‘Moment of Truth’: How AncestryDNA and Reddit are Disproving the Myth of the Traditional Family Institution

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Abstract

Traditional Western notions of the family institution revolve around the expectation that family members – as defined by blood relation or matrimony – are infallible actors who are bound by automatic, guaranteed, legitimate, and permanent love for one another. Yet throughout history and in the present, this promise has proven false: over 10 million adults in the United States are victims of domestic abuse annually, and 40-50% of American marriages end in divorce. As the deployment of DNA testing technology has exponentially increased worldwide in the past three decades, pioneered by industry leader AncestryDNA, so too have firsthand reports of destructive family secrets uncovered by Ancestry – secrets which stand at complete opposition to the expectations of traditional family norms. These stories are shared frequently by Ancestry consumers on Reddit, an online discussion website known for preservation of anonymity. I argue that the rise of DNA testing and social media technologies offer evidence to disprove traditional notions of the family institution. These findings make Ancestry’s advertising strategies to date redundant. Therefore, I propose a new approach to Ancestry advertising with an original speculative ad campaign that acknowledges the failures of the traditional family myth and reimagines Ancestry as a company who aids consumers in seeking the truth.
Introduction

Traditional family ideals are embedded into the fabric of Western society. A quick Google search turns up a slew of age-old adages about family and what genetic relation means, or should mean, to people: *There’s no place like home. Blood is thicker than water. A family that _______ together, stays together. You can’t choose your family.* These proverbs are examples of sentiments often taken as absolute truth about the way families are. They also serve as a summary of the role family systems are expected to play in individuals’ lives in the Western tradition. Traditional ‘family’, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is defined by one of two things: blood relation, or marriage. The primary belief which extends from this is that family members are genetically or matrimonially bound, they are also bound by love. This bond never breaks or ends; it guarantees the highest degree of respect and kinship one can experience, and its continuation into the future is essential.

Yet this societal preoccupation with the expectation of how families ought to be is incongruent with reality. In reality, family members are not automatically and infallibly trustworthy. In the United States, more than 10 million adults experience domestic abuse annually. And 40-50% of American marriages end in divorce. And family members are fallible humans who can, and do, betray and lie to each other on a regular basis: about their pasts, their intentions, their activities, their infidelities. This is not a recent phenomenon – quite the opposite, in fact; the failures of families are the stuff of old lore. Betrayal, violence, and secret-keeping between people who share genetic information have been the subject of Greek mythology – call to mind the story of Atreus and Thyestes, in which one brother committed adultery with the other’s wife and then

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1 Google.com, 2021.
raised a son for the purpose of killing his uncle\(^5\). They have been explored in Shakespearean plays – think of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, who is recruited by the ghost of his own father to poison Hamlet’s uncle\(^6\). They have garnered historic public scrutiny and scandal, like that surrounding Captain Peter Townsend, a married man who divorced his wife in 1953 to marry Princess Margaret of England. Considering this track record, and the current rates of divorce and domestic abuse in the United States, it becomes clear that the truth of family behavior is not one which follows the traditional expectations of Western society.

Technological innovation in the present day is making it increasingly possible to bring such truth to light – truths which are embedded in concrete scientific evidence in a way that was impossible until a few decades ago. AncestryDNA (“Ancestry” for short) is an exemplary company who is responsible for driving such technological innovation and the circulation of information about its capabilities. Founded in 1990, Ancestry has now become the foremost genealogy technology company, offering readily accessible DNA test kits that claim to help you “know your world from the inside.”\(^7\) DNA testing itself was invented only 35 years ago by Sir Alec Jeffreys, a British professor and geneticist.\(^8\) Since then, the rate at which this technology has developed enough to market to the general public has been astounding, and Ancestry is at its forefront; it reported $1 billion in revenue in 2020\(^9\), and has 6 million more user profiles in its database than 23andMe, a rival DNA testing company\(^10\). Ancestry’s website boasts full DNA testing kits at around $100 USD each, advertising that one test offers customers knowledge of their “origins in over 1000 regions” and more “connections to unknown relatives” than they ever have

\(^5\) Seneca the Younger, 1\(^{st}\) Century A.D.
\(^6\) William Shakespeare, ca. 1600.
\(^7\) Ancestry.com, 2021.
\(^8\) Saad, 2005.
According to the company website, the benefits of their “cutting-edge” DNA testing technology are endless, including possibilities for new intercultural connection and the inevitable expansion of love, trust, and community in accordance with traditional notions of family. Indeed, Ancestry’s advertising strategy has revolved around these ideals since the company’s success ballooned a decade ago. Yet quick searches on Reddit, an anonymous discussion forum website, tell a different story. As it turns out via firsthand accounts by Reddit users, Ancestry has played a part in uncovering shocking family secrets which, without the company’s services, would have stayed hidden – possibly for perpetuity. Children born out of unfaithful alliances, hidden relatives, or incestuous relationships from the past, for instance, are easily unearthed with DNA testing, producing information utterly at odds to the family behavior we have been ingrained to anticipate.

This thesis is a dual qualitative research and creative project which argues that Ancestry’s ability to obtain genetic information from 15 million+ willful participants and analyze it against an ever-growing database endangers two things at once. First, it challenges the protection of objectionable secrets families have kept from each other for decades. Second, and on a greater scale, it disproves foundational concept of family trust so central to Western civil society. Just thirty years ago, family secrets of this caliber might have disappeared to the grave. Now, Ancestry’s immense popularity and the tools real consumers use to communicate about their experience demonstrate how the rise of DNA testing and the social media technologies that disseminate stories of Ancestry’s work have fundamentally disrupted the myth of the traditional family and transformed the way humans obtain and understand evidence.

The scientific disproving of the traditional family myth means Ancestry’s advertising strategies, predicated upon such tradition, are now redundant. After analyzing the failures of a

12 Molla, ‘Why DNA tests are suddenly unpopular’, 2020.
selection of Ancestry advertising from the past decade, I propose an original speculative integrated ad campaign for Ancestry. Designed by me and written in collaboration with copywriter Nathan Nguyen, the ‘Moment of Truth’ campaign uses real-life stories from Reddit to reimagine Ancestry as a truth-seeking company whose service is unveiling consumers’ dirtiest family secrets. ‘Moment of Truth’ acknowledges the reality that traditional ‘family’ is a failing and outdated institution and repositions Ancestry as a modern company who encourages consumers to live more honest and transparent lives.

**Family as Ideology, Family in Practice**

In Western societies, “family” calls to mind a certain image: a perfect, prototypical family. A mother and father, married, monogamous, happy and in love. They have children, a dog, and a content array of extended family on the periphery. Within this structure, each family member has designated obligations toward the others – duties which they cannot renounce, which are lifelong, and which extend to virtually every area of physical and emotional need for family members. In a ‘normal’ or ‘real’ family, members care unconditionally for each other, provide love and emotional support, and meet each other’s social needs. Pop culture exacerbates this expectation; the most common configuration of family in entertainment media is that headed by a married couple composed of a man and a woman, where parents aid and support their children through adolescence. Even television shows which explore family conflict and betrayal, such as *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *All in the Family*, almost always end up showing the characters engaging in successful resolution of conflict using positive, proactive, and seemingly intuitive
communication. This is an unrealistic picture incongruent with the 50% divorce rate in the United States, of which approximately 57% are credited to too much conflict and arguing.\textsuperscript{13}

Ideologically, the traditional family is expected to be a cohesive unit. Phillipe Ariès’s 1962 work placed an emphasis on sentiment and privacy as the defining characteristics of the modern family\textsuperscript{14}; this philosophy was emulated and elaborated on by many later scholars\textsuperscript{15}. Peter Laslett’s 1977 conception of the ‘Western Family’ prototype also explains the ideal family form or household as a husband and a wife, with a narrow age gap between the two, relatively late child-rearing, and the wife typically at a higher maturity level than her husband’s.\textsuperscript{16} In his piece ‘Characteristics of the Western Family Considered Over Time’, Laslett also assumes the “familial group surrounding the infant in its earliest years” to be “the scene of primary socialization”; this is “when parents and their entirely dependent children are perpetually in company.”\textsuperscript{17} This ideology forms the basis of the traditional family myth.

The traditional family myth – the unachievable idea of the perfection that all families ought to be – continues to be upheld in Western social life today. Yet it does not account for families who do not experience the loving sentiment Ariès described; it does not consider same-sex relationships, single-parent households, or situations of child neglect and abuse, none of which are uncommon in the present day, and all of which have been practiced throughout history. (According to Pew Research Center, the United States has the world’s highest rate of children – almost a quarter of all American children – living in single-parent households\textsuperscript{18}.\textsuperscript{18}) Nor does it consider that the U.S. Census Bureau recorded a million same-sex couple households in 2019, both married and

\textsuperscript{13} Scott, 2013.
\textsuperscript{14} Ariès, 1962.
\textsuperscript{15} Hareven, 1991.
\textsuperscript{16} Laslett, 1977.
\textsuperscript{17} Laslett, 1977.
\textsuperscript{18} Pew Research Center, 2020.
unmarried\textsuperscript{19}, and a 2016 study in the Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy found that 20\% of single American adults reported having engaged in consensual non-monogamy – or polyamory – at some point in their lives\textsuperscript{20}.) The fact of the matter is that, as much as the descriptions of family put forth by Ariès, Laslett, and Sherwood Schwartz – creator of The Brady Bunch – sound normal, they are neither the norm, nor are they common.

The traditional family myth is additionally strange owing to its entanglement with a uniquely all-encompassing, all-powerful, and frankly bizarre conceptualization of trust – trust that is assumed to be automatic, guaranteed, legitimate, and permanent, and that appears nowhere else in Western society. This type of trust fits none of the models of trust established in 2006 by Lewicki et al.\textsuperscript{21} It is not behavioral or unidimensional, for it doesn’t grow from zero or even from moderate levels but is expected to be completely present from birth. It is not two-dimensional, for it incorporates no room for distrust whatsoever. It is also not transformational, for it assumes an emotional bond of infallible strength by default, rather than the possibility to increase emotional intimacy and shared values over time. With this particular brand of trust, within the family, it is assumed that values are inextricably born shared and positive expectations will always be met. Further, even in situations where a family member only earns the title out of conscious choice, such as when individuals have chosen to marry, after this choice is made it is assumed that utter stability has been reached. Matrimonial law dictates that the marriage of two individuals bond them together as family; this is assumed to equal an achievement of unfailing familial trust. At the same time, shifting perceptions around marriage in recent years continues to dissolve the success of marriage as an institution in the United States. According to the Census Bureau, in 2010 married

\textsuperscript{19} U.S. Census Bureau, 2019.  
\textsuperscript{20} Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy, 2016.  
\textsuperscript{21} Lewicki et al., 2006.
couples dropped below half of all households for the first time in American history, challenging this assumption of trust created via the bond of family and the importance – and truth – of its absolutism. Of course, as humans, we have a natural and instinctive urge to be close with others, to bond with others, to feel a sense of belonging, and to have a safe place to go to when life is difficult. Anthropologically and psychologically, kinship is a basic human need. However, the traditional family myth insists on taking this to an extreme, asserting that only family can satisfy this need, and that will never fail to do so.

The further we explore this particular conception of family and trust, the more elusive evidence of its real-life existence becomes. Far more evidence appears that it is an ideological fabrication in misalignment with real family practices in the Western world. In reality, families and what they look like have been in a constant state of flux since its conception, and there has never existed a time when all, or even the majority, of families matched the ideal model. In any situation in which the traditional family has been touted as the standard, oppositional events have disproven it: in c. 700 BC, within the realm of original Western creation myths, Hesiod’s *Theogony* described the Greek gods and their family ties, but these relationships were fraught with conflict, rivalry, violence, and even murder. As the United States was founded in 1776, the ideal family consisted of a husband, wife, and biological children, only if family members had the privilege of being white; for slaves, a very different set of rules applied – they were not allowed to legally marry and were frequently separated from their biological kin. To the powerful, the “ideal” slave was one who was isolated, who indeed had no family. Nearly two hundred years later, following the Great Depression, almost 2 million married couples lived apart in the United States, with a

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22 U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.
24 Hesiod, c. 700 BC.
great deal of women running single households. And Kath Weston’s 1991 ethnography *Families We Choose*, a chronicle of LGBTQ kinship in the San Francisco Bay Area throughout the 1970s-1990s, echoes the stories of hundreds of gay and lesbian people exiled from ‘normal’ family life due to their inability to fit within the rigidly heterosexual traditional system, and their forced – but nonetheless successful – construction of new systems of social support, kinship, and love. Finally, in the present day, for a non-trivial number of families, familial obligation is mere myth; the care and nurturance of children is not guaranteed (more than 6.6 million children are referred to child protection agencies yearly), and the care of aging parents by adult children is declining. In truth, both throughout history and in the modern day, families bear little resemblance the family unit that is considered ideal and normal. What is normal for family members, in actuality, is conflict.

Surveying the history of the Western family in depth, it becomes apparent that the nostalgia-based myth of the traditional family is just that: a myth. There have always been contradictions and loopholes in the practice of traditional family ideology and breakdowns in its functionality – even to the point of causing severe damage to individual family members, such as those whose sexuality doesn’t fit the heterosexual reproductive needs of this family form. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, when discussing the historical implication of marriage, wrote: “Marriage has always demanded that both men and women sacrifice a considerable measure of individual freedom to act in the interest of the family.” Perhaps the declining marriage rate reflects that people are beginning to recognize this demand, and increasingly fewer are willing to make the sacrifice. I believe it also reflects a decline in people’s faith in the idea that marriage and biological

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28 Childhelp.org.
29 Harvard, ‘Housing America’s Older Adults’, 2018
30 Fox-Genovese, 2008.
family are a certain path to kinship, companionship, and stability, at a time of mass recognition of the adverse effects that following the traditional family mold can have upon mental health. Certainly, more opportunities exist now than in prior history for seeking out kinship experiences that are more attuned to individuals’ unique desires, values, and needs.31

The traditional family structure, like all social structures, was built to last and endure. Yet this goal is oxymoronic because for the family institution to effectively function, family members must be continually replaced within it, yet it fails to acknowledge that each new family member is an entirely different human being with their own ideas, values, and desires. According to the traditional family myth, if these new members are not fit to continue perpetrating the social order that has been constructed, they must forcibly change their own shape or resign themselves to living without family altogether. In this way the traditional family becomes a structure of enforced bonding and bondage, far from the liberating supply of love and support it claims to be. And since the ideal family is a made thing and not an inevitability, family betrayal becomes all the harsher when it occurs. By no means, however, is it anomalous.

The Role of Reddit

With the help of social media, Ancestry has unwittingly become responsible for driving forward a mass reckoning of the falsehoods of the traditional family myth. The dramatic increase in voluntary DNA testing has led to an excitation of social media use to share stories of family betrayal discovered via Ancestry. The most prominent social media platform used for this purpose is Reddit. Known for its discussion forum structure and strong preservation of user anonymity as a chief

drawing point to the website, Reddit has become a de facto gathering place for those slighted by DNA test results.

Two subreddits in particular have garnered popularity for this purpose. On the r/TIFU (‘Today I Fucked Up’) and r/AmItheAsshole subreddits, searching the key terms ‘Ancestry’ and ‘AncestryDNA’ uncovers hundreds of stories. On r/TIFU, users share how they “fucked up” by taking an Ancestry test, asking their families to take one, or revealing the results to their family members. On r/AmItheAsshole, users tend to explain that they received shocking DNA test results and ask Reddit if they would be the asshole (“WIBTA”, Would I Be The Asshole?) to share them with their families, or if they behaved like an asshole (“AITA”, Am I The Asshole?) in the way they reacted to their test results after the fact. Below are screenshots from June 3, 2021, of search results for search term “ancestry” in r/TIFU, and r/AmItheAsshole. The majority of these posts can garner thousands of upvotes and hundreds of comments.
For the shocked Ancestry consumer who has just uncovered a dirty family secret, these Reddit spaces serve three functions. First, they allow for low-stakes, anonymous catharsis for those who need immediate relief of emotional expression but are unable to share the results with their family or friends for whatever reason. They also bring shocked Ancestry consumers together to find shared comfort in their equally distressing results. Finally, they allow these people to appeal to a wide audience for advice on complicated situations. As such, they also attract well-meaning Internet strangers offering their assessments on others’ fortunes, people who harbor suspicions on certain family members and wonder whether they warrant a DNA test, and ‘lurkers’ – those who add no discussion value, but simply spend time surfing the threads and seeking out dramatic stories for entertainment.
The subjects of the particular stories vary widely and reveal the depth and reach of Ancestry’s ability to provide new information. As expected, many stories are about parents – for instance, one post is titled “AITA for getting in contact with my biological dad behind my parents [sic] back?” Over the course of the immensely detailed, 552-word post, the user writes in detail about how they took an Ancestry test, discovered that their dad was not their biological father, tracked down their biological father and met with him secretly for six months. When their parents found out, enormous conflict ensued. The user writes, “I lost it on [my parents] for lying to me all these years and we didn’t talk for months. I lost it on them for lying to me all these years and we didn’t talk for months… it’s been arguing ever since [they found out we had been meeting up] and my dad telling me a bunch of shit about being betrayed by me, and not caring about him.” The user questions their entire conception of family and its meaning, and, without adequate support or resolution from their parents, looks instead to anonymous Reddit strangers online to seek perspective and advice on how to handle the situation. As such, the myth we have been told about constructive family conflict resolution reveals itself to be a lie.

Other posts focus on grandparents, with many users expressing inner conflict on how to handle scandalous situations in which one or more grandparents are ill, unstable, have already passed away, or have kept a secret for decades, even from their own children. Another post, titled “WIBTA for not hiding a mystery cousin I found on Ancestry?” explains a confusing test result that reflects poorly on their grandfather. The following is an excerpt from the post:

32 Reddit.com, subreddit AmItheAsshole, 2021. Link.
So here's the deal: I've gotten very into tracing genealogy and got an ancestry DNA test done earlier this year. My closest match is a lady from near my home town who shares 675cM of DNA with me. All of the shared DNA is on my maternal grandfather's side.

Based on this information and what I know of my immediate family, there are only a few ways this lady can be related to me.

1. She could be my mom's half sister (my grandfather is mystery cousin's father)
2. She could be my mom's half niece (my grandfather is also mystery cousin's grandfather)
3. She could be my mom's 1st cousin (one of my grandfather's brothers would be her dad) **note: My grandfather is deceased, but both of my grandfather's brothers are still alive but very old, one of them is 90**

So basically, there are 3 options and all involve my grandfather or 1 of his brothers having an illegitimate kid. My mom has submitted her DNA but the results aren't back.

Reddit.com, 2021

The entirety of the post is a similar length to the last, at 450 words. In both instances, the users acknowledged that they were using a “throwaway” account (a new Reddit account created for the sole purpose of making and interacting with this post, to keep it unassociated with any posts on their main account) for the purpose of anonymity. This one wrote, “Throwaway because I don’t want my mom to know my real account when I show her this.” Ironically, even as the user has discovered a terrible secret, in order to figure out what to do and how to do it, the user themselves must also keep a secret. The family secrets build upon themselves. On this post, an anonymous commenter replies: “I’m not judging either way, but I will say that this is going to be more and more common as more and more people use these DNA analysis kits. I already know a couple of friends with these issues. So best of luck.” Another writes, “NTA (Not The Asshole). All families
have wild secrets.’’ On these discussion threads, users freely acknowledge the role of Ancestry tests in uncovering shocking secrets and igniting destructive family conversations. They also acknowledge the inevitability of “wild secrets” in families – something the traditional family myth fails to recognize.

In other posts still, users write with concern for loved ones adjacent to the family. Topics include friends’ sticky situations upon taking Ancestry tests, or difficulties with their significant others. In a detailed 623-word post, one user asks, “AITA for not telling my boyfriend he’s adopted?”34 They write of how they announced their intention to buy their boyfriend an Ancestry kit for his birthday, and was immediately pulled aside in secret by their boyfriend’s mother, who confessed that he was adopted and did not know it. And yet another story writes, perhaps the most shockingly of all, “TIFU by finding out I’ve been accidentally dating and fucking my half-sister.”35 A commenter on that post replies: “I’m a moderator of [a DNA testing results subreddit], and you guys would have no idea how common these types of events are… I swear, we can’t go a day without having at least 4 posts about people finding out their fathers aren’t their bio-dads or some other family drama.” The sheer number of desperate, angry, and panicked posts revealing enormous amounts of sordid and even incestuous detail on the unexpected results of Ancestry tests on these two subreddits alone makes this claim highly believable.

This is only a small sample of DNA testing-related stories about explosive family secrets. Many others reside within the comments as responses on original posts and on other subreddits, discoverable with the right search terms. On each post about an outrageous secret come to light, there are comments expressing how this is becoming increasingly common, that all families are hiding things, and that no one is exempt. It seems clear that many Reddit users have discovered

34 Reddit.com, subreddit AmITheAsshole, 2021. Link.
what others have yet to admit: that the traditional construction of family touted in Western society is not in alignment with reality. Browsing through these online communities of shared support and outrage, one by one, real people deconstruct our false ideology on how family members should behave and reveal how real families actually do. That this particular social media platform is so conducive to preservation of anonymity means Reddit is able to play a role in changing family relationships and conceptions without jeopardizing individuals’ privacy. At the same time, the website is transforming users’ ability to connect with like others about their experiences with Ancestry and impacting how thousands of people – be it Reddit posters, commenters, or lurkers – think about, feel about, and interact with Ancestry as a company and service. This impact may vary between positive and negative, but in either case, the mass reporting of stories on family betrayal and conflict is essential to Ancestry’s disproving of the traditional family myth. Like DNA testing itself, this kind of social media information dissemination would not have been possible a mere 30 years ago. The innovations of our technological era are revolutionizing family ideology and practices in an entirely original way.

**Current Ancestry Advertising**

This is not to say that Ancestry has necessarily owned up to the role it plays in this revolution. Indeed, quite the opposite. An assessment of Ancestry’s advertising of the past five years indicates that the company has chosen to take a very different angle, one which revolves entirely around the positive, joyful effects of DNA testing: newfound cultural heritage, newfound family members, and how understanding one’s ethnic roots can connect one to the world around them.
A 2019 digital advertisement, for example, titled ‘More Detail Than Ever’\textsuperscript{36}, spouts the main idea: “you have more in common with the world than you think.” In the video, DNA specialists interview a range of people about their beliefs on their own cultural backgrounds, then offers them surprising results at odds with their own expectations. The reading of the results is portrayed as revelatory, emotional, and humanitarian. At the 3:45 mark, one of these people says: “This [DNA test] should be compulsory. There would be no such thing as extremism in the world if people knew their heritage like that… who would be stupid enough to think of such thing as a pure race?” This suggestion that compulsory DNA testing could be feasible or eradicate political extremism seems almost comically exaggerated, but such a thought does lead one to wonder whether they could have chosen to market the angle that DNA testing has the power to eliminate something else – like family secrets, at least of the genetic variety. The advertisement also discusses wide-ranging geographic and ethnic heritage at length, and continuously proclaims how people might be far more culturally diverse and globally involved than they are aware, but it makes no mention of the revelations that might be happening at home. Even so, one of the top YouTube comments – with over 930 likes – reads: “Imagine, you were dating someone for around 3 years, you have a pretty intimate relationship and love each other very much. You decide to take this test after saving up a bit. You take it annnnnnnd: She's your cousin.” Even on an ad which steadfastly avoids this type of revelation, users of the Internet are unwilling to allow the possibility to go unnoticed.

Another 2019 Ancestry advertisement, titled ‘Imagine What’s Possible’\textsuperscript{37}, takes the approach of simply selling the idea of the classic happy family. The ad begins with several closeup shots of joyful family portraits inside a house, with the rest of the video followed by interspersed

\textsuperscript{36} Ancestry, YouTube video, 2019. \textsuperscript{37} Ancestry, YouTube video, 2019.
shots of family members holding hands, in deep conversation, looking at old photos of other family members, exploring the outdoors together, play-fighting with their children, and other family activities. The video demonstrates that a large part of Ancestry’s advertising strategy takes advantage of and reinforces the traditional family myth, even as it fails to offer any explanation on precisely how Ancestry will lead your family to this fate. Rather, it simply implores us to “imagine what’s possible”, combines it with heartstring-tugging visuals, and leaves the audience with warm fuzzy feelings and the assumption that becoming an Ancestry customer means they’ll somehow get to travel the world with their family more, while ignoring an entire other aspect of the Ancestry test result experience. This fits the description of propaganda that media historian Caroline Jack lays out in *Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information*\(^\text{38}\): that which uses selective presentations of information, persuasive framings, and use of emotional appeals. Ancestry capitalizes on the emotional impact of family clichés by positioning itself in alignment with traditional ideals – without any actual connection to its product.

Another ad from two years earlier\(^\text{39}\) plays even further into this narrative as to pose happy parents and their children directly in conversation with one another. The parents and children are first interviewed separately about what they know of their ethnic backgrounds and then brought together for the children to reveal the DNA test results to their parents. The children are all extremely sweet; the parents are extremely doting. Clips of a little boy adorably counting all the way up to the number of countries his father is from are interspersed throughout other clips of children giggling because they are experiencing a moment where they know a little bit more than their parents. The tests in this video were clearly carried out with the expectation that all the results would be positive, and result in heartwarming bonding moments. In the same video, two women


\(^{39}\) Ancestry, YouTube video, 2017. [Link](#).
– both mothers of students at the school – who have never met before discover they’re fourth cousins; they both tear up immediately and share a heartfelt hug as one of them proclaims, “I didn’t realize I had such a big family!” The unrealistic message is clear: families can only benefit from Ancestry tests, and once someone discovers a previously unknown relative, it’s love on sight. In line with the rest of its advertising, Ancestry promotes the traditional family myth and how its product can only serve to uphold it.

One might argue that while these advertisements were somewhat problematic, they were not directly harmful. Yet this has not always been the case. In fact, Ancestry has attempted to overwrite history. In by far its most tone-deaf move, Ancestry released a now-redacted 2019 ad which was widely criticized as romanticizing slavery. Set in Confederate-era Deep South, the ad depicts a white man asking a Black woman – the two are portrayed to be lovers – to run away with him to the North so they can be free together. The spot ends with a headline reading, “Without you, the story stops here.”

The ad received outrage, perhaps best summarized with Kimberly Atkins’s tweet, which states: “One of about 1,000 awful things about this commercial is it ignores the fact that for black Americans – myself included – and for others in the diaspora, DNA and documentary ancestry information is as painful and traumatic as it is illuminating. These are not love stories.” Tweets like this, and the fact that Ancestry removed the ad within days of its airing, indicates that absolutely no one believed the outrageous suggestion that this was how many Black people of present-day America ended up with a proportion of white DNA. This horrific attempt to rewrite history points to Ancestry’s willingness, and even desire, to avoid sharing the stories of the real pain and destruction that ‘family members’ – people who are merely genetically related to each other – have caused and continue to cause each other; it is deliberate ignorance to the fact

41 Atkins, Twitter, 2019. Link.
that real ‘family members’, no matter how connected via genetic information, can cause the greatest harm to each other.

The picture-perfect, romantic, high-production-value, polished storytelling of Ancestry’s advertising is a stark contrast to the real stories we find upon digging into the places where their customers actually have a voice – places such as Reddit. As an increasing number of the family fallout caused by Ancestry’s undeniable truth-telling come to light, and Reddit makes the sharing of those stories more viable, wide-reaching, and efficient than ever, it becomes apparent that Ancestry’s marketing is increasingly incompatible with what its product actually offers. A 2019 Campaign article regarding the removed slavery-romanticizing ad stated it best: “Ancestry has nothing to gain but transparency. The shattered remains of this spot can be used as building blocks for trust. But, like so many brands, it won’t take advantage of this opportunity… I speak as a consumer when I say that this opaqueness has immediately made Ancestry redundant to my life.” The writer ends the article by imploring Ancestry, “Own your shit to sell your shit.”42 This call for transparency might refer to this specific ad rather than the company’s work as a whole, but it also concisely summarizes why all of Ancestry’s advertising together, especially coupled with the real, messy stories people are telling on social media, feel so disingenuous. Historically, rather than compelling people to seek truth above all, Ancestry has chosen the cliché, age-old ‘family first’ approach – one that sticks to the traditional family myth, even when, on the basis of the scientifically indisputable genetic evidence from which Ancestry’s success is undeniably built, it’s no longer convincing.

Creative Project: ‘Moment of Truth’

42 McAteer, ‘We don’t know what went wrong with Ancestry ad – and that’s the real problem’, 2019.
‘AncestryDNA: Moment of Truth’ is an original speculative integrated ad campaign created in response to the demonstrably changing needs of the Ancestry brand. In light of the vast number of family secret revelations catalyzed by the company, Ancestry’s existing advertising approach no longer makes sense. As a result, I created ‘Moment of Truth’ to update the company’s advertising strategy to focus on its unique access to scientifically undeniable family secrets. This campaign subverts the seriousness of its subject matter, deploying dark humor and raw honesty to openly acknowledge the flaws and failures that are common in so many families. By playing off the consumer’s morbid curiosity and “what if?” mentality, it markets the Ancestry DNA test as one which exposes families’ dirtiest secrets and puts them out of business. Above all, it positions Ancestry as a company who is deeply invested in the mission of helping individuals discover the truth and live more honest lives. In this universe, family may be unreliable, but Ancestry’s technology is foolproof. And while many ad campaigns attempt, with complacency, to tell people what to do, ‘Moment of Truth’ only offers to tell people what Ancestry knows, so that they can figure out what to do.

‘Moment of Truth’ spans five campaign elements: out-of-home, print, digital, social, and product extension. The campaign’s design and art direction were created by me, and copy was written in collaboration with Nathan Nguyen, a friend and copywriter at New Honor Society/FCB. Together we conceptualized the campaign and planned out each element over the course of several months. We then trawled Reddit for firsthand accounts of Ancestry experiences, gathering a selection of the most interesting, outrageous, and inspiring stories shared by real Ancestry consumers to inspire each ad.

While Nate wrote headlines, I devised a design style that could be applied across branding, print design, billboard design, digital banner design, social media design, and product design.
Since the campaign focuses on families’ pasts, and its tone is at once goofy, yet somewhat sinister and twisted, the finished design style incorporates visual themes of history and eccentricity. I sourced an array of real vintage family portraits from the 1970s-1990s, their subjects in particularly kooky clothes, positions, and combinations of characters – the more bizarre the portrait, the better. I sourced vintage frames separately, placed the figures within, and superpositioned them on backdrops of real antique wallpaper patterns, then color toned each deliverable to create balance between their sense of strangeness and their entertainment value. Liberal use of negative space and a very simple typographic treatment allowed the headlines’ humor to shine without being overtaken by visuals. On the whole, visual treatment for ‘Moment of Truth’ aims to create an enticing sense of peculiarity – strangeness that is somewhat sinister, yet still whimsically entertaining. Mockups of each campaign element follow.

**Campaign Element 1: Out-Of-Home Advertising.** Ancestry ads appear large-scale on billboards in locations in which people are likely to be spending time with family (the mall), thinking of family (the airport), or on the move to or from the family home (the bus station). Other potential locations include movie theaters, zoos, supermarkets, bathrooms with changing tables, museums, arcades, subway stations and other transit hubs, and parks. The out-of-home element’s shock factor sparks immediate and unexpected reaction, offers photo opportunities for consumers who enjoy and possibly share Ancestry’s humor with their social networks, and creates surround-sound awareness of the company’s new approach to its services.
THERE'S NOTHING LIKE FINDING OUT YOU HAVE A HALF SIBLING.

ESPECIALLY WHEN HE'S YOUR BOYFRIEND.

CALL DAD TO TELL HIM YOU LOVE HIM.
AND ALSO THAT HE'S NOT YOUR DAD.

Memes of Truth • ANCESTRY
Campaign Element 2: Print Advertising. No ad campaign is complete without classic print ads; these will run in the most popular magazines and newspapers, with a particular focus on family and parenting publications, pop culture magazines whose audience base aligns with the campaign’s humor, publications whose audiences are likely to be young family members, and publications whose readers potentially have an intellectual interest in DNA testing opportunities. Examples include The New York Times, Reader’s Digest, The New Yorker, Martha Stewart magazines, Family Magazine, Wired, The Atlantic, Parents, GQ, Maxim, Men’s Health, and Cosmopolitan.
YOUR UNCLE’S A FAMILY MAN.
PROBLEM IS, HE HAS FIVE.

GRANDMA’S BIGGEST SECRET ISN’T HER COOKIE RECIPE.

YOUR COUSIN HAD A WIFE AND 2 KIDS.
NOW, HE JUST HAS 6 KIDS.
Campaign Element 3: Contextual Digital Banners. We hijack websites used for planning or browsing for families, such as Zillow, a property-search website, and Kayak, a travel planning website. When users enter a certain number of individuals into the search field (e.g. 4 bedroom apartments on Zillow), digital banners appear, stoking curiosity and imploring them to seek certainty on their family situations before making important decisions.
Campaign Element 4: Social Media Memes. Ancestry’s social media accounts will be rebranded with the new visual direction consistent with the traditional campaign elements. True to the twisted humor of the overall campaign, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit memes will draw in younger and digital-savvy consumers.

Campaign Element 5: Product Extension. ‘Moment of Truth’ isn’t merely a campaign – it’s an experience. Each Ancestry testing kit now comes with a booklet with instructions on how to tell your family the secrets you discover about your family. Suggestions include:

1. Send a text in the family group chat.
2. Send a mass email blast.
3. Write snail mail to each family member.
4. Post it on social media and tag all of your family members.
5. Tell them over a family Zoom call.
6. Don’t. (Take it to the grave.)
Conclusion

Ancestry is disproving the traditional family myth and transforming humans’ understanding of themselves, their roots, and their relationships. It is changing the way in which we learn and understand personal evidence and apply genetic information, encouraging consumers to easily access to scientific data rather than draw conclusions from traditional storytelling, written records, and research. In addition to DNA testing, a combination of social media and integrated advertising communications technologies make it possible to disseminate information in a way families of the world have never before seen. Together, these technologies make it impossible to ignore that pre-ordained family relationships are no longer enough to maintain the social order by virtue of their existence. They are transforming our beliefs in what family means, from the fundamentally flawed and impossible myth that ‘family’ equals automatic, permanent respect and kinship to the revelation that in reality, this conception of family is an ideology, not an inevitability. Social media
stories on the fallibility, difficulties, and even cruelties of family systems give rise to the mass realization that families are not a foolproof method of obtaining kinship; instead, kinship is chosen and can be revoked at any time. And a DNA test taken by a single family member can shock us from a conception of family trust as guaranteed to the realization that families are not entitled to trust and trust can be broken at any time.

While the revelations driven forth by Ancestry and Reddit may not be comforting, and certainly hold the potential to cause a great deal of damage, they also serve as an argument for the importance of conscious choice and genuine truthfulness in relationships. Perhaps the knowledge that the worst secrets are not necessarily safe will urge DNA test enthusiasts – and those who know and love them – to pursue more honest and sincere connections. Finally, these technologies teach us that, if and when trust is broken, the only way to cushion the blow is to finally admit that the Western model of the traditional family institution is truly bizarre.
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