 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people).

Table 8: Summary of Technological Open Practices Interview Themes

Superordinate theme	***Master theme***	***Description***
Virtual contact	Practicalities	Defining virtual contact through participant experiences.
	Benefits	Fulfilling identity/curiosity needs of adoptee, family-like nature of contact, extending existing birth family relationships, bringing normality to child's dual connection, and the convenience of technology.
	Risks	The adoptee not being emotionally ready for contact, inappropriate behaviour from birth relatives, and the unmediated nature of virtual contact.
	What makes virtual contact a positive or negative experience?	An IPA comparison of a positive and a negative case of virtual contact to identify potential influencing factors.
	Family management techniques	Adoptee independently managing virtual contact, adoptive parent included in online networks, adult communication, open conversations within adoptive family, and adopters intervening to stop birth relatives making contact. Some adoptive parents felt powerless.
Support needs	Services that are valued by participants	Support of additional challenges faced by adopted child, post-adoption contact support, peer support, and training.
	Participant recommendations for development of services	Participants highlighted a range of changes needed to services in light of the emergence of technological open practices.

The analysis of adoptive parent interviews in this chapter focusses on the key interview questions of:

- Has technology been used as a contact method in your family?
- How would you like contact to progress in the future?

The semi-structured interview schedule for adopted young people had questions within the same themes as their adoptive parents (see Appendix E). The key questions addressed in this chapter are:

- Have you used technology to get in touch with your birth family or been contacted by them in this way (e.g. on Facebook)?
- What would you tell other adopted children about contact?

A description of the main themes addressed in this chapter is presented in Table 8. The analysis aims to understand how adoptive families define, understand, and experience virtual contact. Although the sample is small, with data from eleven families, the stories of virtual contact lead to ideas of best practice in the most effective ways to support adoptive families. The themes are discussed thematically in a similar structure to Chapter 7. However, IPA principles are followed through the use of four case studies to illustrate the themes in more detail from the perspective of individual participants. In addition these cases are cross-analysed to compare idiographic accounts.

8.2 Findings and Discussion

The experiences of virtual contact are first outlined in order to understand the impact of communicative technologies on adoptive families in reality. As noted in the methodology chapter, the stories presented may present a more negative picture than the wider population of adoptive families. This is due to the sampling method used for eight out of eleven families, which involved the adoption agency naming families whom they knew to have experienced virtual contact. However, in order for the adoption agency to have knowledge of these cases the adoptive families had required their support. Therefore, the messages from the positive stories must also be recognised.

8.3 Virtual contact occurrence, experiences and management techniques

This section explores the views of adoptive parents and adopted young people who have experienced virtual contact. Throughout this section, case studies will be used to exemplify the key themes comprising: practicalities of virtual contact, motivations and benefits, risks, and, management techniques.

8.3.1 Practicalities

Before the experiences of virtual contact are outlined, it is first necessary to consider what 'virtual contact' actually means for adoptive family members. How do adoptive parents and adoptees define 'virtual contact'? What technological methods are used and what open practices are involved? And, who is included in virtual contact? Figure 2 illustrates the way in which participants defined virtual contact in this study in the eleven families who

were interviewed. The diagram also includes the main risks and opportunities identified and the management techniques that ensue, that will make up the remainder of the discussion in this chapter.

As outlined in Figure 2, the cases of virtual contact have been described as positive, negative and mixed with positive and negative elements. Defining positive and negative cases of virtual contact stemmed from the meanings attached to the descriptions of the contact from the perspectives of adoptive parents and adopted young people. In order to code the valence of virtual contact experiences, participant responses and reactions were considered and the impact on the adoptive family (e.g. weakening of relationships, child emotional responses). The way in which the adoptive family managed the contact also played a role in defining the contact as positive or negative. For example, if the adoptive parent seemed to describe a supportive environment in which the adoptee managed their own virtual contact with birth relatives, this was defined as positive. However, if adoptive parents felt powerless and unable to stop the virtual contact due to risks involved (e.g. birth relatives providing inappropriate information about the child's past) then this was describes as negative. Ultimately, the positive and negative coding of virtual contact experiences was bound by a multitude of factors related to the impact of the contact, the management of it, and the relationships that were formed.

Figure 2: Defining Virtual Contact

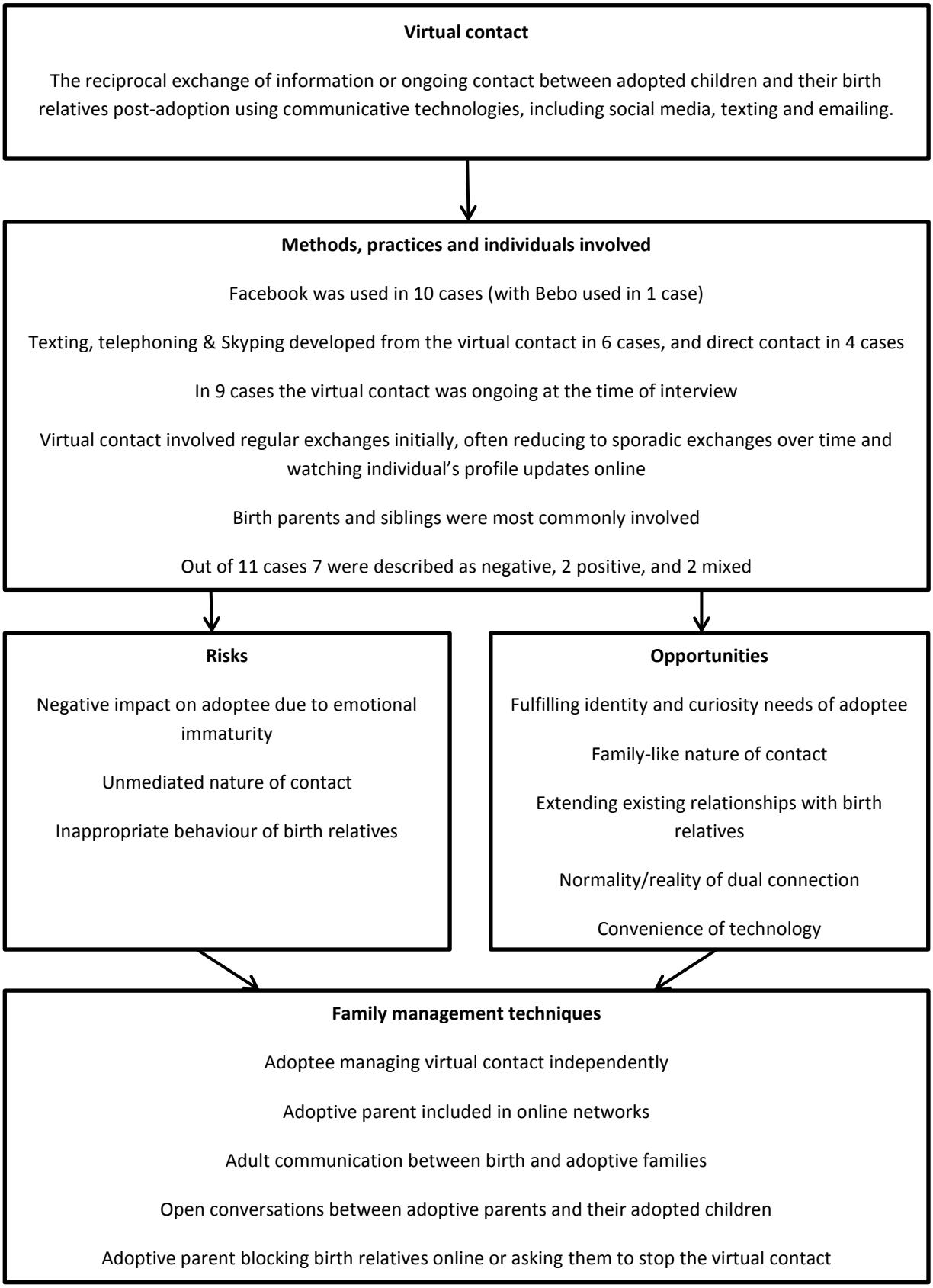


Figure 2 summarises the complex nature of virtual contact in adoptive families that will be explored in the subsections that follow. The common feature of virtual contact is the reciprocal nature of this open practice between adopted young people and their birth relatives. In all cases referred to there was a reciprocal exchange of information or contact, except in family 18 whereby the adopted children were not involved in the exchange (see Appendix F for more details).

Due to the open nature of adoption through traditional methods, the information needed to search was often readily available. For example, if an adoptee knew the forename and surname of the birth relative they were looking for and their location, they could quite easily search online and find them. Often, however, a search for one birth relative would uncover a wider network of birth relatives, as Verity (aged 14) highlights:

"But it kind of went like this, one sister then the other sister then the other sister then the other sister. Like it kept kind of slowly I got more and more sisters online" (Verity, participant 20a, adoptee aged 14, VC).

As outlined in the previous chapter, communicative technologies have introduced other activities into adoptive family life including parent searches online. However, the focus of the remainder of this section will be on the practice of virtual contact. The following sections will explore the benefits, risks and family management techniques outlined in Figure 2 in more detail, referring to case studies and participant voices.

8.3.2 Benefits

Out of the eleven cases of virtual contact represented in the interviews with adoptive parents and adopted young people, only two were coded as positive and two were mixed with positive and negative elements. This was coded with reference to the way in which participants described their experience of virtual contact, and in particular when they described beneficial or risky elements. This section explores the benefits that have been experienced by adoptive families through virtual contact and the motivations for maintaining this contact. The benefits include: the contact answering adoptee's identity questions and curiosity, the family-like nature of virtual contact, extending existing relationships with birth relatives, the normality and reality it brings to the child's dual connection, and the convenience of technology.

The case outlined below is an example of a beneficial experience of virtual contact. Diane's story highlights many of the benefits discussed in this section.

Family 11: positive

Diane, along with her husband, adopted her son when he was 10 years old, he is now 19. His mother was unable to look after him due to her drug addiction. Diane's son has two older birth siblings, a brother and a sister with whom he has twice yearly direct contact. He also had annual direct contact with his birth mother, which has stopped as her son found it difficult to see her. The contact with his siblings was going well and all three seemed to enjoy it, and it began to be managed informally with the brother accompanying the family on holiday. During contact, the siblings exchanged mobile telephone numbers and went on to use Facebook to contact one another. The siblings asked Diane's permission before contacting their brother in this way.

Diane is supportive of her son's virtual contact with his siblings and maintains that it has helped to normalise their relationship as it is the way young people communicate today. Virtual contact has also allowed the siblings to organise meeting up of their own accord.

However, the brothers have developed a closer relationship than that they have with their sister, who has a chaotic life. The brothers have moved away from Facebook and tend to prefer meeting up for a night out, leaving the sister behind. Due to this, Diane has supported the sister through difficult times. Diane is also concerned about the risk of wider birth family members becoming involved in the Facebook contact. Despite these concerns, Diane believes that Facebook has been a useful tool for her son. Diane insists that virtual contact has been a positive experience due to the fact that they have kept communication open.

Diane's story is an example of how virtual contact can be used positively and be a useful addition to open practices in adoptive families. The virtual contact allowed Diane's son to extend his existing relationships with his siblings and to take more control over the arrangements as he got older. Diane was included in the decision to begin virtual contact, as the siblings asked her permission first allowing her to be available to support the contact. Using social networking sites to stay in touch has provided normality to the sibling relationship and is convenient due to the contact being carried out through media that are used every day by young people. However, complications are evident in this family such as the weaker relationship between the brothers and their sister and the potential online presence of wider birth relatives. This can be linked to the survey findings that suggest a complex interplay between risk and opportunity through the use of technological open practices. Despite this, this case of virtual contact was described as an overall positive addition to family life and seems to work due to the open communication between Diane and her son.

When interpreting this family story three relating themes emerge: identity, power and control. This family highlights how the nuanced connections between these concepts may influence the way in which virtual contact is experienced. The virtual contact in Diane's family has given her son the ability and power to choose to extend the direct contact he had with his siblings. He can now control when he talks and sees his brothers which has been a positive addition in the maintenance of their relationships. The siblings have the power to manage the contact informally. Diane has been able to maintain some control over the virtual contact as she was included in the decision to extend the sibling connection in this way and also continues to support the contact. Therefore, all members of the adoption kinship network (that are included in the contact) have a share of control over the arrangements. Within Diane's family there are different identity needs between the siblings which have caused complexities in the maintenance of contact. However, Diane's overall perspective of virtual contact is positive due to the control her son now has over his relationship with his brothers. The contact method itself didn't seem as important as the relationships that the contact facilitated. For example, the direct contact Diane's son had with his siblings was positive, but it was negative with his birth mother. Therefore the virtual contact also enables the siblings to control the boundaries of their connection, with the exclusion of their birth mother. Diane's son is able to utilise his agency and make decisions about which relationships are important to him. The importance of adopter support is still evident with Diane taking on a supportive role for the sister. Therefore, there are potential risks that may emerge in the future due to the differential expectations of the brothers and sister. In addition, Facebook has created the potential for 'out of the blue' contact from wider birth relatives. In this way technology has facilitated the positive extended relationships of siblings, whilst simultaneously presenting the possibility of wider birth relative access. Although it is not possible to speculate with certainty, it seems that this family possess the strategies to manage this in the future with shared control, support and positive relationships.

This case has illustrated an example of where virtual contact can work well. The themes highlighted in this case will be discussed with reference to other participant accounts to consider the patterns in the positive experiences of virtual contact.

8.3.2a Adoptee's identity questions and curiosity

Wider literature and research highlights the importance of the maintenance of contact to ensure the development of a healthy identity for adoptees (Hoopes, 1990; Grotevant, 1997;

Macaskill, 2002). The previous chapter highlighted certain limitations associated with the use of traditional methods of contact. Therefore, virtual contact was seen by some adoptive parents and adoptees to offer a way to fill in gaps in their identity and to satisfy their curiosity.

Steven, a 15 year old adoptee, describes how the virtual contact with his birth siblings has reduced the information gap (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009) in his genealogical history by answering questions about his past. He feels that the contact with his siblings is enough to satisfy his curiosity without having to ask his birth parents any questions. Steven's experience highlights the different purposes individual birth relatives can fulfil. For example, Steven has developed a relationship with his siblings that has been extended from previous direct contact with them, however he does not feel ready to talk to his birth parents:

"I think if I wasn't in touch with [siblings], I think there'd be a lot more questions I'd be asking my birth parents. But with them, it sort of explains quite a lot" (Steven, participant 16a, adoptee aged 15, VC).

In comparison, Alexandra describes how the virtual contact was unexpected in their family as it was initiated by birth relatives. Despite this, the virtual contact did fulfil identity needs for Alexandra's daughter particularly as she felt she did not belong in her adoptive family:

"But, going to the stage where [daughter] was found, she was probably quite happy to be found because she was really unhappy in her life with us at that point. So she was quite delighted because it gave her a bit of an identity. Because she felt she didn't fit in with us" (Alexandra, participant 14b, adoptive mother, VC).

Alexandra and Steven's accounts highlight that regardless of whether virtual contact is a positive or negative experience, this practice can be beneficial by providing information to satisfy curiosity and fulfil identity needs. Research with adult adoptees found that all adoptees described their search and reunion experience as beneficial for this reason (Howe & Feast, 2000). Beyond fulfilling identity needs, virtual contact offered a more family-like and regular contact experience for some families.

8.3.2b The family-like nature of virtual contact

The formal nature of arrangements was highlighted as a limitation of traditional contact methods. Therefore, the unmediated nature of virtual contact allows adoptive families to

have more control over contact arrangements. This has been identified as a risk, to be discussed in the following subsection, but for some families it allowed a more natural and everyday development of family contact. Sharon, an adoptive mother, describes this in relation to the fact that Facebook is used in the same way with her family as with her children's birth relatives. Therefore, the virtual contact that has developed with birth relatives is included under the umbrella term of 'family' incorporating both sides of the adoptive and birth families:

"So there's nothing different about the way Facebook has grown with the children's side of the family, the in-laws if you like, compared with how it's grown with my side of the family. It's just been very similar in terms of the way we use it. So it's just a way for the family to know what each other is doing" (Sharon, participant 13, adoptive mother, VC).

Virtual contact has allowed adoptive families to move beyond the more formalised nature of traditional forms of contact and have more control over how relationships are managed and who is included within family boundaries. For some adoptive families, the virtual contact had developed from traditional methods of contact and technology allowed them to extend the relationships developed without professional intervention.

8.3.2c Extending existing relationships with birth relatives

Where traditional methods of contact had worked well, some families had moved on from these methods and extended their relationships with birth relatives in a positive way. This is highlighted in Diane's family where the direct contact with siblings has been extended through technology. The regularity of the contact via Facebook, has allowed the relationships between the siblings to develop:

"So when he met up with his brother and sister they did exchange, eventually... I don't think it happened straight away, actually. Both his brother and sister asked my permission…I think it was some comfort that, you know, rather than just have a meet up twice a year they could speak to each other" (Diane, participant 11, adoptive mother, VC).

The extension of relationships online also added normality and reality to the child's dual connection to two families. The lack of formality allowed the connection to feel more natural and family-like.

8.3.2d The normality and reality virtual contact brings to the child's dual connection

Lee describes how the various methods of contact, including virtual contact, have allowed him to maintain a real sense of his dual connection to his birth and adoptive families. He talked about how he finds this normal due to the traditional methods used as he grew up and now the addition of technological methods:

"But keeping contact with them in different methods I can know how they are and I've grown up knowing I was adopted and also knowing who my birth family was. When I talk to people they also think it's a big deal and get upset but I don't I just think it's a normal way because I've grown up with it and I've got used to it. Got used to having four of my different family members instead of two" (Lee, participant 13a, adoptee aged 18, VC).

A practical reason that allows virtual contact to extend openness in the positive ways described above, is the convenience it affords adoptive family members.

8.3.2e The convenience of technology

The ease, immediacy, and speed of virtual contact via sites such as Facebook, make it a more convenient method of contact allowing individuals to circumvent professional procedures of search and reunion. Steven prefers the use of Facebook to the traditional method of letterbox contact as it reduces the time he has to wait for a response from birth relatives. The speed of technology is something that we are used to in modern society due to the ubiquity in the use of social networking sites for example, which has changed the way in which people communicate. As such, Swanton (2002: 129) questions whether letter writing is a 'modern-day skill'? For Steven, letterbox contact is too slow:

"It's easier because it's quicker and you can, like you don't have to wait three or four days for a reply, maybe longer depending on what they want to write or something…And you can just, you can send them a message and within about three or four minutes you can get a reply, rather than waiting a few days" (Steven, participant 16a, adoptee aged 15, VC).

In addition to speed, the convenience of virtual contact has been felt by both Martin and Diane by reducing the distance between family members. For both families, the siblings of their children are separated by distance making regular contact practically difficult:

"Now Facebook is ideal, it's fantastic for them because they're all over the place. The adopted siblings groups and my family's sibling groups are in touch" (Martin, participant 15, adoptive father, VC).

"And the three of them [siblings] have just communicated with each other, so they sort of... and their friends have communicated as well. So, it's been, I think, quite useful to them to maintain contact, because they're so far away" (Diane, participant 11, adoptive mother, VC).

This section has described the beneficial aspects of virtual contact and how this has been a useful development of openness in some families. For some adoptive families, however, these benefits may actually be risks as more convenient and family-like contact may not be appropriate for some adoptees. As highlighted in Figure 2, only four out eleven cases of virtual contact had positive elements. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the risks that were evident for the remaining families and how risk has interplayed with the benefits in the more positive cases.

8.3.3 Risks

As with more traditional methods of contact (letterbox and face-to-face), virtual contact is not appropriate for all families. Technology allows adopted young people and birth relatives to contact one another without professional support and mediation. For some families in this study, this resulted in negative and risky experiences of virtual contact. Seven out of eleven families described their experiences as negative. The risks included: a negative impact on the adoptee due to them not being emotionally ready to deal with contact, the unmediated nature of virtual contact, and inappropriate behaviour from birth relatives such as lying and sharing new information.

The following case describes the experiences of Glenys and her family and highlights the negative impact that virtual contact can have on a family. This case exemplifies each of the risks that will be discussed in this section.

Family 19: negative

Glenys and her husband adopted their 15 year old daughter when she was 6. She had been in foster care for two years prior to being adopted and she experienced severe abuse and trauma in the birth family. Their daughter has three older siblings (16, 18 and 21) who are still in the birth family. The contact arrangements included twice a year letterbox with birth mother and direct contact twice a year with birth mother and older siblings. The eldest sibling sometimes didn't show up due to the fact that she was using substances. Despite this, the contact was going well and their daughter settled in their family and was doing well in school.

When their daughter was 14 she started using Facebook and immediately became involved in risky online behaviours with older men in which the police became involved. Shortly

after this the family took part in the annual direct contact with the siblings, where Glenys believes the siblings exchanged mobile phone numbers and Facebook details. Their daughter was then in touch with her birth relatives online and via telephone, including the birthmother, siblings and other extended members of the birth family. The birth relatives were making unhelpful comments such as 'the court case was based on lies', 'birthmother is having a breakdown and it's your fault' and 'we want you back'. This caused her daughter extreme distress. Once her daughter told her what was happening, Glenys was concerned due to the nature of contact rather than the contact itself.

Glenys' daughter has been severely affected by the virtual contact which has re-triggered the trauma she experienced as a child. Glenys compares her daughter's behaviour before and after the contact: "Before January, [she was] very keen to engage with people in an appropriate way. Would show an interest in age-appropriate things. School activities, both curriculum-based and extra-curricular, she was very actively involved in sport, drama, music, she sang…she was a very active girl and young woman…She has withdrawn from all her other activities. She is less able to articulate feelings and…She has lots of times of being very dis-regulated, has been very aggressive, self-harms, and that has literally happened since January" (*interview took place in September 2013*).

The other contact arrangements have been suspended due to the actions of the birth family through virtual contact. Glenys describes how they were so pleased with how the birthmother behaved in contact that they wanted to think the best of her, but feels the birth family were just 'biding their time' until they could get their daughter back. Due to the time that the virtual contact happened when their daughter was experiencing psychological and emotional trauma, it didn't matter who initiated the contact as she was 'up for it' rather than being scared. Her daughter finds the contact difficult and emotionally charged but cannot stop it.

A social worker went to visit the birthmother to explain why the contact needed to stop, who agreed that she would stop. As soon as the meeting was over birth mother was in touch with their daughter. Glenys is concerned that the contact cannot be stopped. Glenys has tried to search herself for the birth relatives, she did find them on Facebook but a lot of the contact happens via private messages. The contact is still ongoing.

The adoption support workers are now going to try facilitated contact whereby the birth mother will make a video for her daughter saying sorry and acknowledging her responsibility in her daughter's pathway to care. In the meantime, Glenys is trying to support her daughter by talking about the difficulties this contact is causing her.

In this case, virtual contact had a particularly negative impact on Glenys' daughter's emotional and physical wellbeing suggesting that her daughter was not emotionally ready for this contact. The inappropriate behaviour by birth relatives in this case has made the content of the contact negative rather than the actual occurrence of the contact itself. And finally the unmediated nature of the virtual contact, despite professional intervention, meant that the contact could not be stopped when it started to have a negative impact on

Glenys' daughter. This case highlights how, for some adoptive families, virtual contact can have damaging effects.

In contrast to Diane's family story (Family 11) described earlier, not all adoptive kinship stakeholders have a share of control over the virtual contact situation. In particular, Glenys describes a feeling of powerlessness that can be linked to MacDonald and McSherry's (2013) notion of 'constrained parenthood'. This has contributed to Glenys' negative perception of virtual contact. One factor of constrained parenthood is the paradox that adopted children face being technologically competent to facilitate the search and reunion process online and having the power to do so, but not the emotional capability to manage their own identity needs. Glenys' daughter is described as having multiple ongoing issues that may have influenced the negative contact that she has with her birth family. These ongoing issues may indicate that Glenys' daughter is not emotionally ready to manage her identity needs. Her daughter also engaged in previous risky online behaviour which may indicate that she is not able to keep herself safe online, and therefore Glenys' daughter may be unaware of the risks of online communication more generally. Glenys places the blame for the change in her daughter's behaviour solely on the occurrence of virtual contact. However, it may actually be more complex than simply the communication choice due to the additional difficulties her daughter faces and the negative relationships that have developed through virtual contact. Glenys' overall concern with the virtual contact between her daughter and her birth family was not that is was happening per se, but rather the content of communication. She describes how it was the potential for contact to be relentless that caused distress for her daughter. However, due to the desire to be in contact with birth relatives, Glenys' daughter found it impossible to stop, which is where professional guidance to restrict the contact can be helpful. Of key importance here is that Glenys' daughter is not managing the boundaries of the contact successfully and does not seem to have the ability to exercise her agency to be able to control this. An important message for practice is highlighted through this case in that it is important to consider whether the child is emotionally able and ready to manage virtual contact. Additional support will be needed when adoptees' facing additional challenges experience virtual contact as they may not possess the power and agency to put controls in place to manage the boundaries of virtual contact. This case highlights that the communication method of virtual contact can present risks, however negative outcomes seem to occur in the presence of additional risks and challenges within the adoptive kinship network.

The factors that may make virtual contact difficult to manage for some will now be outlined.

8.3.3a Adoptee not emotionally ready for contact

"Facebook has exposed all these children to their birth families at the worst possible time, really, in their lives when, you know, they're such vulnerable adolescents anyway" (Sue, participant 17, adoptive mother, VC).

As with traditional methods of contact, the child's best interests should be of paramount consideration (Neil et al., 2011). Therefore, one of the key risks highlighted by adoptive parents, and adoptees themselves, was the negative impact the virtual contact had on the adoptee due to them not being emotionally ready to deal with the contact. As Sue highlights in the quotation above, virtual contact occurs when the adoptee is going through adolescence with all the additional challenges this brings (Brodzinsky, 1987). Therefore, for many of the adoptees, virtual contact caused emotional difficulties.

Peter, aged 16, describes how the virtual contact, particularly with his birth father, was getting "*a bit too much*". He has started to question how safe it is to be in contact with a man he knew to be violent in his past. After the initial romance of the virtual contact, the reality of his birth history made Peter unsure about the contact and he seemed to be in emotional turmoil as to whether or not to continue:

"Well, I was just realising what I was doing, because, like, as I was saying I had information about them. I was obviously adopted for a reason, so would I really want to get back in with someone who couldn't actually look after me? I was thinking. Was he actually a good person, or will he start another fight? Would he get arrested or do any things he shouldn't, and I was just a bit all over the place with him" (Peter, participant 21a, adoptee aged 16, VC).

The dramatic nature of Verity's reaction when her adoptive mother, Andrea, told her that her birth mother had approached her elder sister on Facebook highlights the considerable negative impact this contact can have. She described how she has now learnt to manage the virtual contact, and things have now 'calmed down' as she maintains contact with her siblings and not her birth mother. However, the initial fear in her reaction was overwhelming for her:

"Well I just walked in the kitchen and my mum was like 'your birthmum she sent [your sister] a friend request on Facebook and I think she might have sent you one' and I don't know why my reaction was so bad but I almost fell backwards. I jumped and shaked, and was shaking and fell backwards then I was crying going 'I don't want to talk to her, I don't want to be with her' and then I got really scared and everything. But then I calmed down and thought actually I don't have to talk to her if I don't want to and it all calmed down. But when I first found out I was really scared, I was crying and everything" (Verity, participant 20a, adoptee aged 14, VC).

Brenda summarises this idea by stating that adopted young people have the digital skills to perform virtual contact but not necessarily the emotional and social skills to positively manage this practice. This was also highlighted as a paradox in MacDonald and McSherry's (2013) notion of 'constrained parenthood':

"They have all this knowledge, and they can use... whizz around computers, and whizz around phones, the buttons, you know, the texting is fast, fast. But emotionally and socially they don't know what they're doing" (Brenda, participant 12, adoptive mother, VC).

Adopted teenagers may find contact emotionally challenging anyway (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011) without the added complexity of inappropriate behaviour from birth relatives.

8.3.3b Inappropriate behaviour from birth relatives

The inappropriate behaviour of birth relatives during contact has been highlighted as a risk in more traditional methods of contact (Macaskill, 2002). However, the unmediated nature of virtual contact means that there may be a lack of professional support to manage this negative behaviour or to control it. Verity, aged 14, describes how the very nature of the virtual contact meant that her birth mother was "*breaking the rules"* before the inappropriate behaviour she discusses. Verity is aware that her birth mother should not be contacting her until she is 18 years old, which, to her, is a cause for concern. Once the contact began, her birth mother crossed the appropriate family boundaries for Verity by asking her to call her 'mum'. The combination of these factors resulted in quite traumatic nightmares for her:

"At the beginning when she started talking to us she wasn't really allowed to because she was told until we were 18, unless we choose to talk to her she's not allowed. When I found

out …that scared me as well because she was breaking the rules already, she didn't respect them…the one thing that did bug me was that when I was talking to her she said to me 'can you call me mum?'… And after that I started getting, just for a little bit, I started getting scared. It's kind of weird but I used to get nightmares… They were quite horrible actually, sometimes she would kill someone like [my sister or mum] or someone. Which is nonsense, I know it's absolute rubbish and I don't know why" (Verity, participant 20a, adoptee aged 14, VC).

Glenys' overall concern with the virtual contact was not that is was happening, but rather what the birth relatives were saying to her daughter:

"I was certainly concerned… because so quickly, it wasn't just that there was contact, they were immediately saying, "We're getting you back." It was the nature of the contact rather than the contact that concerned me" (Glenys, participant 19, adoptive mother, VC).

Inappropriate behaviour by birth relatives can be more damaging during virtual contact due to the unmediated nature of it and therefore lack of professional guidance and support.

8.3.3c Unmediated nature of virtual contact

The unmediated nature of virtual contact means that there is a lack of professional guidance, but also the contact is less restricted due to the informal nature. Glenys describes how it was the potential for contact to be relentless that caused distress for her daughter. However, due to the desire to be in contact with birth relatives, Glenys' daughter finds it impossible to stop which is where professional guidance to restrict the contact can be helpful:

"But the problem is it can happen at any time. And I think that's what our daughter finds really difficult. And the emotionally-charged things that they say are very difficult for her. But, what she can't do, is to stop the contact, you know, she finds it difficult but she can't stop it. Which is understandable" (Glenys, participant 19, adoptive mother, VC).

Andrea describes how her daughter, Verity, used to want more contact when it was restricted to traditional methods. However, now that virtual contact has allowed for unmediated contact at any time, it is too much for Verity and she wants to return to more formalised practices:

"So she used to press for more contact, supervised contact, times and things like that, and she was the real driver for it. And now she says she wants to really pull back a bit, or quite a bit, but she says she got sucked in beyond her depth, and that she does want to see them but kind of only like one visit or something. She doesn't want them to be in contact with her all the time" (Andrea, participant 20, adoptive mother, VC).

The last two sections have outlined the positive and negative aspects of virtual contact for adoptive families. However, it has become clear that the same aspects of virtual contact that create benefits for one family can create risks for another. This can be related to the use of communicative technologies by children and young people in a more general sense, as the act of making a Facebook 'friend', for example, can be positive or negative (Livingstone, 2013). For example, the unmediated nature of virtual contact can have beneficial outcomes for some in the form of more family-like, regular contact. However, for another family this aspect of virtual contact can lead to intrusions in family life from inappropriate birth relatives at any time. Therefore, the following section will consider the question: what makes virtual contact a positive or negative experience?

8.3.4 What makes virtual contact a positive or negative experience?

This section considers the factors that may influence the experience of virtual contact following the analysis of the positive and negative stories of virtual contact above. To illustrate this, the stories of two adoptive families have been specifically compared. One story describes the negative impact virtual contact can have on an adoptive family, whilst the other paints a picture of a case where virtual contact can be a positive addition to openness within the adoptive family. In particular the factors that may interact to make one experience of virtual contact beneficial and another challenging will be explored. The analysis presented in this section only includes two family experiences and therefore highlights the unique perspectives of each family, although there are some similarities with the previous two case studies discussed. In line with the IPA approach it is important to maintain sensitivity to each unique story whilst also illustrating more general themes through cross-case analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Therefore this is achieved by in-depth discussion of two case studies and the consideration of common themes. Due to the idiographic nature of this section of analysis, concrete conclusions about the factors that may influence the experiences of virtual contact in the general population of adoptive families cannot be made. However, the stories presented do describe distinct family characteristics that may influence the success of virtual contact. The findings of wider

research and the lessons we have already learned about traditional contact are used to support and contrast the suggested influencing factors.

The first case tells the story of adoptive mother Brenda and her two daughters.

Family 12: negative

Brenda and her husband adopted their two daughters when they were 7 and 8 years old. The girls are siblings and are now 17 and 18 years of age. Their pathway to care involved 'severe abuse and chronic neglect'. Brenda describes her daughters as 'traumatised children', who have huge ongoing difficulties including mental health concerns. Brenda has extremely difficult relationships with both daughters and has struggled to find the correct support over the years.

The family engaged in letterbox contact with the siblings of the girls, however, this stopped when the girls were younger due to the fact that the siblings were still in touch with their birth mother.

Her younger daughter has engaged in risky online behaviour, including going to stay with men she met through Facebook and going missing for days. She would also steal money from Brenda. One day, when she was 15/16 her younger daughter sat her adoptive parents down and told them that she would like to go back into foster care. This caused extreme distress for Brenda who had to give up work and didn't see her daughter for 15 months. When Brenda started seeing her again she discovered that her daughter had been involved in virtual contact.

Her younger daughter had put a call out on Facebook to find her birth siblings. She did not want to find her birth parents due to her memories of their involvement in her pathway to care. She found her siblings, including an older sister in her 40s that she was unaware of. This has now developed into direct contact, with 'manipulative' birth siblings. Her daughter cleans for her older sister and gives her money which she receives from social services. Brenda's daughter now goes to stay with her birth siblings every weekend and is due to celebrate her 18th birthday with them. This is out of Brenda's control. Brenda's older daughter is not interested in contacting her birth family.

Brenda hadn't heard from her younger daughter for a few weeks at the time of interview and does not think that she will see her in the near future unless she needs something from them, although she thinks this unlikely as 'her needs are now met by other people'. Brenda believes that virtual contact has made an already damaged family, 'a damn sight worse'.

There are several elements to Brenda's story that could suggest why virtual contact has been part of a particularly challenging experience for her family. Brenda describes her daughters as 'traumatised children' and discusses the existence of additional emotional and behavioural issues concerning her children, which contribute to her description of her family as 'damaged'. Virtual contact seems to be an extra challenge that has made the

situation more difficult and has led to Brenda becoming ill due to trying to cope with a variety of issues. The additional challenges faced by this family have resulted in Brenda's youngest daughter returning to care and a breakdown in the adoptive family unit. Therefore when the virtual contact occurred, her daughter did not have Brenda's support. Due to the lack of ongoing contact with the birth family, when Brenda's daughter began to see her siblings there was a continuation of the chaotic relationships that were evident pre-placement. It is important to note that her eldest daughter does not want to reunite with her birth family which highlights the individual differences that can be evident amongst siblings (Jones & Hackett, 2007).

The experiences of Brenda and her family share similar factors to those of Glenys (Family 19). In particular, Brenda describes a feeling of powerlessness due to the fact that she does not hold a share of control in the contact situation. This leads to Brenda not being able to provide support for her daughter. This has had a negative impact on Brenda due to the fear that this has instilled due to not being able to manage what may happen in the future. This will also have a negative impact on her daughter as this powerlessness reduces the availability of adopter support, which has proved so important for adoptees through traditional methods of search and reunion (Feast & Philpot, 2003). This is linked to the breakdown in Brenda and her daughter's relationship. Therefore the identity needs associated with the virtual contact may be related to Brenda's daughter needing a sense of belonging rather than the extension of existing relationships. This does not provide a relational base from which positive virtual contact can develop. The use of virtual contact extended the risky online behaviour Brenda's daughter was undertaking. However, the direct contact that developed following the virtual contact has also had a negative impact. Therefore it is the nature of relationships with birth relatives that underpin the risk of virtual contact rather than the communication choice itself.

The contact in Brenda's family has caused concerns from the beginning of placement. The letterbox arrangements that began their contact journey were tainted with concerns about the birth mother being involved via the siblings involved in the contact remaining in her care. Therefore, concerns over the control of contact boundaries spans traditional and technological methods. Despite these concerns, Brenda's daughter was able to differentiate between the relationships she wanted to continue through virtual contact and those she did not as her birth parents were excluded. Therefore, despite the negative experience of virtual contact overall, there is a potential that it could have been more damaging if the

boundaries were not controlled. This case again highlights, as in Glenys' family (family 19), that the communication choice itself is not necessarily what causes the negative outcomes. The individual and family factors that surround the contact mediate the way in which it is experienced. There were additional challenges evident in Brenda's family surrounding her younger daughter that created an unstable situation in which virtual contact occurred. The contact was not used to extend existing positive birth family relationships, but rather continued previous risky online behaviour and may have been used to fill the gap left by the weak relationship between Brenda and her daughter. This is further suggested due to the fact that Brenda's elder daughter did not participate in the virtual contact showing the importance of individual agency, choices and identity needs.

In contrast the second story describes the positive experiences of single mother Sharon and her three adopted children.

Family 13: positive

This family included a single mother who had adopted three half siblings: a daughter aged 16, a son aged 18, and a son aged 22. Sharon adopted the children when they were 4, 6 and 10 years old. The children entered the care system due to neglect on the part of their birth mother. All family members took part in an interview.

The family have maintained direct contact with the maternal grandmother, who they fondly refer to as 'Nana'. Nana also sends birthday and Christmas cards and presents and telephones Sharon and the children. They also see two Uncles, Mark and Sam, with Mark in particular holding importance to the children. This is due to Sam falling in and out of contact with the children's birth mother who is not included in contact. The contact is informally managed within the family without social work intervention. Sharon has positive relationships with Nana and the Uncles and has been included in the contact from the beginning. They are referred to as 'the best in-laws you could imagine!' The contact is positive and enjoyed by all members of the family.

The siblings did have different thoughts about contact and openness in general however. Sharon's daughter aged 16 doesn't like talking about adoption but loves being in contact with her birth relatives but would also like to see their other half-brother (adopted by another family). The son aged 18 didn't mind talking about adoption but only when it would come up, but loved being in contact with his birth relatives. He expressed that he wanted to see his birth mother and meet his birth father in the future. The eldest son, aged 22, is happy to talk about adoption but only when the context is right. He is passionate about the need to stay in touch with his birth relatives who he considers family. He would also like to know who his birth father is and to meet him.

As the children got older, Mark asked Sharon if he could add the children on Facebook to stay in touch in between contact visits and also to keep an eye on Sharon's daughter who was being cyber bullied. Sharon agreed and also became included in Mark's Facebook network. The whole family enjoy seeing Mark's updates on Facebook, especially as he had just had a baby, and chatting to him when they like. Sam has very recently been included in the Facebook network. However, the family were wary of his connection to the birth mother, but as they are not in contact at the moment, this is currently not a problem. Sharon has discussed the possibility of birth mother getting in touch on Facebook with her eldest son and they both decided to ensure his privacy settings were high enough so she could not contact him. The two younger siblings would like to speak to her. However, at the moment, the family are enjoying getting to know the new baby in the family!

Sharon has encouraged and maintained ongoing contact with birth relatives throughout the placement. These arrangements are informally managed and negotiated through positive adult birth and adoptive relationships. This contact has been enjoyed by all members of the adoption triangle. The adoptive family is secure and stable and does not appear to be experiencing any additional challenges due to the adoption. The virtual contact was negotiated prior to its occurrence and is now used as an extension of the openness that has developed throughout the adoptive placement. Sharon has been included in the contact and now virtual contact throughout, which has nurtured positive relationships with the birth family. The birth family are also supportive of Sharon as the children's adoptive mother. Due to her support, Sharon has the ability to help her children contain the virtual contact to birth relatives who are non-threatening and prevent contact with their birth mother.

The ongoing nature of the virtual contact has created an everyday nature to the contact with birth relatives and blurred the boundaries between the adoptive and birth families. This has allowed the individuals within Sharon's family to create a new family network that includes birth relatives. The virtual contact allows the ongoing communication necessary to facilitate these family ties and to meet the identity needs of the adopted young people who consider the birth relatives involved as much a part of their family as the adoptive family members. The fact that traditional methods of contact were used before this was extended technologically, created a relational basis on which to build these positive connections. The virtual contact was experienced positively due to all stakeholders having the power to decide how to manage and extend their existing relationships. In addition all members are able to control the boundaries of the adoptive kinship network which currently exclude the birth mother. However, Sharon's children discussed differing identity needs and information gaps. This may cause complexities in the future due to tensions associated with meeting all sibling needs whilst protecting the boundaries of

individuals. In particular, the boundaries of the arrangements are currently controlled and exclude the birth mother. However, the two younger siblings have expressed a desire to meet the birth mother which creates a threat to the boundaries of the current online network. This highlights the fact that the unmediated nature of virtual contact, and the lack of professional control, can have positive and negative consequences. In particular, all members of the adoptive kinship network need to have a share of control to enable all to manage the boundaries of their relationships.

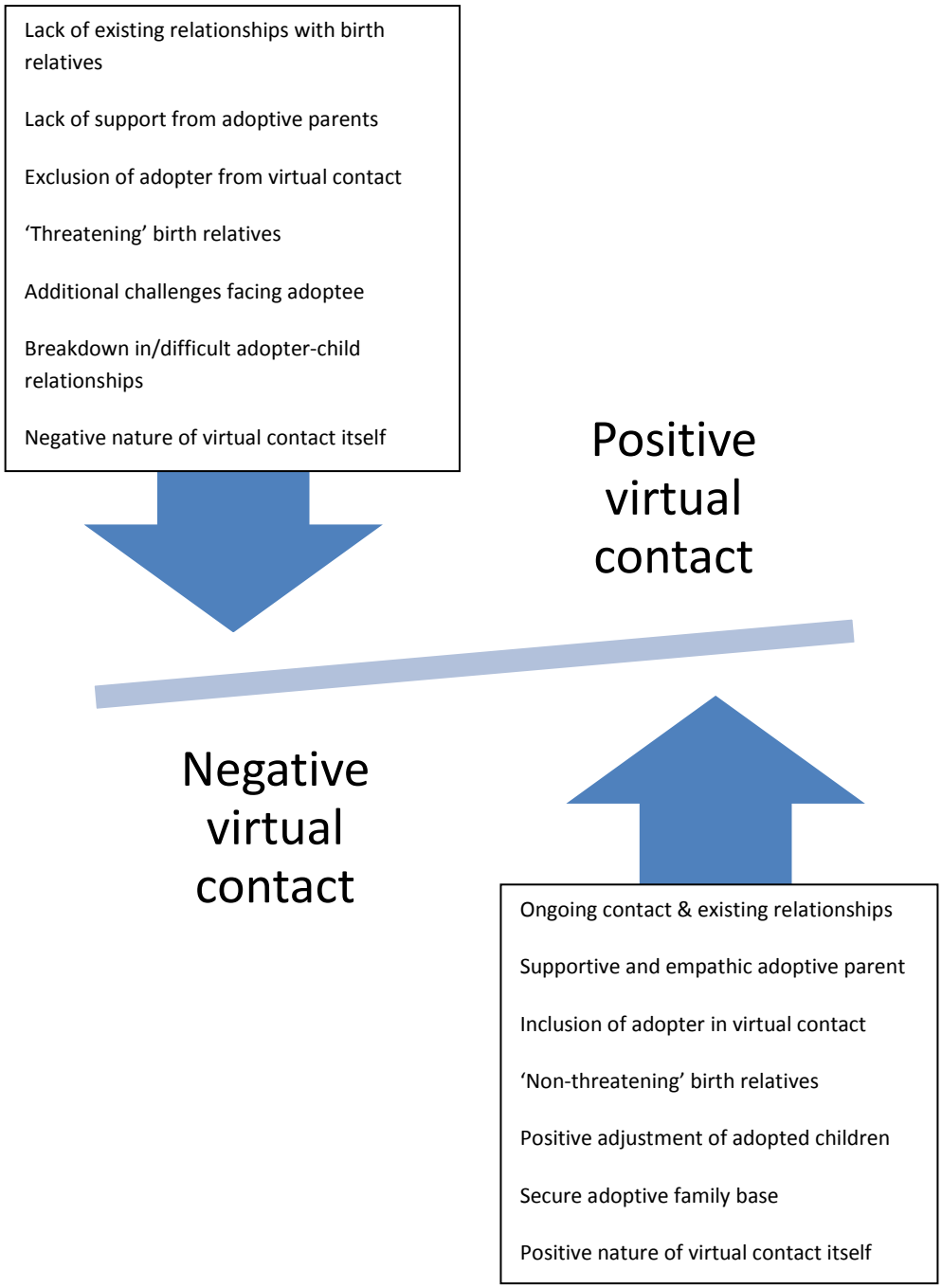
The two cases outlined above describe the actual experiences of two families who are still living with the impact of virtual contact in positive and negative ways. The cases highlight the unique family experiences of virtual contact which must be remembered in terms of the individualised nature of contact and support needed (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013). However, it is possible to learn from the experiences of these two families and to consider the possible risk and protective factors that may be evident in wider families.

The influencing risk factors that were evident in Brenda's family were: additional emotional and behavioural challenges of children, the breakdown of adoptive family relationships, the involvement of 'threatening' birth relatives, lack of support from adoptive parents, the exclusion and lack of control of adopter over contact, a lack of previous continuing birth family relationships, and the negative nature of the relationship with birth relatives through virtual contact.

The protective factors that were evident in Sharon's family were: the positive adjustment of the adopted children, the presence of existing birth family connections, positive adult relationships, the negotiation of virtual contact and inclusion of the adoptive parent in the contact, the involvement of 'non-threatening' birth relatives, the support and empathy of Sharon in her role as adoptive parent, the existence of a secure adoptive family base, and the positive nature of the relationship with birth relatives through virtual contact.

Figure 3 outlines the key factors that distinguish the family situations of Brenda and Sharon, which may have influenced their experience of virtual contact. This model is useful to consider whether virtual contact may be appropriate for families who possess any or all of the positive and negative attributes outlined.

Figure 3: Factors Influencing the Positive or Negative Experience of Virtual contact



This analysis has presented the potential influencing factors that may make virtual contact a positive or negative experience. When referring to research that has explored the factors that influence the success of traditional methods of contact, certain similarities can be applied here. Traditional methods of contact can be beneficial in the following ways: continuing relationships with birth relatives with whom they are attached (Slade, 2002), can facilitate empathy in adoptive parents (Neil, 2003), and contact can enable higher

levels of communicative openness and improved relationships between adopted children and their adoptive parents (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Brodzinsky, 2006; Neil, 2009; Grotevant et al., 2011). Neil et al., (2011: 6-7) identified several factors that led to a definition of contact 'working very well' in their study of complex direct contact requiring agency support, they were: the child not having emotional or behavioural difficulties, the child being under age 2 at placement, the contact not being with a birth relative who had abused them, high levels of communicative openness, and high adoptive family strengths. These factors are very similar to those highlighted in the data of this study regarding the positive experience of virtual contact. However traditional methods of contact can be problematic in the following ways: due to the complex histories and ongoing needs of children (Jones & Hackett, 2007), the chaotic lives of birth relatives (Neil, 2007), the lack of emotional maturity of adopted children (Neil et al., 2011), the inappropriate behaviour of birth relatives (Macaskill, 2002). The comparison between traditional and technological methods of contact suggests that the meanings underlying both sets of practices are very similar. Therefore despite the introduction of additional tasks and communication choices through technological open practices, the fundamental phenomenological meanings underpinning the maintenance of openness remain.

In summary, the influencing factors can be related to the following areas:

- The characteristics of the adoptive family and individuals in it
- The existing relationships between the adoptive and birth family
- The existence of additional challenges within the adoptive family

In particular, Neil, Beek and Ward (2013) suggest that the experience of virtual contact is mediated by the purpose of the contact itself. Positive experiences can develop from existing contact and established relationships with birth relatives and more mixed experiences are linked to virtual contact that is used to fill a gap due to a lack of ongoing contact (Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013). However, it is also important to consider the expectations of individual members of the adoption triangle in relation to virtual contact and questions such as:

- What is the adoptee or birth relative seeking online (information, contact, relationships)?
- What relationships are possible? Who initiated the contact and why?

- Do members of the adoption triangle possess the resilience to manage the positive or negative impact of virtual contact?

All incidences of virtual contact, and traditional methods of contact, are sensitive and involve two family networks coming together that may not always get along (Grotevant, McRoy & van Dulmen, 1998). Therefore, effective management strategies are needed to ensure beneficial virtual contact continues to be positive and risky virtual contact does not cause further harm. Due to the unmediated nature of virtual contact, the management of virtual contact will often fall to the adoptive family itself.

8.3.5 Family management techniques

Adoptive families were often able to manage virtual contact themselves in the following ways: the adoptee managing the contact independently, the adoptive parent being included in online networks, adult communication and relationships, continuing open conversations between adopters and their children, and in negative cases, the adopters blocking birth relatives or contacting birth relatives directly to ask them to stop. Adoptive parent support had shifted from actively controlling contact through indirect and direct methods, to supporting their children to continue contact online themselves or through maintaining open conversations with them. This had positive consequences in the form of more family-like and regular contact, or negative consequences through direct access between birth relatives and adoptees.

8.3.5a Adoptee managing the contact independently

Martin explains how his children have developed management strategies amongst themselves to ensure that their birth mother is not included in the virtual contact:

"The eight kids don't ask confidential information of each other, and to mum they don't divulge anything...because they know where their other siblings live and they don't disclose any of that information. So they're quite wised up to the situation, they've done that themselves that's nothing to do with us and I admire them for doing that" (Martin, participant 15, adoptive father, VC).

David, a 22 year old adoptee, describes how he has developed e-safety strategies to ensure that his birth mother cannot find him online:

"I was like 'well what if she can search for me on Facebook?' And we thought they've got settings for people you don't want to talk to and I was like 'oh ok I'll have a look at them'.

And all you can do is click public/private and all is closed and whatever. All she'd see is my profile picture and that would be it" (David, participant 13c, adoptee aged 22, VC).

The two examples explained by Martin and David highlight how adoptees are able to develop strategies to ensure their safety and to control which birth relatives are included in their online networks. Julie discusses the importance of her son's freedom in relation to the fact that the virtual contact is with members of *his* family and she would never try to cut the ties between him and his birth relatives:

"Are you happy with him to continue this Facebook contact with his siblings? You don't try and monitor?

Oh no, no I wouldn't at all, no. No, I mean, they're his brothers and sisters" (Julie, participant 16, adoptive mother, VC).

In some families the adoptive parent(s) were also included in the virtual contact.

8.3.5b The adoptive parent being included in online networks

For some families, the adoptive parent(s) were included in online networks to monitor the contact. In the case of Sharon and her family, however, she had been included in the virtual contact due to her being considered part of the family by her adoptive children and the birth and adoptive families being fully integrated in the network. Her son David describes this:

*"**So your siblings have mentioned this to me already that they have your Uncles on Facebook. Do you?***

Yeah.

And does your mum as well?

Oh yeah! That's the thing my mum's just as much part of my birth family as we are because she's looked after us for so long that they just consider us family…Because she goes with us on visits, she's as much their friend as grandma. So it's like, it's no different it's like we're all going round for tea like we used to do but the mum that brings us is different for some reason" (David, participant 13c, adoptee aged 22, VC).

8.3.5c Adult communication and relationships

Sharon's family also provides an example of the importance of positive adult relationships between the adoptive and birth families. Sharon describes how her child's birth Uncle, with whom the virtual contact is maintained, asked her permission before openness was extended in this way:

"[Birth Uncle] Facebooked me first, which I thought was very thoughtful of him. He Facebooked me first to ask if it was alright if he Facebooked the children, which I thought was very thoughtful. You know there would be nothing I could have done if they decided to Facebook without my knowledge" (Sharon, participant 13, adoptive mother, VC).

Sharon highlights how the virtual contact could have been very different and could have been a secretive practice with her exclusion, which emphasises the importance of communication.

8.3.5d Continuing open conversations between adopters and their children

In addition to communication between adults, continuing open conversations between adoptive parents and their children is important to ensure support is maintained. Diane explains how due to her son and his siblings wanting to be in control of their own contact online, she has encouraged an environment of openness that means that virtual contact is something that is naturally discussed in the family:

"They just want to be in control, so if they've decided they wanted to do it I think they would do it. I don't think you... I don't think that you can avoid it. I think the thing that worked best for us was making sure that it was completely out in the open, that everybody could talk about it, and we just had a chat about it" (Diane, participant 11, adoptive mother, VC).

8.3.5e The adopters blocking birth relatives or contacting birth relatives directly to ask them to stop

In more negative cases, adoptive parents actively intervened to try to mediate the virtual contact. Andrea describes how she contacted her daughters' birth mother directly to ask her to stop the virtual contact and offer a more mediated route instead:

"I then sort of Facebooked to her and said, 'Look, you know…you're not really supposed to be in direct contact with the girls. But if I email you every week telling you news of them and things, would you promise to not be in direct contact with them, because it's also very

unsettling for them'. And she said 'yes'. But, you know, I can understand it, she obviously just didn't find out, you know, she got bored with that, she didn't want to do that really very much. So at the beginning I emailed her every week and stuff, and then, well really what she wanted was direct contact with the girls. So then she just sort of broke that, really, and got back in direct contact with them" (Andrea, participant 20, adoptive mother, VC).

This is an example of a situation where family management techniques did not work. In some cases, this led to some adoptive parents feeling powerless and unable to manage the virtual contact.

8.3.5f Powerlessness

The family management techniques come in direct contrast to some families, and adoptive parents in particular, who felt powerless when virtual contact occurred. Referring back to the fear of losing control of contact through technological methods expressed by adoptive parents, it is clear that this is also a reality for some adoptive families. Sue and Glenys both describe how they feel that they cannot control the virtual contact between their children and their birth relatives as their intervention could possibly be counterproductive and lead to secretive contact:

"I do think it's re-traumatising her, but I think if I was to stop her doing it she would find a way anyway because, you know, I can't stop her using the house 'phone when I'm out. And I think it would just drive it underground" (Sue, participant 17, adoptive mother, VC).

"And our approach in terms of, you know, we don't try to prevent the contact with birth family because I think that would be counter-productive, because actually, we can't. It's not within our power. I think that would be entirely counter-productive" (Glenys, participant 19, adoptive mother, VC).

All cases referring to the theme of powerlessness have been described as negative. Referring back to Figure 3, a negative experience of virtual contact was characterised by factors including, additional challenges facing the adoptee, a lack of openness between the adoptive parent and child, and the exclusion of the adoptive parent from the contact. Research into traditional methods of contact has found that adoptive parents are less positive about contact when they are not in control of it (Barth & Berry, 1988; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Smith & Logan, 2004). Therefore, a feeling of powerlessness seems to be an additional aspect of negative virtual contact.

Due to the potential for differences in control between traditional and technological practices, the feeling of powerlessness when virtual contact occurred did persist with some families. Therefore it is important to consider what support services are needed to alleviate the feeling of powerlessness and ensure families are equipped to be able to manage virtual contact effectively. Adoptive parents and adopted young people discussed the support services that they had found useful with reference to virtual contact, and also the gaps in services that they had identified. The following section outlines participant opinions about support services and their recommendations for how they could be improved in light of the emergence of technological open practices.

8.4 Support needs

"We are the kind of ***guinea pig generation*** *of adoptive parents, because our adopted children have hit adolescence with Facebook. When our daughter was placed with us, Facebook didn't exist and nobody could have foreseen it"* (Glenys, participant 19, adoptive mother, VC).

The quotation above by Glenys highlights the current condition of adoption support services. Adoption practitioners are responding in ad hoc ways to manage the positive and negative impact of technological open practices. As Glenys describes, the current cohort of adoptive families who have adoptees approaching or in their teenage years, are having to react to the emergence of virtual contact without preparation or training, and are therefore the "*guinea pig generation*" of adoptive families. It is important to learn from adoptive families who have experienced virtual contact to ensure prospective adopters are prepared and trained to manage this contact and to have support in place to respond to those families who may be experiencing virtual contact now. This section will focus on the gaps in service provision and participant recommendations for the development of support services.

The support services that were valued by adoptive parents and adopted young people included, support for any additional challenges faced by the child (e.g. CAMHS, life-story book), post-adoption contact support workers, peer support groups, and training sessions. However, there were gaps in service provision and adoptive parents highlighted the importance of preparation and training of adopters about the ways in which technology is changing openness in adoption. In particular, adopters would value peer support and hearing case studies from families who have experienced virtual contact and how they

have managed it, in both positive and negative ways. Adoptees would also tell younger children not to rush into reunions online and ensure they have adult support. Virtual contact was identified as something that must be considered at the start of placement, incorporating the management of it into contact plans and considering carefully what identifying information is shared. Families who have adopted over the last ten to fifteen years need to be revisited and ongoing support offered.

The interviews of all adoptive parents and adoptees were analysed with reference to support needs to ensure that concern about virtual contact is also considered as an important need alongside actual experiences of this contact. There were clear similarities in participant recommendations for practice, highlighting the underlying similar phenomenological meanings that scaffold the experience of traditional and technological methods of openness.

8.4.1 Participant recommendations for the development of support services

The emergence of virtual contact is changing the nature of post-adoption contact arrangements and the way in which we think about the dual connection and openness between two families. Therefore, the system that surrounds adoption needs to adapt to respond effectively. Adoptive parents and adoptees provided recommendations for the ways in which adoption practice needs to develop. Participants focussed on the following areas: guidance for adoptive parents, peer support for parents, openness, work with birth relatives, support following virtual contact, and adoptee recommendations to slow down reunions.

8.4.1a Guidance for adoptive parents

Due to the fact that the adoptive parents of today's teenage adoptees may be considered the 'guinea pig generation' of parents, adopters stressed the importance of the provision of guidance. Josie thinks that it would have been useful if she had received training during her preparation as a prospective adopter. In this preparation, Josie thinks there should be practical information regarding e-safety on sites such as Facebook and also guidance about how to specifically support adopted children:

"I think it might have been useful if someone had given us some training or people in our situation some training as to how do you keep your own Facebook profile as closed as possible so you can talk about your children without making it too public…But, mostly it's obviously about guidance. It's about what do you do if you know your child is getting to a

stage where they start looking? What do you say? Or how do you guide them through it?" (Josie, participant 7, adoptive mother, VC).

Due to the fact that this preparation was lacking for adoptive parents who have teenage children today, Diane states that these families need to be revisited when their children are approaching teenage years and virtual contact is possible:

"I think it's very important to stay in touch with an adopted family and say, "We are still here. Your child is this age. Are you considering these things are happening?"…I don't know if I was waiting for the trouble to happen, or if I thought it just wasn't going to happen. But it would probably be better if the support services are actually put more out there sooner, rather than waiting for it to happen, because in the end we have to contact them in crisis" (Diane, participant 11, adoptive mother, VC).

8.4.1b Peer support

As suggested in the survey data, the training that adoptive parents would value is to be given scenarios of virtual contact experiences and the way in which they were managed within the adoptive family and by professionals, rather than practical e-safety advice. Charlotte highlights this point and believes that this training should be given during preparation groups with adoptive parents. Charlotte describes how actual family examples of the management of positive and negative cases of virtual contact would be beneficial:

"I think you'd spend a large part of your time in the training in the early sessions talking about people's experiences, and what happened in some real life kind of cases. Sort of what has happened as a result of it. And, you know, if there are any out there, examples of where it's been healthy and it's served a purpose that's been a constructive one… An awful lot of time should be spent on that, I think, to just get people to really understand the pitfalls, potentially, and maybe the opportunities as well" (Charlotte, participant 21, adoptive mother, VC).

The knowledge that would be obtained through the training described by Charlotte could reduce the feeling of powerlessness by some adoptive parents as they would possess the information about successful management techniques. Adoptive parents from the 'no-virtual contact' and 'virtual contact' groups indicated that they would find it useful to be given scenarios of real virtual contact cases in preparation groups or later training. This would allow them to learn from other adoptive families who have experienced virtual contact, positively and negatively, and the way in which this was managed within the

family and by professionals. Parents generally felt that their technological skills, in terms of e-safety, could be developed personally and that practical, experiential cases would be more valuable in terms of learning about the adoption specific management techniques were something that were lacking. The case studies presented throughout this chapter could be used as examples or templates for practitioners to use when training adopters.

8.4.1c Openness: Extension or restriction?

The question posed in the heading of this section highlights the contrasting views that were evident amongst adoptive parents. Sue believes that the values of openness should be extended to ensure that communication amongst adoptive parents and their children is encouraged. Sue found that open communication in her family has helped to ensure that a supportive environment surrounds her daughter's virtual contact:

"I think it's just sort of keeping the lines of communication open and, you know, being really open about it and hoping that you know when it's happening, that they can talk to you about it. And I think if you try and stop it it's just... they're so clever they'll just find ways to do things" (Sue, participant 17, adoptive mother, VC).

The reconsideration of openness also emerged by the recommendation of regressing the level of openness. A number of parents thought that less information should be shared at the time of adoption between the two families, and therefore increasing the anonymity of adoptive families. Mary argues this due to the fact that adopted children having the information necessary to search does not mean that they are ready to do so. Therefore Mary suggests withholding traceable information until children are ready to deal with the contact that may come with searching online:

"I think to be honest it would have to be more anonymity. So if I look at all the documents that we've got, as I say my older daughter she knows their surname and she knows her birth name so it's easy to search. But I think now it would have to be that you only know that birthmum is called this, her first name and any other personal information like that would have to be completely confidential to the point that they don't get to find that out until they're older and they're able to handle that" (Mary, participant 1, adoptive mother).

Some adoptive parents also mentioned the fact that if the adopted child has been given an unusual name by the birth family that this could lead to them being easily traced online, as Lauren states:

"I do know of other children who've got very unusual names and they'd be very easy to trace through social media" (Lauren, participant 4, adoptive mother).

The question of openness was one that was evident amongst virtual contact and non-virtual contact parents. However, those who had not experienced virtual contact were more likely to consider the value of a regression of openness in line with their 'fear of the unknown'. Adoptive parents who were experiencing virtual contact often considered the importance of encouraging open communication with their child, although some did regret sharing as much information with the birth family in the past.

8.4.1d Support following virtual contact

Diane describes how she felt scared when she thought that there was no support available for her family. Therefore it is important that support mechanisms are in place for adoptive parents and adoptees to turn to following virtual contact:

"I would say you do need somebody afterwards to support you, because it can feel very scary when I realised that we didn't have anybody to support us, and don't now... we have nobody, because my son's relatively grown up, and they're all falling outside the services" (Diane, participant 11, adoptive mother, VC).

This section has so far heavily focussed on the support recommendations of adoptive parents. The final section will consider the key idea of adopted young people, to not rush into a reunion online.

8.4.1e Adoptee advice: Slowing down reunions

Adopted young people were asked to consider what advice they would give to other adoptees. Following their experiences of virtual contact, some adopted young people reflected on the contact they had with their birth relatives and thought that technology may be too immediate. Verity explains the importance of getting to know the birth relative in question first before allowing access to all her information online. She also does not share true, identifying information to ensure her safety:

"First, you know don't click ok as soon as you see her, a request from them. Start talking to them through, like I did, the messenger thing, you don't have to be friends with them on Facebook to talk to them. Start getting to know them that way and if you feel comfortable then add them. But also if you don't fully trust them or how I had a bad reason for getting

taken away, maybe if you don't feel comfortable do what I did and don't put real…information on Facebook" (Verity, participant 20a, adoptee aged 14, VC).

Lee discusses the value of traditional methods of contact when getting in touch with birth parents to ensure truth and trust can build. He also reminds us of the vital importance of considering the risks of contact for each individual child (Neil et al., 2013):

"I think it all depends on the circumstances really, of the child and parent behaviour before they actually meet up. I wouldn't recommend meeting up with the parents straight away, I'd probably get in contact by mail or something, something not face-to-face, something where you can read their writing and know that that's their own words. Because if you've written an email or posted something on Facebook you might not know it's them but if you hand write it in a letter and send it over you know that's their handwriting and you know that that's them and they sincerely mean it" (Lee, participant 13a, adoptee aged 18, VC).

In both cases, Verity and Lee were discussing the importance of caution in relation to online contact with birth parents. They were both a lot more relaxed about the contact they maintained with other relatives, including siblings, grandparents, and uncles. This highlights the importance of considering the value of relationships and risks of each birth relative. Virtual contact with certain birth relatives was managed positively by some families. However contact with other birth relatives, particularly birth parents, could have been challenging.

The suggestions made by adoptive parents and adoptees about the way adoption practice could respond to the emergence of virtual contact are extremely valuable as they reflect the actual needs of adoptive families today. Lessons from participants are used in the production of recommendations for policy and practice and areas for future research in the argument chapter and conclusions. This ensures that the service user voice is heard and that evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence can be considered.

8.5 Discussion: How is virtual contact experienced by adoptive parents and adopted young people? And, does adoption practice need to change to respond to the impact of technology?

"Well, I think the one big bit of advice... the one big bit that people really need to realise is that in large numbers of occasions that it's not the Facebook, or the social network... that makes it easy. It makes it easier. It's the strong desire that kids have to be connected back to where they came from" (Charlotte, participant 21, adoptive mother, VC).

The interview data suggest that the use of technology in adoptive families is causing a development in the open practices within adoptive families. Not only are new technologically open practices emerging, so too are additional parenting tasks and attitudinal responses. Despite this, as Charlotte argues above, it is important to remember that the fundamental ideology behind the emergence of technological practices remains the same. As Morrison (2012) argued, the fundamental shift to openness happened decades ago. It can therefore be argued that the practicalities of openness may be changing but the lessons we have already learned about the success and outcomes of contact can be applied. This will be discussed in the following chapter when it will be considered how the conceptualisation of openness may need to develop in light of these technological changes. The interviews with adoptive parents and adopted young people have uncovered the family experiences and meanings given to technological open practices.

The majority of virtual contact cases were negative, with two being mixed and two positive. Risks included: a negative impact of the child due to them not being emotionally ready to deal with contact, inappropriate behaviour from birth relatives, and the unmediated nature of virtual contact. However, virtual contact had benefits for some families such as fulfilling adoptee identity and curiosity needs, the family-like nature of virtual contact, extending existing relationships with birth relatives, providing normality and reality to a child's dual connection to two families, and the convenience of technology. The factors that seemed to create a positive experience of virtual contact were: ongoing contact and existing relationships, supportive and empathic adoptive parent, inclusion of adopter in virtual contact, 'non-threatening' birth relatives, positive adjustment of adopted children, secure adoptive family base, and the positive nature of virtual contact itself. In summary, the influencing factors can be related to the following areas: the characteristics of adoptive family and individuals in it, the existing relationships between the adoptive and birth family, and the existence of additional challenges within the adoptive family.

Family management techniques had developed and included: the adoptee managing the virtual contact independently, the adoptive parent being included in online networks, adult communication and relationships, continuing open conversations between adopters and their children and in negative cases the adopters would block birth relatives or contact birth relatives directly to ask them to stop. Some families did receive support from their adoption agency which often resulted in social workers talking to the birth relatives involved to explain why virtual contact was inappropriate. However, some adoptive parents reported feeling powerless and did not know how to manage virtual contact.

Adoptive parents and adoptees provided recommendations for the ways in which adoption practice needs to develop. Participants focussed on the following areas: guidance for adoptive parents, peer support for parents, questioning openness, work with birth relatives, support following virtual contact, and adoptee recommendation to slow down reunions.

Communication or contact choices (traditional and/or technological) involved risks and challenges in their own unique ways. The risks experienced were mediated by family and individual factors rather than the communication choice itself. Therefore the direct relationship between communication choice and risk/safety issues has not been isolated and explored. As the analysis presented in Figure 3 suggested, it is relationships and relational strengths (parent-child relationships and adult relationships) that form the basis of positive virtual contact (and traditional contact) rather than the method of communication. The factors that influence the experience of virtual contact will mediate the risks and benefits of communication choices. However, the unmediated nature of virtual contact does present extended risks and benefits of this communication choice raising new challenges for adoptive families. Referring back to existing knowledge regarding search and reunion, the measure of success goes beyond simply the method of search or the individuals found. Pacheco and Eme (1993) found that 'success' had many dimensions, including overall satisfaction, the relationship with the birth family, and the relationship with the adoptive family. Therefore, it is important to not let discussion be dominated by concerns over technological communication methods, but rather the relationships thought to be possible and safe through post-adoption contact.

As with more traditional forms of contact, virtual contact presents risks and opportunities and will not be suitable for all adopted young people and their families (Neil et al., 2011). Therefore it cannot be assumed that virtual contact is necessarily a positive or negative development. It would be more useful to ask questions such as: what are the risks involved

for each family and child? Can virtual contact be a positive addition to contact for a particular child? Does the family possess sufficient resilience to manage virtual contact?

Comparing the technological open practices explored in this chapter to the wider literature and empirical evidence on traditional post-adoption contact and openness allows for parallels and distinctions to be drawn. Smith and Logan (2004: 6) stated that contact cannot be thought of as the same as 'access' and is often mediated. However, it can be argued that technological open practices are changing the extent of structural openness from mediated contact to access by extending openness in some families and creating more family-like contact. Jones and Hackett (2012:287) have drawn the distinction between prescribed open practices (e.g. mediated contact) and the open practices that develop within the private realm of the family. A significant feature of adoptive family life, however, was the need to integrate these public and private practices into day-to-day family life (Jones & Hackett, 2012: 287). However, the nature of post-adoption contact often means that it is fairly infrequent, formal and publicly mediated, creating a lack of family intimacy on a day-to-day basis and a lack of current information and knowledge about birth relatives (Jones & Hackett, 2012). This was highlighted in the limitations of traditional methods of contact in this study. Jones and Hackett (2012) argue that contact arrangements should be an extension of existing family practices in order to make them meaningful and able to create kinship. This can be linked to the potential opportunities technology creates to allow contact to be more closely attuned to the creation of kinship. In particular, the use of communicative technologies extend the existing practices that children and young people use in their everyday lives, namely social networking sites, and it is possible that contact can now fall within the realm of private family practices due to technology creating more 'family-like' contact experiences in the control of adoptive families. However, as the interviews with parents who had experienced negative virtual contact experiences highlight, this extension of openness into the private realms of family life can create risks for some families.

Recurring themes throughout Chapters 7 and 8 that underpin the analysis are identity, power and control. These themes emerged in participant discussions of both traditional and technological methods of post-adoption contact and highlight shared concerns of participants. The motivations that underpin both traditional and virtual forms of contact often stemmed from factors associated with the adopted child's identity. *Identity* is associated with adoptee questions and curiosity related to the perceived 'information gaps'

(Wrobel & Dillon, 2009) in their birth history. Historically the *power* to answer these questions was defined and professionally mediated by traditional forms of post-adoption contact and formal modes of search and reunion, restricted to when an adoptee reaches the age of 18 years and can access their birth relatives. However as Triseliotis et al. (2005) argued, although identity questions and curiosity remain the key reasons for search and reunion the societal context can change motivations. For example, the availability of communicative technologies could facilitate more search and reunion activities due to the power of individuals to redefine how they manage their identity development. The power held in the search for identity information is tied into the level of *control* one has over the contact situation. The notion of control was discussed in the analysis in relation to whether technological methods of contact and the ways in which relationships and boundaries are maintained within the adoption kinship network.

The existence of family management techniques, highlight the adaptability of adoptive families in their ability to manage new developments in adoptive family life. Swanton (2002) carried out research with adoptive families when traditional contact was a fairly new and untested concept, but still found that most adoptive parents were positive about openness and felt that this should be managed within the adoptive family. Therefore, as Whitesel and Howard (2013) have argued, adoptive and birth families seem able to manage, utilise and respond to the use of the Internet and social media in their families, contrary to the belief that virtual contact is a negative development. It is important however to recognise the complex interplay between risk and opportunity with regards to virtual contact that is evident in this sample. The development of technological open practices will not be appropriate for all families. Therefore, adoption practice needs to develop (perhaps in the ways recommended by adoptive parents and adopted young people in this chapter) to ensure virtual contact can be managed safely where appropriate, and families are safeguarded from harm where virtual contact would be damaging.

8.5.1 Reflecting on the Analysis

The analysis presented across chapters 7 and 8 did not entirely reflect the original analytical plan outlined in the Methodology chapter. The principles of IPA were not strictly followed due to reasons of sample size and the number of themes identified through the analytical process (see section 7.1.1 for more detail). This has resulted in various strengths and weaknesses of the qualitative data. A strength of the analysis is the wide range of themes that have been discussed which has allowed for breadth over the depth of a

strict IPA study. In addition, it has been possible to see both the patterns that have emerged across participant experiences through thematic analysis, whilst still maintaining idiographic focus through the use of case studies that looked at individual stories in more depth to illustrate key themes through real experiences.

However, the analysis did not produce the level of interpretive depth that was originally intended. The lack of interpretive depth has been highlighted as a common problem in published IPA studies and as Smith (2004: 51) argued "there is scope for pushing further". Of key importance is having the confidence and discipline to sample only a small number of participants and focus on depth over breadth. In future, I would be interested in completing a strict IPA study using a small sample of five families to conduct an in depth cross-case analysis of virtual contact experiences. In this way it would be possible to explore 'why' people experience virtual contact in the way they do rather than focussing on 'what' they have experienced.

8.5.2 Reconceptualising Open Practices

Contact seems to be complex through both traditional and technological methods and participants identified gaps in support services for both sets of practices. Therefore it is necessary to consider the lessons learned from the findings of this study to ensure the complexities are highlighted and incorporated into an updated reconceptualisation of openness. The following chapter outlines and discusses the central argument of this thesis, being that openness is experiencing a transition from the sole use of traditional methods to the incorporation of technological practices, which results in a range of opportunities and challenges for adoptive families. There is no suggestion, however, that virtual contact and other technological practices are replacing more traditional forms of openness. Therefore, a reconceptualisation of what 'openness' means for adoptive families today is offered, creating a new spectrum of 'open practices'.

Chapter 9: Argument - A Reconceptualisation of Openness

My overall argument states that openness is experiencing a transition from the sole use of traditional methods to the incorporation of technological practices, which results in a range of opportunities and challenges for adoptive families. There is no suggestion that virtual contact and other technological practices are replacing more traditional forms of openness. Therefore, a reconceptualisation of what 'openness' means for adoptive families today is offered, creating a new spectrum of 'open practices'.

This chapter critically reviews the knowledge generated through the findings of this study and develops arguments surrounding the impact of communicative technologies on adoption practice. I begin by outlining the key findings from the research, before situating these in the context of existing knowledge in the field of adoption research. The new directions and contributions developed from the research findings are discussed and critically evaluated. The main contributions are as follows:

- Describing adoptive family experiences of traditional methods of contact, the complexities involved, and questioning the suitability of these traditional methods in light of technological developments.
- Describing adoptive family experiences of technological open practices, defining the methods used by adoptive family members, and outlining the risks and opportunities created.
- Reconceptualising what is meant by 'openness' in adoptive families today by developing an integrated spectrum of traditional and technological practices.
- Considering the impact of technological practices on adoptive families through the development of theoretical ideas:
    - A conceptual model of technological openness
    - Blending family boundaries and relationships through technological open practices
    - Technology acting as a facilitator of identity development
    - The shift in control from adults to children
    - The shift from the public, mediated nature of traditional post-adoption contact, to the private management of technological practices within the adoptive kinship network

  - The additional parenting tasks that technological open practices introduce that can mediate the level of parenting stress experienced
  - Finally, the dominant factors that have emerged through the analysis are drawn together to consider how they may interlink and mediate the experience of virtual contact; namely, power, agency, control, identity and risk.

9.1 Lessons Learned from Findings

The four findings chapters have presented data from an online survey of 101 adoptive parents and interviews with 23 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people. Survey data provided contextual patterns, suggesting the ways traditional and technological practices are structured in adoptive families in this sample. The interviews explored the meanings attached to these practices. I will now present an overview of the key lessons learned from the findings linking them back to the aims of the study:

- To establish the extent to which virtual contact has become a feature of post-adoption contact *(Chapter 5: Findings - The practice of openness in adoptive families today):*
  - Several developments have emerged that suggest changes in the open practices of adoptive families due to the use of communicative technologies, namely a large proportion of adoptive parents had searched online for birth relatives (63%) and a minority of families had experienced virtual contact (9%).
  - Children over the age of 13years were more likely to have initiated the virtual contact themselves than younger children.
  - Virtual contact does not have a significantly negative impact on adopted family life and in-family management techniques develop.

- To determine associations between psychological factors and the experience of virtual contact *(Chapter 6: Findings - The individual factors that relate to parent perceptions of virtual contact):*
  - Experiencing virtual contact is associated with more positive parent views on and expertise in communication technology.
  - Parents who had and had not experienced virtual contact did not differ with respect to reported communicative openness, but parents who had experienced

virtual contact reported lower levels of satisfaction. However, this may be mediated by child age and the complexities associated with adolescence.

- In relation to mind-mindedness, a tendency to focus on pre-adoption experiences made parents less likely to represent their children in terms of their current mental and emotional states.
- There was no relation between experiencing virtual contact and mind-mindedness. However, in children who are old enough to be likely to be using communication technology, representing one's child in terms of their mental and emotional states rather than in terms of their pre-adoption experiences is related to more positive views about communication technology.

- To gain an understanding of the impact of communicative technologies on the practice of openness in adoptive families *(Chapter 7: Findings - A qualitative exploration of the impact of technology on openness):*

  - The motivations for maintaining post-adoption contact differed between adoptive parents and their adopted children. Adopters maintained and facilitated contact due to empathy for their child and/or the birth relatives. However, some also felt obliged due to agency agreements or the need to maintain contact through fear of blame for lost connections by their child in the future. Adoptees focussed on their dual connection in terms of maintaining birth family relationships, building their identity and answering questions.
  - Interview accounts revealed certain elements of satisfaction with direct contact, including: providing reassurance for adoptees, maintaining relationships and positive adult relationships. However, challenges were also discussed, including problematic behaviour displayed by birth relatives and the risk posed due to their involvement in a child's pathway to care. Indirect contact was thought to be problematic in certain ways, including the unreliability of birth relatives and formality of arrangements. However, it was also beneficial and some adoptive parents and adoptees treasured letters and enjoyed the personal nature of this contact.
  - Certain influencing factors that affected the success of contact emerged: the judgement of birth relatives and adult relationships, the significance of relationships to the child, the formal nature of contact and the risks involved. Throughout adoptive parent and adoptee accounts, certain benefits and

successful traditional practices have been highlighted, including: acknowledging dual connection, integration and maintaining relationships and providing ongoing information. However, limitations and challenges have also emerged that suggest that the practice of openness can be complex, including: adoptive parent personal discomfort with dual connection, adoptees experiencing split loyalties and challenges involved in maintaining contact from birth relative risks to the unfamily-like nature of contact (Jones & Hackett, 2012).

- In some cases, there seems to be limits to the extent of these traditional practices for meeting the identity needs of adopted adolescents. Therefore, there were suggestions that technological practices are emerging to supplement and extend traditional openness and may provide alternatives for some families, including: virtual contact, parent online searching and information searching and sharing online.
- Adoptive parent views about virtual contact focussed on risks, including: the immediacy and lack of support, the risk posed by the birth relative, and any negative information found online. However they were also able to identify potential benefits, including: addressing identity needs and questions of adoptees, an opportunity to prepare for further contact at a safe distance, and address information needs and curiosity.
- The level of positivity and satisfaction for contact from the perspective of adoptive parents seemed to be higher for more traditional methods of contact where they could maintain more control. However, respondents who had experienced virtual contact were able to see the benefits of the shift in control. The main differences in control between traditional and technological methods of openness, seems to be a shift away from state intervention. This causes concern for some adoptive parents. However technology also allows for in-family management of open practices including, parent online searching and virtual contact.
- The practice of adoptive parent online searching fulfilled the aims of preparation, monitoring birth relatives and information finding with one adoptive parent stating “forewarned is forearmed”. Once parents had searched, some shared the information they had found with their child, some continued to

monitor birth relatives, and others blocked birth relatives on their child's social media account.

- To explore the benefits and risks of virtual contact and develop understanding of the meanings that are attached to this contact *(Chapter 8: Findings - Qualitative Accounts of Virtual Contact):*
    - The majority of virtual contact cases were negative, with two being mixed and two positive. Risks included: a negative impact of the child due to them not being emotionally ready to deal with contact, inappropriate behaviour from birth relatives, and the unmediated nature of virtual contact. However, virtual contact had benefits for some families such as fulfilling adoptee identity and curiosity needs, the family-like nature of virtual contact, extending existing relationships with birth relatives, providing normality and reality to a child's dual connection to two families, and the convenience of technology.
    - Virtual contact seemed to be managed positively with: the positive adjustment of the adopted children, the presence of existing birth family connections, positive adult relationships, the negotiation of virtual contact and inclusion of the adoptive parent in the contact, the involvement of 'non-threatening' birth relatives, the support and empathy of the adoptive parent, the existence of a secure adoptive family base, and the positive nature of the relationship with birth relatives through virtual contact.
    - Family management techniques had developed and included: the adoptee managing the virtual contact independently, the adoptive parent being included in online networks, adult communication and relationships, continuing open conversations between adopters and their children and in negative cases the adopters would block birth relatives or contact birth relatives directly to ask them to stop. However, some adoptive parents reported feeling powerless and did not know how to manage virtual contact.

- To identify strategies and support services needed to manage virtual contact that minimise risk and increase resilience *(Chapter 8: Qualitative Accounts of virtual contact)*:
    - Participant recommendations focussed on the following areas: guidance for adoptive parents, peer support for parents, openness, work with birth relatives,

support following virtual contact, and the adoptee recommendation to slow down reunions.

- As with more traditional forms of contact, virtual contact presents risks and opportunities and will not be suitable for all adopted young people and their families (Neil et al., 2011). Therefore it cannot be assumed that virtual contact is necessarily a positive or negative development. It would be more useful to ask questions such as: what are the risks involved for each family and child? Can virtual contact be a positive addition to contact for a particular child? Does the family possess sufficient resilience to manage virtual contact?

The analysis of findings points to a need to reconceptualise how we define 'openness' within adoptive families and adoption practice. This chapter will discuss this in detail and present a conceptual model about the way openness may be changing with the integration of technological open practices.

The findings suggest that adoption is experiencing a transition from the sole use of traditional open practices to the incorporation of technological practices. There is no suggestion that technological open practices are replacing traditional ones, but rather they exist and relate to one another at the same time. Therefore, it seems necessary that the term 'openness' be redefined to include these technological changes and acknowledge the potential additional open tasks for adoptive families.

Figure 4 below outlines the updated spectrum of openness that has been developed from the findings of the study and features the integration of traditional and technological practices and the meanings and values that underpin them. The spectrum represents the additional tasks and practices that technological methods introduce, however the underlying motivations behind the maintenance of openness remain the same. The spectrum integrates traditional and technological practices under an umbrella definition of openness. The meanings that underpin successful openness stretch across both sets of practices. By 'successful', I mean openness that fulfils the needs of all members of the adoptive kinship network. When needs are incompatible, openness can be problematic. The spectrum includes all practices that have been discovered in this sample but does not suggest that all adoptive families will or should maintain all practices. Rather the spectrum represents a range of open practices that are now available to adoptive families. Within this spectrum exists three ideological and practical tasks that must be recognised within the adoptive kinship network; the *dual connection* of the adopted child to their adoptive and

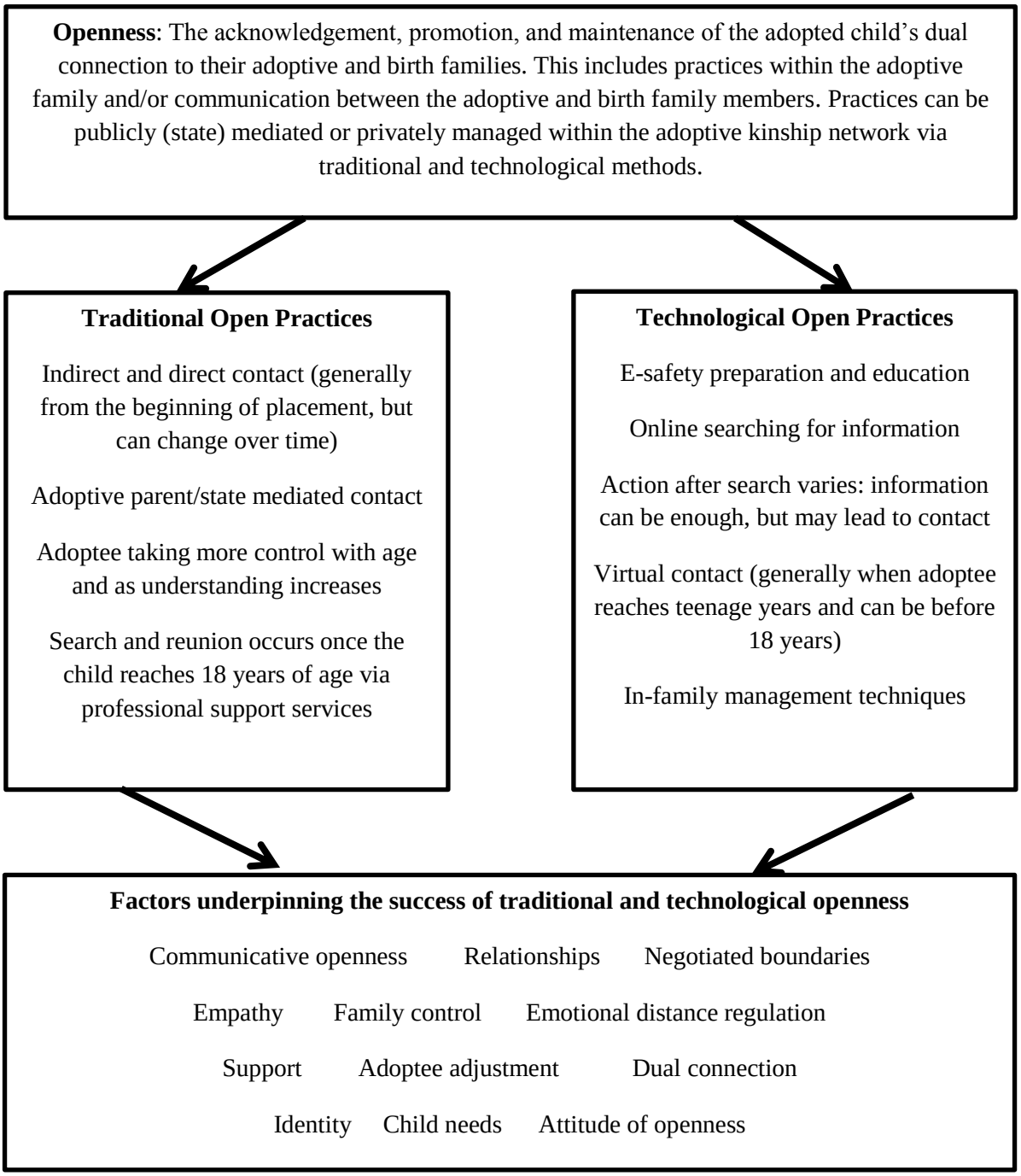
birth families, the *communicative openness* about adoption-related issues, and the *structural openness* that facilitates contact between the birth and adoptive families. The three ideological tasks remain, however the practices that fulfil these tasks have been extended by technological methods. The needs of each adoptive kinship network will be unique and technological practices may not be suitable for all families in the same way that traditional ones will not. Looking more closely at this sample, traditional methods still underpin openness in adoptive families. The majority of families who had experienced virtual contact had also experienced traditional forms of openness to some extent. Traditional methods had been used in the early stages of the adoptive placement, with technological practices being used as the adoptee reaches teenage years. Once virtual contact occurs, this is often used in combination with traditional methods, but can also replace traditional methods in some cases. Technological and traditional open practices can have positive and negative consequences. The traditional and technological categories in the Figure 4 are not mutually exclusive and the tasks that underpin traditional methods, including communicative openness, may also be evident in families that maintain virtual contact.

The reconceptualisation of openness raises the question of what openness was and what it is now? The definition of openness by Reitz and Watson (1992: 11) outlined in the introduction to this study states that adoption creates:

> "a new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child, who is shared by both…it expands the family boundaries of all those who are involved".

This definition of openness, and therefore the underpinning ideology, is still valid following the analysis of data for this study. However, technological practices add fluidity to the boundaries of the adoptive kinship network and expand the options available for the maintenance of open connections. The possibility for the private management of contact through technology and the seeking of information via online mediums, circumvents professionally mediated services. This may mean that support is not available for some families, but for those who maintain both traditional and technological methods, openness can be maintained both privately and publicly. This of course has positive and negative outcomes that seem to be mediated by relational factors, including the nature of the relationship maintained between the adoptive and birth families and the strength of the adoptive-parent child relationship.

Figure 4: Reconceptualising Open Practices



The theoretical implications of the reconceptualised spectrum of openness will be discussed later in the chapter. For now, I turn to situating the findings of this study within the existing knowledge of the field.

9.2 Situating the findings in the context of the field

In order to understand the contribution of the knowledge generated from the findings to the field, it is necessary to situate them within the context of wider theoretical and empirical data. The literature has been critically reviewed earlier in this thesis which outlined the existence of several ongoing debates and gaps in knowledge. Therefore this section will attempt to contribute to the existing debates and to add new knowledge to the field. I begin by providing a recap about the main theoretical and empirical trends discussed in the literature review. The review started with an overview of the growth in the use of communicative technologies, including social media sites, by children and young people and presenting a discussion of the risks and benefits of this development. Parental responses to the use of technology by their children was considered, with a focus on why adoptive parents may be particularly concerned about their adopted children communicating online due to the additional challenges and vulnerabilities that may exist. This was linked to the characteristics and complexities of modern adoptive family life, including the shift to openness and the acknowledgement of the adopted child's dual connection to their birth and adoptive families. Traditional methods of openness were discussed, including communicative openness and mediated indirect and direct contact and the impact of these methods on adoptive family life were critically analysed with reference to empirical evidence. The debate surrounding traditional methods of openness is ongoing. Factors that may influence the success of traditional openness were discussed, including, the additional challenges faced by the adoptee particularly in adolescence, parent-child relationships and parental mind-mindedness, and parenting stress. It was then considered how the context of increased openness in adoption and the use of communicative technologies have led to the emergence of 'virtual contact'. Finally the current empirical and practice responses to virtual contact were presented and gaps in knowledge were identified.

The potential contribution of the findings of this study on existing knowledge surrounding openness will now be considered with reference to the main themes covered in the literature review: openness, virtual contact, and questioning the suitability of traditional open practices.

9.2.1 Openness

The dual connection of the child to two families forever ties the adoptive and birth families together (Reitz & Watson, 1992) regardless of the level of openness between them.

Therefore, members of the adoptive kinship network (Grotevant et al., 1998) are psychologically present in each other's lives (Howe, 1996). The extent to which birth relatives are physically present in the adoptive family's life is dependent on the amount of ongoing contact that is sustained. Even if no contact is maintained, adoptees may decide to search and reconnect with birth relatives in late adolescence or early adulthood (Howe & Feast, 2000). And today, technological open practices have extended the openness that is possible. Due to the elements of openness and contact, the adoptive kinship network will have to negotiate the level of closeness of relationships (Grotevant, 2009), and the roles and boundaries within the network (Fravel, McRoy & Grotevant, 2000). Due to the dynamic nature of openness and the changing needs of the adopted child, this process of negotiation will be in a state of continual evolution over the life course of the adoptive family (Logan & Smith, 2004; Neil & Howe, 2004). Openness exists along a continuum, referring to the frequency of contact, the dynamic nature of contact being subject to change, and the relationships maintained (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998: 2). Neil et al. (2011) describe the tasks of openness as a 'spectrum' of open practices, including contact, life story work, and the adoption contact register.

Communicative technologies are changing the way openness is developing in adoptive families by providing an extended range of open practices to the spectrum, including online searching and virtual contact. This has presented risks and benefits to the families in this study, and in the research that has emerged to date (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013; Whitesel & Howard, 2013). However, the phenomenological meanings behind openness have remained. This was highlighted in the discussion of the factors that influence the positive or negative experience of virtual contact. The factors that seemed to create a positive experience of virtual contact were: ongoing contact and existing relationships, supportive and empathic adoptive parent, inclusion of adopter in virtual contact, 'non-threatening' birth relatives, positive adjustment of adopted children, secure adoptive family base, and the positive nature of virtual contact itself. In summary, the influencing factors can be related to the following areas: the characteristics of the adoptive family and individuals in it, the existing relationships between the adoptive and birth family, and the existence of additional challenges within the adoptive family. In their study of complex direct contact, Neil et al. (2011) found similar factors that can influence the experience of contact. In particular, they highlight the importance of positive relationships between the child and birth relatives and the adoptive parents and birth relatives, that contact is in the child's best interests, and that the child has a healthy

development. They argue that a balance must be struck between the benefits and challenges of contact, and if the challenges outweigh the benefits then contact will not be suitable for that particular child. This lesson can be applied to the case of virtual contact, with this method becoming a useful addition to openness if positive factors are evident to mediate the beneficial experience of virtual contact. An application of the influencing factors associated with traditional methods of contact on to the responses to virtual contact, can allow for a risk/benefit assessment for each family.

The meanings behind technological open practices outlined in this study mirror those underlying traditional openness. Siegel and Smith (2012) identified a range of opportunities and challenges regarding traditional openness in their survey of 100 adoption agencies facilitating infant adoptions in the USA. They argue that the following four factors can lead to strong open adoptions and relationships:

- A *shared understanding* of what openness is: child-centred focus, understanding benefits of openness and moving beyond fear, openness does not erase feelings of loss, and importance of role clarity.
- *Foundational relationship qualities*: empathy, respect, honesty and trust, and, commitment to maintaining the connection.
- *Self-determination* from all parties in shaping open relationships: ability to set boundaries, and adaptability of relationships.
- *Collaborative communication* in planning contact and discussing needs and feelings: planning and the availability of support services (Siegel & Smith, 2012: 24).

These four factors can also be extended to the maintenance of successful technological openness. The practices of openness may be developing due to shifts in communication in society generally, however the meanings remain. Shifts in openness are not new. Henney and Onken's (1998) study involved a sample of 720 participants including adopters, birth mothers and adoptees involved in infant adoptions. Of those adoptions that were described as fully disclosed, two thirds did not start this way and openness had increased and developed over time. Grotevant (2009: 298) argued that "when interactions are positive and rewarding, participants are willing to risk a bit more the next time". Therefore, technology may allow participants to increase openness if it has been working well in more traditional ways. However, problems occur when openness is extended through technology

when it has not been maintained traditionally or if openness has been maintained and it was not a positive experience. The dynamic nature of openness (Neil & Howe, 2004) has been recognised, and technological practices are an additional way that openness is developing.

The risks and benefits of technological open practices in this study can be compared to those outlined by Henney and Onken (1998) in their discussion of fully disclosed adoptions. Contact methods that allow for fully disclosed adoptions are thought to be superior in practice as they provide reality, choices, and allow quality relationships to develop (Henney & Onken, 1998). However, Henney and Onken (1998: 58) outline several issues that can make fully disclosed adoptions problematic, including: boundary issues, lack of commitment, lingering fear or mistrust, communication and negotiation issues, fewer safeguards and avenues for abuse of trust between parties, loss of agency control, and the requirement of hard work and commitment from all parties. These issues mirror the benefits and risks of virtual contact, which allows for fully disclosed 'access' between parties. For the adoptee, fully disclosed adoptions allow direct access to birth relatives and their birth family history, an increased sense of power by not being dependent on an agency or adoptive parents for information, not needing to search if contact is ongoing, help with identity issues, avoid fantasy, feeling important to birth relatives, and therefore having reduced feelings of rejection (Henney & Onken, 1998: 60). Contact in itself sends a message about which birth family relationships are valued and confirms who is a family member (Cossar & Neil, 2013). Virtual contact can allow adoptees themselves to define who is important to them. However, adoptees can experience difficulties in the relationships between their two families which can lead to split loyalties (Henney & Onken, 1998: 60). As Macaskill (2002) argues, children may want more contact than they can actually emotionally manage and may need support to understand why an increased level of contact may not be appropriate.

The interview data highlighted the risks and benefits of virtual contact from the perspectives of those adoptive parents and adoptees who have experienced it. Risks included: a negative impact on the child due to them not being emotionally ready to deal with contact, inappropriate behaviour from birth relatives, and the unmediated nature of virtual contact. However, virtual contact had benefits for some families such as fulfilling adoptee identity and curiosity needs, the family-like nature of virtual contact, extending existing relationships with birth relatives, providing normality and reality to a child's dual

connection, and the convenience of technology. I discussed the benefits and risks of traditional methods of openness in the literature review. When comparing the two methods of openness, similarities and differences become apparent. It seems that although technological practices present additional risks, such as the unmediated nature of the contact, they also provide answers to some of the challenges of traditional methods including providing more 'family-like' contact (Jones & Hackett, 2012). Therefore the expanded 'spectrum' of openness that exists with the addition of technological open practices provides more choice that could help some families overcome some of the challenges of openness. However, one of the most complex tasks facing adoptive families is the responsibility they hold to come to terms with, and help their adopted child come to terms with, the connection they have with the birth family (Von Korff et al., 2010). This complex task still remains and openness continues to present challenges to the adoptive kinship network.

9.2.2 Virtual contact

Due to the current lack of empirical data regarding the emergence of virtual contact, the only research available to compare the quantitative findings of this study to is Whitesel and Howard's (2013) survey in the USA. However, this does have several limitations when comparing to this UK sample as outlined earlier. Despite this, it is possible to make some comparisons between the main findings of this study to those of Whitesel and Howard, suggesting some commonalities between the US and UK samples. The extent to which virtual contact featured in each sample was similar, with 9% in this study and 11% in the US sample. The link between direct contact and virtual contact in this study was also mirrored in the USA. A common practice that emerged in this study was adoptive parent online searches for birth relatives. Whitesel and Howard (2013) also found that some adoptive parents tried to find birth relatives when contact had ceased. The shift in control from adopter to adoptee that was highlighted through virtual contact experiences in this study was also emanated in Whitesel and Howard's (2013) study, with 54% of adoptive parents allowing the virtual contact to continue. However, most revealed some reservations suggesting the interplay of risk and opportunity that was evident in the UK sample. Finally, the small proportion of virtual contact respondents that were satisfied with support services in the UK sample, suggests that support was lacking or may not even be available. Whitesel and Howard (2013) reported that only 34% of professionals had received training about the Internet and adoption in their study. The current practice and empirical

knowledge needs to develop if families are to be protected from risk and supported to utilise the opportunities available through communicative technologies.

MacDonald and McSherry (2013) highlighted the notion of "constrained parenthood", whereby adoptive parents face a paradox of their child possessing the digital, but the not the emotional, skills to reconnect, making it difficult for parents to provide support. This was certainly true for some parents who felt powerless over the maintenance of virtual contact. However, most families were able to develop successful family management techniques. Neil, Beek and Ward (2013) highlighted the positive and negative aspects of technology to fulfil needs of information, communication or reunification. Neil, Beek and Ward (2013) suggest that the experience of virtual contact is mediated by the purpose of the contact itself and lessons can be learned from knowledge we already have about traditional practices. Positive experiences can develop from existing contact and established relationships with birth relatives and more mixed experiences are linked to virtual contact that is used to fill a gap due to a lack of ongoing contact (Neil et al., 2013). I extended this discussion through the comparison of two virtual contact cases in this study. The factors identified that mediate the positive or negative experience of virtual contact mirror those factors that also mediate traditional methods of contact. This study has also incorporated traditional and technological practices into an updated spectrum of openness (Figure 4) that includes the factors that influence its successful maintenance.

Risk and opportunity in relation to virtual contact have been defined in terms of content, contact, and conduct (Byron, 2008). These three elements of online behaviour are discussed in relation to the risk they can cause in the Byron Review (2008) of online safety. However, the data suggest that these terms can create benefits and challenges for adopted children and their families. Positively, virtual contact can provide the adopted child with information about their past to help to answer their identity questions in the form of *content*. This method can also reunite the child with birth relatives who are important to them through virtual *contact*. The supportive *conduct* of birth relatives can lead to long-term relationships. However, as the majority of cases in this study demonstrate, virtual contact can lead to negative experiences with risks for the adopted child. For example, the child may be exposed to damaging *content* about their birth history. The *contact* that they make to birth relatives may be unwelcome and they may face a second rejection. Finally, the *conduct* of birth relatives may be inappropriate.

The psychological characteristics of adoptive parents can also influence their levels of stress. The reflective functioning of parents interacts with the degrees of stress in relation to post-adoption contact. As Neil (2003: 9-10) argues:

> "If post-adoption contact meetings introduce a significant source of stress for adopters, e.g., by undermining their feelings of closeness with their child, this may make it harder for them to take the perspective of the child or birth relative. Alternatively, if contact can be reflected upon in ways that serve to reduce feelings of insecurity, it may increase empathy for others…[and] contact can improve adoptive parents' understanding of the child's needs and the birth relative's perspective".

This relationship was also discovered through the analysis of mind-mindedness in this study. Parents who had experienced virtual contact were more able to see their child as an individual and possess more positive views of technology and be more competent online themselves. As the title of this thesis suggests, the main psychological task for adoptive parents through the maintenance of openness is "to find a space in their minds for another mother, father, grandparent or sibling" (Neil et al., 2011: 287). The extent to which the 'other' birth relatives feature in adoptive family life is influenced by the traditional and technological methods of contact that are maintained.

9.2.3 Questioning the suitability of traditional methods of openness

I questioned the suitability of traditional open practices in the literature review due to the debate that still surrounds them. The 'complex dance' (Grotevant et al., 2005: 182) that is involved in the maintenance of post-adoption contact creates challenges for the adoption kinship network. The challenges are particularly evident when considering the ability of current methods to meet the purpose of acknowledging and sustaining the adoptee's dual connection. The nature of post-adoption contact often means that it is fairly infrequent, creating a lack of family intimacy on a day-to-day basis and a lack of current information and knowledge about birth relatives (Jones & Hackett, 2012: 291). I argued that virtual contact could help to normalise birth family relationships and add an everyday element to contact. The findings confirm that this is true as virtual contact had benefits for some families such as fulfilling adoptee identity and curiosity needs, the family-like nature of virtual contact, and providing normality and reality to a child's dual connection to two families.

Schofield and Beek (2006) argue that adopted children need to maintain a connection to their birth family but also be able to belong in the adoptive family. However, adoptive identity issues can arise due to the disconnection from birth relatives and potential lack of background information (Hoopes, 1990; Grotevant, 1997). Technological media, such as social networking sites, could offer the adopted adolescent a tool to find information, explore ones identity, and potentially regain a connection to birth relatives online. Technology can also offer 'communicative choices' to adopted young people and the ability to be in control of their communication (Livingstone, 2009). Adoptees may need to feel in control due to their past experiences, where the use of communicative technology to make virtual contact with birth relatives may allow this (Morrison, 2012). Finally, technological open practices allow adoptees to set parameters in ways that feel protective and control a 'connection with distance' (Whitesel & Howard, 2013: 27). However the unmediated nature of virtual contact and the search that precedes the contact can cause problems. With reference to traditional methods of search and reunion, most adoptees in Howe and Feast's (2000: 188) study valued the counselling offered as "each stage of the search process can throw up practical and psychological difficulties". Therefore, technological and traditional methods of openness carry risks and benefits for the adoptive kinship network. However, Neil, Beek and Ward (2013: 245) argue that:

> "It is important to consider the potential benefits of contact via social networking, and not to allow the debate to become totally driven by fear of risks. Especially for young people of the same generation, contact via social networking may normalise some of the 'strangeness' which can permeate other forms of contact, addressing some of the difficulties that more formal, mediated forms of contact bring with them such as long gaps between exchanges and the lack of 'currency' in terms of the information people have about each other".

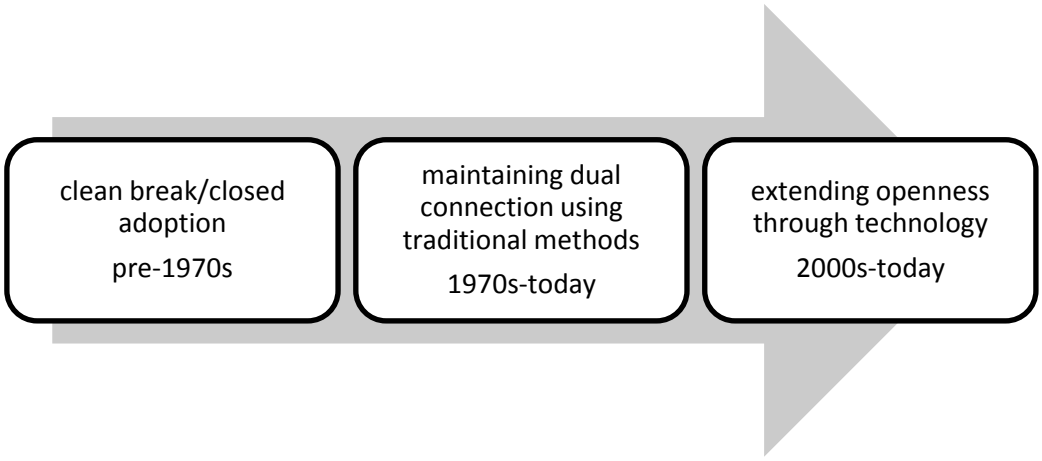
Technological practices could address some of the limitations of traditional methods of openness for some families and their ability to sufficiently maintain the child's dual connection to their birth and adoptive families by offering an alternative method.

Although I argue that the phenomenological meanings underlying openness have remained the same, there are several ways in which technological practices are changing the experience of openness for the adoptive kinship network.

9.3 New theoretical directions and contributions to knowledge

This chapter has outlined the key lessons from the findings of this study, presented a reconceptualisation of openness to integrate traditional and technological practices, and situated the findings within the context of the field. It has become clear that virtual contact and other technological practices exist along the continuum or spectrum of openness that is already established in the field of adoption. Figure 5 presents a visual representation of the way in which the spectrum of openness has developed in practice.

Figure 5: Shifting Openness



Over the past three decades, adoption has witnessed a shift from an ideological approach of a 'clean break' of the child from their birth to adoptive families, to an approach of openness and maintaining the link between the two families. This is still a relatively new development and one that is still debated and contested in research and practice. The emergence of technological practices has extended the practical methods available to adoptive and birth families. However the phenomenological ideas underlying the fundamental shift to openness still remain. Therefore, this diagram represents a shift on the continuum of openness in terms of practical means and also a need to widen the acknowledgement of the meanings of openness for the adoption triad. The following subsections present the new theoretical directions of this study that have stemmed from the experiences of adoptive parents and adoptees and the wider 'spectrum' of open practices, including: family boundaries and relationships, barriers and facilitators to identity

development, control, public to private shift in openness, additional adoptive parenting tasks and the interlinking themes that may mediate the experience of virtual contact.

9.3.1 A Conceptual Model of Technological Openness

The reconceptualisation of openness has described the integration of traditional and technological open practices that now exist in an updated spectrum of openness within adoptive families. I have developed a conceptual model (Figure 6) based on this to consider how technological openness is experienced in practice. This model assesses the extent to which technological practices feature within the family experience of openness in adoptive families in this study. I have focussed on traditional and technological contact methods as survey data suggests that communicative openness is common across the sample.

This model, which stemmed from the analysis of qualitative virtual contact cases in this study, suggests that the integration of technological and traditional open practices can occur across a range of categories. However, the extent to which the practices overlap and become part of the ongoing experience of openness varies. The model features four categories describing the level of integration of technology in the maintenance of openness within the adoptive kinship network.

Figure 6: Conceptual model of technological openness

	Low technological openness	*High technological openness*
Low traditional structural openness	1) MINIMAL OPENNESS Searching online No/minimal traditional contact	3) TECHNOLOGICALLY FACILITATED OPENNESS Searching online Unexpected incidences of virtual contact
High traditional structural openness	2) TRADITIONALLY FACILITATED OPENNESS Searching online Frequent, ongoing traditional contact	4) INTEGRATED OPENNESS Frequent, ongoing traditional and technological contact (which can include online searching and virtual contact)

The extent to which the integration of traditional and technological openness is occurring within this sample will now be considered by situating the adoptive families within the

conceptual model. The families who took part in interviews and have experienced virtual contact were situated within the model based on their responses at the time of interview. The eleven virtual contact families fell into the categories as follows (each family has been placed in a category using their family number as stated in Appendix F):

1. Minimal openness = no families
2. Traditionally facilitated openness = 18
3. Technologically facilitated openness = 14, 17, 19, 20, 21
4. Integrated openness = 11, 12, 13, 15, 16

In some families, the impact of virtual contact had replaced the use of traditional methods which led to '*technologically facilitated openness'*. All families who were in this category described the virtual contact as a negative experience due to the risks and challenges presented. The fact that traditional methods had ceased was often due to the risks that would be involved in continuing it or because the adopted child and birth relatives had taken control of contact technologically. Those families in the '*integrated openness*' category described positive or mixed experiences of virtual contact. The integration of technological and traditional methods worked well when an agreement had been reached regarding the level and methods of openness. This led to more positive, natural, and family-like connections and was linked to the factors that made virtual contact a positive experience. There was an exception with family 12 where the integration of traditional and technological methods had a negative impact, with the adopted child returning to care. The virtual contact occurred following the disruption of the adoption, therefore this case is different to other family situations in this sample. Family 18 were placed in the '*traditionally facilitated openness'* category as their experience of virtual contact was an isolated incident and they continue to use traditional methods. There were no families who fell into the '*minimal openness'* category amongst the virtual contact cases. However, this was included to highlight that online searching can occur across all levels of openness. Parent online searching occurred across the conceptual categories and was therefore not dependent on the method of contact used. The maintenance of openness can also fluctuate between categories over time. However, overall it can be inferred that virtual contact works well when it is successfully integrated with the maintenance of traditional methods (usually direct methods). This provides a relational basis for contact with virtual and face-to-face connections, rather than unexpected virtual contact without prior connections.

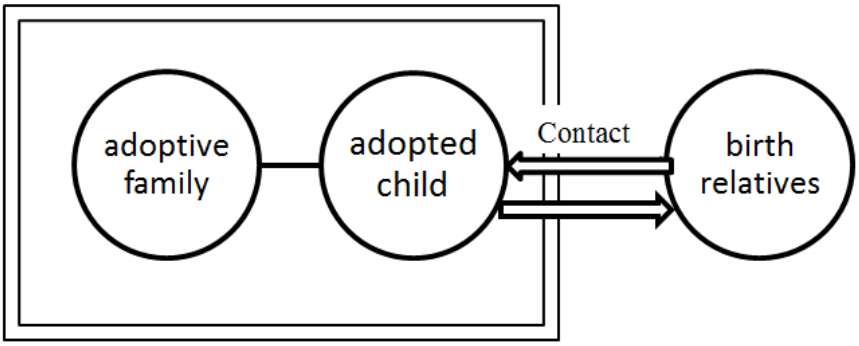
Ultimately the impact of traditional and technological methods will be influenced by individual and family factors that make contact a risky or opportunistic development.

The sections that follow discuss the potential meanings that varying levels of integration of traditional and technological methods of contact can hold for the adoptive kinship network.

9.3.2 Family Boundaries and Relationships

The findings suggest that technological open practices change the family boundaries and relationships within the adoptive kinship network. Figure 7 represents the boundaries and relationships that are facilitated through traditional open practices. Due to the mediated and often formal nature of traditional methods of openness, families are connected but remain separate through boundaries and emotional distance regulation (Grotevant, 2009). The methods of openness often do not facilitate the development of 'family-like' relationships and closeness (Jones & Hackett, 2012). This is due to the boundary that exists around the adoptive family, with birth relative presence within this boundary varying due to the level of contact that exists.

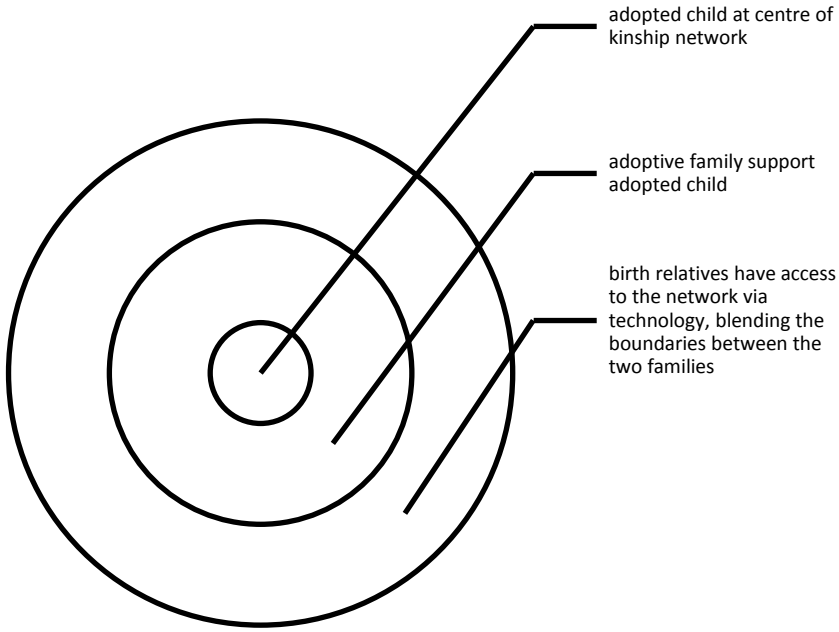
Figure 7: Family Boundaries & Relationships Facilitated through Traditional Methods of Openness



Technological open practices can 'blend' the boundaries between the adoptive and birth families of the adoptive kinship network. Virtual contact is incorporated into existing online networks and is therefore not separated or formalised through distinct 'unfamily-like' contact (Jones & Hackett, 2012). In positive cases this can facilitate the development of more 'family-like' relationships and a closer family connection. However, in negative cases this can result in unmediated contact between the adoptee and birth relatives that can be damaging. Figure 8 below illustrates the 'blending' of adoptive kinship boundaries which, it is important to remember, can have positive and negative consequences. As Feast

and Philpot (2003) argued in the relation to traditional forms of search and reunion, managing new relationships can be difficult. Therefore, even in positive virtual contact cases, the blending of family boundaries through technology will require complex emotional distance regulation to ensure a comfort zone is achieved for all members of the adoptive kinship network. Howe and Feast (2000) describe the search as a process which is not static and often involves ongoing negotiation and adjustment. Where virtual contact has developed from existing openness with the birth family, this may be an easier task. This is suggested in this study as families who already had contact before virtual contact occurred generally had a positive experience due to the existence of established relationships.

Figure 8: Blending Family Boundaries and Relationships through Technological Open Practices



It can be argued that the blending of adoptive kinship network boundaries through technology has shifted the definition of the practices of structural openness from 'contact' to 'access'. Smith and Logan (2004: 6) stated that contact cannot be thought of as the same as 'access' and is often mediated. However technological open practices are changing the extent of structural openness from mediated contact to access. This idea will discussed further in relation to the 'public to private shift in openness', however here the concept of 'access' is highlighted as a resulting factor of the blending of boundaries through technology. Again, 'access' between the adopted child and their birth relatives can have positive and negative consequences. The unmediated nature of the virtual 'access' requires support whether risks are present or not. As highlighted with reference to traditional

methods of search and reunion, most adoptees in Howe and Feast's (2000: 188) study valued the counselling offered as "each stage of the search process can throw up practical and psychological difficulties".

Despite the potential blending of boundaries, it is apparent in this study that the act of searching is more common than reciprocal virtual contact. This suggests that most adoptive kinship network members are able to respect the boundaries developed and not intrude in one another's lives directly, even where technological 'access' is available. Adoptive and birth families seem able to manage, utilise and respond to the use of the Internet and social media in their families, contrary to the belief that virtual contact is a negative development (Whitesel & Howard, 2013).

9.3.3 Barriers and facilitators to identity development

Figures vary in relation to the proportion of adoptees and birth relatives who will search and reunite through traditional methods. Brodzinsky et al. (1992) suggested that only 30-40% of adoptees will actually physically search for birth relatives, despite all adoptees undergoing an intrapsychic search in relation to their curiosity about why they were adopted and fulfilling their sense of identity. Grotevant and Von Korff (2011) argued that barriers and facilitators to information will influence the identity development of an adoptee, and ultimately the decision to search. The action taken to fulfil curiosity is based on the individual's perception of the information gap and the ability to obtain the information. Therefore "the removal of barriers to information may allow the adopted person to focus on the information gap leading to action" (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009: 221). The emergence of technological open practices may allow certain adopted adolescents to act upon their curiosity and to fill their information gaps, in ways not previously available through traditional methods. Therefore, we may see an increase in the amount of search and reunion behaviour due to the availability of technology. However, it is important to remember that just because the methods are available to search it does not mean that it will be successful. The Internet enables searching but it does not guarantee it will be successful due to, lack of information, common names, or individual privacy settings (Whitesel & Howard, 2013). The emergence of technological methods will facilitate the search of those who may have been put off by formalised routes. However, there will still be a proportion of adoptees and birth relatives who do not want to search and reunite. This study highlighted that adoptees were able to differentiate between birth relatives that they wanted

contact with, normally siblings, and those that they did not. Therefore, technological open practices still require careful preparation, planning, and support.

9.3.4 Control

A key distinction in the experiences of traditional and technologically mediated methods of contact and openness expressed by adoptive parents is in the level of control and power held by adoptive family members, and in particular the adoptee. Figure 9 highlights the relationship between contact method and the level of family control held.

Figure 9: The level of control held by the adoptive family depending on the contact method used

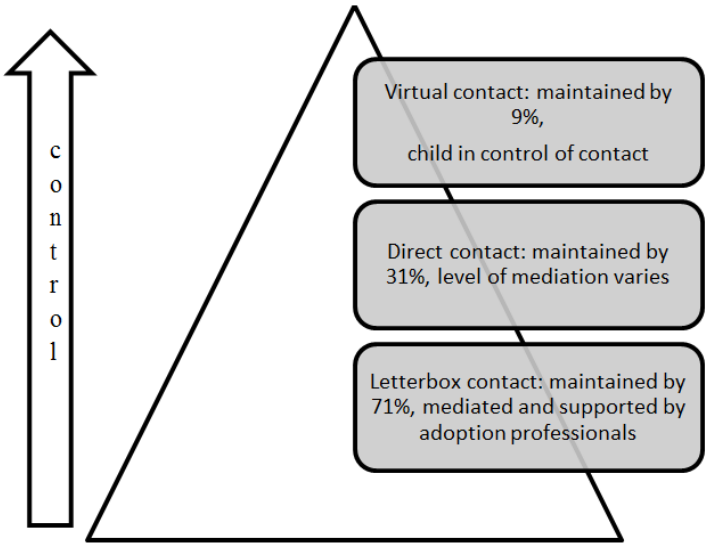


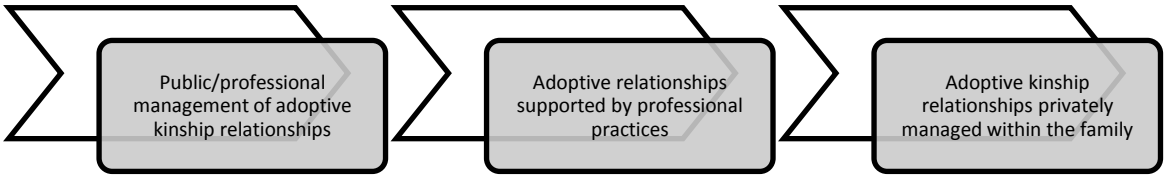
Figure 9 represents the proportion of the sample that maintained the different contact methods and highlights the dominance of letterbox which is the most mediated method. The smallest number of the sample maintained virtual contact which led to the highest level of control. *Traditional contact* experiences were described as the adoptive parent(s) and/or the state holding the control. However, this tended to be thought of as being in the best interests of the child, with the child often consulted about their opinions and needs. Birth relatives did not seem to hold much (if any) power in these situations. Child control was described as increasing with age, but with adoptive parents hoping to still be involved. *Technological methods* of contact were often perceived in a negative way by adoptive parents who had not experienced virtual contact, with a lack of adult control (being adoptive parents and/or the state) being described as a key reason for this. These methods of contact were thought to remove control from the adoptive parent and the state to the child and birth relatives. Adoptive parents did try to maintain control through searching

online themselves and through e-safety techniques. However, some adoptive parents who had experienced virtual contact could see the positives of their child gaining control over their contact arrangements. Some also valued the in-family management of contact rather than state intervention, which was particularly felt by adoptees. For the adoptee, fully disclosed adoptions, which can now include an integration of traditional and technological methods, allow direct access to birth relatives and their birth family history and an increased sense of power by not being dependent on an agency or adoptive parents for information (Henney & Onken, 1998). This change in control is linked to the shift from the public to private management of openness with technological open practices.

9.3.5 Public to private shift in openness

As I have outlined, the unmediated nature of virtual contact can have positive and negative consequences. As can the shift technology creates from the publicly managed nature of traditional contact to the private nature of virtual contact. The publicly mediated nature of post-adoption contact often means that it is fairly infrequent, creating a lack of family intimacy on a day-to-day basis and a lack of current information and knowledge about birth relatives (Jones & Hackett, 2012: 291). Technological practices allow for the blending of contact with birth relatives into existing communicative practices with family members, rather than formalised practices that can be 'strange' (Cossar & Neil, 2013). Figure 10 represents the shift from formalised, professional methods of contact to practices that are managed within the adoptive family.

Figure 10: The shift from the publicly mediated nature of traditional contact to privately managed technological methods



Technology facilitates family practices of openness in comparison to the professional practices of traditional openness (Jones et al., 2010). Family practices of openness

traditionally require adoptive parents to facilitate open conversations with their adopted child. Technology now extends the private family practices to include the maintenance of contact with birth relatives. Professional intervention and mediation must be proportionate to the risk posed by the birth family, to reduce unnecessary restrictions on family relationships (Jones & Hackett, 2012). Therefore due to the benefits of virtual contact for some families in this study, adoptive kinship networks may be given the choice to be able to manage their dual connection privately through technology. Traditional practices of openness can also be managed privately, although professional mediation is more likely. However, with the private mediation of virtual contact comes additional responsibility on behalf of the adoptive parents.

9.3.6 Additional adoptive parenting tasks

The findings suggest that there are certain protective factors that strengthen adoptive parent and child relationships and reduce parenting stress. This is particularly important for the maintenance of successful contact (Neil et al., 2011). Technological open practices have introduced additional parenting tasks for adopters. The importance of parent-child relationships has been highlighted through this study. Parent-child interactions and relationships are an important factor in the success of family life. One factor of the relationships between parents and their children that has been found to be protective is the way in which parents perceive and represent their child through mind-mindedness. In relation to the experience of virtual contact, in the parents whose children are old enough officially to have Facebook accounts, mind-mindedness is positively related to a more positive attitude towards virtual contact and more competent Internet use. These findings suggest that parents whose children are of an age to use social networking sites are more attuned to their child's Internet use.

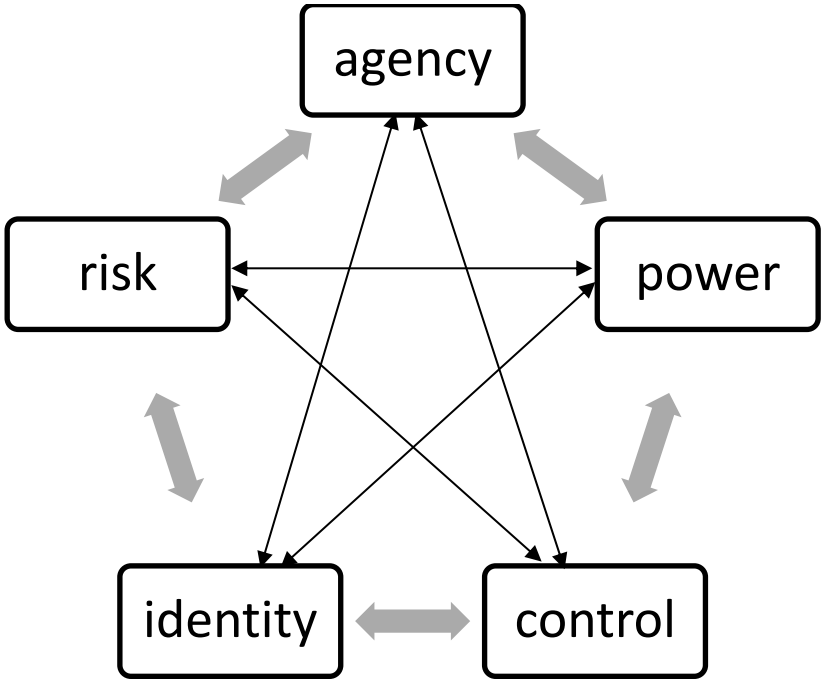
Adoptive mothers made up the majority of the sample in this study. Despite the fact that additional family perspectives may have added to the research, the views of adoptive mothers are important due to the fact that they are considered to be 'kin keepers' within the adoptive kinship network (Grotevant, 2009). Therefore the tasks involved in the maintenance of openness may often fall on the adoptive mother's shoulders. She may now have to maintain traditional and technological open practices within the new 'spectrum' of open practices, which may be difficult due to the additional challenges and vulnerabilities of adoptive families in relation to technology. Therefore the factors that were suggested to

influence the positive or negative experience of virtual contact must be considered alongside the participant support recommendations.

9.3.7 Interlinking factors mediating the experience of virtual contact

Through the analysis of the qualitative data, key themes emerged that seem to mediate the way in which virtual contact is experienced: agency, power, control, identity, and risk. Figure 11 illustrates the complex interactions between these key themes and demonstrates that although the themes hold individual significance, they are interlinked.

Figure 11: The interaction between agency/power/control, identity and risk through the experience of virtual contact



During adolescence adoptees grapple with identity questions surrounding their own individuality and their adoption history. Part of this identity journey involves developing a sense of ***agency*** and independence and utilising this to answer questions and fill information gaps (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009) in their adoption life history. Some adoptees will decide to utilise their agency to search for information and birth relatives, with the potential for them to now do this online. Internet resources facilitate the search activity and give teenage adoptees the ***power*** to search at a younger age than the formal search and reunion processes allow. Despite the fact that adoptees can now use the Internet to have more power over their adoption identity journey, the support of adoptive parents will still

be important. Through more traditional methods of searching for adoptees aged 18 years and above, the support of their adoptive parents has been highlighted as important (Feast & Philpot, 2003). Therefore parental support for younger teenagers will be even more important. However, the level of support needed will vary depending on the needs of the adoptee. For example some will want to take full ***control*** of the search process and others will not. This was highlighted in research surrounding traditional methods of search and reunion (Feast & Philpot, 2003) and was something that emerged in this research. Virtual contact worked better when adoptive parents still maintained a level of control and inclusion in the contact. Fear and negativity of adoptive parents to the search process has previously been linked to their perceived lack of control (Triseliotis et al., 2005). Therefore a shared sense control amongst all adoptive kinship network stakeholders may lead to a more positive experience of virtual contact for all. However, the way in which virtual contact is experienced will also depend on the renegotiation of the boundaries of the kinship network, and depending on the level of control the adoptee has over the virtual contact situation, may involve young people managing new relationships between their birth and adoptive families. However, the extent for relationships to develop will be dependent upon the ***identity*** needs of individual searchers. Finding information online may not be enough for some searchers and contact may ensue, as is the case in traditional methods of search and reunion (Smith & Logan, 2004). Therefore the identity needs and the reasons for the search will mediate whether virtual contact occurs and is ongoing. If virtual contact is ongoing the complex renegotiation of relationships via online platforms may create ***risks*** for some. Pacheco and Eme (1993) highlighted that negative outcomes of search and reunion processes can occur when stakeholders have unrealistic expectations of the reunion. In addition they found that adoptees are more likely to be dissatisfied with reunions if this occurs due to 'out of the blue' contact from birth relatives. These risks still hold true for online reunions and are tied to the renegotiation of complex family relationships through traditional and technological methods of contact. In particular the latter risk can be linked to the importance of the adoptee feeling in control of the virtual contact in order for this to be positive. However, this alone will not lead to positive outcomes as it is necessary for the adoptee to be appropriately supported, for the contact itself to be positive and for positive relationships to develop. The relationship between the key themes points to the complex scaffold that is needed to hold up successful virtual contact. This scaffold needs to contain the following elements: support, communal expectations, positive relationships and shared control.

9.4 Evaluating my contribution to the field

This chapter has outlined the empirical and theoretical contributions of the findings of this study to the existing field of openness in adoption. The key message of the findings is the importance of integrating traditional and technological practices into theoretical and practice understandings of openness and the maintenance of post-adoption relationships in order to reflect the experiences of adoptive families today. Traditional and technological practices present risks and opportunities for the adoptive kinship network. This study has added to the limited knowledge of the risks and benefits of both sets of practices and situated this in the existing context of the field. Technological methods may present additional tasks for the adoptive family, however the values that underpin openness remain. I identified the gaps in the existing knowledge surrounding virtual contact, and this study addressed some of these disparities. In particular, the factors that influenced the success of virtual contact in this sample have been identified. My philosophical position has led to an in depth analysis of the experience of openness in adoptive families today. The online survey of 101 adoptive parents created an understanding of the extent to which communicative technologies are influencing the practice of openness and the family and psychological factors that construct the nature of the experience. The development of statistical measures in the survey allowed for the exploration of issues that directly addressed the research questions; The Satisfaction with Adoptive Family Life Scale, Mind-Mindedness (new coding categories and relating to adoptive families and contact), and the Parental Communicative Technology Score. The interviews with 23 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people uncovered the meanings behind the practices of openness and the key themes and patterns that define virtual contact. The new directions of this study add to the understanding of the ways technology is changing the experiences of openness. The theoretical contributions outlined in this chapter are all underpinned by a central idea of the unmediated and private nature of technological open practices. This provides opportunities for more meaningful contact for some families, but provides additional risks and challenges for others.

The empirical knowledge that has emerged regarding the experiences of virtual contact centres around the studies of Whitesel and Howard (2013) in the USA and Neil, Beek and Ward (2013) in the UK. However, this study is original in the exploration of virtual contact in the UK using quantitative and qualitative accounts, to explore the meanings of this contact whilst situating these in the context of influencing factors. This study also explored

the relationship between traditional and technological practices which provided a rich picture of the 'spectrum' of openness today. However, the limitations of this study that will be discussed in the concluding chapter mean that the arguments presented in this chapter must be considered cautiously.

9.5 Discussion: A reconceptualisation of openness

The overall aim and research problem was to investigate the impact of communicative technologies on the practice of openness in adoptive families and begin to uncover the extent to which virtual contact has become a feature of adoptive family life in the UK. This is in terms of the way in which this practice is framed in adoptive parents' minds and also the way this is experienced within adoptive families. My overall argument states that openness is experiencing a transition from the sole use of traditional methods to the incorporation of technological practices, which results in a range of opportunities and challenges for adoptive families. The emergence of virtual contact is one that must be soundly incorporated into definitions and practices of openness and post-adoption contact, to develop an updated 'spectrum' of openness (Neil et al., 2011). This study has outlined a reconceptualisation of openness to integrate traditional and technological open practices in to one model. As Morrison (2012) argued, the emergence of virtual contact is part of the fundamental shift to openness that began in the mid-1970s (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Therefore, the technological practices of virtual contact and adoptive parent online searching found in this study, and categorised as information seeking, communication, and reunification by Neil et al. (2013), needs to be included in practice definitions of openness. In this way adoption practice can develop responsive and effective support services to utilise the 'window of opportunity' available (Hammond & Cooper, 2013), and to protect vulnerable adopted teenagers (Macaskill, 2002) from the risks of virtual contact, particularly for those with complex care backgrounds in the UK (Department for Education UK, 2013). The lessons we have already learned about openness and contact in adoption to date point to the need to consider a variety of individual, family, and structural factors when planning and sustaining contact for each adopted child to decide whether contact is suitable and in which form (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). The emergence of virtual contact is another factor to consider in the maintenance of a child's dual connection. However, the developing knowledge we have about post-adoption contact more widely can provide a foundation to consider the potential impact of technology on the practice of openness in adoptive family life.

Chapter 10: Conclusions

This chapter begins by reviewing the findings and evaluating the success of this study in answering the research questions. This concluding chapter also considers the implications of the findings for practice. The originality of the research is outlined before considering the strengths and limitations of the study. In light of some of the limitations of this study and building upon the strengths, the areas for future research are suggested. Finally I reflect upon the process of completing this research. This research has explored the impact of communicative technologies on the field of post-adoption contact in the UK. To do this, I carried out a mixed methods study seeking accounts of adoptive family experiences. This allowed for quantitative analysis of the influencing factors that construct these family experiences, and a qualitative thematic and interpretative phenomenological analysis of the underlying meanings attached. Before discussing the contributions and challenges of this study, the research is briefly summarised overleaf in Figure 12. This diagram includes the main findings of this study.

Figure 12: Summary of the Research

Context

- A shift to openness in adoption with a focus on the adoptee's dual connection to birth and adoptive families, communicative openness, and maintaining post-adoption contact.
- The empirical and theoretical debate regarding the risks and benefits of openness is ongoing.
- A growth in the use of communicative technologies by children and young people.
- The emergence of virtual contact is causing concern amongst practitioners. The limited amount of research (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013; Whitesel & Howard, 2013) points to the existence of risks and opportunities.

Research Questions

- How common is virtual contact amongst adoptive families and how is virtual contact perceived by adoptive family members?
- What individual factors relate to parent perceptions of virtual contact?
- How is technology changing the open practices in adoptive families?
- How is virtual contact experienced by adoptive parents and adopted young people?
- Does adoption practice need to change to respond to the impact of technology?

Methodology

With a constructivist focus, the research has considered the influence of internal and external structures and factors on individual experiences through quantitative data. In addition the interpretive and thematic meanings behind these experiences were discussed through qualitative accounts. I used a mixed methods approach to answer the research questions that emerged from the literature review, carrying out an online survey of 101 adoptive parents and interviews with 23 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people.

Main findings

- Complexities exist in the maintenance of traditional contact methods. However they remain an important feature of openness.
- Communicative technologies have created new open practices; a large proportion of adoptive parents had searched online for birth relatives (63%) and a minority of families had experienced virtual contact (9%).
- Adopted children contribute to contact more when it is maintained through technological methods, suggesting a shift in control from parent to child.
- Communicative technology could facilitate the development of adoptee identity due to the ability to search.
- Parental psychological characteristics can act as protective factors in the occurrence of virtual contact, including communicative openness, a positive and supportive attitude to technology, and possessing mind-mindedness.
- Risks associated with virtual contact included: a negative impact of the child due to them not being emotionally ready to deal with contact, inappropriate behaviour from birth relatives, and the unmediated nature of virtual contact.
- Benefits associated with virtual contact included: fulfilling adoptee identity and curiosity needs, the family-like nature of virtual contact, extending existing relationships with birth relatives, providing normality and reality to a child's dual connection, and the convenience of technology.
- Family management techniques had developed surrounding virtual contact, including the adoptee managing the virtual contact independently and the adoptive parent being included in online networks.
- Factors associated with positive virtual contact experiences included: the positive adjustment of the adopted children, the presence of existing birth family connections, positive adult relationships, the involvement of 'non-threatening' birth relatives, the support of adoptive parents, and the positive nature of the relationship with birth relatives through virtual contact.
- Within the conceptual model of technological openness, virtual contact was a more positive experience if it was integrated with traditional methods of contact.
- Virtual contact blends the boundaries between the adoptive and birth families and results in contact that is more akin to access due to the unmediated nature of its occurrence. This can have risks and benefits for the adoptive family.
- Technological methods create a shift from the public to the private family management of contact.
- Knowledge surrounding traditional methods of contact can lay foundations for the successful management of emerging technological practices.

Argument

My overall argument states that openness is experiencing a transition from the sole use of traditional methods to the incorporation of technological practices, which results in a range of opportunities and challenges for adoptive families. There is no suggestion that virtual contact and other technological practices are replacing more traditional forms of openness. Therefore, a reconceptualisation of what 'openness' means for adoptive families today is offered, creating a new spectrum of 'open practices'. Conclusions are drawn that suggest that although technology presents new tasks for the adoptive kinship network, traditional practices are still maintained and the phenomenological meanings behind openness remain.

10.1 Implications for practice

A key practice message to emerge from this research with regards to the management of virtual contact is the utilisation of existing knowledge regarding the benefits and weaknesses of direct and indirect methods of contact for the adoptive kinship network. The factors that emerged as influencing the positive or negative experience of virtual contact mirrored those discovered in previous research surrounding traditional methods of contact (Neil et al, 2011). Therefore, although advances in communicative technologies have facilitated the development of novel adoption practices related to search and reunion, the meanings behind them have remained the same. Therefore, the relational strengths that uphold successful contact, including communicative openness, positive relationships, empathic and mind-minded parenting qualities, and family support networks, ought to be supported and encouraged from the beginning of placement. This may avoid some unexpected virtual contact due to needs being met, or will ensure the family and individual protective factors are evident to 'scaffold' (Bruner, 1983, cited by Neil, 2003) the child's contact experiences and development.

The current lack of practice and empirical knowledge needs to be addressed if families are to be protected from risk and supported to utilise the opportunities available through communicative technologies. As with wider technology use, it seems that the same technological practice can lead to a negative or positive situation (Livingstone, 2013). For example, an adopted young person taking control of the contact situation and searching for birth relatives on Facebook may result in a positive reunion for one and a traumatic event for another. Certain factors were likely to influence this as mirrored in wider research, including the chaos in the birth relative's life (Neil, 2003), the resolution of psychological challenges for the adoptee (Brodzinsky, 1987) and the online resilience of the adoptee (Livingstone, 2013) and their adoptive parents. Therefore family characteristics that lead to risk or resilience need to be considered. Practice needs to recognise the interplay between risk and opportunity to ensure families are supported, whether that is protecting them against the risks of virtual contact or ensuring virtual contact can be managed effectively and safely (Adams, 2012; Fursland, 2010). As with more traditional forms of contact, virtual contact presents risks and opportunities and will not be suitable for all adopted young people and their families (Neil et al., 2011). Therefore it cannot be assumed that virtual contact is necessarily a positive or negative development. It would be more useful to ask questions such as: what are the risks involved for each family and child? Can virtual

contact be a positive addition to contact for a particular child? Does the family possess sufficient resilience to manage virtual contact? Although a significant minority of adoptive families had experienced virtual contact in this study, the proportion was still fairly small. Therefore virtual contact was not a common feature of this sample. However, as technology develops and communicative styles change alongside this, it is hard to predict how adoption practice will be affected in future years.

The individualised nature of the experience of virtual contact has been illustrated through the use of family case studies throughout this thesis. Neil, Beek and Ward (2013) also highlighted the need for individualised planning of contact in the child's best interests through professional practice, rather than overarching government policies in response to the emergence of virtual contact. The idiographic nature of contact has been recognised by Grotevant et al. (2013). They also suggest that:

> "Because contact arrangements evolve over time, temporary setbacks or disappointments should not discourage families from pursuing new opportunities, nor should well-functioning relationships be taken for granted. Like any relationship, arrangements involving contact require effort and attention" (Grotevant et al., 2013: 197).

Therefore, it is important for practitioners and adoptive families to consider the range of traditional and technological practices that are available under the new 'spectrum' of openness. This will allow contact to evolve over time and provides the opportunity to utilise a variety of practices until an agreement is reached within the adoptive kinship network regarding the family roles, boundaries, and emotional distance.

Certain findings have emerged through this study that could help practitioners to target support services through the identification of key family factors that impact the experience of contact, coming directly from the perspectives of the families who participated. This service-user focus allows practice to develop in response to the needs of the adoptive kinship network. Data highlighted complexities for adoptive families through the maintenance of traditional methods of contact, including letterbox. Therefore, a decade ago, Swanton (2002) may have been right when arguing that letters are not a modern way to communicate. Lessons regarding the most successful way to maintain an adopted child's dual connection, in terms of satisfaction and meeting their needs, may be found in the development of communication in wider society, including technology. There was a

suggestion, however, that adoptive parents were not satisfied with the professional support they received following virtual contact occurrence. Thus, practice should develop to ensure it is equipped to respond to virtual contact effectively and to take a balanced approach between risks and opportunities. Virtual contact will not suitable for all but can work well for some if the protective factors outweigh the risk factors to make this connection a positive experience. The use of case studies in the form of family stories in this thesis could provide a benchmark for the preparation of adoptive families today. Adoptive parents highlighted the value of hearing the stories of other families and learning from the ways in which virtual contact was managed.

It is important to remember that traditional methods remain an important part of the maintenance of openness in adoptive families today. This was highlighted by the small proportion of virtual contact incidences. However this may be due to the younger age of children in this sample. An important finding that should be brought to the attention of practitioners is that technology is being utilised as a searching tool by a majority of families as represented by adoptive parents. The use of communicative technologies as a reunion tool by adopted children and birth relatives may have experienced a more tentative development. However, the activities of adoptive parents may not be the focus of practitioner attention due to the paramount importance of child needs. Therefore, support for adoptive parents needs to be in place to ensure the foundations of traditional methods of contact are solid to either buffer the transition to technological methods through existing adoptive and birth family connections, or prevent the shift to technology by meeting needs early through established mediums of contact.

The adoptive parents and adopted young people who participated in this study, provided their own recommendations for the development of support services. Participants focussed on the following areas: guidance for adoptive parents, peer support for parents, openness, work with birth relatives, support following virtual contact, and the adoptee recommendation to slow down reunions. Service-user voices are vital if practice is to develop and respond in a way that effectively supports adoptive families who are utilising technological open practices. I have ensured that service-user voices have been heard locally through the dissemination of reports to participants and the host adoption agencies. Further research into the new directions of this study would ensure that the participant voice is heard further afield.

Overall, the practice responses to the emergence of technological open practices need to recognise that this practice development has become part of the continuum that underpins the ideology behind the major shift from secrecy to openness in adoption since the mid-1970s. Research suggests that adoptees have an enduring need to discover their biological roots and reasons behind their adoption (Triseliotis, 1973), and this should be remembered. The traditional and technological spectrum of open practices presents new tools to fulfil these needs. Practice now needs to respond to the risks and opportunities that this presents.

In summary, this study has uncovered several concrete policy and practice recommendations that should be considered in the development of adoption practice in light of technological changes.

1. <u>The utilisation of existing knowledge surrounding traditional contact methods</u>

The existing knowledge surrounding traditional open practices can lay the foundations for 'good practice' surrounding technological open practices. This study should provide reassurance for social work practitioners, as the skill set they already hold is still appropriate to scaffold and support the developing nature of technological practices of openness. Research findings and practice guidance that highlight the factors that influence the success of traditional contact including communicative openness, parental mind-mindedness (measuring empathy), and inter and intra-familial relationships are still important and the lessons can still be applied.

2. <u>Utilising data to support and train adoption stakeholders</u>

The importance of practice-based evidence was highlighted by Ferguson (2003) in which the voices of service users are used to inform practice. Therefore, in line with this and a participant recommendation of the importance of peer support, the voices of adoptive parents and adoptees in the form of verbatim quotations and family case studies could help to inform practice by utilising everyday experiences of virtual contact. Within the framework of IPA, this allows the lived experiences of virtual contact to be highlighted. In addition, the psychological measure of mind-mindedness could prove a useful assessment mechanism when recruiting adopters. Identifying levels of mind-mindedness in adopters could serve as a useful measure to assess whether adoptive parents are able to consider the needs of their child appropriately and whether they need further support to do so, particularly if new challenges are presented through virtual contact.

3. Building technological practices into research and practice documents

Communicative technologies are a normal part of everyday life and therefore should be built into practice rather than being an 'add on'. Technology will only get more important, therefore it is vital that practice develops in line with this trend. Practice must evolve to ensure that it is equipped to support families to minimise the risks that virtual contact can present. However, social work practice cannot have a solely negative outlook on emerging technological open practices and must also consider the positive addition that technology can bring to the maintenance of openness in the adoptive kinship network. In order to ensure that practice developments are evidence-based, research must consider virtual contact as a key facet of the adoption experience today. As suggested in this research, virtual contact was integrated with traditional forms of contact in some families. The suggestions I have made for future research based on the key findings of this study can provide a starting point in addition to wider research studies that are emerging in this field (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; Neil, Beek & Ward, 2013; Whitesel & Howard, 2013).

4. The need for regular review

The utilisation of technological methods of openness in this study highlights the evolving nature of open practices across the child's life. In all participating adoptive families, the occurrence of virtual contact had added an additional element in the maintenance of the adoptee's dual connection. Even where this was a positive addition, virtual contact was very much a 'live issue' with embedded sensitivities. Therefore, the contact and support needs of the child and their family require regular review. In addition, the knowledge generated in this study regarding the success of *integrated openness* when combined traditional and technological methods of openness are used, suggests that the current government policy focussing on the 'presumption of no contact' in the Children & Families Act (2014) may not be helpful. The potential for unmediated virtual contact when the child reaches teenage years seems to be best supported by existing post-adoption contact and ongoing relationships with birth family members. Therefore, where in the best interests of the child, post-adoption contact should be maintained throughout the child's life to ensure the relational factors that support positive virtual contact are evident.

5. Balancing identity needs, safety and control

It has been highlighted that despite virtual contact offering benefits in relation to filling information gaps in an adopted young person's identity and allowing them to take control of this, the sensitivity and changeable nature of this contact mean that the safety of the adopted young person must be closely monitored. This study highlighted the importance of relational factors for the successful integration of traditional and technological methods of contact. Therefore it is important for all members of the adoption triangle to have a share of control over the contact situation to ensure boundaries are maintained and contact is supported by relationships. The notion of *integrated openness* underpinned by this relational basis suggests that virtual contact that is used to extend existing relationships can be more positively supported than virtual contact that is initiated in adolescence to fulfil curiosity and identity needs. Therefore reviewing the contact and information needs of adoptees throughout their life can avoid the risk of adopted young people not being emotionally ready for information that can be provided immediately online as opposed to gradually at appropriate stages of their childhood.

6. One size does not fit all

Through qualitative analysis in this study it became clear that, despite shared perspectives and themes emerging, the experiences of openness are unique, individual and dynamic. For example, although adoptive parent online searching emerged as a common activity, the actions parents took after searching varied. The factors that have been presented as influencing the positive and negative experience of virtual contact could act as a framework to consider those families with the greatest safety concerns. However, perspectives sometimes varied between siblings and adoptive parents and their children even when the overall family case of virtual contact had been coded as positive or negative. Therefore, the individual must always be remembered in any practice intervention and different stakeholder interests considered.

10.2 Originality of research

The originality of this research can simply be stated through its attempt to fill the many gaps in the knowledge that surround the recent emergence of virtual contact. However, this research also covers new ground in other areas outside simply the research topic. There has been little research on virtual contact in adoptive families, and researchers have highlighted the potential benefits and risks of this form of contact. However, previous

research has not paid due consideration to relations between the occurrence of virtual contact and factors such as mediated contact arrangements, family demography, and adoptive parent views on and expertise in communication technology. Moreover, little is known about the prevalence of virtual contact in adoptive families. This study has added originality and contributed to the field in various ways.

First, my findings have added to the limited knowledge of the ways in which communicative technologies are impacting adoption and contact. In particular, placing the emergence of virtual contact at the centre of the research has allowed for a rich exploration of the factors that are related to and construct the experiences of this contact, and the meanings that are attached to it. Not only has this research uncovered statistical knowledge regarding the technological practices that are emerging in adoptive families, it has also situated these practices in the context of wider structural and psychological factors (for example, communicative openness, mind-mindedness, and parenting stress). This has produced knowledge about the ways in which the emergence of technological methods of contact is related to wider aspects of adoptive family life. Although I cannot draw conclusions about cause and effect, the directions for future research that are outlined later in this chapter highlight the key correlates related to the incidence of virtual contact. The measures designed for the survey allowed for a focussed exploration of the relating factors specific to adoptive family life. The thematic analysis supplemented by an in-depth interpretative phenomenological analysis of family experiences has provided an insight into both the positive and negative aspects of communicative technologies in adoption. This has informed service user recommendations for practice and the theoretical directions outlined in the previous chapter. Overall an integrated spectrum of traditional and technological open practices has provided a reconceptualisation of openness to incorporate the changes in the ways in which the adoptive kinship network maintain the child's dual connection that were identified by participants as a result of the growth in the use of communicative technologies.

10.3 Strength and limitations of the study

Research and practice are beginning to catch up with the impact of technological developments on the field of post-adoption contact. However, gaps in knowledge are evident as outlined in the review of literature earlier and the areas for further research signposted throughout this paper. I have attempted to address some of these gaps, in the following ways: exploring the impact of communicative technologies on the experience of

openness, investigating the ways virtual contact is experienced, considering the ways openness may be changing as a result of technological developments and to explore the risks and opportunities of these changes in practice. I was able to gather rich data of the phenomenological and constructing factors that influence the experiences of traditional and technological openness in adoptive families today from the perspectives of adoptive parents and adopted young people. Collaboration with two adoption agencies and an interdisciplinary supervisory team has allowed me to gather multiple data to answer the variety of research questions posed. Studies which include the voices of children adopted from care are limited (Neil, 2012) therefore the adoptee perspectives gained in this study are important to ensure that practice can respond effectively to their needs. The data allowed me to develop a reconceptualisation of openness that inductively developed from these accounts. In order to test the validity of my analysis it would be necessary to cross-validate my findings using further research and additional researcher perspectives. However, my results do provide a pilot framework to take forward into further research and to begin to inform practice about the ways adoptive families experience post-adoption contact.

There are several limitations of this study that mean that further research is necessary. The sampling methods used in this study create a potential for bias that may have influenced the results. For example, the self-selecting nature of the survey sampling method makes generalisability not possible. The data gleaned is from the perspective of adoptive parents and therefore is not representative of wider adoption triad views. And finally, the younger age of adopted children referred to means that technological practices may be different and wider amongst older adopted young people. This study also gathered a sample mainly of children who were adopted from the public care system. The data may therefore not reflect the experiences of other types of adoption, for example, international and infant adoptions. The survey was originally intended as the primary recruitment method to establish the interview sample. There were only a small number of adoptive parents who had experienced virtual contact who decided to take part in an interview following completion of the survey (n=3). This may have been due to the fact that the adoptive parents who had experienced virtual contact were still dealing with 'live issues' as described earlier. Therefore, an additional sampling technique was employed to increase the numbers of interviewees who had experienced virtual contact. The host adoption agency, Scottish Adoption, contacted some of their adoptive parents (n=8) who were known to have experienced virtual contact to take part in an interview. An issue of sampling bias must be

noted as the participants who were recruited via the adoption agency were known to practitioners due to them reporting the virtual contact in their family and asking for support. Therefore their accounts may not be representative of wider families and may represent a more negative picture of virtual contact. I also found it impossible to recruit birth relatives in this sample. The sampling method meant that birth relatives were to be recruited, in the same way as adoptees, via the adoptive parents who acted as gatekeepers to the adoption triangle. However, even in cases where virtual contact was working well, adoptive parents were reluctant to contact birth relatives to inform them of the study in order to not 'rock the boat'. This is also true for adopted young people, as most adoptive parents refused to allow their child to take part in the study either. As noted earlier, the live issues that the families were dealing with were often deemed too sensitive to allow further research intrusion. Therefore additional perspectives of all stakeholders in the adoptive kinship network would add to the findings of this research.

One limitation of this study is the fact that the majority of the data collected is from the perspective of adoptive parents. Not only does this mask the wider the perspectives of the adoptive kinship network, it may also not be an accurate picture of the wider adoptive parent population. Adoptive parents who choose to take part in a study may have a more open and inclusive attitude towards adoption (Neil, 2009). Therefore the findings of this study, whilst uncovering important understandings of the experience of openness in adoptive families, must be interpreted cautiously. The adopted young people who were interviewed were accessed via their adoptive parents who acted as their gatekeepers. Therefore, the findings are based on parental awareness of virtual contact and do not capture any secret contact or information searches online that may be happening between adopted children and their birth relatives. Sachdev (1992) found that 34% of adoptees in their study did not tell their adoptive parents about their search. Therefore it is unclear how complete the picture of openness is that this study presents. Finally, due to the focus on the use of Facebook in the media, practice and within adoptive families themselves, Facebook was chosen as the example. This leads to a note of caution regarding the timeliness of the Facebook reference and an awareness that this may change as technology develops.

In summary, the strength and limitations of this study are outlined below:

Strengths

- Use of mixed methodology to create a detailed account of virtual contact
- Development of measures used in the survey with satisfactory validity
- Adoptive parent and adoptee voices
- In depth accounts of virtual contact
- Practice recommendations

Limitations

- Sensitivity of topic and dealing with live issues
- Self-selecting sample in survey and the purposive sampling of some interview participants could have created bias in the data
- Limited number of adoptees and the absence of birth relative accounts

The data collected as part of this study has provided a valuable insight into the family practices of openness in the age of ubiquitous use of communicative technologies in society. However, in hindsight I think that the data collection process would be improved by a recognition and expectation of the existence of 'live issues' and continuing evolution of openness with adoptive families due to technological open practices. This recognition would encourage the implementation of sampling techniques that ensure the perspectives of all members of the adoptive kinship network are gathered, whilst minimising the intrusion into adoptive family relationships. In particular, I would consider gathering the perspectives of each representative of the adoptive kinship network separately to minimise the level of intrusion within sensitive family relationships. This research has outlined new directions and contributions that require further investigation.

10.4 Areas for future research

Due to the dearth of research currently available surrounding the emergence of virtual contact in adoption, the data emerges into a field with little comparison to refer to. Due to this, several areas needing further exploration with a broader sample are formed as a way to direct future research and begin to inform practice surrounding the emergence of technological open practices:

- Parents are more worried about virtual contact if they have not experienced it and develop a 'fear of the unknown'. This may lead to adoptive parent online searching.

- Older adoptees are more likely to initiate virtual contact themselves.
- Virtual contact does not have a significantly negative impact on adoptive family life and in-family management techniques develop.
- Factors that create a positive experience of virtual contact include: ongoing contact and existing relationships, supportive and empathic adoptive parent, inclusion of adopter in virtual contact, 'non-threatening' birth relatives, positive adjustment of adopted children, secure adoptive family base, and the positive nature of virtual contact itself.
- Factors that create a negative experience of virtual contact include: a lack of existing relationships with birth relatives, lack of support from adoptive parents, exclusion of adopter from virtual contact, 'threatening' birth relatives, additional challenges facing adoptee, breakdown in/difficult adopter-child relationships, and negative nature of virtual contact itself.
- In parents whose children are old enough officially to have Facebook accounts, mind-mindedness is positively related to a more positive attitude towards virtual contact and more competent Internet use. Parents whose children are of an age to use social networking sites are more attuned to their child's Internet use.
- The conceptual model of technological openness suggests that *Integrated Openness* creates conditions for technological methods of contact to work well.

Although the adopted child remains central in the adoptive kinship network, other members also influence and are influenced by open practices (Neil & Howe, 2004, Neil et al., 2011). Therefore, in order to understand the full picture of the experiences of openness today it is necessary to gather birth relative perspectives. The absence of their voice in this study leaves a gap in the findings and practice recommendations. It is also necessary to evaluate the long-term outcomes and impact of virtual contact on the adoptive kinship network and the relationships within it. Therefore the exploration of virtual contact should not only be built into longitudinal research, as Neil, Beek and Ward (2013) have done in the third wave of their 'Contact After Adoption' study, but also become the focus of studies of this type to ensure the dynamic nature of contact and technology is monitored. It is important to note that the findings presented in this thesis are dependent upon the context at the time of the research. Therefore the meanings surrounding the experiences of

virtual contact were constructed by participants based upon the individual and family factors at play at the time of the interview or survey. This further highlights the need to conduct longitudinal research to explore the potentially changeable nature of post-adoption contact, particularly now that technology could speed up changes in openness for individual families.

10.5 Reflections

The final section reflects on the process of this research and considers the main messages the findings have produced.

10.5.1 Challenges faced in research

I faced a number of challenges related to the research process. Initially the process of recruiting a sample was difficult and challenging. Approaches to local authority agencies were not fruitful and therefore after almost a year, the voluntary agency Scottish Adoption kindly agreed to support the research and help to recruit participants. The interview stage of the research presented difficulties in the recruitment of all members of the adoptive kinship network, through the gatekeepers of adoptive parents. The families were in the process of fragile renegotiations of closeness and boundaries within the network due to the shift to technological open practices. As described earlier, this created sampling challenges due to the evolving nature of this sensitive contact period. Despite this, valuable insights have been gained through adoptive parent and some adopted young people accounts regarding the practice of openness in adoptive families today.

At the beginning of the research process, I planned to carry out a short-term longitudinal study over the course of a year. This would have followed the online survey, with the qualitative data being collected at two points in time. The first semi-structured interviews were planned to take place with adoptive family members who had experienced virtual contact with participants being left with a diary to complete over a 12 month period. The diary would have asked participants to record incidences of virtual contact, how these changed and developed, whether the birth relatives were involved in changes, how relationships developed over time, and how the adoptive family managed this contact. The diaries were then planned to be used as a discussion point for a second interview at the end of 12 months to analyse how virtual contact develops. However, due to the initial problems recruiting a host agency to act as a gatekeeper and support network for the research, there was not scope to carry out the longitudinal aspect of the study due to timing and funding

restrictions. This was disappointing and longitudinal data is important for future research to ensure virtual contact is monitored over time to make timely practice recommendations that are regularly reviewed and updated in line with developing technological open practices. Despite this, the semi-structured interviews were able to gather rich data from adoptive parents and adopted young people regarding their experiences of virtual contact. However, caution must be paid regarding the timeliness of participant experiences that represent the subjective meanings recorded at the time of the interview.

10.5.2 Reflexivity

It is necessary to be aware of and consider my position as a researcher and the influence this may have had on the research process. I certainly felt a vested interest in the families that participated in the research due to the sensitivity of the topics discussed and how open families were with their personal stories. I therefore felt responsible to ensure their stories were accurately reflected in the way that they were told. However, I was also responsible as an academic researcher to critically consider the hidden meanings behind family stories and draw upon some of the 'messiness' in their accounts. In order to strike a balance I have ensured that both participant voices have remained through heavy use of verbatim quotations and family case studies, whilst considering some of the hidden complexities and speculating on future possibilities.

In addition to the participants, I also felt a responsibility to the host agencies that have worked closely with me throughout the research project. Despite the fact that they have supported my decisions as a researcher and generously allowed the freedom for me to carry out the research in my way, I personally felt responsible to them and have tried to produce research that is both academically and practically valuable. Therefore, I have ensured that the analysis focussed on academic integrity but allowed for practice recommendations to be made.

Finally, I joined this project on a Durham Doctoral Studentship which meant that the outline and overall research aims were already designed in the form of a funding bid. I used this outline to implement the exploration of the research topic. Whilst informed by the research topic, I defined the research questions, created the design of the research, and performed rigorous data collection and analysis strategies. Despite the potential biases outlined in this reflexive section, the research design that was employed was successful in collecting valuable data and allowing in depth analysis.

10.5.3 Overall conclusion

Openness has gradually permeated adoption practice since the 1970s to become entrenched in adoptive family life today. However, the family practices and tasks that are behind the ideological concept of 'openness' are still shifting and developing. The debate continues surrounding the risks and benefits of openness for the adoptive kinship network relating to more traditional methods of contact. Therefore, with an embryonic evidence base surrounding virtual contact, it is still unclear how this development will impact adoptive families in the long term. This study has shed some light on the structural factors and private practices that influence openness in family life, both traditionally and technologically, and begun to consider the meanings behind these tasks. Although, practically, openness is shifting to incorporate technological methods, ideologically openness embodies the same individual, family, and adoptive kinship network values and meanings. Therefore the messages we have already learnt from empirical investigation into traditional methods, including the importance of communicative openness, the identity needs of adoptees, positive adoptive-parent child relationships, and adoptive parent empathy for the success of openness, can be used to predict the outcomes of virtual contact cases. In addition the lessons learned from the findings of this study add to the knowledge base to inform future research and practice including: the parent and adoptee perceptions of virtual contact, the importance of parental mind-mindedness, the family meanings of traditional and technological open practices, the factors that influence the positive or negative experience of virtual contact, and the reconceptualisation of openness to incorporate these recent developments. The existence of strong and meaningful relationships, both within the adoptive family and between the adoptive and birth family, is vital as the basis of successful long-term dual connection. Although the limitations of this study and the small empirical knowledge base surrounding virtual contact make it difficult to draw concrete conclusions, we are beginning to understand how technology is influencing adoptive family life. As with traditional methods of openness, technological practices present both risks and opportunities for the adoptive kinship network and therefore the value, design, and longevity of openness should be considered on a case-by-case basis. The family stories contained in this thesis illustrate the unique experiences of adoptive families and paint a picture of openness in adoption today. Forty years on since openness emerged in adoption, we are still learning about the impact of this on the adoptive kinship network. Therefore the dynamic nature of open practices will continue to challenge researchers and practitioners. In particular the changing nature of technology

presents an uncertain future for the maintenance of relationships. However, the importance of the child's dual connection to two families will persist and knowledge of this aspect of adoptive family life can help to inform the maintenance of open practices that develop in the future.

Appendices

Appendix A: Online Survey

Appendix B: Mind-mindedness coding

Appendix C: Interview information sheet for adoptive parents

Appendix D: Interview questions for adoptive parents

Appendix E: Information sheet and interview questions for adopted young person

Appendix F: Interview participant profiles

Appendix A: Online Survey (Bristol Online Surveys)

Information for participants

Dear adoptive parent,

You are being invited to complete this survey as part of a research study being carried out at Durham University. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. Participation does not affect any services you may receive. Please take time to read the following information to decide if you would like to take part.

This study is concerned with supporting family relationships following adoption. We would like you to help us understand how post-adoption contact arrangements affect adoptive family life. We are interested in exploring the range of contact methods used by adoptive families, including letterbox/information exchange, face-to-face and technology.

By gathering information from adoptive families, it is hoped that this project can provide practice and policy recommendations about the best ways to support family relationships.

If you decide to take part, your results will remain completely confidential and anonymous. Your results will form part of a larger bank of data and will be used in a doctoral dissertation to be submitted at Durham University. It is also possible that the data will be used in journal publications and conferences outside the University. It will be impossible to identify individuals and their responses from the data presented in these pieces of work.

If you if have any questions, please contact me (s.k.greenhow@durham.ac.uk) or my academic supervisor (christine.jones@durham.ac.uk).

By continuing on to the next page it will be taken that you have given your consent to take part in the survey and understand all the information given.

Thank you for your time!

Sarah Greenhow (researcher)

Welcome and Instructions

Thank you for deciding to complete this survey!

Your opinions will help us to gain an understanding of post-adoption contact arrangements and their effects on adoptive family relationships and day-to-day life.

The survey is divided into 6 sections: general adoption information, your child, contact arrangements, openness of placement, technology and adoptive family life, and satisfaction with family life.

Part of the survey asks for your views about the use of technology by adopted children, adoptive parents and birth relatives to keep in touch or find out information. This can include (but is not limited to) social networking, emails, texting and video calls. We are interested in adoptive parents' views about this technology and/or any experiences of its use within adoptive families as a form of contact.

The survey should take no longer than *30 minutes* to complete and there are no right or wrong answers. At the end of the survey you will be given the option to take part in further research. Please do consider this so that we can gather a deeper knowledge of the effects of post-adoption contact on family members.

Please follow the instructions given throughout the survey. If you have more than one adopted child please complete the survey relating to your **oldest** adopted child.

Please continue to the main questions.

Where did you hear about us?

1. Where did you find this survey?

- I found the link on the Adoption UK website
- I was contacted directly by Scottish Adoption
- I found the link on the Scottish Adoption website/Facebook page
- Other *(please specify)*:

2. Where do you live?

- Scotland
- England
- Northern Ireland
- Wales
- Other *(please specify)*:

The following set of questions asks for demographic information about your family

3. Your relationship to child

4. Your age

5. Your Occupation

6. Marital Status

- Single
- In a Relationship
- Married
- Divorced
- Separated
- Widowed

7. Number of adopted children

8. Number of biological children

9. Adopted child's date of birth

(DD-MM-YYYY)

10. Adopted child's age at placement (Years and months)

11. The adoption process took (approximately from initial approach of interest to agency to adopted child being placed with you) (years and months)

12. My child entered the care system due to...

(select all that apply)

- Neglect
- Family Stress
- Low Income
- Family Dysfunction
- Parent's Illness/Disability
- Domestic Violence
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Child's Disability
- Absent Parenting
- Socially Unacceptable Behaviour
- Prefer Not To Say
- Other *(please specify)*:

13. Our family accesses the following support services...
(select all that apply)

- Letterbox/information exchange
- Attend Social Events

- [ ] Post-adoption Support (e.g. advice, support, therapeutic services...)
- [ ] Professional Support (e.g. social services, health, education...)
- [ ] Training Events/Seminars for Parents
- [ ] Training Events/Seminars for Adoptees
- [ ] Other *(please specify)*:

14. Please state how much you agree with the following statement

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
a. I am satisfied with the adoption support services I have received since adopting my child	○	○	○	○	○

Your Child

This section asks about your adopted child.

15. Think about your adopted child. Please tell us a little about your child in the box below, writing the first things that come into your head.

There are no right or wrong answers. You are free to write as much or as little as you wish.

Contact Arrangements

The following questions ask about the types and frequency of contact arrangements within your family.

16. How open is your adoption in terms of the amount of contact you have with birth family member(s)?

	Very Closed		Neither closed nor	Open	Very

	Closed		open		Open
a. I would classify the adoption as	○	○	○	○	○

17. Please state how much you agree with the following statement

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
a. My child understands their adoption story	○	○	○	○	○

18. My family has post-adoption contact with my child's birth family

○ Yes, we have contact

○ No, we do not have contact

If *No contact*, please move on to the next section *Openness of placement*

19. The main method(s) of contact we currently use are... (please indicate which birth family member(s) the contact is with and its frequency e.g. annually, twice a year etc.)

	Method	Who with and frequency of contact?
a. Direct (Face-to-face)	☐	
b. Letterbox	☐	
c. Telephone Calls	☐	

d. Email	☐	
e. Social Networking Sites	☐	
f. Texting	☐	
g. Skype/Facetime (Video calls)	☐	
h. Other (please describe opposite)	☐	

20. I share the following information with my child's birth family
(select all that apply)

- ☐ Letters
- ☐ Photographs
- ☐ Cards
- ☐ Gifts
- ☐ Information about your child (e.g. school achievements)
- ☐ Identifying information about your child (e.g. names, addresses)
- ☐ Nothing
- ☐ Other *(please specify)*:

21. My child is currently aware of some or all of the above contact arrangements

Yes No

22. My child currently contributes to some or all of the above contact arrangements

Yes No

If *Yes*, please answer *Question 23.* If *No*, please move on to *Question 24*.

23. If Yes, my child contributes the following in contact arrangements
(select all that apply)

- Writes letters
- Telephones/texts
- Posts on social media sites
- Is present at contact meetings
- Draws pictures
- Sends photographs
- Emails
- Other *(please specify)*:

24. To what extent do you agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
a. I am satisfied with the level of contact					
b. I feel that my child is satisfied with the level of contact					

25. My family engages in contact arrangements because...
(select all that apply)

- The contact arrangements were already agreed before the adoption was finalised

- [ ] It benefits my child and helps to maintain links to their birth family
- [ ] You felt you did not have a choice
- [ ] You felt pressured by the agency
- [ ] You personally feel that it is important to maintain links between your family and the birth family
- [ ] My child asked for contact
- [ ] Prefer not to say
- [ ] Other *(please specify)*:

26. I think my family's contact arrangements should be reviewed...

- ○ Annually
- ○ Every 2-3 years
- ○ Every 3-6 years
- ○ At significant times in my child's life
- ○ Never
- ○ Not sure

Openness of Placement

The following question asks about the connection between your family and the birth family, and how you communicate about this with your child.

27. How much do you agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
a. I talk to my child on a regular basis about his/her adoption	○	○	○	○	○
b. I bring up my child's adoption without them asking about it	○	○	○	○	○

c. My child talks to me about their adoption					
d. My child asks me questions about their adoption					
e. I feel comfortable/happy talking about adoption with my child					
f. My child talks to me about any concerns relating to their adoption					
g. I communicate with my child's birth parents/birth relatives about the adoption					

Technology and Adoptive Family Life

Technology can be used by adoptive parents, adopted children and birth relatives to communicate with one another on the internet or on mobile phones. For example, social networking on sites such as Facebook can be used for this type of activity. The following questions surround your opinions about this use of technology in adoptive family life.

28. Please state how much you agree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
a. I have heard about this type of contact happening within adoptive families					
b. I am worried about this type of contact happening in my family					
c. I am a regular user on sites such as Facebook					
d. I feel competent on sites such as Facebook					
e. My child regularly uses sites such as Facebook					
f. My child is competent on sites such as Facebook					

g. I would feel comfortable with my child having contact through technology with member(s) of their birth family					
h. I think there could be benefits involved with the use of technology as a method of contact					
i. I think there could be risks involved with the use of technology as a method of contact					
j. My child would feel comfortable having contact through technology with member(s) of their birth family					

29. I have looked up my child's birth relative(s) on a site such as Facebook

Yes

No

If Yes, did you find who you were looking for?

Yes

No

i. If Yes, did you follow this up in any way (e.g. by contacting the birth relative(s))?

Yes

No

ii. If Yes, please explain what happened (including technology used if possible)

.....

30. My child has searched for their birth relative(s) on a site such as Facebook

Yes

No

Don't Know

If Yes, did they find who they were looking for?

Yes

No

Don't Know

i. If Yes, did they follow this up in any way (e.g. by contacting the birth relative(s))?

Yes

No

Don't Know

ii. If Yes, please explain what happened (including technology used if possible)

31. Contact through technology (which is the use of social networking sites, such as Facebook, and other forms of mobile technology, such as mobile telephones and instant messaging) between my *adopted child* and their birth relative(s) has happened within our family

Yes

No

If *No* please move on to *Question 42*

32. If Yes, this contact was...

Wanted Unwanted

Expected Unexpected

33. The contact was initiated from...

A birth family member to my child

My child to a birth family member

Please state which birth family member(s) your child is having contact using technology with, and if possible explain a little about what happened (including technology used if possible)

34. The contact...

Is still happening

Was a one-off occurrence

Don't Know

35. When I found out my child had been contacted using technology, I felt...
(select all that apply)

Worried

Unsure of what to do

Scared

Happy for my child

OK

Other *(please specify)*:

36. When my child experienced this contact using technology, they felt...
(select all that apply)

Worried

Unsure of what to do

Did not want to tell you

- [ ] Scared
- [ ] Happy to be in contact with birth relatives
- [ ] OK
- [ ] Other *(please specify)*:

37. When I found out my child had been contacted through technology, my reaction was...
(select all that apply)

- [ ] I banned the contact
- [ ] I banned my child from using the computer/mobile phone
- [ ] I now supervise this contact using technology
- [ ] I spoke to the adoption agency
- [ ] I can see the positives
- [ ] I help my child continue the contact
- [ ] I give my child the freedom to continue the contact
- [ ] Other *(please specify)*:

38. The use of technology as a form of contact has changed the existing contact arrangements in my family

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ N/A

If *Yes* please answer *Question 39*. If *No*, please move on to *Question 40*

39. If Yes, the contact arrangements have changed in the following way (please choose the most appropriate

answer)

- My child now has more of the same contact as described in question 19
- My child now has contact with more members of their birth family
- The amount of contact has now been reduced
- My child is no longer having contact at all
- Don't know

40. Thinking about the following categories, please state whether the experience of technology as a form of contact has impacted *negatively*, *not at all* or *positively* on each within your family

	Negatively	**Not at all**	**Positively**
a. My child's school achievements			
b. My child's relationships with friends			
c. My child's relationship with me			
d. My child's relationship with their birth family			
e. Our overall family life			

41. The following adoption support services (if any) would be useful to help manage the use of technology as a contact method in my family
(select all that apply)

- [ ] Pre-adoption training (using technology)
- [ ] Pre-adoption training (managing contact through technology within my family)
- [ ] Pre-adoption preparation (knowledge about contact through technology)
- [ ] Support for me
- [ ] Support for my child
- [ ] Support for birth relatives
- [ ] None
- [ ] Other *(please specify)*:

42. Do you have any further comments/concerns about the use of technology in adoptive family life?

Satisfaction with Family Life

The following questions ask you about your family's overall satisfaction with adoptive family life.

43. Please state how much you agree or disagree with the following statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	NA
a. I am happy with my family life						
b. I find being a parent stressful						
c. I think parenting an adopted child is more stressful than parenting a biological child						
d. I think parenting an adopted child is more rewarding than parenting a biological child						
e. Our family has experienced stress related to the adoption process (prior to child being placed)						
f. Our family has experienced stress related to the adoption placement (since child was placed)						
g. We overcome problems as a family						
h. I am happy with the support my partner provides						
i. I am happy with the support my friends provide						
j. I am happy with the support my adoption agency provides						
k. Our child has settled within our family						
l. I know what to do if we have any adoption related problems						
m. I have someone to talk to who understands my feelings about adoption						

n. We experience no greater stress than a family with no adopted children would experience						
o. Adoption is everything I hoped it would be						

Thank you for taking time to fill out this questionnaire.

I am looking for families with children aged between 11-18 years who have experienced contact through technology to take part in further research. This will involve face-to-face meetings to discuss this experience of technology in more detail.

I have limited resources so can only invite a small number of families to take part. If you do provide your details I will endeavour to contact you.

If you think you might be interested in taking part and receiving some more information, please complete the following, or email s.k.greenhow@durham.ac.uk:

44. I would be willing to be contacted with more information about further research and my adopted child is aged between 11-18 years old

Yes No

If Yes, please provide contact details, including: Name (not to be used in the study), telephone number, email, and/or address

You have now completed the survey!

If you would like any further information please feel free to contact me s.k.greenhow@durham.ac.uk

Or for more information about adoption and support services available please visit the following websites:

http://www.adoptionuk.org

http://www.scottishadoption.org/

http://www.baaf.org.uk/

Please remember that you can also revisit your original placing adoption agency for advice and support.

Appendix B: Mind-mindedness coding

Coding manual for comment categories (adapted for this sample using Meins & Fernyhough (2010), Demers et al. (2009), and Harris-Waller (2012))

Category	Description	Examples from adoptive parents
Mental attributes *(mind-minded)*	This category includes comments that refer to the child's mental, internal states. This includes, emotions, will, memory, personality, intellect, knowledge, mental characteristics, preferences (but not those that are behavioural).	*"He is a bright boy who loves to learn"* *"Constantly needs attention and set routine"* *"He finds it very hard if he is criticised in any way"* *"He is very anxious and much of his choices are driven by fear of the unknown"* *"She is extremely caring, very considerate to others"*
Behavioural attributes	This category includes comments that refer to the behavioural traits of the child, including activities, behaviours, behavioural difficulties, behavioural signifiers of emotion.	*"very active and outdoorsy"* *"Hard to handle"* *"some anger issues and impulsive behaviour occasionally"* *"Hopeless at team games…but talented dancer and loves to sail and windsurf"*
Physical attributes	This category includes all comments that refer to the physical descriptors of the child, including appearance, position in the adoptive family and age.	*"Slightly small in height compared to his peer group"* *"My boys are stunning, really good-looking boys"* *"My daughter is now 14, she is beautiful"*
General attributes	<u>General</u> This includes non-specific value-judgements (e.g. lovely) and practical information such as the child's name or school.	*"A lovely little lad"* *"wonderful big sister"* *"Lights up the room"* *"Extremely demanding and exhausting"* *"He has strong likes and interests"*
	<u>Placement related</u> These comments refer specifically to the adoption placement, process or family history of the child. Comments regarding birth family members are also	*"In care too long before plan for adoption made"* *"He was also groomed and abused in the birth family"* *"Has settled in well but difficult at first"*

	included here.	*"My child is amazing and currently coping well with the challenges of her adoption"* *"They wanted to be part of my family so much"* *"In care for too long before plan for adoption made"* *"We were her 4th home by the age of 21 months"* *"Our little girl was removed from birth mother at 2 months old , into care"*
Self-referential	This category includes any comments related to the parent's own feelings/thoughts/behaviours. Any comments related to attachment are also included here.	*"we love him to bits"* *"the best thing to ever happen to us"* *"We feel so fortunate to have been chosen as her parents"* *"the level of therapeutic parenting that we constantly need to do"* *"My son has been damaged far more by the 'system' then I would have ever realised at placement"* *"I never realised quite how many difficulties she would have"* *"A joy to parent, but totally exhausting"*

Coding manual for valence

Valence	**Description**	**Examples from adoptive parent sample**
Positive	Comments with a positive context, such as the achievements of the child, praise, pride/pleasure with child's personality, behaviour etc., the use of socially accepted positive terms e.g. 'popular'	<u>Mind-minded</u> *"Thoughtful and caring young woman"* *"imaginative"* *"He is desperate to learn new things" "kind, caring, sensitive, loving"*
		<u>Non mind-minded</u> *"A beautiful little girl who has enriched our lives"* *"Amazing progress since he came to*

		us" *"he has lots of friends at school and is very popular"*
Negative	Comments with a negative context such as, critical comments about child's shortfalls, disapproval or annoyance, the use of socially accepted negative terms e.g. manipulative, faults in child's personality	<u>Mind-minded</u> *"Hates any change, is verbally aggressive if doesn't get own way"* *"Unable to compromise or consider others' perspectives"* *"manipulative"*
		<u>Non mind-minded</u> *"We do worry about his future, and suspect that the teenage years will prove challenging"* *"can be a pain"* *"A loner"*
Neutral	Comments with no obvious positive or negative context, such as references to behaviour or characteristics stated in a neutral manner or the use of unclear terms such as "unique"	<u>Mind-minded</u> *"has an interest in the world around him"* *"likes to be in control"* *"He entered the care system age 3 and so he still has memories of 'old' mummy and daddy"*
		<u>Non mind-minded</u> *"My daughter has changed considerably since being with us"* *"she is a typical teenager"*

Examples of MM coding from full parent descriptions:

- A beautiful <u>Ph +ve</u> little girl <u>Ph</u> who has enriched our lives <u>Rel +ve</u> and is now a wonderful big sister....most of the time <u>Be +ve</u>! We were her 4th home by the age of 21months <u>Pl</u> and as result she worries a lot with regards to change <u>M</u>, she cannot tell us that yet but her behaviour demonstrates this <u>M</u>. Life would not be the same without her <u>Rel +ve</u>.
- Beautiful <u>Ph +ve</u>, musical <u>M +ve</u>, artistic <u>M +ve</u>, thoughtful <u>M +ve</u> and caring <u>M +ve</u> young woman <u>Ph</u> who had done incredibly well considering her start in life <u>Pl</u>, but still faces many challenges <u>M</u>

- Complex learning needs M –ve at far greater level than expected SR. Age 12 functioning as a 6 year old M -ve. Extremely demanding M –ve and exhausting SR. Constantly needs attention and set routine M -ve. Has sleep disorder (just to add to the exhaustion) B -ve. Hates any change M -ve, is verbally aggressive if doesn't get own way M -ve. Unable to compromise M –ve or consider others perspectives -ve. Is funny B +ve gorgeous P +ve and wouldn't be without her Rel +ve

Appendix C: Interview information sheet for adoptive parents

Information Sheet for Adoptive parents

Title: Post-Adoption Contact: Adoption triangle views

Researcher: Sarah Greenhow

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Please take time to read the following information and decide if you would like to take part. Participation does not affect any services you may receive. Your participation is completely voluntary, you do not have to accept this invitation and can withdraw from the study at any time.

Thank you for your time.

Aims of Study

This study is concerned with supporting family relationships following adoption. We would like you to help us understand how post-adoption contact arrangements affect adoptive family life. We are interested in exploring the range of contact methods used by adoptive families, including letterbox, face-to-face and technology exploring the views of adopters, adopted young people and birth relatives.

This research aims to provide practice and policy recommendations about the best ways to support family relationships.

Why do I need you?

I would like you to take part because your opinions are extremely valuable to this study. As an adoptive parent I hope that you will share your experiences and knowledge in this study to help form a deeper understanding of the range and impact of contact arrangements within adoptive family life. I also hope that you will allow and encourage your adopted child (if between the ages of 11-18 years) to take part so we can gather knowledge about

the best ways to support and protect adopted children and young people, now and in the future.

What will happen if you take part?

If you decide to take part in this study, I would like to talk to you and your adopted child through an interview. You do not have to answer any questions you don't want to. The interviews will be recorded for means of transcribing interviews accurately and will not be heard by other people and will be destroyed after the research. If you would prefer for interviews not to be recorded then please let me know.

The interview will give you the opportunity to share as much or as little as you want about your experiences of post-adoption contact and the effect these arrangements can have on family life (1-1.5 hours).

Your information will remain completely confidential and anonymous. Your results will be used in a doctoral dissertation to be submitted at Durham University. It is also possible that the information provided will be used in journal publications and conferences outside the University. Anonymity will be protected at all times in these pieces of work.

What will happen if my child takes part?

Your child will take part in an interview lasting 1-1.5 hours, talking about the same information as described above. The interviews will also include two activities, one about family relationships and one designing a paper version of a Facebook profile (to capture children's understanding of information sharing online). The interviews will take place with you in the same building (in your home, adoption agency or location of your choosing) and if requested by your child it can be arranged for you to be in the room during the interviews. Again, interviews will be recorded. Please let me know if you would prefer them not to be. The information your child provides will be treated confidentially and will only be shared if it is felt that they or another family member are at risk. I will encourage your child to share any issues they may have with you or an adoption support worker.

Confidentiality

All information will be confidential, unless something is disclosed during an interview that is thought to suggest that you or someone else is at risk. In this case information may be passed on to an adoption agency worker to support in the appropriate way.

What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, at any time during or after the interview please feel free to let me know by contacting me (Sarah Greenhow s.k.greenhow@durham.ac.uk) and I will try to help. You can also contact me to withdraw from the study or ask any further questions. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me with, then you should contact my academic supervisor at Durham University (Dr. Chris Jones christine.jones@durham.ac.uk).

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet. If you are happy with the information and you would now like to take part in the study, please fill in the *Consent Form* overleaf, if not thank you again for your time.

For more information about adoption support services please see the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) website, Scottish Adoption or Adoption UK listed below.

http://www.baaf.org.uk/

http://www.scottishadoption.org/

http://www.adoptionuk.org/

Consent Form (Adoptive parents)

Research Title: Post-Adoption Contact: Adoption triangle views

Researcher: Sarah Greenhow

Please complete this form to give your consent. Tick the boxes below if you agree with each statement and then sign your initials at the bottom of the page. You can still withdraw from the study after you have signed this form. *(Statement in brackets, only if applicable).*

Please Tick the boxes

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated [16/05/2013] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐

2. I understand that my own participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. ☐

3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish. ☐

4. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

---

5. *(I confirm that I am happy for my child to take part in the above study).* ☐

.....

Please place your initials here to give your consent

Researcher: Sarah Greenhow

Email: s.k.greenhow@durham.ac.uk

Appendix D: Interview questions for adoptive parents

What is adoptive family life like for you?

Tell me a little about you and your family

Do you talk about adoption in your family?

Who brings it up? Where would you go for information about your child's birth family?

What contact arrangements do you have in place?

How were these decided? Has contact changed in any way since you adopted your child? Are you happy with this contact? Why do you maintain contact?

Do you think your child is happy with the level of contact?

Can you tell me about the use of technology in your family?

What do you use technology for? Do you feel confident using technology?

What types of technology does your child use? How much does your child use technology? What do they use it for?

How do you feel about your child's use of technology? What are the positives and risks? Do you get involved in your child's technology use (e.g. controls)? What technology is available to your child at home or school?

Have you or your child ever searched for information about birth relatives online? If yes, what did you find and what did you do with this information? Did you/would you ever follow this up in any way by contacting the person?

Has technology been used as a contact method in your family?

If yes, how did/do you feel about this? What did you do? What are the benefits and risks? What are your hopes and fears about this contact? Why do you think technology was used as a contact method? Is technology still being used as a contact method? Why is this? How has this developed/or ceased? Do you still manage contact in the same way?

What are your opinions about the use of technology to make contact with birth family members?

Positive/negative? What could be the benefits and risks of this type of contact?

If virtual contact hasn't already happened, do you think this could happen in your family? Are you worried about this?

Would you know what to do/what would you do if this happened?

How would you like contact to progress in the future?

What support do you think is important to help families manage contact and specifically virtual contact? If you have concerns, what preparation/support would have helped/would help now with this?

What would you tell other adoptive parents about virtual contact?

Would you do anything differently (if anything) regarding contact, knowing what you now know?

Has contact affected your family in any way, positively or negatively?

How would you like contact to progress in the future?

What are you hopes and fears about contact in the future?

Appendix E: Information sheet and interview questions for adopted young person

Durham University

Invitation for Adopted Young Person

You are being invited to take part in a piece of research about families who have adopted a child or children. I would like to talk to you about what it is like in your family and how you feel about staying in touch with your birth family. Your story will then go on to help us understand how we can support and look after other young people who are adopted.

If you decide to take part I would like you to think about the questions and diagrams below. You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to and anything you do tell me I won't share with anyone else unless you ask me to or you tell me something that I think may put you or someone else in danger, then I may have to pass this information on to a trusted adult at an adoption agency. I will use what you tell me to write a report for my University and maybe in articles outside the University too. I will never use your name so no one will be able to see that it is you.

If you start the research and feel that you don't want to carry on that is OK and you can stop and leave at any time and also tell me not to use your information if you wish.

Please ask any questions you like. You do not have to take part.

If you do, please sign at the bottom of the page to say you understand what the research is about and you want to take part. Thank you!

X……..

Contact: s.k.greenhow@durham.ac.uk

Interview Questions for Adoptees

Can you tell me about your family?

How much do you talk about adoption in your family? Do you talk about it as much as you want to?

What more would you like to know about your birth parents or their families? What questions do you have?

How would you find out answers to your questions or information about your birth parents or their families?

Can you tell me a little about your birth family? Do you have contact with them? If so how often and what happens?

Can you tell me about the ways you use technology (e.g. Internet, mobile phone, Facebook)? Do your parent(s) know what you use technology for?

Have you used technology to get in touch with your birth family or been contacted by them in this way (e.g. on Facebook)? Can you tell me a little bit about what happened? How did you feel? Are you still in touch with your birth relative(s) in this way?

What do you think your family will be like in the future? Would you like to carry on being in touch with your birth family? What would you tell other adopted children about contact?

Appendix F: Interview participant profiles

No- virtual contact interview participants (n=10)

Interview participant No. and pseudonym name	**Family structure (number of adopted children)**	**Traditional Contact**	**Parent searched online?**
1 *Mary* Adoptive Mother	2 daughters (aged 12 & 15)	Letterbox, telephone calls & direct with grandparents (virtually stopped)	No
2 *Joan* Adoptive Mother	3 child sibling group (aged 9, 11, 13)	Direct & letterbox with birth mother (annual plus pre-meeting between adults) and direct with grandmother (tri-annual)	Yes
3 *Katie* Adoptive Mother	Twins (boy & girl, aged 15)	Letterbox birth mum, paternal aunt and brother (annual)	Yes
4 *Lauren* Adoptive Mother	Son (aged 14)	No contact (letterbox with birthmum and sister in past)	Yes
5 *Joyce* Adoptive Mother	1 daughter (aged 16), 1 son (aged 18) 1 biological child (age and gender unknown)	No contact (letterbox with birthmum and sister, and with daughter's birthdad & direct with 2 older sisters in past)	Yes
6 *Maureen* Adoptive Mother	Daughter (aged 7)	No contact (adopted from Russia)	No
7 *Josie* Adoptive Mother	Son (aged 11) & daughter (age unknown)	Letterbox birth mum (annual)	Yes
8 *Jenny* Adoptive Mother	Son (aged 13) Biological daughter (age unknown)	Letterbox and direct with birth mum (annual), letterbox with birth dad (annual), direct half-brother (annual plus email between parents)	Yes
9 *Cheryl* Adoptive Mother	1 daughter (aged 17) & 1 son (aged 16) 2 biological children (ages and genders unknown)	Letterbox dad (annual)	No
10 *Natasha* Adoptive Mother	2 brothers (ages unknown)	No contact (letterbox with birthparents in past)	Yes

Virtual contact interview participants

N.B. pseudonym *names* in the first column indicate all interviewees, whereas participant numbers correspond to the adoptive family the participant belongs to (11 families, numbers 11-21; with 13 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people; 19 virtual contact respondents in total)

Interview participant (s) No. & pseudonym name	**Family structure (number of adopted children)**	**Traditional Contact**	**Parent searched online?**	**Virtual contact details**	**Virtual contact positive, negative, or mixed?**	**Virtual contact ongoing?**
11 *Diane* Adoptive mother	Son aged (aged 19)	DC & letter: birth mum, annual Now stopped DC: siblings twice a year (older brother & sister) Now informally managed	Yes	Exchanged at direct contact, siblings asked Diane's permission. Phone, email, text, SNS with siblings: described as 'normal'	Positive	Yes
12 *Brenda* Adoptive mother	2 sisters (aged 17 & 18)	Letterbox with siblings, but stopped when they were younger	No	Younger daughter with siblings, found them on Facebook developed into direct contact, elder sister not interested	Negative	Yes
13 *Sharon* Adoptive mother 13a *Lee* son aged 18 13b *Nicola* daughter aged 16 13c *David* son aged 22	3 siblings: daughter (aged 16), son (aged 18), son (aged 22)	Direct contact grandmother, uncles, cousins	Yes	Facebook uncles: positive, extension of existing relationships	Positive	Yes
14 *Dale* Adoptive father 14a *Alexandra* Adoptive mother	Daughter (aged 19)	Annual letterbox birth mother and aunt	Yes	Daughter found on Bebo by grandmother who sent direct message, led to ongoing contact with her and aunty. Second rejection. Birth mother became involved and let her down	Negative	Yes

15 *Martin* Adoptive father	9 adopted children (ages and genders unknown)	No contact	Yes	Birth mother contacted children on Facebook whilst in prison, had photos of children on profile: Negative, lies deception Siblings in touch on Facebook: positive	Mixed	Yes (with siblings)
16 *Julie* Adoptive mother 16a *Steven* son aged 15	Son (aged 15) Biological daughter (aged 19)	Direct contact siblings (2 sisters, 2 brothers), paternal aunt Letterbox birth parents twice a year	No	Birth mother contacted son on Facebook but one-off, didn't reciprocate Phone siblings SNS siblings: positive, developed from direct contact	Mixed	Yes (with siblings
17 *Sue* Adoptive mother	Daughter (aged 16)	Letterbox birth mum annual (now ceased due to virtual contact)	Yes	Daughter found birth mother on Facebook, SNS with extended members of birth family. Birth relatives abusive to Sue, chaotic	Negative	Yes
18 *Hanna* Adoptive mother 18a *James* Adoptive father	2 half-siblings (aged 10 & 11)	Annual letterbox with birth mother, Direct contact with great aunt and uncle	No	Birth mother scanned photos onto Facebook and made comments suggesting children were still with her. Not reciprocal contact with children	Negative	No
19 *Glenys* Adoptive mother	Daughter (aged 15)	Twice a year letterbox with birth mother Direct contact twice a year with birth mother and older siblings Contact now suspended due to VC	Yes	Birth mother, siblings and other extended members of the birth family: negative, caused 'extreme distress', re-traumatising, taken out of school, unsure who initiated it but swapped details at contact	Negative	Yes
20 *Andrea* Adoptive mother 20a *Verity* daughter aged 14	Two daughters, half-siblings (aged 14 & 16)	Letterbox with birth mother, and elder daughter's birth father	Yes	Birth mother got in touch on Facebook, contacting daughter every day. Snowballed to include siblings	Negative	Yes (with siblings)

				(daughters part of 8 sibling group) Led to direct contact with 3 siblings		
21 *Charlotte* Adoptive mother 21a *Peter* son aged 16	Son (aged 16)	Letterbox with birth mother and direct contact once Letterbox with birth father	Yes	Son searched for birth mother and father on Facebook - secretive Birth mother reported this to social workers due to birth father contact Birth father negative impact, inappropriate contact Skype with half-brother led to direct contact	Negative	Yes (with siblings)

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