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You're not alone: virtual communities, online relationships & modern identities in the Military Spouse Blogging Community

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This work is dedicated to the men and women of the American military – and their tireless families

ABSTRACT

The American military and its military families have faced unprecedented deployments and injuries since the United States declared a "war on terror" in 2001. In this same time, the Internet has grown into an everyday source of contact for dispersed individuals across the world.

This research project aimed to uncover the ways that female military spouses use blogging to connect with each other and explore their own identities. Positing that the military spouse community is a minority within its own country, the dissertation asks whether these online connections function like offline ones, and to what extent military spouses, as an underrepresented minority, benefit from these new networks. The discussion relied on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 13 current military spouse bloggers, and results revealed three main themes: virtual communities, online relationships and modern identity.

Ultimately, findings indicate that online spaces are now functioning like offline places, allowing community, relationships and identity to flourish online—in some cases even more robustly than offline. Beyond its immediate findings, these results have reverberating impact on social capital in America and the way networked societies exist in multiple dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

> I honestly think 12 years of war definitely ties us all together. I mean … there are
> obviously the multiple deployments, moves with children and, you know, the struggles they
> have. Definitely. 12 years of war will tie anybody together. Isabelle.

Since the Global War on Terror (GWOT) began in 2001, more than 2.4 million American troops have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan (IAVA, 2011). Countless others have served elsewhere in the world. And millions of spouses and family members have waited at home, hoping their loved ones return.

In these same 12 years, civilian society has separated from the military one it parallels. Lewis postulates that the American draft during the Vietnam War began a rift that stretches into modern society and affects America's attitude toward its current wars (Lewis, 2012). Wiegand and Paletz's (2001) study of media portrayals of the so-called military-civilian culture gap found that, "during the last thirty years, citizens have lost trust in the federal government and many other institutions of American life 'to do the right thing'" (p. 199). And then, in 2001, America was attacked on its land for the first time since Pearl Harbor.

In the wake of September 11, as President Bush urged Congress to declare war, he delivered a speech which further cemented the division between America's civilians and America's military. Instead of uniting the nation, he urged the public to hug their families and grow the economy. To his military, he delivered an entirely different message: "Be ready. I have called the armed forces to alert, and there is a reason. The hour is coming when America will act, and you will make us proud" (Bush, 2001). Whereas American response to World War II glorified military families and saw civilians planting "Victory gardens," the GWOT was fought by "the military cluster" alone (Lewis, 2012, p. 10). Military spouses—or "milspouses"—fell into this camp, and grew further apart from the civilians around them.

While their physical lives were uprooted, many milspouses turned to blogging as a way to meet people going through similar circumstances, share tips on housekeeping and successful moves, and keep in touch with friends and families across the country. Once considered part of the old, bourgeois perspective on society, Habermas' public sphere (1974) has seen a resurgence in the form of online communication. Often criticized for being overly utopian and impossible to achieve (Mouffe, 1999; Calhoun, 1992), his idealized public body can be found in recent years online, springing up in comment sections on blogs and websites. Although today's online public sphere may look nothing like Habermas' enlightenment cafes, milspouse bloggers are connecting online and building a strong sense of community.

This group of women presents a perfect case study through which to examine the way virtual communities in the digital age have begun working in tandem with, or even replacing, failing offline communities across America. Using this community as an access point into Castells' (2009) network society, this project analyzes the roles virtual community plays both in the lives of members and in society more generally. It asks how individual relationships within virtual communities function and about the importance of modern identities. Chapter 2 begins with an exploration of the theoretical arguments behind the research and introduces relevant empirical findings. The methodology is described in Chapter 3, and the results and discussion presented in Chapter 4. The final chapter applies the findings of this small-scale study on a larger scale, asking about the dual impact this research has on both military families still fighting the GWOT and global diasporas displaced by time and space.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter builds the theoretical groundwork for the claim that virtual communities are replacing offline communities, identifying online relationships and modern identities as key components within. It introduces the milspouse blogging community (MSBC) as a case study through which to answer the research questions that frame the dissertation.

Literature review

Putnam's (2000) iconic work on social capital finds that America's decline in social capital over the second half of the twentieth century led to a decrease in civic participation. As Americans spend less time together, and more time alone, he proposes, they lose relationships with each other and investment in the community. Although writing during Jenkins' (2002) so called "digital revolution", I would point out that Putnam fails to consider the way the Internet and associated digital technologies factor into his research.

At first glance, the Internet may be understood to further Putnam's claim: as individuals turn to their computers in Castells' (2009) networked society, and learn to communicate with each other via the Internet, traditional offline communities may fracture. Indeed, in the past, it's been necessary to share time and space with others to form a physical, offline connection (Meyrowitz, 1985); by this finding, one might suspect that our new computerized habits find us ever more alone.

Virtual Communities

Instead, in this new, networked society, Meyrowitz finds the opposite is true. Time and space become increasingly unimportant as individuals connect across time zones, traditional boundaries and physical borders. Noting a trend toward decreased differences between online and offline interactions, Meyrowitz argues that the rise of electronic media denotes that being physically alone no longer means being socially alone. We, in the electronic age, are always connected through media, and rarely ever truly alone (see Skoric, Ying and Ng, 2009).

Fernback and Thompson (1995) provide a definition of online community as "social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest" (online). To that end, multiple studies have examined the sustainability of online communities and the relationship between the online and offline components of existing communities (Matzat, 2010; Cheung and Lee, 2009; Nip, 2004; Stavrositu and Sundar, 2012). Fox (2004) even developed an entirely new framework to "integrate virtual and physical communities" (p. 47).

The analysis of online community here, however, will be grounded in McMillan and Chavis' (1986) concept known as "sense of community" (SOC). Because it was developed in an offline context, it provides a key link to determine how contemporary online communities function like their offline forefathers. McMillan and Chavis lay out four elements that determine SOC: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment, and shared emotional connection (p. 9). This seminal definition invites nuance in uncovering both the benefits and responsibilities of community, and can easily be transferred to an online environment.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the term "virtual community" has been used in various contexts, with various definitions. Wei (2004) uses it to define an established organization of bloggers, with set rules, a joint home page, and widgets for participating blogs. Blanchard (2004) recognizes this formal definition, but revisits McMillan and Chavis' to determine whether blogospheres with a strong SOC can give rise to less official virtual communities. Blanchard's revised, unofficial virtual community seems synonymous with Fernback and Thompson's unstructured online community. I define virtual community here as a group of online interactions between a specific set of people and characterized by a strong SOC.

While Blanchard finds that the blogosphere is not a virtual community, she suggests that "blogs have the potential to evolve into socially beneficial, self-sustaining virtual communities" (2004, online). The research presented in this project revisits Blanchard's

argument a decade later, updating her conclusion and examining the ways that virtual communities do function as 'socially beneficial' and 'self-sustaining.'

Here again, we find relevance in Putnam's original concept of social capital (2000), albeit applied to Meyrowitz's electronic world. Does participation and membership in a virtual community function to increase the social capital Putnam saw jeopardized by our disconnected lifestyles? Much like Blanchard's early work, this research analyses the extent to which today's virtual communities serve to connect individuals and increase social capital, thereby fostering an online SOC.

Online relationships

In order to address this question, we must break down the interactions and connections between individuals online. How do they combine to form virtual communities? In an increasingly online world, the question is whether relationships built between strangers online can function the same way as relationships in the physical world.

Online vs. Offline Relationships

Wood and Solomon (2009) contend that "the dynamics of social influence that are so well-documented in physical contexts...transfer to virtual group relationships as well" (p. xii). They recognize that the structures of relationships remain relatively similar, while the types and origin of relationships may vary. With time, Floridi predicts that "the very distinction between online and offline will become blurred and then disappear" (2011, p. 477). For now, though, researchers are working to better understand online relationships in the context of offline structures. For instance, Szell and Thurner (2013) examined the differences between how men and women build online relationships and networks. Chan and Cheng (2004) conducted groundbreaking research into the quality of these relationships, finding that while online relationships developed more slowly, differences between the relationships disappear with time. Much of the research in this field, though, studies differences between online and offline habits, behavior and interests (Hirzalla and van Zoonen, 2010; Ogan, *et al.*, 2008; Awan and Gauntlett, 2013), rather than looking explicitly at relationship types.

Types of Relationships

Another key issue behind online relationships is grounded in one of the basic tenets of identity theory. Goffman argued that "two individuals become acquainted when each can identify … and acknowledge … the other" (as cited in Zhao, Grasmuck *et al.,* 2008, p. 1818) Based on this definition, one only knows people with whom they personally interact.
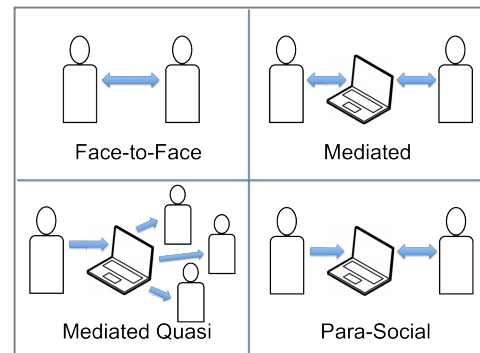

Figure 1: Types of Interaction

Thompson (2005), whose relationship definitions are widely regarded, outlines three types of interaction, but only the first two fit Goffman's requirement (see Figure 1). The first, face-to-face, is seen in dialogical, in-person conversations. The second, mediated interaction, is "stretched across space and may also be stretched out or compressed in time" (p. 33). Importantly, this communication is mediated by a technology, such as the computer. Finally, Thompson's third type is mediated quasi-interaction, different from mediated interaction because it both addresses an "indefinite range of potential recipients" (p. 33) and is "largely monological" (p. 33).

This last relationship is the one most relevant to this study. In a mediated world, where one absorbs producer-driven content, the reader may come to feel they know the producer personally. Horton and Wohl (2006) refer to these relationships as "para-social", emphasizing the way that technology allows mediated relationships to feel face-to-face, seemingly collapsing Thompson's scale of mediated interaction. Empirical research into this phenomenon has focused mainly on television and celebrity culture (Houlberg, 1984; Perse and Rubin, 1989; Maltby, Giles, *et al.,* 2005; Stever, 2011; Tsai and Lu, 2012), and avoided the ways these relationships form online.

Here, as will be discussed more below, milspouses are seen to actively engage with one another online. The question remains whether they are forming virtual face-to-face relationships or creating para-social relationships between literal strangers. The research presented here aims to address this question and better understand the nature of online relationships.

Identity

The nature of online relationships, of course, and whether they form as virtual, face-to-face relationships or the para-social ones discussed above, depends to a large degree on the

identities of those involved. Identity on its own is a complicated concept with many varying definitions and points of view. Scholars disagree on whether identity is an innate, fixed aspect of one's existence, or whether it is variable, fluid and context-dependent aspect. Viewed within the context of the new networked society, however, identity becomes more complex, ultimately leading to a discussion of the way identities function in modernity.

Fixed vs. fluid identities

Arguing for the concept of fixed identity, Rothman "assert[s] that there is considerable evidence that the human psyche is embedded in a biological structure which sets the parameters of identity and personality and which is defied with difficulty" (1997, p. 49). He continues by suggesting that any social organization need be "rigid" to accommodate for and control these personalities (ibid). Although Hearn acknowledges this point of view, calling identity "a relatively fixed sense of self" (2003, p. xiii), he suggests that there is more nuance in the issue than traditional theorists recognize.

Classical sociologists would likely agree with Hearn, recognizing that identity is a "hybrid and constantly changing" form (Woodward, 2002, p. 160). Mead, a key theorist on identity, emphasizes the importance of the dialogical understanding of identity. A "symbol" does not become "significant," he postures, until after it is acknowledged; without the two-way exchange that recognizes a wave as a greeting, the wave remains a gesture without meaning (da Silva, 2007, p. 4). This type of interaction keeps identity fluid, changing based on the situation, and emphasizing the way that the "generalized other" perceives an identity. (ibid, p. 5). At the center of Mead's theory is the concept that one must understand how the other perceives them, an idea he calls "taking the role of the other" (ibid, p. 4). This understanding is initially learned in children through "play," as when playing house, and then through game, requiring children to understand not just one point of view, but the actions of all players in the game (ibid, p. 5).

While Mead discusses the importance of playing in another's identity to further frame your own, Goffman (1959) seems to extend this theory of play even further. Recognizing audience interpretation, he places the entire construct in a theatrical vein. For him, identity is a series of both *performances*, where the player is constantly "fabricat[ing] impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance" (p. 244), and *characters*, figures "whose strength, spirit, and other sterling qualities the performance was designed to evoke" (p. 244). According to Goffman, life is literally a stage where the self "is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented" that requires "interpretative activity" from the audience to fully understand itself (p. 245).

Woodward (2002) warns, however, against isolating identity as either too fluid or too rigid, arguing that placing identity within any confines, whether conservative or liberal, limits our understanding of it. She writes, "just at the moment when you might think that you have a handle on it the narrative is reframed and its [identity's] structure becomes uncertain" (p. 158). Even Goffman's understanding of identity, which allows for constant flux between performer and audience, also establishes a boundary around the way that identity is constructed and expressed. Instead, Woodward sees identity as the sum of experiences, based on an individual's history, sense of belonging, geography, stories and relationships. As these extend, so too does identity shift, mature, expand and contract.

Identities in a Modern World

Never is this more true than in Meyrowitz's electronic age. Hoover and Coats (2011) find that men are fed aspects of their masculinity from the media that surrounds them everyday, a phenomenon Shohat and Stam (1996) also discuss: "Contemporary media shape identity … They exist close to the very core of identity production" (p. 145). Each interaction with produced media, then, shapes and molds the identities of those who absorb it. Indeed, Davies (2004) discovered that websites help teach young girls how to enact their own femininity, a term so loaded that an entire field of study surrounds it. Media, then, have the power to affect a person's very core.

Understandably, this argument extends easily from a television environment to an online one. Dean (2010) calls the online space one of "infinite doubt" (p. 6), where "there's always another option, link, opinion, nuance, or contingency that we haven't taken into account" (ibid). Consequently, these experiences change the shape and tenets of an individual's identity each time they go online. One set of researchers even claim that "the combination of disembodiment and anonymity creates a technologically mediated environment in which a new mode of identity production emerges" (Zhao *et al.,* 2008, p. 1817). Identities are shaped by each moment of online interaction, leaving them constantly in flux, never definable, and perpetually influenced by the people, stories and experiences they encounter.

As the world continues to modernize, Giddens (1991) argues that this flux of people, stories and experiences is "characterized by the profound processes of the reorganization of time and space" (p. 2). Lives are constantly changing and boundaries and borders crossed (see Appadurai, 1990). Risks increase and the "potential destructive power of weaponry" leads to what Giddens' coins "total war" (p. 15).

These experiences, Giddens offers, shape identities in ways unique to high modernity. He argues, "each of us not only 'has', but *lives* a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life" (p. 14). This is what I call modern identity.

Milspouses, I would argue, live in this total war society, and do shape their own identities based on understandings of their experiences and constructions of their "narrative of the self" (p. 76). Giddens suggests those living in high modernity must journal their own narratives to better understand their identities, the events they've lived and the implications of each. "At each moment," he says, "the individual is asked to conduct a self-interrogation in terms of what is happening" (p. 76). These moments of expression can be found on milspouse blogs, as women chronicle challenges and achievements, reach out to comfort or support fellow spouses, and negotiate their own modern identity.

Numerous studies have examined identity production and self-representation online. These range from analyses on topics ranging from blogging (Guadagno *et al.,* 2008; van Doorn, *et al.,* 2007; Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005), to dating sites (Ellison, *et al.*, 2011), to social networking sites more generally (Zhao *et al.,* 2008; Kendall, 2000; Siibak, 2010; Elm, 2009), and even considering the relationship between online and offline identity (Livingstone, 2008; Bortree, 2005; Yee, *et al.*, 2009). To my knowledge, none have examined the interaction between virtual communities, online relationships and modern identity.

The Milspouse Blogging Community

Bringing all of these concepts together—virtual communities, online relationships and modern identity—requires a specific online space dependent upon the rise of Castells' networked society. We find this specific network in the milspouse blogging community (MSBC) (see Appendix A for an in-depth discussion about blogging).

Milspouse bloggers are communicating on individual and mass levels, broadcasting hopes and fears to friends and strangers, building relationships and revealing their souls. As such, they offer a perfect framework through which to study the issues raised above, namely, the extent to which virtual communities offer a SOC, how online relationships function and the role that modern identity plays in the creation of both. Although numerous studies have been

examined blogs, their functions and their benefits[1], fewer have looked at military blogs specifically.

Of those that have, most centered on deploying service members connecting with family and friends back home or participating in citizen journalism (Finer, 2005; Stelter, 2008; Dao, 2011; Shapiro and Humphreys, 2012). Other scholars have examined health information presented on blogs (Konovalov *et al.*, 2010), blog credibility (Johnson and Kaye, 2010) and comparisons between civil war letters and contemporary war blogs (Shapiro and Humphreys, 2012). No major studies have been conducted that focus on the MSBC and its bloggers. The interviews conducted within this study contribute to this new field and lay the groundwork for further research.

The Milspouse population, a modern minority

American female milspouses lead a life in limbo. They often move from families to marry spouses, are asked to relocate frequently, face deployments, periods of single parenting and long stretches of time without employment (Eubanks, 2013). Furthermore, many are civilian brides, who "become part of the military family" (ibid, p. 97) at their wedding. As has been discussed, they exist within Giddens' (1991) "high modernity," and blog to negotiate identity.

This particular group of high-modernity citizens, and their online presence, exemplifies a perfect 'niche community' to form the basis of this study. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2012 there were more than 313 million people living in the United States, of which just over 50 percent (about 159 million) were female (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Comparing these figures to the number of American milspouses (just over 1 million, including Coast Guard, National Guard and Reserve families)[2] reveals a stark minority. Less than one percent of the females in America are milspouses.

It stands to reason, then, that even fewer of these are milspouse bloggers. This distinction allows me to treat the group with special consideration. Female milspouse bloggers are a minority numerically—in terms of their representation in the larger population, and experientially—in terms of their separation from the civilian population. Previous research has established the way that minorities favor "niche communities" where they can communicate with one another and feel included (Correa and Jeong, 2010). As a minority

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[1] Studies on blogs have examined some of the main purposes of blogging, such as relaying news, staying in touch with family and friends, working through experiences, and connecting with distant peoples (Wall, 2005; Gurak and Antonijevic, 2008; MacDougall, 2005; Drezner and Farrell, 2004; Pedersen and Macafee, 2007). Other research has focused on some of the broader benefits of blogging, such as evaluating its usefulness to specific professions (Maxymuk, 2005; Cole, 2011), understanding its role in research (Shema, *et al.,* 2012; Hookway, 2008; Eastham, 2011), and examining the role it can play in education and civic engagement (Custin and Barkacs, 2010; Bouwma-Gearhart and Bess, 2012).

here, milspouses have established a niche community of online bloggers that forms the perfect network to study the question of how online spaces have begun replacing offline places.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As argued above, milspouse bloggers present a unique opportunity to study interactions of virtual community, online relationships and modern identity. Given this discussion, the execution of this analysis and the findings of the research will be grounded in these three key concepts.

First, discussions around a virtual community will be defined by the presence of McMillan and Chavis' SOC. Examining an offline concept through an online lens allows analysis of the ways Americans are turning to the Internet to replace declining social capital.

Second, the research here examines the creation and execution of four types of relationships online: Thompson's three types of interaction and Horton and Wohl's para-social relationships. To accommodate the MSBC context, Thompson's concepts are appropriately updated. Face-to-face interaction becomes an offline relationship grown out of contacts made online. Mediated interaction remains much the same, allowing bloggers to communicate with each other online via email or comment threads (which admittedly have the potential to be read and responded to by many). Mediated quasi-interaction becomes the act of blogging itself. Written from the point of view of the post's *author*, it is "monological" and published for an "indefinite" number of viewers. From a *reader's* perspective, however, Thompson's definitions cease to apply, as a mediated quasi-interaction leads to the creation of a para-social relationship.

Third and finally, the project aims to uncover how milspouses identify themselves and represent themselves online. This analysis accounts for two key theories. First, Woodward's theory of identity creation, which rests on an ever-shifting landscape of experiences, interactions and understandings. Second, Giddens' conceptualization of high-modernity. Together, these terms form the concept of modern identity, which allows identity to be fluid and simultaneously multi-form, influenced by the movement of people, ideas and histories across physical borders (see Appadurai, 1990).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

[2] Gathered from Department of Defense data (Military Community and Family Policy, 2011).

In order to better understand the dynamic between virtual community, online relationships and modern identities, this research conducts an exploratory study into the MSBC. To this end, the research questions guiding the empirical study are:

To what extent, if any, do online spaces serve to replace disconnected offline places in an increasingly digital society?

- To what extent, if any, do virtual communities exhibit markers of a sense of community?
- To what extent, if any, do online relationships function as offline relationships?
- How do modern identities contribute to one's role in an online space?

The chosen case study narrows the scope of the work, allowing in-depth analysis of the issues and concepts examined. On the surface, gathering blogger insight regarding their understanding of virtual communities, online relationships and modern identity forms the basis of future research into this under-studied population. As America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, more and more spouses will feel the stress of returning service members struggling to reintegrate into civilian life. As the popularity of milspouse blogging increases, it seems likely that this stress will be reflected in the MSBC. Understanding the dynamics of these blogs and their roles in military life is absolutely essential to supporting American military families over the next several years.

This case study, however, also primes the field for even more far-reaching outcomes. This research begins to address questions left unanswered by Putnam's fear of declining social capital and Castells' insight about the new network society. As people increasingly shirk traditional offline communities and engage in a digital network society, they lose connection with those with whom they share time and space. This research allows empirically grounded analysis of the ways in which the online world is replacing the aspects of the offline world that have declined in the last fifty years.

METHODOLOGY

Addressing the research questions outlined in Chapter 2 requires analysis of the ways that milspouses use blogging platforms, interact online and react to online relationships. Although blogs present opportunities for multiple types of qualitative research such as interviews and critical discourse analysis, as well as quantitative techniques such as content analysis and surveys, interviews were chosen as the most appropriate way to learn about bloggers' own "self-understanding…and perspective on their lived world" (Kvale, 1996, p. 105). The findings of this exploratory study were analyzed through thematic analysis, and coded into themes and categories that allowed key issues to arise from the data.

This chapter outlines and justifies some of these key methodological decisions framing the research technique before describing the research design and its implications.

Qualitative interviews and thematic analysis

This research was not interested in semantic detail of the words milspouses chose on their blogs, as interpreted through discourse analysis or content analysis (see Krippendorff, 2004; Hansen, 1998; Chouliaraki, 2008; Fairclough, 1992). Additionally, the behavior and habits that could be tabulated through survey data (see Dillman, 2008; Moser, 1971) would not reveal the crux of opinion, attitude and outlook. Instead, the research questions ask about milspouse opinions, experiences and social relationships, all information best gathered through interviews (Silverman, 2001; Esterberg, 2002; Kvale, 1996). For this reason, interviews were determined to be the most appropriate method to gather data.

Why interviews?

Although there are three types of interviews common in qualitative research—open, semi-structured and structured (Esterberg, 2002)—this research uses the second. The first allows for "spontaneous and free-flowing" conversation (Esterberg, 2002, p. 89), while structured interviews are planned and prescribed with no variety in the questions asked (ibid, p. 85). Semi-structured interviews, not surprisingly, occur somewhere in the middle. As Esterberg explains, "the goal is to explore a topic … and to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words" (ibid, p. 87). Although each of the three methods has its own pros and cons, semi-structured interviews were used here to allow for organic discussion and

"spontaneous and in-depth responses" (Baumbusch, 2010, p. 255) between researcher and participant. Additionally, as the research conducted here was an exploratory study, conversation needed to flow naturally around specific topics, two key aspects which would have been impossible in open and structured interview conditions, respectively.

By building a relationship with participants, I was able to encourage honest opinions and ask follow-up questions to unearth a deeper understanding. Participants needed to lead, uncover and discover "new dimensions" to the research field (Kvale, 1996, p. 100; Roulston, 2010), so an interview guide was created to structure the interview (Kvale, 1996), allow participants to derive their own meaning (Baumbusch, 2010), and control against both researcher personality type and bias.

There has been, to my knowledge, no research to date concerning milspouse bloggers, although researchers have suggested examining the ways digital networks shift war correspondence (Shapiro and Humphreys, 2012), contacting bloggers themselves through snowball sampling for hard-to-access populations (Johnson and Kaye, 2010). Consequently, no hypotheses were written prior to gathering data.

Limitations of interviews and mitigation techniques

While interviews were appropriate to answer the research questions presented here, they are not without their drawbacks and theoretical debates. One such limitation concerns the relationship between researcher and participant. Although a candid conversation is necessary, researchers must maintain distance to preserve the integrity of the interview (Esterberg, 2002, p. 90). Researcher personality can impact an interview's outcome and a participant's "level of self-disclosure" (ibid, p. 88). As an extroverted person, my personality certainly impacted outcomes here, even with an interview guide designed to mitigate this. It is, however, impossible to isolate the effects of my personality on the research's findings.

A second key limitation of interviews arises directly from the first, focusing specifically on the bias inherent in conversations between researcher and participant (Kvale 1996). With this specific population, a minority in their own right, I worried about sensitivities around candid answers. Because of the military-civilian culture gap, many milspouses fear civilian misconceptions about them (Lewis, 2010). As the researcher, I am not a member of the community, and have limited prior exposure to it. Both researcher and participant bias is unavoidable in any conversation, but the construction of an interview guide here (like with the personality issue above) limited the degree to which prior knowledge of and attitude towards military families swayed conversations across multiple interviews.

Ethical concerns weigh heavily on any research carried out with human subjects. One such concern relates to the inherent interviewer bias discussed above. Another concerns online research (see Ess, 2009; Elgesem, 2002), but here (although related to online participation) the research was conducted offline. Clarke (2006) highlights one of the biggest concerns, which relates to the impact the interview situation has on participants, emphasizing the importance of building rapport with participants, introducing yourself and your point of view, allowing the conversation to flow naturally and ensuring the participant also has time to ask questions. Each of these suggestions was taken into consideration when planning and conducting the interviews.

Thematic analysis

There are two main ways to analyze interview data: narrative analysis and thematic or categorical analysis (Silverman, 2001; Kvale, 1996; Gillham, 2005). This project uses thematic analysis and theme-based coding to uncover "natural meaning units" (Kvale, 1996, p. 196) that arose during interviews and categorize them as a way of "creat[ing] meaning out of...raw materials" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 152). This allows the data to guide the findings (Gillham, 2005), as opposed to imposing preconceptions upon the research data. Here, again, the exploratory nature guided this decision; as findings weren't predicted, categories couldn't be defined ahead of time.

SAMPLING PROCESS

A pilot was conducted that explored how blogs help construct identity for members of the military, including men and women, reservists and active-duty service members, enlisted personnel and officers, and service members and spouses. Following the pilot, the research question was altered and the sample narrowed. Here, the sample includes only female milspouses, a sub-group of the initial sample. This condensed approach allows more in-depth research, as well as a comprehensive examination of the nuances observed.

Selecting participants

Following the precedent sent by Bauer and Gaskell (2000), I prefer the word selecting over sampling to describe building a pool of participants for this study. In order to "sample the range of views" (p. 42) represented in milspouse blogs, I employed what Esterberg (2002)

calls a "purposive strategy" (p. 93). I built a list of the criteria in my participant pool and ensured each was met by at least one participant. These included aspects such as age, education and branch of the military. I initially searched Wordpress blogs, as Wordpress is a major platform for users to self -publish their sites. Using the built in search function, I searched blogs tagged "milspouse" or "military life". After creating this specialized feed, blogs were matched against the criteria and those created after January 2013 were eliminated. To expand the initial participant pool, I used snowball sampling (Esterberg, 2002). Suggested bloggers were fitted to the criteria above and if applicable, added to the participant pool.

Difficulties encountered

This particular sample, however, presented its own set of difficulties. First, many big milbloggers self-host their sites, so they weren't searchable on Wordpress. Most of the bigger blogs included were discovered through snowball sampling, future studies may do better to find milspouse bloggers through other veins.

Furthermore, early summer is what the military informally refers to as PCS season, when hundreds of thousands of families move to new duty stations (Military.com, 2012). Consequently, many spouses were in the middle of moves when I contacted them and unable to find time to talk. Additionally, military families are highly trained about national security issues and recognizing threats. More than one spouse confirmed that they had nearly ignored my email[3], assuming it to be a phishing attempt from a terrorist organization, before talking with other spouses about their experiences during the interview and deciding to respond.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Selected participants were contacted regarding their willingness to participate (see Appendix B for Consent Form). If they indicated interest, they were sent the consent form and explained that data would be anonymized and unpublished. As referenced above, an interview guide was written in alignment with the findings and research questions in Chapter 2 (see Appendix C), and used to conduct semi-structured interviews. Each was recorded and transcribed (see Appendix E for sample), before being coded.

Coding technique followed a combination of Esterberg's three steps (2002)—open coding, theme-based coding and focused coding—and Kvale's (2002) recommended process. During the first stage, each interview was reviewed independently and main topics, interesting

phrases and key moments were noted. During the second, these initial impressions were compared to each other and consolidated into main themes. Transcripts were then read again to note how these themes resonate through each conversation, and to build sub-themes. The final phase saw the interviews coded a final time against these themes and sub-themes, pulling out key quotations and material for analysis and discussion.

Expectations

Conducting interviews as part of this research significantly shapes the outcomes and findings. Whereas surveys would provide information about blogging habits and behavior, demographics of bloggers, and perhaps even a more reliable count of milspouse bloggers, interviews take a far more in-depth look at opinions and values. This information is not, however, statistically significant and cannot be expanded to an entire population (Kvale, 1996; Dillman, 2008). Instead, themes that arose from conversations with milspouse bloggers can be true only for these participants and not for the entire population of milspouses.

This data still proves useful, though. As one of the first exploratory projects on this sample, the findings here provide an important basis for further research within this specific population, laying the groundwork for further studies on the MSBC. Furthermore, they provide in-depth look at a virtual community within the larger digital society, hoping to answer questions about how the online world is functioning as, and even replacing, the offline one.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research included 13 interviews with female American milspouses[4], aged between 22 and 44, representing every branch of the military, including active duty and reserve officers and enlisted service members (see Appendix D for participant demographics).

As discussed above, there are roughly a million female spouses in the American military community, and not everyone blogs. Jill, one of the longest-active bloggers, estimates that the MSBC comprises 300-400 people. Based on those interviewed, this number seems low, as about half did not belong to the forums Jill used to estimate this number. Ultimately, though, the number of milspouse bloggers seems almost impossible to track across platforms, and

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[3] Out of the nearly 35 people I contacted, half never responded.

[4] All identifying information has been anonymized throughout the dissertation to protect participants.

perhaps unnecessary. Compared to the number of milspouses, the number is miniscule, and yet to the women involved, the small community is vital.

This chapter[5] examines the data gathered to analyze three key themes that arose: virtual community, individual relationships and modern identity. The analysis pays particular attention to the ways the MSBC functions, the roles individual relationships play in this digital society and how identities are given freedom online. Grounded in the conceptual framework and directed by the research questions outlined in Chapter 2, it aims to address and answer these questions, ultimately building the argument that online spaces in our networked society function much like offline places.

The Virtual Community

> It's very helpful in our community to be able to connect with people who
> are not necessarily living next door to you, or even in your community.
> And to know that you're not alone in this world. Isabelle.

The virtual community's function and benefits arose as the most wide-reaching theme in the data. All 13 participants recognized a community of milspouse bloggers online. Jill explains the community, its activity and its merits:.

> *Jill*: We are a close-knit community, we all read each other's blogs, we all, you know,
> are on the same forums. It has really strongly become a community that I identify
> with. I think because, in my everyday real life, I don't have military spouses to talk to
> and who understand. So, my blog is kind of that place where I can go where I can
> talk about my life, but I can be understood. Because in my normal life, when I talk
> about military stuff, I get a lot of blank stares.

Jill identifies with this group of women as if they are her closest friends, admitting at once point, "my entire life is online". As a long-standing member, Jill has solidified her position in the center of the community, and benefits from what it offers.

At the same time, newer bloggers are aware of the opportunity, but don't feel the same level of inclusion. Hailey, for instance, started blogging because she was surprised by the community at her boyfriend's Marine Corps Ball, and wanted to locate that offline experience online. She fears, though, that the community may be less active now than it has been:

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[5] Throughout this chapter, participant quotations are indented and printed in 10 point font. An ellipsis offset by spaces indicates a removed section of text, whereas a phrase ending in an ellipsis indicates that the speaker trailed off.

> *Hailey*: I feel like a year or two ago, there may have been [more]. ... But if there is one out there, I'm determined to find it. Or, if there isn't, create it myself.

For her, the community is such an important—if weak—aspect of her blogging experience, she is determined to recreate it. Her belief that it is not active, however, makes Hailey the exception. Other less-involved members still recognize both the importance of the community and its activity. Fran, who admits she doesn't blog often about military-related topics, reflects that she still enjoys being a part of the community, which provides benefits to its members.

These benefits take three key forms: a shared emotional connection, a sense of emotional support and an ongoing education about others in the community. Discussions here examine each of these, as well as the risks inherent in any group.

The benefits of blogging: connecting online

Throughout the interviews, milspouse bloggers reported sharing similar experiences, connecting with others like them and relating instantaneously online. Emma, whose blog receives fewer than 20 hits per post—most of which she believes to be her friends and family—still values the "solidarity" felt between bloggers over shared experiences such as misconceptions, frequent moving, distance from loved ones and more.

One of the oldest women, Claire, is a relatively new blogger who already enjoys upwards of 60,000 views a month. She discusses the same connection, highlighting the parallels between the offline and online communities:

> *Claire*: Being a military spouse, it doesn't matter what branch, or where you live, or anything. When you meet a military spouse, there is just ... this instant connection that you have. And, you know, the same thing plays online.

For some bloggers, then, it seems the difference between online and offline space may matter less than the connection felt between strangers. Claire feels this connection both offline—having spent most of her husband's nearly 20-year career on post—and now online, as she heads towards his retirement and her reentrance into the civilian community.

For others, the online space is a lifeline. Isabelle, whose blog focuses on tips and resources for military families, stresses the way the Internet has the capacity to end isolation for those that are far from extended families, military instillations, close friends, or all three.

> *Isabelle*: They don't have the support. So they reach out looking for it, and they find it in the blogging community. They reach out to blogs and are like, 'Oh, I feel the same way!' And they are instantly connected to people because they can see that their experiences, they are not alone in them.

Indeed, many of the women emphasized this online connection, and the important role it played in their life. For instance, Dana, as a stay-at-home mom, finds it hard to leave the house to connect offline. Grace moved to Hawaii as a newlywed only to have her husband deploy shortly after, leaving her "isolated" without friends, neighbors or a job. For these two, and many more, their online connections are invaluable.

This data supports Meyrowitz's (1985) prediction: the movement of offline communities online allows physically alone individuals to remain socially connected. For many, this connection means they are no longer in the midst of an isolated struggle but a member of a coherent and widespread community.

This sense of connectedness fulfills McMillan and Chavis' (1986) first two qualifications for identifying a SOC within a delineated group: membership and shared emotional connection. In the MSBC, bloggers feel that they belong to a group, can identify with others, and share experiences, opinions and history.

The benefits of blogging: supporting online

If the first main benefit that milspouse bloggers find in their community is a sense of belonging, the second benefit addresses the ways the community improves their lives. Eight spouses talked about the general importance of the community during a spouse's deployment, because, as Claire said, "they know what I'm dealing with ... They know what it's like".

Lily, whose husband deployed a week after their marriage, only to deploy a second time five months after returning home, had intense anxiety about his second homecoming. They had no verbal communication during his seven-month absence, and she admitted her fears on her blog:

> *Lily*: And that's when a lot of military spouses kind of came out of the woodwork and everybody kind of shared their homecoming experiences. ... That just sticks out in my mind about the community. Again, not just one spouse in general, but a whole group of spouses coming together letting me know it was going to be ok.

In this instance, Lily saw the entire community as a single entity supporting her when she needed it most.

Sometimes, however, the support comes from individual members. Amber, going through an adoption, was unexpectedly told that she had been matched with a newborn. Having blogged about the process for months, she was still surprised to find support online:

> *Amber*: Actually, surprisingly, some of my online friends started going on my baby registry and started sending us stuff.

Here again, as with Lily, Dana and Hailey above, the Internet has changed the way these women communicate, and shifted their support networks online. Even as Amber talked about not "put[ting her]self out there as much," she still benefited from its existence. The SOC is so strong that even those who aren't aware of their membership benefit from the support networks within.

McMillan and Chavis touch on this in their definition of SOC, as they speak about "integration and fulfillment of needs", which "is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group" (1986, p. 9). These women state needs either explicitly (as with the baby registry) or implicitly (as with concerns about homecoming), and the needs are met online. This aspect of the community benefits both the giver and the receiver, strengthening their ties to the group and increasing satisfaction.

The benefits of blogging: educating online

The third main benefit of blogging that was traced throughout the interviews, and which ties into the final aspect of McMillan and Chavis' definition of SOC, is the way the MSBC educates.

Grace talks about the support she's received as she prepares for her first PCS. One of the MSBC's functions is as a place to connect, advise and share moving tips:

> *Grace*: Again, we've never had a real PCS, so we have no idea what we're doing. I've gotten so much insight and information, and people bending over backwards and writing me 10-page emails, helping out. So people have just been wonderful and I get so much information from them.

For milspouses in the 21st century, the MSBC serves as a classroom, and each blogger a teacher.

Hailey, new to the milspouse community, looks forward to this rich exchange:

> *Hailey*: The women who are in there have been military wives for 15 years, and they've gone through deployments and PCS-ing across the world with four kids. I have a lot to learn from them!

In its education capacity, we see evidence that the MSBC can refute Putnam's (2000) claim about the decline of social capital in the modern world. Rather than simplifying these women's cultural exchange, the online network recognizes them as experts. As such, it increases social capital and encourages knowledge exchange.

Benefits vs. Risks

Although the community is full of benefits for those involved, it is not without its risks. Risks fell mostly in two categories: safety and bullying, although the first seemed less of a concern to the interviewees. Dana said:

> *Dana*: The nature of the blogging world is that you're very open with people. … [But] I have to take that degree of danger into it all, I suppose.

Across the interviews, the general consensus seemed to be that while one should always be careful sharing personal details, there was no way to blog openly while maintaining ideal security.

Of greater concern were issues surrounding bullying, a facet one might expect to see in any community—online or offline. Grace admitted that although she has not been targeted with negativity, she is aware of others who have been:

> *Grace*: I've never gotten any negative comments … But I know … there are quite a few bloggers in the circle of people I communicate with who have gotten on the radar of, 'get off my Internet' or other sites like that. And have gotten slews of horrible, horrible comments.

Indeed, one spouse admitted changing her behavior as a result of bullying:

> *Jill*: I've only gotten one negative comment ever. And it was so awful and so negative that I stopped blogging for about six months. It was just an awful comment, … I actually stopped thinking of my blog as being a safe place for me to be able to go to.

Ultimately, however, she returned to the community, regained her confidence and continued benefiting from the interactions. Risk is a part of any modern society (Giddens, 1991), but, as Lily pointed out:

> *Lily*: But for me, I think the positives, as much as I've been negatively affected by it, the positives outweigh that. I feel that it's definitely beneficial to kind of have that kind of support system. … Even when I've been beat up over the stupid stuff, I kind of feel like I have my little posse of military spouses who understand. … So, I feel like … it could be a very isolating lifestyle if you didn't have that community.

In this sample, the benefits of participation outweigh the risks, and the MSBC exemplifies an offline community with a strong SOC. As posited in the first research sub-question, the virtual community, in this case, does exhibit all the markers of McMillan and Chavis' offline SOC. First, those within the community feel they are a part of it. Second, their involvement fuels a feeling of fulfillment as their needs are met and they benefit from the online support. Third, they have influence over other members through their comments and their content, both educational and supportive. Finally, the community is rife with shared emotional experiences; milspouses are part of a unique minority best understood by those within it. Connecting online allows them to expand social networks otherwise confined by physical space. The virtual community congeals a widespread milspouse diaspora separated by geography.

ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

> We're all around the world. … So it starts with a comment, which leads to
> checking out their blogs, that can lead to a Twitter or a Facebook follow,
> which leads to a conversation, which leads to a friendship. And like I said,
> these friendships, some of them, you've never met the people and
> you'd do anything for them. Karen.

Friendships within this community blossom from comments shared between bloggers and transform into meaningful relationships. Some become in-person friendships, and others remain online. An examination of these relationships serves as the second theme in this analysis. As outlined in Chapter 2, there are four types of relationships: Horton and Wohl's (2006) para-social relationships and Thompson's (2005) three types of interaction. All of these were seen in the data, and each is discussed below, preceded by a discussion about the importance of sincerity in blogging as the basis for any relationship formed.

Building relationships on sincerity

Eleven of the interviewees mentioned the importance of sincerity, honesty and transparency in their blogging lives. This subtheme rose as a precondition to any type of relationship online:

> *Beatriz*: I'm pretty transparent. I'm pretty transparent and I feel like that's what makes a good blog. But you have to be comfortable. … People bare their souls on their blog.

A recurring theme across the interviews, this openness seems necessary to build and maintain an audience. Hailey compares her own blog to a site she finds useful and informative, but lacking in personality:

> *Hailey*: I hope that I lend enough of my personality to the blog, and that … it's not just informative. It's also, you know, anecdotal about my stories from my life: going to a wedding, participating in the 5K run-amuck for the Marine Corps. … And then there are others. She, I feel like she is almost on the opposite end of the spectrum than I am. Where it's a business for her. She probably makes a good amount of money doing it, but it's gotten to the point where she has completely taken herself out of it, and I almost find it's not enjoyable anymore to read, because it's not personal. … There is a lot of value on the site, but it's almost just too dry.

Because the blog is "dry" and therefore difficult to relate to, Hailey is unable to connect with the blogger.

Were there more personality and sincerity, however, the reader would get a "feel" for the person behind the site you're reading:

> *Grace*: I think with how much of people's lives you can see over the Internet now, that you get a good feel for people. And sometimes you're deceived and sometimes you don't know. But the majority of the time, I think people are fairly honest and people are fairly good. And you know, you can kind of see their character. … And you know, you want someone who is honest and you want a friend who gives good advice and is fun.

Getting a feel for the personality and "characteristics" of the people you connect with online is a vital first step in deciding whether this person is someone you want to connect with on a personal level. This connection is necessary before an online relationship can progress from stranger to something more, as seen with the para-social phenomenon explored below.

Para-social relationships online

Horton and Wohl's para-social relationships focus mainly on celebrity culture, but they echo across the MSBC as well. Every participant said felt like they knew certain bloggers they follow online, regardless of whether they'd met or spoken directly:

> *Lily*: Yeah, I kind of feel like you get an overwhelming sense of, 'Oh, I know that person! ... We would totally be friends if we met!'

Some of the participants even addressed this phenomenon directly, highlighting the difference between friendships and this relationship:

> *Morgan*: Even with Instagram and stuff, you start to feel connected to these people. And they have no idea who you are, but you know their kids, you know what their house looks like, you know all their activities. It is kind of strange. You do feel that connection like you know them. Um, but it, I mean I've often wondered about--it's a very one-sided, not even a friendship. I'm not sure what you'd call it.

This feeling echoed across transcripts and Beatriz even likened it to "when you meet celebrities." These findings extend the work of earlier empirical research, uncovering the way that para-social relationships form online and supporting the claim that they function in much the same way as offline ones.

The biggest difference between online and offline para-social relationships seems to be the potential to meet the blogger. Beatriz said:

> *Beatriz*: If you follow someone's blog, you get a false sense that you know them. But when you meet them, it's like, 'Oh my god! This is the person who wrote that awesome post!' It's awesome.

Meeting the person on the other end of a para-social relationship, however, transforms it from a one-way mediated experience to a face-to-face interaction. This final shift, and the differences between online and offline relationships, is discussed in the next section.

Online relationships vs. Offline relationships

As offline places are replaced by online spaces, as seen with the MSBC, Thompson's three types of interaction need be updated. Blogging begins with a quasi-mediated interaction: bloggers create content and post on their individual sites, which are then read by large audiences. Morgan talks about realizing people read her blog:

>*Morgan*: It is strange when I go home and visit my family and people come up to me and they know all about me and my kids and I have no idea who they are.

Similarly, Amber discusses how fulfilling it can be to discover unknown readers:

>*Amber*: It's kind of refreshing. … It's nice because I didn't know what she read my blog because she never comments. … And she [told my husband], 'I read your wife's blog and I always cry and I'm so grateful that she writes them.' It's nice because it's kind of to me, like, 'ok, she's doing this, even though it's hard to expose yourself on the Internet.'

Examined from this perspective, it becomes clear that Thompson's quasi-mediated interaction, when adapted to a blogging community, becomes the reverse of Horton and Wohl's para-social ones. Whereas the participants experience para-social relationships as the blog *reader*, they experience quasi-mediated interactions as the blog *writer*.

When both of these parties are interested in connecting, the resulting interactions transform the relationship to the next level: mediated interaction.

>*Jill*: I've developed some very good friendships. And have some really close-knit friendships with a variety of bloggers who don't know me from Adam in the real world. It's a weird turning point for me when I realized that more of my real-life friends were online.

The transition from this level of friendship (which exists online and never offline) to Thompson's face-to-face interactions (which begins online and continues offline) is hard to ascertain. Some of the interviewees end up meeting each other at conferences and some find ways to visit those they've met online. Still others use Skype to connect:

>*Amber*: We Skype date every week. … It's pretty awesome; we're like soul sisters. … You're sitting over here and you're Skyping with your awesome friend. And you feel like you're in her living room. … I've never met her in real life, but … honestly, three hours pass by and you're like 'Oh crap! I need to make dinner!' … You're just visiting in their house, you know? And they see your dog and I see their dog and it's like, 'oh hello Bruno.' It's really cool.

With the many possibilities for communication in the digital world, there seems to be little differentiation, for those interviewed, between people they know through mediated interaction and those they know face-to-face.

While not statistically significant, it is worth noting that only four of those interviewed thought their offline relationships were more substantial than their online ones. The other nine participants placed equal or greater emphasis on their online relationships:

> *Beatriz*: The relationships I've built through blogging are some of the most emotionally connected relationships I've ever had. … And I mean I have more friends now than, than I think I've ever had! … That's weird! But they're vested.

Lily takes it one step further, suggesting that most of her milspouse friends are based in online relationships:

> *Lily*: And I kind of feel like in real life I have very few, in-real-life military spouse friends that I didn't meet through blogging.

For her, blogging provides most of her "strongest tie" to the military community at large, a space in which she admits feeling out of place.

For the women in general, blogging provides a platform to meet friends and build relationships with others like them across the world, rather than relying exclusively on proximity. And because individual relationships are based on one-on-one conversations, they quickly become meaningful for many of the interviewees:

> *Emma*: I think it's because you're communicating through one mode of communication generally, through writing. I mean, I don't know, what else is there to build off of? You can't really build a friendship online off like just hanging out in a group or something. It's mostly a one-on-one sort of thing.

Emma's use of the phrase "one-on-one" to describe her mediated relationships echoes Thompson's "face-to-face" interactions. In the MSBC, then, only three types of relationships are present, as two of the expected ones—mediated interaction and face-to-face interaction—merge into a single relationship category called 'mediated one-on-one interaction' here.

These findings address the second research sub-question, and reveal the ways that online relationships do indeed function like offline ones, supporting Floridi's (2011) claim regarding the gradual disappearance of an offline/online distinction. Built the same way, online interaction can lead to an even deeper sense of "knowing" somebody. Although not everyone in the MSBC feels these relationships to the same degree—indeed, some still value their offline interactions over their online ones—online relationships are becoming interchangeable with offline ones. As Castells' (2009) network society continues to expand and flourish, the strength of these online interactions may become ever stronger.

MODERN IDENTITY

> That's what we're known as, as dependents. You know, and so, that's what that whole network is about. Is re-identifying who you are, and staying true to

> who you are as an individual, and how to balance your personal life and
> who you were before you became a military spouse. [laughs]
> Because it does change. It really does change. Claire.

The final theme to emerge from the interviews dealt with issues of identity online. This data was most nuanced, and hardest to trace trends across, supporting Woodward's (2002) argument about the fluid, ever-changing nature of identity. Even within individual interviews, participants' opinions of themselves seemed to shift and reconfigure based on context and question.

The clearest instance of this, across most of the interviews, was seen regarding the intersection of military/civilian identities and blogging identities. Dana, for instance, was nonchalant about her milspouse status. She even changed her blog's title to reflect her identity outside of the military:

> *Dana*: I don't really care. I don't have it on my front page at all. … I used to be a
> military blogger, now I'm just a blogger. I don't really talk about military stuff solely
> anymore, you know?

Her argument is valid, as she's not blogging specifically about the military anymore, but about her life, her young child and her day-to-day activities. But, at the same time, when asked whether she identified with civilian or military groups, she answered:

> *Dana*: Um, mostly military. Because I mean, we live on military base. I shop in
> military stores. There's no way around it. Our life is by his schedule and where we're
> moving next, and all that junk. … I don't really remember what it's like to be a
> regular civilian. It's been a very, very long time.

And here arises the identity conundrum. By Dana's own admission, her everyday life is driven by the military, and her everyday life in turn drives her blog. Yet her blog is not about the military, and is not military focused.

Although it would be impossible to argue that Dana's individual experience could stand as representative for the entire milspouse community, aspects of this contradiction echo across many of the interviews. Claire explains the significance of her blog's military ties, from its title to its point of view to its purpose:

> *Claire*: That is an important aspect of the blog, because my blog comes from the
> perspective of being a military wife and moving constantly and recreating our life
> every time we move.

At the same time, she sees how the blog allows her—for the first time in 14 years—to reclaim the life she "sacrificed" for her family and it's military lifestyle:

> *Claire*: I sacrificed my career once I got married and had children. And I put my professional career on the back burner to be a mom. … I guess a great way to say it is I'm trying to reinvent myself as a stay-at-home mom that is not a stay-at-home mom to small children. … I'm just exploring a lot of options to become a work-at-home mom.

And finally, before ending the conversation, she clarifies:

> *Claire*: It's easy for military spouses to lose their identity. It's easy for them to become a military spouse. You know? I think that's where my blog has really benefitted me the most, personally. It has allowed me to resurrect that person inside of me that I haven't been in all these years. I've either been [my daughters'] mom, or I've been a military wife. You know? We're a military family and that's how we're identified in this world. I think a lot of people do turn to blogging because it does kind of keep them in check as to who they [are]… You know, I would say, it's very very easy to lose your whole identity. … You just become a military wife, and that's pretty much who you are.

It would be misleading to continue without explaining that these dichotomies are not contradictory, but evidence of the complexity of the MSBC. Members see themselves as traditional spouses, supporting husbands and improving themselves ("I'm so incredibly proud of the guy that I'm with, and that makes me want to be a better woman," says Hailey) and also independent women ("I get professional identity [from the blog], which is the most important thing to me. Because I haven't been able to own something for such a long time," says Beatriz).

Certainly some of the participants did seem to have a more straightforward understanding of their relationship with the military, but not a single woman identified herself solely as a milspouse. They recognize that their identities may be complex, and salute their blogs for allowing these nuances:

> *Jill*: I want it to be a place I can go to kind of be who I am and talk about my life and talk about how I see the world.

Their online identities shift and change as they do, influenced by their everyday experiences and the world that surrounds them. The blogs serve as collections of self that reflect complex, modern identities in the moment a post is published, whatever that identity may temporarily be.

And here is where the entire discussion – virtual communities, online relationships and modern identities – comes full circle. It is precisely the fluidity of identity and the flexibility of the blogging platform that allows the virtual community to be so strong. As discussed, milspouses post raw, honest pieces of themselves online, and connect with others like them over these shared emotions and experiences. Without the complexity, the honesty and the willingness, these connections wouldn't be nearly as strong.

To address the third research sub-question, in the case of milspouses, modern identities—fluid, complex and honest—allow online spaces to function as rich virtual communities dependent upon transparent and satisfying individual online relationships.

ONLINE SPACES OVER OFFLINE PLACES

This discussion set out to address the research questions presented in Chapter 2:

To what extent, if any, do online spaces serve to replace sprawling offline places in an increasingly digital society?

- To what extent, if any, do virtual communities exhibit markers of a SOC?
- To what extent, if any, do online relationships function as offline relationships?
- How do modern identities contribute to one's role in an online space?

An in-depth analysis of data gathered in support of the first sub-question found that, by McMillan and Chavis' definition, virtual communities do exhibit all four signs of SOC. This finding updates Blanchard's (2004) research. Nearly a decade later, her prediction that "blogs have the potential to evolve into socially beneficial, self-sustaining virtual communities" (online) has come true.

The second sub-question examines issues around types of relationships, and the discussion here revealed that these types must be updated for an online world. Whereas offline relationships reveal four types of interaction originally outlined by Thompson, Horton and Wohl, online relationships only reveal three: mediated quasi interaction (the act of blogging itself), para-social interaction (the feeling that a *reader* knows a *writer*), and mediated one-on-one relationships (which form online, but may or may not progress to offline). This third type of relationship seems, according to this exploratory study, to transcend either an offline or online designation. Most interviewees reported no difference between the two, and often their interactions progress from one to the other, and back again. This last finding upholds the work done by Chan and Cheng (2004), which found few differences between offline and online relationships after a year of friendship.

Looking at these two together reveals the importance of the third sub-question. An examination of the way modern identity shapes online space, findings here tie each theme together and address the overall research question. Milspouse bloggers see their blogs as safe havens in which they can express themselves openly and without fear of rebuttal. As such, they are able to nurture true online identities that garner meaningful relationships among those with whom they interact. This, in turn, enables a powerful community connection online, addressing the overall research question: this online space is replacing its corresponding offline one, and furthermore, it builds community online where there would be isolation offline.

CONCLUSION

Although the MSBC is not defined by those within it nor contained by borders around it, it exists as an amorphous space online, stretching to include spouses not only within the United States but at bases and posts across the globe. This finding underlines the study's implications: Whereas offline, the female milspouse community is a small minority diaspora spread across the entire world as a result of their husbands' duty stations, online geography doesn't matter. Physical distance shrinks as the online space expands to include hundreds of bloggers and contracts to form tight-knit bonds and strengthen the overall community. These bonds will be essential as the GWOT winds down and military families begin the arduous task of reintegration.

Perhaps more importantly, though, is the implication this finding has for other virtual spaces across Castells' networked society. These digital platforms allow social interactions across physical place, and, as these results portend, such connection can end the loneliness Putnam sees in isolated, geographically disperse groups. Whereas Putnam sees groups watching the same TV channel as separate and alienated from each other, this research demonstrates that individuals in isolated places can benefit from mediated interactions in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, the modern identities that engage online are in fact building social capital, that is, using their networks to help each other. The Internet, in this capacity, has the potential to reconnect America, reengage communities and perhaps—eventually—reintroduce civic participation. It already is used to build solid, emotionally connected relationships, and provides access points for these new digital friends to literally invite others into their lives: debate the news on Twitter, read journal entries on blogs, encourage to-do lists on Facebook and visit homes via Skype.

Minority communities are connecting across physical borders and modern identities are breaking free from strict offline molds. The network society provides each with space to express themselves, and a hospitable virtual place to seek support and connection with others. As a unique socially beneficial phenomenon, virtual communities lay the groundwork for other networked interactions, and suggest that online spaces can now successfully replace interactions traditionally held offline.

The interviews conducted as part of this research generated more useful data than could be contained within this dissertation, or addressed by the research questions outlined. Future research into this population should be conducted promptly, while the GWOT winds down, so that the results can benefit both this specific minority community and the population at large. Possible topics for continued qualitative analysis include: blogging as a transportable business for moving populations, negativity and competition regarding portrayals of real life online, motivations for and guilt around blogging, and the issues behind anonymity online. Additionally, surveys of milspouses to determine demographics, community size and participation habits would enhance any data. Similarly, content analysis of milspouse blog posts, to analyze frequency and tone of military posts versus civilian ones, and comments, to determine response trends, would further thicken findings.

Other areas of research that would augment understanding of this population, and provide further insight into the results presented here include military spouse culture and sense of duty, and comparing the evolution of Facebook friends to other online relationships, such as those built on Twitter, blogging platforms and more.

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APPENDIX A: BLOGGING

Named "weblogs" in 1997 by Jorn Barger and later shortened to "blogs" by Peter Merholz in 1999 (Siles, 2011), blogs have existed since the dawn of the commercial Internet. Originally, they served as filters, or "websites devoted to classifying and annotating online information" (ibid, p. 738). The key, though, was the "commentary...the new content that made the blog itself worth reading" (Dean, 2010, p. 42). This early compiling of data, interwoven with opinions, laid the groundwork for an entirely new content medium that would blossom throughout the next decade into tens of millions of blogs across the global Internet (Helmond, 2008).

Contrary to Boyd's 2006 article to the opposite effect, defining the practice of blogging now seems simple. In the last five years, many scholars agree that blogs share a reverse chronology, allowing new content to be uploaded at the top of the site (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008; Siles, 2011; Hookway, 2008). Additionally, many blogs feature sidebars that offer links to other, recommended blogs as well as an archive function allowing users to search past posts (Siles, 2011). Blogs are praised for their accessibility and ease of use (Jenkins, 2002; Awan and Gauntlett, 2012; Shapiro and Humphreys, 2012), and widely credited with kick-starting the rise of citizen journalism (Jenkins, 2002; Latta and Lowrey, 2007; Bruns, 2007; King, 2008; Meyers, 2012).

Dean suggests that in 2007 blogs 'died', a term used to describe the transition from a popular new medium to a reality of everyday life (2010, p. 40). Since then, they have become a part of the everyday experience of those who use them for everything from journals to cookbooks to fitness logs and photo albums.

Blogs as mediums

One of the key debates regarding blogs centers on what role they play amongst other, established media. Early scholars argued that blogs are a new genre (Wall, 2005), viewing blogs as a type of site on the Internet, much like news is a type of programming on the television. Hookway (2008) confusingly calls blogs "the newest online genre" while simultaneously listing a "number of weblog genres in existence," including "warblogs and celebrity blogs ... educational, professional and pornographic ones" (p. 93). One key empirical study concludes that blogs serve as a "bridging genre" between HTML-based websites and "text-based computer-mediated communication," but warns that as blogs become more ubiquitous the term genre may cease to be meaningful, replaced instead by the term "medium" (Herring, *et al.*, 2005, p. 184).

Within five years, it seems that this prophecy was fulfilled. Most scholars writing after 2010 agree that blogging serves as "a medium for and practice of communication" (Dean, 2010, p. 46). Siles (2011) uses the word "format" almost interchangeably with "medium," arguing that blogs allow users to "[participate] in the public sphere" (p. 753). Throughout this paper, blogs will be treated as a medium, allowing milspouse blogs to serve as a genre within this larger field.

Blogosphere vs. Blogipelagio

Thinking of the way that these similar issues are addressed within the "blogosphere," as the network of online blogs is often referred to (Guadagno et al., 2008), lays further groundwork for the genres within a larger medium of blogging, discussed above. Different issues live within different genres, which might be viewed as independent blogospheres. Dean (2010) criticizes the use of this word, arguing that it echoes Habermas' public sphere, suggesting "a space accessible to any and all...a kind of conversational unity, as if bloggers addressed the same topics and participated in the one giant discussion" (p. 38). She suggests using the term "blogipelagio," which brings to mind "separateness, disconnection, and the immense effort it can take to move from one island or network to another" (p. 38). Building off of her

argument, I propose defining both and using them differently. Here, a blogosphere will be understood to encompass a more private (although technically open-access) series of conversations related to similar topics; that is, the genre of milspouse blogs exists within its own blogosphere. A series of blogospheres may overlap or occur independently, but together, they comprise Dean's blogipelagio, a medium in its own right.

References to Appendix A

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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

- Introduce about project
- Confirm about consent form, and any questions
- Ask to begin recording, confirm it will be anonymous and used for transcription

Blogging

- *Tell me a little about how you got interested in blogging.*
  - How long have you been doing it?
  - How regularly do you blog?
  - Did you have other blogs before this one?
  - Do you receive ad revenue for it?
- *What topics do you blog about?*
  - When you do post, do you plan ahead?
    (i.e. Are your posts purposeful or more stream of consciousness)
  - What topics have been most popular?
- *How do you decide what topics to post about?*
  - Do you treat it as a diary or a public train of thought?
- *Do you promote your posts?*
  - Do you track people's interests?
  - How many visits do you get? Total? Per post?
- *Did you design your site yourself? What guided your decisions? What are you trying to convey?*
  - Do you want people to know you're a military wife?
- *What are the aspects that you enjoy the most? What do you get out of it?*

Questions about Virtual Communities

- *Have you ever thought about your audience? How do you imagine them?*
  - Do you have an idea who your audience is? Who reads the blog?
- *Do you think the audience you have is similar to the audience you imagine?*
- *Do you feel like there is a community of military spouse bloggers?*
  - Do you feel like you are a part of it?
  - Do you feel like you share something in common with them?
  - That you can relate to their experiences?
- *Talk a little bit about whether the group matters to you, and if you think you matter to it - do you feel like you bring something to the table?*
  - Alternately, do they bring something that you value?
  - Ways you benefit from interacting with other people within the community?
- *Have there been instances where you benefit directly from something the group has taught you? Or introduced you to? Any resources they've shared -- actual, physical, emotional, etc. -- that have helped you?*

Questions about Online interactions

- *To what extent, if any, do you have conversations with people via the blog (i.e. comments, etc?)*
    - o   Have you built relationships with other bloggers?
    - o   Have you made any friends through the blog that now you communicate with regularly, either online or offline?

- *What kind of feedback do you get, if any? How do you/don't you incorporate this into future posts or management of the blog?*

- *Do you read other people's blogs? What sorts?*
    - o   Do you comment on these?
    - o   Do you follow other people?

- *Are there any blogs that you read, but maybe don't reach out to the blogger? Can you talk a little about those experiences?*
    - o   Do you feel like you know the bloggers?
    - o   Do you think they (or other people) read your blog?
    - o   Have you spoken with any of them?

Questions about Offline vs. Online relationships

- *How would you define relationships that you have offline? For instance, how could you describe what it means to be "friends" with someone -- for you -- in real life?*

- *How does this compare to the friendships or other relationships you've built online?*

Questions about identity

- *Tell me a little bit about you, who you are, what you do, aspects of your life that are important to you.*

- *How would you introduce yourself to someone at a dinner party with friends?*

- *How would you introduce yourself to someone if you attended a networking event for your husband's work?*

- *You have many roles - professional, mother, wife, etc., - do you see these as separate? Are they the same?*
    - o   If so, are they separate? How are they different?

- *Do you feel like aspects of these roles relate more to the civilian side of your life or to your military side?*
    - o   Which is stronger?
    - o   Is either closer to the 'true you'?

- *Do you see a military marriage as different than a marriage between two civilians?*

Identity on the blog

- *When you're writing posts, which of these do you think plays more of a role?*

- *Do you blog anonymously or identify yourself on your site?*
    - o   Are there moments when you hesitate to post based on the fact that people know who you are?
    - o   Do you post things about your personal life?

- *Do you think about privacy on your site? When you're posting, who do you imagine is reading it?*

- o If you treat it as a diary, do you censor yourself or do you write everything?
- *Would you say you're a public or a private person?*
  - o Introverted? Extroverted?
- *Do people you see regularly in 'real' life read your blog? How does this make you feel, or does it change the nature of your posts at all?*

Wrapping up

- *What are your goals for the blog?*
- *How do you feel about your blogging? Do you think you'll continue? Any major changes coming up?*
- *Finally, some demographic questions.*
  - o What year were you born?
  - o What branch and rank is your spouse?
  - o What is your highest level of education?
  - o Are you currently employed?
- *What other bloggers do you read? Are there any that seem influential? Are there any you would recommend I include in my research?*
- *Anything you thought I would ask but didn't? Or anything you'd like to add?*
- *Do you have any questions for me?*

Closing

- Confirm again that the material will be anonymous, ask if they have any concerns
- Offer to share quotations prior to publishing

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHICS

This research involved interviewing 13 American military spouses[6] between the ages of 24 and 44. Each has been blogging for between 1 year and 8 years, and while some of the blogs garner only 15 views per post, others receive up to 60,000 views a month. Together, they represent the Army (5), Marine Corps (3), Navy (2), Air Force (2) and Coast Guard (1), including four officers, seven enlisted service members and 1 of unknown rank[7]. The women's educational background ranges from some college to completed masters degrees, and their employment statuses include everything from unemployed, to direct sales, to part-time employed, to full-time student, to part-time blogger, to professional blogger, to full-time employed outside of their blog.

The table below shows the names and demographic information of each interviewee.

Name	Age	Education	Employment	Children	Branch	Rank[8]	Yrs Blogging	Average Views
Amber	24	Some College	Unemployed	Yes	Marine Corps	E-5	7 years	50 - 100 / post
Beatriz	32	Masters Degree	"Professional Blogger"	Yes	Air Force	O-3	1.5 years	2000 / month
Claire	44	Masters Degree	Unemployed	Yes	Army	O-5	1 year	60,000 / month
Dana	26	Bachelors Degree	Unemployed	Yes	Army	CW2	10 years	5000 / month
Emma	27	Pursuing Masters Degree	Part-Time Teacher	No	Army	E-4	3 years	15 / post
Fran	37	Bachelors Degree	"Part-Time Blogger"	Yes	Air Force	E-7	4 years	unknown
Grace	25	Bachelors Degree	Unemployed	No	Army	E-4	2 years	unknown
Hailey	28	Pursuing Masters Degree	IT Consultant	No	Marine Corps	E-6	2.5 years	unknown
Isabelle	35	Some College	Unemployed	Yes	Navy	E-6	1.5 years	unknown
Jill	30s	Bachelors Degree	Veterinary Technician / "Semi-Professional Blogger"	No	Marine Corps Reserve	--	5 years	5000 / month
Karen	29	Bachelors Degree	Unemployed	Yes	Army	E-7	2 years	unknown
Lily	29	Some College	Direct Sales	No	Navy	O-4	3 years	30,000 / month
Morgan	30	Masters Degree	Part-Time Contractor	Yes	Coast Guard	O-3	6 years	100 / post

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[6] Names changed.

[7] Jill blogs anonymously, and spoke with me through her pseudonym. As such, she was unable to provide specific details of her life.

[8] Ranks that begin with an "O" are officers and the number indicates their rank, while ranks E-4 and above are non-commissioned officers (NCOs).

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