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

Elizabeth M. Lockwood

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

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. I sabelle.

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—

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'

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 b

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

These experiences, Giddens offers, shape identities in ways unique to high modernity. He argues, "each of us not only 'has', but 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"

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 d

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

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,

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 email³, assuming it to be a phishing attempt from a terrorist organization, before talking with other spouses about their experiences duringd thefo1 (o) -5 (r) 11 (h) 6 (p) 3 (e) 5 (s) 6 1 (e)() 9 (d) 3

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

This chapter⁵ examines the data gathered to analyze three key themes that arose: virtual community, individual relationships and modern identity. The analysis pays particular

H : 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,

I : 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-

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:

B : 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

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:

L: 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:

M : 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 *M* : 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:

A : 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 , they experience quasi-mediated interactions as the blog .

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

J: 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:

A : We Skype date every week. ... It's pretty awesome; we're like so

B : 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:

L : 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:

E : 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

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.

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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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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people living in rural areas. E	J $$	C	S	, 16(1), 3-23.	

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

- *T*
- 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?
- - 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?
- *H* ?
 - Do you treat it as a diary or a public train of thought?

?

- D ?
 - Do you track people's interests?
 - How many visits do you get? Total? Per post?
- D ? ? ?
 - Do you want people to know you're a military wife?
- ? ?

Questions about Virtual Communities

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Questions about Online interactions

- T , , , (... , ?)
 - \circ $\$ Have you built relationships with other bloggers?

o If you treat it as a diary, do you censor yourself or do you write everything?

?A

?
Introverted? Extroverted?
D ' ' ?H
?

Wrapping up

- ? • H ?D '
- ?
- *F* ,
 - What year were you born?
 - What branch and rank is your spouse?
 - What is your highest level of education?
 - Are you currently employed?
- ?A ?A I ? • A I '?O ' ?
- *D* ?

Closing

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is a work of love, inspired by the service members and military families I met over the course of my years as a communications consultant with the Department of Defense. While many Americans hear "DoD" and think guns, uniforms and bad politics, I've learned it's a much warmer place. It's full of people truly dedicated to their everyday jobs and families who bear the sacrifice. It's an organization that should be proud of its inspirational humanitarian programs, incredible scientific advancements, outstanding research and world-class health care.

And yet, this paper is not a political statement. It's an examination into the lives of those often unseen. The people back home who don't make it on the news. And, I hope, a tribute to them and an eyeopener to us.

The journey I've made from college to this, my last assignment at the LSE, is a long one. There are multiple people who deserve credit for helping me construct this path, take the first step and remind me not to veer off. From my friend who submitted my CV, to the supervisors I've learned under, to the many co-workers, friends and peers, I say thank you. To the students in my classes, the faculty in St. Clement's, and even (especially) the baristas who fueled this long year, I'm grateful for every conversation, lecture and espresso.

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For my family, I'm not sure I have words. It will come as no surprise that you are my daily inspirations. You never retreat, you never surrender, and you still manage to cradle every spark of this life. Without you, I'd be adrift in this big world, taking no risks, accepting no challenges and probably laughing about an eighth as much. But because of you, here we are.

And lastly, to the women in this paper: You took a chance, opened up to a stranger, and let me glimpse the inner moments of your lives, all in the name of education. I am forever indebted.