

Desire to have a Child: Possibilities of the Digital Age and its Consequences for Reproductive Medicine and Psychosomatics

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Background

A lot of fertility treatments are existing and research consider also psychological aspects of artificial insemination and surrogacy. But there is little known about the role of the Internet, which delivers diverse options for having a child, e.g. initiation of egg- or sperm donation or co-parenting via websites. All these options have a special meaning for psychological counseling in context of family planning and reproductive health.

Research questions

What are the intersections between the desire to have a child and the Internet? Which motives and usage scenarios can be identified with regard to current state of research?

Method

Systematic literature research in the relevant medical and psychological literature databases (e.g. Pubmed, PsycInfo), search period: last 10 years; from 2008—2018.

Results

Sperm donation via connection website

Private search for a sperm donor online. There are more donors on websites registered than in clinics (Freeman et al. 2016).

- *Motives of women:* Searching for a donor with specific characteristics e.g. appearance, intelligence, personality or looking for a person having a “deeper connection”. Motives of single-women: Greater sense of family and children, desire to act, living without partner (Frederiksen et al. 2011), age, present social support (Leiblum et al. 1995).
- *Motives of donors:* A donation initiated online is more informal and the recipient can be selected by the donor (Bossoma et al. 2014). Having a child conceived by sperm-donation which was initiated by a connection-website can facilitate a family structure which is alike a traditional family where each parent is known (Ravelinigen, Provoost, Pennings 2016). Most donors are heterosexual, aged 18–69. The most men have seen a photo of the child they conceived (Freeman et al. 2016).

Egg donation via Internet agencies

Initiation of egg donation via Internet agencies, which are connecting donors and recipients. Most agencies are using marketing instruments to get attention and emphasize the mutual benefits between donors and recipients (Keehn, Howell, Sauer, Klitzman 2015).

- *Motives:* cost-effective (compared to clinics), wider variety of donors, partially not anonymous.

Reference:

Eichenberg C, Huss J, Küsel C (2017). From online-dating to online-divorce: An overview of family relationships shaped through digital media. *Contemporary Family Therapy*; 39 (4): 249–260.

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Surrogacy: Surrogates can be find online via websites or online agencies. Despite surrogacy is controversial, there is a huge online-community (e.g. surro_moms_online.com) for surrogates and women, who are looking for a surrogate or wants to become one. Online they chat with each other, get information's e.g. about surrogacy, pregnancy, legal constraints, experiences and can offer help if needed.

- *Motives:* High level of empathy, willingness to accept an obligation

Co-Parenting: Contact via forums/ websites to a women/men for having a child without being in a romantic relationship or marriage.

- *Motives:* Raising a child together without any obligations regarding a relationship. Fulfilling the desire having a child and having a life which is similar to traditional family forms (Jadva et al. 2015).

Discussion

- The Internet can support people with desire to have a child
- Risks of private sperm donation websites: lack of control of medical and personal factors, partially no binding contracts.
- Varying legal constraints in different countries. Founding a family via websites/online-forums can be illegal.
- There is a need for information of psychotherapist and physicians about online options for having a child.
- There are a lot of studies about the experience of a sperm- or egg donation and motives. However, there are only a few studies considering the motives and experiences looking online for a donor or surrogate (Jadva, Freeman, Tranfield, Golombok 2017).
- There is a need for research about long-term effects of donations initiated online on developmental psychology aspects (e.g. searching online about the own donor, meeting half siblings).

