

#InstaMoms:

Social Media Influencers Are Helping Lesbian Couples Navigate the Journey to Conception More Than Fertility Clinics



2021 | A White Paper Presented to the Fertility Industry
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Abstract

Lesbian and queer women have less knowledge of sexual and reproductive health than their heterosexual counterparts. This can be attributed to the fertility industry's heteronormative language and representation in materials and services. Lesbian and queer individuals and couples with a large social media following have noticed this lack of information by the fertility industry and have taken it upon themselves to document their own journeys to conception in order to better educate and prepare their followers. While their ability to communicate to the masses is impressive, the fertility industry should see its lack of inclusive educational resources for lesbian and queer women as problematic and should learn from social media influencers' abilities to communicate in order to better serve all people and fulfill its medical responsibility.

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An Introduction to Lesbian Reproduction

Research has revealed a general knowledge gap on sexual and reproductive health among lesbian and bisexual identifying women (Thomas, S. et al.). While women in this demographic largely seek to be informed through medical professionals as well as online (Khurana and Bleakley), discrepancies in the way information is presented puts women of the LGBTQ+ community at a disadvantage.

More specifically, lesbian women wishing to conceive face challenges in navigating their unique conception process due to a lack of information and heteronormative practices and language by fertility clinics and medical professionals. Fertility clinics grew in the late 1960s and early 1970s to more specifically aid white heterosexual women struggling with infertility. Expansion in the 1980s resulted in more clinics, sperm banks, and reproductive specialists that still largely focused on helping the women that fit the demographic as white, heterosexual, married, and middle to upper class (Holland, S).



The lack of access to these services for non-white, non-heterosexual, and lower class women was a sort of gatekeeping that “served as a form of medical social control, defined by Conrad (1979: 1) as ‘the ways in which medicine functions (wittingly or unwittingly) to secure adherence to social norms’, by positioning certain groups as worthy of reproducing and others as unworthy,” (Holland, S).

An Introduction to Lesbian Reproduction

Access to fertility and reproductive health services have largely grown for minorities since, specifically allowing for the treatment of lesbian couples. However, information materials from clinics still largely represent straight white married women and their journey to motherhood through infertility struggles with their husbands. The different struggles lesbian couples face when starting a family including health, financial, and legal issues are not presented.

This issue is important for the fertility industry because lesbian couples turn to fertility clinics for help conceiving. “The fact that same-sex couples in this clinic, and in the world at large, are currently in the minority does not relieve medical professionals from educating themselves about the unique family-building processes and decisions that same-sex couples encounter” (Holland, S.)

The purpose of this paper is to **inform the fertility industry** of areas of concern in terms of maintaining strict heteronormative practices and inspire avenues of outreach in order to **better reach, educate, and serve minority patients.**



The Problem

Prominent LGBTQ+ individuals (with a large, influential presence online) are doing more to help lesbian and queer couples navigate the journey to conception through their social media channels than the fertility industry.

This is problematic because people should not have to rely on the internet and unqualified people to provide accurate medical information.

Lesbian couples (and other LGBTQ+ identifying people that do not produce sperm) need medical intervention in order to biologically conceive a child. Because of this, these couples have turned to the help that the fertility industry can provide. However, while there are several different routes lesbian couples can take for assisted conception including at-home or in clinic artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization (IVF), intrauterine insemination and more, the steps and options are not well-represented for lesbian couples. Fertility clinic sites and products still heavily cater to and represent heterosexual couples struggling with fertility issues rather than same sex or queer-identifying couples that do not have the ability to reproduce on their own together. While the industry does offer these services for all couples, their media and outreach does not make it clear to the public. Furthermore, it can be difficult to find this information elsewhere as mainstream media sanitize depictions of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) individuals, preventing LGB characters from engaging in realistic sexual talk or sexual behaviors” (Bond).

Other obstacles come into play for lesbian and queer couples specifically when trying to conceive that most heterosexual couples don't usually run into. Picking a sperm donor, deciding which partner will carry, which partner's eggs will be used, financials, and the legal complexities behind them regarding parental rights are all issues that come into play for lesbian couples that are not often detailed by the fertility industry. Running into this issue, several lesbian influencers have taken it upon themselves to document their own fertility journeys to help educate and spread awareness to the lesbian community. While it is commendable that these influencers are stepping up to fill a knowledge gap due to a lack of information from the fertility industry, it is not their responsibility to educate the public. The fertility industry needs to learn from the success of these influencers and realize the content lesbian and queer couples are needing for better education and preparation for their conception journey.

Why Inclusivity and Representation in the Fertility Industry Matters

Underrepresentation & Misinformation

Although growing, there is still a large lack of information on the lesbian conception process in fertility clinic materials, websites, and legal documents. A study published in 2016 revealed that “the majority of fertility clinic websites (54.5%) with information for heterosexual couples still do not include information for LGBT couples,” (Jin & Dasgupta).



Similarly, a study conducted in 2019 interviewed several queer women in queer relationships and who were seeking fertility treatment in a professional clinical facility. One couple stated that “there was no representation of queer couples in the media at their clinic,” (Ortis).

Furthermore, a majority of respondents detail different experiences with fertility clinics making heteronormative assumptions and failing to remember long term patients’ sexualities and reasons for care, causing lesbian patients to constantly come out to their providers and remind them of their visits being for conception without a male partner, rather than infertility.



Industry Responsibility

There is a medical industry responsibility to treat all patients with fair and equal opportunity. Ultimately, knowledge gaps should be filled by medical professionals and not be made the responsibility of social media influencers.

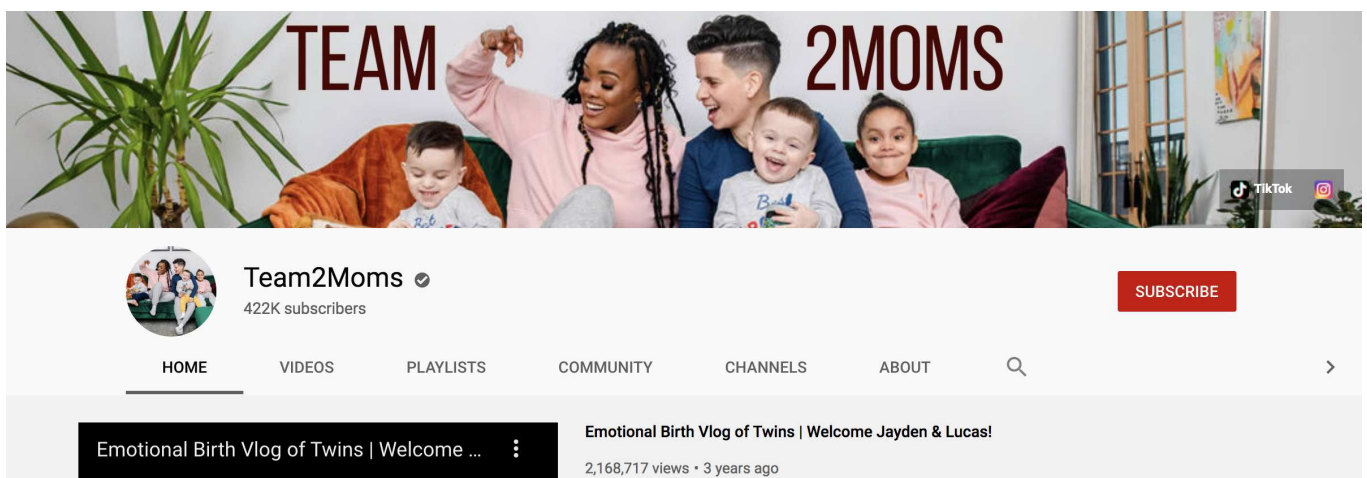
What Are We Seeing?

The Power of Real People



With this lack of representation and information on a lesbian's journey to conception, it comes as no surprise that LGBT individuals have worse fertility knowledge than heterosexual women (Thomas et. al). With the rise of the internet and connectivity, many women have turned to online forums and other cyberspaces to learn more about their options to motherhood (Holland). The growth of these networks can be seen through some of the current most-followed lesbian couples on the internet. Having noticed a lack of representation and guidance when it came to growing their own families, some lesbian couples have taken it upon themselves to document their own journeys to conception in order to better represent and educate the LGBTQ community.

Among some of the most-watched YouTube channels are: Living Rosa (pictured above), Team2Moms (pictured below), Abbie & Julia, Rose and Rosie, and Sam & Alyssa. With each of these YouTube channels ranging from 100 thousand to over 300 thousand subscribers, these women document their journeys to becoming mothers. With videos covering issues like financial costs, the sperm donor selection process, the different types of insemination procedures, honest conversations about loss and hardships, legal documents, lawyers, and rights, these women share more information compiled on their YouTube channel than can be obtained from fertility clinic websites and professionals.



How Does This Work?

While it is ultimately not the job of social media influencers to educate the public on topics that the fertility industry fails to cover, they are successful in reaching large audiences with their content and messages for various reasons.

Diffusion of Innovations

The Fertility Industry

One of the oldest social science theories developed by E.M. Rogers in 1962, the diffusion of innovations theory “originated in communication to explain how, over time, an idea or product gains momentum and diffuses (or spreads) through a specific population or social system” (LaMorte). The visualization of the adoption of innovations can be seen in Figure 1.

When taking this theory into account, it can be seen how slow the fertility industry has been to represent LGBTQ+ couples and their journey to parenthood.

Necessary formalities like documents and paperwork have not “caught up to speed with the country’s legislation and the social acceptance and social norms of the country” (Blackwood). This slow process to adapt this kind of representation has caused people to gather their information through other channels.

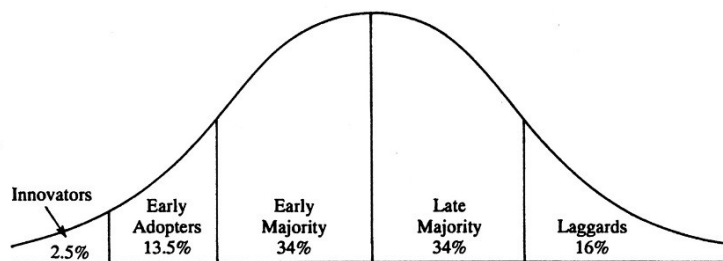


Figure 1 (Beever)

Social Media & Influencers

Since it first started in the early 2000s, social media has been on a constant rise in terms of users worldwide. “Social media has changed the world. The rapid and vast adoption of these technologies is changing how we find partners, how we access information from the news, and how we organize to demand political change,” (Ortis-Ospina).

The quick adoption of social media use can be seen in Figure 2. Since the early 2000s, social media continues to see a steep rise in users with platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram as the top performers. This quick adoption to the masses allows for a faster spread of information to billions of people worldwide, allowing social media influencers to reach extremely large audiences with their content.

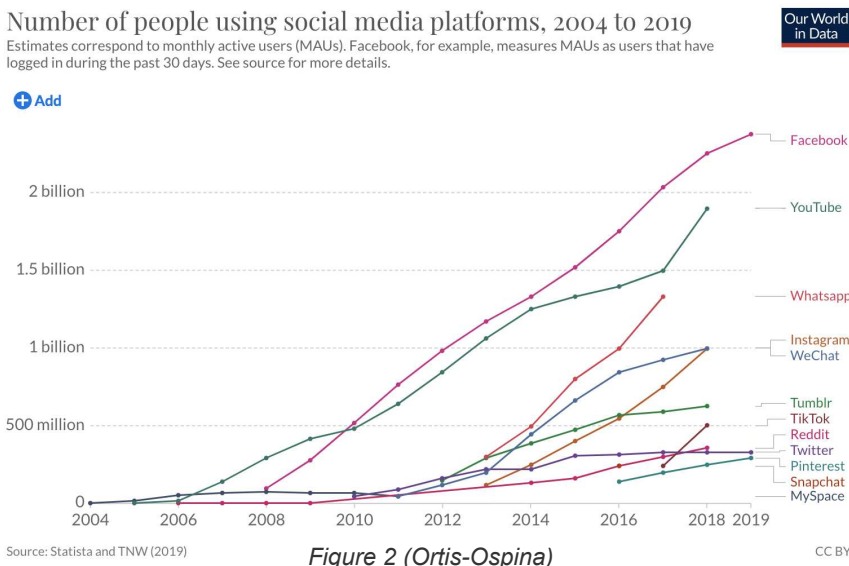


Figure 2 (Ortis-Ospina)

How Does This Work?

Interactive vs One-Way Communication

Along with the ability to reach billions of people through social media platforms, influencers have the potential to interact with their audiences. This is due to the interactive nature of social media. Rather than communication being linear where a message is delivered from the sender to the receiver, interactive communication “incorporates feedback, which makes communication a more interactive, two-way process” (Ashman).

Unlike fertility industry websites, commercials, and clinics merely presenting their information to the public on their platforms, influencers are able to engage with their audiences through comments on posts, live streaming, answering frequently asked questions, and responding to reviews from subscribers and followers. This gives influencers the upper hand at understanding what their viewers are experiencing or interested in learning more about, and therefore allows them to tailor their content to better align with the kind of content and representation people are interested in seeing.



Accessibility to the Masses

The accessibility of social media to the masses is another factor that makes people on these sites so influential. Engaging in social media is free and accessible at any time every day. Lesbian couples discussing their fertility journey can turn to their favorite influencers or search related hashtags hear true stories and opinions from real people at a time that works for them. This accessibility does not require them to set up appointments with doctors to discuss options, is free, and can be done from the privacy of their own homes.

The internet holds so much information about news, health, politics, social issues, and more, and social media helps to connect the world and people alike. For members of the LGBTQ+ community, “having access to information around identity, resiliency, and empowerment are particularly important and necessary. For this reason, platforms like YouTube are particularly valuable” (Refinery29). Among the top social media platforms of 2020 are Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram each with 1,100 million to 2,700 million active users worldwide as of October 2020 (Statista).

What Can Be Done?

Fill the Gaps



The lack of information and proper care and attention towards lesbian and queer identifying couples and individuals wishing to conceive must be addressed by the fertility industry in order to better serve all patients. Lesbian couples run into several hidden costs when starting a family (Longman & Patni). While the circumstances of these patients might be of the minority, that does not exterminate their importance and right to proper care.

Unable to see themselves and their potential fertility options presented in medicine, lesbians wishing to conceive are turning to the internet for advice. This can lead to more misinformation through discredited sources, which further implies why fertility clinics should strive for more diverse representation and information to better educate.

New Avenues



While it is ultimately not the job of LGBTQ+ influencers to educate the lesbian community on the reproductive health knowledge they lack, fertility clinics should recognize these people's abilities to better communicate the science, health, and legal barriers and obstacles lesbian mothers-to-be have to overcome. "The online fertility community is a robust and growing sphere of influence" (Fertility and Sterility). With social media influencers taking on topics of fertility and having such a large and successful platform to speak on, a lot can be said about the power of this form of outreach.

Medical professionals should learn how to better emulate this way of presenting information in totality, rather than making these issues harder to come by across various platforms. They can learn from the accessibility of the information, the ways in which it is presented, and the communication theories that deem most effective.

Conclusion

As it can be seen, lesbian and queer couples are an under-informed demographic in the fertility industry and therefore have had to navigate their journeys to conception through the information found on popular social media sites and through people with a large social media following. Focusing on topics that the fertility industry fails to cover for lesbians and other LGBTQ+ couples wishing to conceive, these social media influencers are successful in communicating with such a large audience through the means of several communications theories including the Diffusion of Innovations, Interactive Communication, and their general accessibility to the masses. While it is commendable that these influencers have taken it upon themselves to help an underserved demographic, the fertility industry should see its lack of educational resources for these people as problematic and should learn from influencers' abilities to communicate in order to better serve all people and fulfill its medical responsibility.



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