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Examining the Impact of Selected New Media on Spousal Relationships in the Military

Margaret C. Stewart

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EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF SELECTED NEW MEDIA
ON SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE MILITARY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Margaret C. Stewart

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2013

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The United States Armed Forces were once comprised primarily of single young men. The military began to diversify as servicemen married and started families. As women joined the service a growth in military partnerships and dual-parent military households became increasingly prevalent. With these changes, coupled with the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, challenges were realized about maintaining marital and family norms in balance with professional duties. The contemporary era of wars is hallmarked by longer tours and reoccurring deployments, further complicating the work-life balance for military personnel. This decade of wars parallels with innovation of new media and staggering societal adoption of online platforms for social networking and information-sharing. The trials and tribulations of deployment for military members and their loved ones require distinct efforts to communicate during extensive periods of time apart. With these modern outlets available to facilitate relational communication remotely, this study set forth to examine the impact of new media on spousal relationships in the military. Interviews with ten military spouses who experienced deployment indicated five themes regarding their use of new media: (1) mobility, (2) monitoring and surveillance, (3) community, (4) utility, and (5) uncertainty and urgency.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the loved ones of those in uniform. For the sleepless nights spent praying and wondering, for the anxious days spent worrying and hoping, your courage and bravery are noteworthy. For those who are constantly adapting and readjusting to the demands of the military lifestyle on the home front, your strength and agility are admirable. For those who are faithful and resilient during separation and for those who remain patient and supportive of their loved one(s) when they return home from combat, this work is done in your honor.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Throughout history, civilian spouses of military personnel have utilized all available technologies to communicate during times of separation caused by military operations or wartime deployments. Most commonly, these tools included pencil and paper, two-way radio devices and telephones, and recently Internet platforms that support computer-mediated communication (Schumm, Bell, Ender, & Rice, 2004; Merolla, 2010). New media platforms have emerged as the preferred methods of interpersonal communication and represent innovative means for contemporary maintenance of relationships (Levinson, 2009; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009). Existing research concludes that the cultural group of military spouses rely on mediated communication to sustain their relationships during separation; however, the characteristics that constitute this experience and the meaningfulness of these interactions are not altogether realized (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007; Merolla, 2010). This dissertation gathers evidence about the role of new media platforms like Facebook and Skype in maintaining such relationships, their use in sustaining computer-mediated communication within spousal relationships, and the impact on the couples' communication behavior during wartime deployment and military separations.

Overview of the Study

This study focuses on two interconnecting phenomena. The first is that of the unique communication patterns and behavior of military spouses in a deployment or separation context. Second, their use of Facebook and Skype to facilitate communication interactions, and the impact of using these platforms as communication channels is also explored. This study examines the potential impact of using Facebook and Skype to communicate, and the orderliness of human interactions between married military-civilian partnerships during wartime deployment and other periods of separation. New media platforms represent their own exceptional

dimension, characterized by the rapidity of their adoption and ability to change the climate of how people communicate.

Ongoing technological innovation makes it difficult to capture a timely picture of new media's influence. It is challenging to obtain an accurate measure of the experiences and impacts of using contemporary online platforms for the purposes of interpersonal and relational communication. In the military, separation from loved ones during training operations and deployments represents another type of phenomenon worthy of human understanding.

There is valuable to explore the intersection of these respective phenomena not only because of this constituency's reliance on emerging communication channels for the maintenance of relationships, but also due to the circumstances of war and technologies being intrinsically transient. This study seeks to capture the essence that constitutes the communication experience between military spouses when using Facebook and Skype during wartime deployment, military separation, and in daily life in the military culture.

Problem Statement

Research on new media as a communication tool for military spouses is limited to date (Merolla, 2010). Merolla and Steinberg (2007) acknowledge the restricted research in the variations in types of deployments and military separations, and how they differ in terms of the experience upon which each tour draws. These researchers note in their analysis the research limitations of studying communicative behavior in military context. They also discuss how the model used for their examination was also used in other contexts, such as K-12 education, dual-career and dual-residence partnerships, and transnational relationships. The unique military culture calls for its own in-depth examination and analysis because of its exclusive characteristics and the one-of-a-kind experience that each deployment and separation represents

(Merolla & Steinberg, 2007).

On a broader scale, Drummet, Coleman, and Cable (2003) indicate the shortcomings in effectiveness of family education programs within the military culture. This is pertinent because spousal support for the military and military lifestyle is highly influential in a service member's reenlistment decision and long-term career goals (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007). Keeping this in mind, it becomes increasingly urgent to understand the particular needs of this culture and how they communicate interpersonally within spousal and familial relationships. Gaining this understanding can assist in the development of more resourceful and beneficial programs to assist spouses and families with their enculturation into military life. As a result of more efficient and comprehensive preparedness, perhaps there will be an increase in marital satisfaction and fulfillment with the military lifestyle, a lower divorce rate, and a greater retention rate for the Armed Forces.

Unfortunately, the communication field has been limited by not having foundational research that explores military spousal communication, unlike the way that sociology and psychology have examined it. There are currently few studies in the field that include the variables of new media, computer-mediated communication, and deployment. Additionally, while McCubbin, Dahl, Lester, Benson, and Robertson (1979) noted a distressed response to the deployment experience on behalf of military spouses, Merolla (2010) suggested that with a shift in relational maintenance behavior, the ability to adapt more seamlessly to deployment is possible. In reality, while he does not envision a universal deployment communication model emerging, Merolla (2010) contends that gaining a deeper comprehension on the types of relationship maintenance behaviors that are common to the deployment experience, and subsequently their effects on the marital relationships would be beneficial to understand.

The knowledge of this unique communication culture would allow for enhanced military training and preparedness, as well as for more effective counseling on managing relational maintenance during times of military deployment and separation. This information has potential ramifications that expand beyond academia. It may also contribute to the knowledge-base of family readiness group (FRG) volunteers, family readiness officers (FROs), counselors, and other less formal support systems, including friends, church leaders, and extended family members (Wheeler & Torres-Stone, 2009). By conjoining research from the fields of psychology and new media, the opportunity is present to look closely at the intersection between military culture, use of select new media, and deployment and separation qualities.

Rationale

The findings of this study impact the understanding of new media, relational communication, interpersonal communication, and communication in long-distance and/or geographically variant relationships. The results contribute towards the theoretical constructs related to communications media that emerged from this investigation, as the current study was designed having initially drawn upon literature primarily from family studies, psychology, relationship maintenance, long-distance relationships, and military culture. This study looks at intersecting phenomena of the use of new media, such as Facebook and Skype, for deployment communication and within the military lifestyle by the unique co-cultural group of military spouses. The study follows a qualitative approach using the phenomenological methodology to (1) qualify how specific new media platforms are used to support computer-mediated communication from the theatre of war (2) constitute the nuances of the communication experience in this specific cultural group (3) interpret the experience and perceived impact of using these platforms and (4) grasp the meaningfulness of this mediated communication under

specific circumstances during the experience of deployment and separation. At minimum, the study's findings capture a snapshot of new media use for relationship maintenance in a military context during a wartime, the circumstances of which are distinctive and non-replicable.

Need for the Study

The benefit of this study is the ability to actualize the prevalence and experience of using platforms like Facebook and Skype for spousal communication during wartime deployment. This exploratory research contributes to a benchmark that examines how new media augment relational communication during geographic separation. This study looks at how new areas of communications media help or detract from military spousal communication. These findings may potentially aid military agencies in developing strategies to decrease anxiety and stress among their constituents and their relations when apart.

Another value of this study is that it captures a snapshot of the inherently transient role and the effects of selected new media as communication channels for military spouses during wartime. This dissertation looks at the combined phenomena of communicating using new media in military spousal relationships during wartime deployment. Utilizing a phenomenological research approach, the impact and experience of using new media platforms to enact computer-mediated communication by the unique co-culture of military spouses is qualified. The findings of this study seek to actualize the essence of using Facebook, Skype, and similar outlets for spousal communication during wartime deployment.

Purpose of the Study

This exploratory study is designed to analyze the impact that various new media platforms such as Skype and Facebook have on communication in military relationships. Through the collection and analysis of qualitative data, an examination of the actual

communication experience and the relevance of its effects of that experience is undertaken. Examining such communication in the context of contemporary military deployments, this research delves into the practice of using new media platforms to communicate in military spousal relationships. This researcher examines the effect(s) of new media on the communicative behavior of military spouses, the perceptions of this constituency about the impact of these platforms, and any differences between the use of these channels during wartime deployments and other types of military separations.

Theoretical Approach

According to Ramirez and Broneck (2009), “the phenomenal growth of the Internet and the tools its development has fostered challenged scholars to rethink existing theoretical perspectives on relationships and their underlying processes” (pg. 308). As explained herein, this particular study will investigate in careful detail how select new media are used in military spousal relationships to facilitate computer-mediated communication (CMC) for online relational maintenance during deployment and separation using an inductive research approach. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research approaches accommodate inductive data analysis, meaning that the themes, patterns, and categories that emerge in the results are derived organically, without the creation of *a priori* hypotheses. Following a structure that organizes the data in an ascending structure, starting with specific details and fanning out into more abstract, over-arching themes and groups, allows for maximum constitution of the experience based on the highly personal descriptions provided by the participants. Participant meaning is essential to the value of data gathered through qualitative approaches. The researcher’s agenda is removed from the investigation, thus the detail of the subjects’ vantage points is exposed, thereby creating a more in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Creswell, 2009).

The phenomenological approach enables a holistic understanding of the experience to develop. The subjects in this study have potential differences or variations in their use of Facebook, Skype, and/or other new media channels and how they perceive these platforms to affect communication within their marriages. Further, the circumstances of each tour of deployment and military separation are inherently different. Examples that highlight the distinctions in tours and illustrate the fundamental difference between deployment and military separation are detailed in the section entitled 'Definition of Terms'. Taking the phenomenological approach allows this researcher to gain multiple perspectives on the experiences of using new media for CMC in military spousal relationships, and the particular circumstances of deployment and military separation (Creswell, 2009). Using an inductive procedure and reserving the identification of specific theoretical frameworks until after data collection and analysis allowed for the most open and inclusive investigation to take place within this highly specific population.

Research Questions

Three research questions are explored in the following study:

RQ1: What are the effects of using Facebook and Skype on the communicative behavior and patterns between military spouses?

RQ2: Do military spouses perceive that the availability of Facebook and Skype enhances their communication during wartime deployment?

RQ3: Are there differences in the role and priority of Facebook and Skype as communication channels during deployment as compared with other forms of military separations (i.e. training operations, disaster relief, and peace-time deployments)?

Limitations

Limiting the study to military spouses narrows the scope of the project and keeps it focused and concentrated. Spouses have different communication routines than do unmarried romantic couples or dating partners (Ramirez & Broneck, 2009). This study is also limited by its exclusion criteria, eliminating homosexual couples and unmarried partners. The rationale for this exclusion falls in the recently-repealed laws of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in 2011, and the on-going legislative debate on same-sex marriage (Department of Defense, 2010; NCSL, 2012). Inclusion criteria for the study are limited to subjects between the ages of 18-35 years old who have been married to an active or reserve duty member of the United States Military for less than 5 years. Participants’ spouses must have experienced at least one wartime deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan during their marriage. The time period of their deployment(s) and separation(s) must have been during the years 2007-present for reasons defined hereafter. Keeping the population limited prevents the results of this study from applying to larger or alternative populations. Nonetheless, this study was exploratory and did not seek to make global claims about military spousal communication, but rather to understand comprehensively the spouses’ individual experiences using new media.

Definition of Terms

Military Nomenclature

The military has long been known for their use of jargon and abbreviations in both verbal and nonverbal exchanges. Several terms to be utilized throughout this report require amplification and clarification. First is the distinction between deployment and separation. Existing research defines *deployment* and *military separation* interchangeably. Burrell, Adams, Durand, and Castro (2006) define *deployment* as “a spouse being away from home for thirty days

or more on combat, peacekeeping or humanitarian mission”. They describe *military separation* as when servicemen and/or women are divided from their families for the purpose of field or class training, combat tours, peacekeeping efforts and/or disaster response and relief (Burrell, et al., 2006). According to Merolla and Steinberg (2007) *deployment* describes the experience wherein a member of the military is carrying out orders to perform duties, training, or other operations under circumstances or in locations that make it impossible for the member to spend off-duty time at home or at the permanent duty station where they are assigned.

For the purpose of this research, deployment and separation will have distinct meanings and definitions. In the context of this study, *deployment* refers to a tour of duty within a theatre of operation hallmarked by the Global War on Terror (GWOT) (Orthner & Rose, 2005). In the last decade, the geographic areas in which the United States has been present were primarily Iraq and Afghanistan. Such areas of war and conflict are known as *theatres*. In the GWOT and other wars, theatres are subject to change as the conflict develops and/or alters. This is demonstrated by the more recent military efforts in Libya, Egypt, and Syria, all of which were linked to the GWOT. In this dissertation, *Military separation* is used to describe a particular type of deployment that does not typically involve being stationed in a combat theatre. Some examples of *military separations* that occurred during the time period that correlates with this study are the relief efforts in Haiti during the earthquake 2010, in Japan during the tsunami in 2011, and throughout various domestic disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 and, most recently, Hurricane Sandy’s devastation in New York City and New Jersey (2012). In this study, *military separation* will refer to these and similar types of humanitarian and peace-keeping efforts, as well as military training exercises where the service member is away from his/her permanent duty station and/or home (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007; Burrell, et al., 2006).

Pre-existing data emphasizes the significance of these deployment and separation occurrences. Orthner and Rose (2005) indicated that, at the time, more than one-third (36%) of Army families were presently experiencing or recently went through the deployment of their family-service member to a theater of war. Half of these families are estimated to be separated for a period of 12 or more months out of 36 months of their service. The data presented by Orthner and Rose (2005) was gathered even before the 2007 and 2010 “troop surges” to the major areas of combat in the GWOT (Spera, 2009; Wheeler & Torres-Stone, 2009). This type of unpredictable and lengthy time apart can yield stressful consequences. Among them is *PTSD*. *PTSD* is the abbreviation for *post-traumatic stress disorder*, a psychological condition affecting many veterans of war as a result of their combat experiences (Rudden, 2009). The Department of Veterans Affairs (2012) estimates that 10-18% of veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) are likely to have or develop PTSD upon their return. For these and other reasons, Orthner and Rose (2005) contend that the greater the number of supportive and skilled personal, social, and Army resources there are available among military constituencies, the better and easier the transitions are between deployment(s), separation(s), and homecoming(s).

Each unit within the military consists of a *family readiness group (FRG)* and/or has a designated *family readiness officer (FRO)*. *FROs* are civilian employees of the military who serve as liaisons between the military spouses and families and the unit’s command. These individuals assist with developing programs and communication channels to foster relationships among on-base spouses and families, and disseminate necessary information to spouses and immediate family members during times of deployment and separation (Drummet, et al., 2003). *FRGs* are groups that began in the Army with the mission and purpose of bonding military

families and providing resource and support. This volunteer organization is also responsible for facilitating communication and information between the deployed unit and the service member's spouse and family (Sloane & Freidman, 2008).

New Media and Relationships

New media is a broad term used to describe many different mediated forms of communication in consideration of how they have advanced as a result of Internet and online capabilities (Levinson, 2009). *Social media* is a branch of new media characterized by the ability of individuals to make online connections and promote themselves through the use of public or semi-public online profiles (Levinson, 2009). The most common platforms of contemporary social media are *social networking websites (SNSs)*. These websites are designed for the purpose of initiating, developing and maintaining online and offline relationships. This study will focus on the popular *Facebook* (www.Facebook.com), and *Skype*, a voice-over-Internet software application that supports calls and video (Levinson, 2009). SNSs allow individuals to present themselves to other users through a variety of channels including photo, text and instant messaging (Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2008). One such feature of these sites includes the ability to *instant message*, or '*IM*', a written medium for communicating with others (Ramirez & Broneck, 2009).

These new media platforms foster *computer-mediated communication (CMC)*, which constitutes the vast spectrum of media that utilize digital encoding to transmit information in synchronous and asynchronous contexts (Rabby & Walther, 2003). The features that support synchronous or asynchronous communication are characterized as having the capability to transmit real-time or delayed delivery and exchange of messages (Ramirez & Broneck, 2009).

Relationship maintenance is the behavior enacted to keep a relationship in a mutually

satisfied state for the partners involved (Dindia & Canary, 1993). The term is used interchangeably with *relational maintenance*, the various types of behavior that are used routinely or strategically by partners to sustain and existing relationship (Merolla & Steinberg 2007; Dindia & Canary, 2003; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford, 2005, 2010).

Defining the Population

Subjects in this study are between the ages of 18-35 years of age at the time when their spouse was deployed. The rationale that supports this criterion is that the majority of active duty military fall into this age range, with 55.7% of all active duty enlisted personnel across all branches of the military being between the ages of 18-35, with a mean age of 27.3 years old for enlisted personnel (Department of Defense, 2010). The overwhelming majority of adults between the ages of 18-35 are active users of the Internet, with 94% of 18-29 year olds and 88% of 30-49 year olds participating in online activities. Among these users, 25% of adult users utilize Skype, or a similar online voice-over-Internet protocol platform to communicate, and 66% use Facebook or a related social-networking site (Pew Research Center, 2012). In 2010, Skype had reached 663 million users (Telecompaper.com, 2011); today, Facebook.com has topped one billion users (Facebook.com, 2012).

The study is limited to couples who have been married for 5 years or less, due to the changes in communicative behavior in spousal relationships through the tenure of the marriage. There is neither restriction nor differentiation for participation in this study based on gender; although participation will be limited to heterosexual married couples who meet the inclusion criteria. The justification for limiting the population to excluding same-sex marriages, as previously explained, is rooted in the former “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” legislation. These laws were repealed in 2011 (after being in effect since 1993), permitted homosexual personnel to

serve in the military but prevented them from openly identifying as homosexual. Further, an on-going legislative debate has been underway in this country during the tenure that coincides with this investigation (2007-present) about same-sex marriage. According to the National Conference for State Legislatures (2012), only 12 states issue marriage licenses to same-sex couple or recognize civil unions. The other 38 states prohibit the lawful recognition of same-sex partners and limit marriages to relationships between a man and a woman (NCSL, 2012).

Participants of this study are civilians (non-military personnel) who have been married to an active duty member of the United States Armed Forces for duration of 5 years or less. Relational communication changes and evolves throughout the duration of a marriage, thus why this study focuses on “young” or newer marriages (Dainton, 2007). Participants’ spouses must have experienced at least one wartime deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan during the tenure of their marriage (2007-present), in order for participants to be prepared to compare the experiences of separation and deployment. The study adheres to these time limitations for relevancy, due to the evolving nature and growing popularity of the Facebook and Skype platforms, coupled with the intensity of troop surges within combat zones during this period (Spera, 2009; Wheeler & Torres-Stone, 2009). Participants are also active users of either or both Facebook (social networking site) or Skype (voice-over IP video chat) during the pertinent period of deployment(s) and/or military separation(s). The participants are invited to share their experiences with other new media platforms; however, due to the overwhelming popularity of the Facebook and Skype platforms during the time period being studied, they are the primarily platforms of focus to qualify this investigation.

Significance of Study

This study is timely and relevant, given the nonreplicable and unpredictable circumstances of

wartime, coupled with the ever-evolving nature and expanding cultural prevalence of the selected new media. Limited research is available in the communications media field that examines the variable of military spousal relationships, and even less that looks at use and effects of new media by this particular population. This exploratory study develops information about the unique communicative behavior and patterns that exist in military spousal relationships and the role and impact of Facebook and Skype. It has potential benefits by contributing to an ongoing body of research that examines using new media for relational maintenance. By examining the effects of Facebook and Skype use for military spousal communication, the communication patterns and behaviors of military spouses, their perceptions about the role of these platforms during wartime deployment, and their variations during deployment as compared with other types of military separation can be grasped in a comprehensive, first-hand way.

Organization of Research

Phenomenological research allows the researcher to gain an understanding of these lived experiences and affords advancement in philosophical and historical knowledge constructs. Williams, Rice, and Rogers (1988) recognize the challenges in designing studies surrounding new media and technology due to the rapid innovation and changes that occur, thus implying that phenomenology is an acceptable research approach with which to explore new media. This approach adds to the derivation of potentially workable models and practices for conducting inquiry-based research within distinctive and unique populations through extensive engagement and relationship-building (Creswell, 2009).

Langsdorf (1994) presents four areas of priority and focus for the phenomenological researcher: (1) constitution, (2) reflexivity, (3) interpretation, and (4) meaningfulness.

The concept of constitution describes the social reality which forms through human

interaction within a particular environment. As such, constitution is relevant to this study based on the mediated context of the communication and the environment of wartime deployment and other forms of military separation. Creating constitution in the unique environment of deployment and its intersection with spousal communication using mediated technologies and using phenomenological approaches to investigate draws about a number of questions. What is reality? How is it formulated through human experience? What is relevant knowledge from that unique experience? (Langsdorf, 1994). In the specific context of this study, these questions are designed specifically to address the reality, experience, and essence of contemporary spousal communication within the military culture during a time a global conflict.

Reflexivity reinforces the awareness of breadth and variation in research. Langsdorf supports variations within research approaches based upon: (1) diversity of research interests, (2) multitude of assumptions, (3) diversity in methodologies and different approaches within them, and (4) intrinsic ambiguity imposed by posited research questions. Reflexivity acknowledges the complexity of questions, topics, and themes that serve as a reminder that many investigations do not produce generalizable results. In this case, the examination of a highly specific group of military spouses warrants reflexivity in its approach (Langsdorf, 1994).

Interpretation is required in phenomenology, as the conclusions that are derived through this research are considered to be plausible verdicts that are valuable within the particular context and tradition where the research occurs. Given the variable of wartime deployment and other forms of military separation, coupled with the use of new media platforms to sustain computer-mediated communication within this niche, these results look to provide insights that are relevant to this particular group under the particular circumstances described (Langsdorf, 1994).

Meaningfulness quite simply focuses on the shared value and mutual understanding that

couples transact in their communication exchanges. Meaningfulness in the communication between the military spouses will aid in developing a comprehension about the experience of communication using Facebook and Skype while apart, and its impact on their communication patterns and behavior (Langsdorf, 1994).

According to Langsdorf (1994), phenomenological research strives to provide a detailed description about: (1) the uniformity of the lived experience, (2) the structure and organization within that experience, (3) the patterns of the activity in response to the context of the environment, and (4) gain an knowledge of the experience from the viewpoint of the individuals who have undergone or participated in it. In this study, actualizing the meaningfulness and essence will involve looking at the regularity and patterns of the experience of using Facebook and Skype to communicate during deployment and military separation. Further, through the use of inductive procedures, the study attempts to understand the relevant patterns and themes of communication interactions in the particular contexts of wartime deployment(s) and separation(s) from the subject vantage point of the experience.

Role of the Researcher

There are several benefits to using the phenomenological method for this study. For one, it supports the use of semi-structured interviews, comprised of open-ended questions to gather a pool of potentially valuable information. Meloy (2002) acknowledges the rich experience for this researcher in conducting in-depth interviews as the data collection instrument. Through implementation of this process, this researcher gets to build a unique rapport with the participants and gather information by way of a dialogue, created in words and concepts that could not be developed and captured within the limitations of quantitative survey or potentially under-developed questionnaire. As such, this dialogue created collaboration between this

researcher and the participants as the conversations unfolded (Creswell, 2009).

This study may present the need for data and thematic classification, so rather than rely on grounded theory, this phenomenology will borrow ideas from Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach for reflection and writing of a qualitative report. In particular, Van Manen's (1990) insights on interviewing and establishing results by way of coding and classifying the units of analysis into themes are useful as results are generated in the proposed study. The researcher strives to observe how social reality develops from human interaction and determines what kind of social reality is constituted based on the environment and interaction. Also, breadth of variations are accounted for based on diversity within the sample, interpretations influence how the phenomenological description is explained, and understanding is derived based on cultural norms, morals and values, and societal standards (Langsdorf, 1994).

Data Collection Procedures

The procedure consists of conducting one-on-one interviews with a small group (ten or less) of civilian spouses of U.S. military personnel. The primary instrument is a protocol of open-ended questions used by the researcher to collect participant responses about their use of Facebook, Skype, and other forms of new media, and their use of these platforms to sustain their communication during wartime deployment. Each participant's responses to the interviews are transcribed and the contents are reported in a narrative context.

The instrument is designed to contain a series of questions to gather basic demographic data, information about the participants' relationships, and their use of social media and online media platforms. The protocol also consists of open-ended, in-depth questions regarding their use of Facebook and Skype to communicate with spouses during military deployment, seeking

details on their frequency and patterns of communication, topics of conversation, the features/applications of the platforms employed for their interactions, and their opinion as to the perceived impact(s) that using these platforms has on their spousal communication and relationship while apart during deployment. The interview questions are constructed based on the five characteristics presented by Moustakas (1994) to guide the investigation of human experience(s). The interview questions seek (1) to reveal the essence and meaning of human experiences, (2) to explore the qualitative factors in behavior, (3) to engage the participant holistically in the research process based on the personally sensitive and passionate commitment to the experience, (4) avoid making predictions about casual relationships, (5) to not rely on measurements, and (6) to utilize comprehensive descriptions and critical interpretations to gather information about the essence of their experiences.

Once enough qualified volunteers were recruited, this researcher contacted the subjects via email (see Appendix C) and provided them with a letter of informed consent (See Appendix B). A series of three interview sessions with each of the subjects was scheduled over a three month period at mutually convenient times. During scheduled sessions, one-on-one interviews were conducted. The interview instrument (see Appendix D) was designed to contain a series of questions to gather basic demographic data, and open-ended questions regarding the subjects' use of Facebook and Skype to communicate with their spouses during the military separation and deployment, their communication patterns and behaviors, frequency, and perceived effects. Interview sessions were recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Participants were aware of the recording and transcribing processes as a part of providing informed consent for participation in the study. Upon conclusion of the series of interviews, a letter was sent to each participant providing necessary debriefing instructions/information.

The digital recording of interviews took place in compliance with IRB regulations. The hardware and software to record and transcribe the interviews was purchased at this researcher's expense. Every effort was made to avoid settings that may hinder clear and adequate conversation and audio recording capabilities. Distance interviews were geographically necessary in 90% of cases and were conducted by telephone.

Expected participation risks were minimal. Subjects provided information on their communicative behavior and patterns using Facebook and Skype during wartime deployment and military separation. Also, they described the role and perceived effects that using these platforms have on their marital relationship and relational communication in a narrative context. Identifying information was limited to the use of first names only and corresponding demographic information and descriptive information (i.e. "the 24-year old wife of a Marine deployed to Afghanistan in 2010"). The names and narratives reported are used with permission from the subjects. The confidentiality of all information gathered from these interviews was and continues to be preserved in accordance to all IRB and institutional regulations.

Subjects

Van Manen (1998) emphasizes that phenomenological research focuses on "borrowing" from other people's accounts and reflections allowing for a deeper meaning to emerge about human experiences. In this study, the phenomena being investigated are described based upon the information gathered from interviewing the spouses. Through the analysis of their narratives, the impact of using new media for computer-mediated communication by spouses during wartime deployment can be constituted and interpreted. Participants are comprised of a small convenience sample of civilian spouses of military service members of one of the branches of the United States Armed Forces who were deployed at least once to a combat theatre in Afghanistan

or Iraq between the years 2007 to the present day. The restrictions of the stated time period are due to the evolving nature and growing popularity of the Facebook and Skype platforms, coupled with the intensity of troop surges to the wars during this era and the legislative implications.

In addition to the requirement of having deployed to war at least once, other inclusion criteria are that the couples must be heterosexual and married for less than 5 years; both partners must be active users of Facebook and Skype, and be between the ages of 18-36. This age range of the largest user groups of new media platforms according to the PEW Research Foundation (2010). These participants were gathered by contacting the Family Readiness Officers (FROs) of currently or previously deployed units within the respective branches of the United States Armed Forces (Marines, Navy, Army, Air Force) and asking them to distribute information about the study to help recruit voluntary participants who meet the inclusion criteria to participate in the study. Additionally, members of a qualified convenience sample were also recruited to participate. Creswell (2009) indicates that using a small number of participants is acceptable in phenomenological research; with a usual sample of less than ten individuals participating in the in-depth process of interviews. A pool of 10 subjects were interviewed for this study. The next chapter examines relevant literature that supports this investigation.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Since September 11, 2001, more than two million U.S. Troops have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, engaged in wars highlighted by multiple deployments of longer duration than ever before (Department of Defense, 2010; Lambert & Morgan, 2003). For this reason, military spouses and families have sought ways to maintain their relationships during deployment(s) and separation(s). Accordingly, the members of this distinctive co-culture have turned to new media outlets to serve as communication channels. The days of the perfume-laced

letter tucked into a lipstick smeared envelope and sent to the theatre of war are a thing of the past. Today, the Internet and new media platforms afford the ability for spouses to communicate both synchronously and asynchronously while apart, allowing them to remain in more constant communication than ever before. This capability eliminates much of the stress-laden “waiting game” that at one time existed within the communication cycles between the spouses at home and those in the field.

The Culture of Military Spouses

Marriage and the Military

Over the last few decades, a drastic change has taken place in the culture of the American military. Once the single man’s profession, today there are more women and dual-career military couples in the Armed Forces. It was not until the 20th century that recruitment of full-time military was unrestricted to personnel other than single males. For the first fifty years of American military history, only officers were permitted to marry and only when they were established in their careers. First time enlistees were required to be single, and servicemen were strongly discouraged from getting married at all while they were under military contract. In 1953, only 38% of the active duty military personnel were married. By 1976, 56% of all active duty personnel were married, and their median age was twenty-four years old (Kohen, 1984). According to the Department of Defense, that percentage has remained fairly consistent over the last 35 years with over 55% of active duty troops reportedly married as of 2010. As a result of wartime technologies becoming more sophisticated and costly, a greater urgency arose to retain skilled and dedicated troops. After World War II, there was an even greater global commitment towards international policy and maintaining a larger Armed Forces constituency during times of peace (Kohen, 1984).

The most notable qualities of a single man's military of the past were their unlimited and unattached commitment to service, constant mobility and readiness, and their ability to easily isolate from the civilian community. Once marriages became an important component of military lifestyles, these inherent traits dissolved organically (Kohen, 1984). Given the influence that a wife, fiancé, or serious girlfriend has on a young man's decision to reenlist, concern for the marital aspect of the military became over time a reality. The Gulf War marked a change in the demographic makeup of the military in several noteworthy ways: There were more married service members, more women in the military, and lastly, more single parents serving in the military and deploying to the combat theatre (Drummet, et al 2003).

This change in the composition of the Armed Forces has intensified the stressors of military life for both the service member as well as the spouse (Rotter & Boveja, 1999). As opposed to previous times in history, the current military lifestyle is distinguished by recurrent deployments (Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). When a service member deploys, the roles and norms within the relationship alter, and the partner is forced to recalibrate for the duration of the separated tenure (Spera, 2009). Lange (2004) acknowledged that fostering an ongoing growth of unity, intimacy, and similar qualities are critical in a marital relationship; these characteristics are especially challenged within the military spousal context. Lange notes that it requires particular tolerance, patience, understanding, compromise, and attention to maintain a military spousal relationship. Military spouses experience the same daily stressors that are common in civilian marriages, such as career participation and advancement, child and elder care, household responsibilities and education. The difference is that the military spouse must face and deal with these issues on his/her own. Military life is distinguished by frequent

and/or repeated relocation, regular separations from the military service member(s) and resulting reorganization of family member roles and responsibilities (Drummet, et al., 2003).

More Time Apart

In addition to the ever-changing composition of the service, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have caused the frequency and duration(s) of the deployments of service members to steadily increase (Lambert & Morgan, 2009; Mmari, et al, 2009). As of 2008, nearly 70,000 Army soldiers have done at least three tours in Iraq and/or Afghanistan since the commencement of those wars and that figure does not count members of the other Armed Services branches (Lambert & Morgan, 2009). Drummet et. al. (2003) describe the unique facets of military marital culture including the ever-present possibility of deployment by their spouse, and the constant need for negotiation and refinement of roles when deployments and separations arise.

Adjusting to the new structure of the military is imperative. Transitioning from an exclusively autonomous military to one comprised of families and spouses, coupled with the demands caused by reoccurring deployments, has prompted the military to now consider the implications of taking care of the spouses in addition to the service members themselves. This realization has initiated the development of many groups, resources, and programs designed to facilitate military-spousal interaction, particularly when a unit is deployed or separated from their homestead due to training or other remote obligations.

Uncertainty Reduction in Military Marriages

Military marriages, by their very nature, often result in spousal separation, and this dynamic of parting can contribute to uncertainty in the relationship. Relational uncertainty is defined as an individual's confidence in his/her perceptions about the relationship's status (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). There are three sources of ambiguity that contribute to relational

uncertainty: self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty. Self-uncertainty is defined as doubts that are self-possessed about the relationship involvement; partner uncertainty describes the doubt(s) about the partner's commitment and connection to the relationship; relationship uncertainty refers to all-encompassing doubts and questions about the relationship's status (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999).

It is fair to assume that at any given time, military spouses may experience one or more of these types of relationship uncertainty. It is likely this uncertainty is heightened during times of separation. Relationship uncertainty may be connected to intensified emotions, spikes in irritation, and fluctuating perceptions about the status of the relationship (Theiss & Solomon, 2006). As such, it would seem that military marriages are somewhat plagued by uneasiness, and perhaps these feelings may occur more frequently and/or be present for longer durations than in civilian marriages.

Dainton (2003) concluded that relational uncertainty and inequity can predict the level of relational satisfaction in romantic relationships. In the context of military spousal relationships, uncertainty is elevated during separation and deployment because of the underlying stress and potential fear that their partner will not return. As such, it may be postulated that military spouses will be less satisfied than civilian spouses, due to the intensified levels of uncertainty and inequity that exist in this exclusive niche of marital relationships. Dainton (2003) supports existing theoretical assertions that a linear model exists among inequity, uncertainty, and relational maintenance; inequity in a relationship may yield uncertainty, and uncertainty may prompt an increase in maintenance behavior. In this case, military marriages are subject to experiencing this pattern of emotional and behavioral shifts each time partners are apart, particularly for any length of time or without communication access (Dainton, 2003).

In 2004, Solomon and Knobloch introduced the relationship turbulence model, describing that turbulence can occur in relationships when circumstances interfere with the development of intimacy and trigger heightened reactions in relational involvement (Theiss & Solomon, 2006). In deployment and separation situations, relational turbulence is undoubtedly present in marital partnerships. Aside from the turbulence brought on by deployment and separation, another unpredictable trait is the use of new media. In particular, SNSs challenge new media's benefits to communication exchanges due to their public exposure of information.

In romantic partnerships and marriages, constant exposure and easy access to the social interactions being carried on by partners may prompt jealous emotions (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Behaviors such as commenting on the profile page of an ex-lover or interacting with platonic friends of the opposite sex may incite jealousy between romantic partners (Muisse et al., 2009). While Muise et al. (2009) focus on the negative consequences of Facebook use in romantic relationships, Utz and Beukeboom (2011) suggest that displays of affection online between partners may actually be beneficial to relationship satisfaction, as their findings show that most romantic partners are happy about online displays of affection.

Utz and Beukeboom (2011) revealed that online monitoring behavior in romantic relationships occurs more commonly and is more socially acceptable than traditional monitoring behavior (i.e. looking through their partner's phone or planner). This is likely due to the fact that accessing a great deal of information with less effort than ever before is more likely to occur when monitoring on SNSs than through other means. Many participants in Utz and Beukeboom's study attribute their own lax attitude towards online monitoring to the fact the most surveillance behavior occurs innocently, while perusing profile pages or monitoring their own news feeds. The lack of privacy, coupled with the copious amounts of information that are

publicly available online, create a confounding arena for relational communication, found to have both drastic benefits and severe consequences to romantic relationships. Overall, partners were more likely to be satisfied with Facebook use that threatened by the potential of it causing jealousy within their relationship (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011).

The Few, The Proud, The Spouses

Military research indicates that the retention of skilled, experienced and well-trained personnel is linked to familial satisfaction and stability. These indications prompt the Army and other branches of the United States Armed Forces to dedicate greater resources and emphasis on military family status, which includes relationship maintenance and communication during times of military separation (Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008). The U.S. Army has a keen interest in the status of its military families, as the satisfaction of the family unit in military life has an effect on soldier retention (Van Epp et al., 2008; Drummet et al., 2003). Previous research indicates that healthy coping with military lifestyle adjustments is also linked to a soldier's marital satisfaction and family status (Van Epp et al., 2008; Drummet et al., 2003). These findings reinforce the assertion that the development of healthy relationships and marriages through the use of educational programs lends itself to contributing to healthy marital arrangements, which ultimately benefit the military and allow for increased stability through retention (Van Epp et al., 2008).

The frequent moves, increasing separations, and challenges of wartime deployment are hallmarks of the military culture. These circumstances compound many of the communication norms that exist within traditional marital relationships. As such, military spouses have grown accustomed to coping with gaps in their communication, and improvising on how to communicate with one another while apart. These individuals have a unique incentive which

commits to using and improving channels and strategies to maintain their relationship while apart (Lange, 2004).

Relational Maintenance in Military Marriages

Traditional Relationship Maintenance

The most commonly utilized measures of traditional relational maintenance in communication research are the five- and seven-factor relational maintenance strategies measure (RMSM). The initial five-factor model originated from Stafford and Canary (1991) and then was later revised to include two additional factors by Stafford, Dainton, and Haas (2000). The five-factor model includes positivity, assurances, openness, tasks, and networks, and consisted of twenty-four individual items within these categories (Stafford & Canary, 1991). In 1992, Canary and Stafford refined the original model by renaming two of the factors -- sharing tasks and social networks -- and by adding additional items under each of these categories. The researchers further described the categories in terms of how they related to interactions between the relational partners.

Positivity refers to the favorable, hopeful, and accepting way the partners engage with each other. Assurances are the messages that describe the continuation and desired progression for the relationship. Openness is the honest and transparent discussion about the status of the relationship. Shared tasks are the performance of duties and responsibilities to the relationship and one another in attempts to live in harmony. Social networks are how the partners interact with shared friends, mutual connections, and each other's relatives (Stafford, 2010). In 2000, Stafford et. al. added measures for conflict management and advice to expand the original RMSM. The researchers classified advice as a subcategory of openness and conflict management as a tenet of positivity. Advice refers to the giving or receiving of social support

and information. Conflict management references understanding, cooperation, apologetic behavior, and forgiveness as it occurs within a relational partnership (Stafford, et. al., 2000).

In 2010, Stafford advanced these original RMSM models and developed an improved Relational Maintenance Behavior Measure (RMBM), citing weaknesses in the traditional constrictions. Stafford undertook a series of four studies to drive this modification and develop a sound measure that is reliable and relevant to contemporary relational maintenance research. The RMBM is derived from the original models, yet follows a standard set of item-construction procedures that addresses previous conceptual discrepancies. Across three separate samples, Stafford was able to record the new seven-factor model, comprised of positivity, assurances, relationship talk, self-disclosure, understanding, networks, and tasks (Stafford, 2010).

In the new model, positivity and understanding are intrinsically linked and constituted as global positivity, related to connection, shared meaning and unrelated exclusively to love. Openness, self-disclosure, and relational talk are each recognized as distinct entities and not tenets of one another. Openness varies based on different methods of relational maintenance. Self-disclosure reveals new insights, whereas relational talk is referred to as more global forms of communication. The definition for networks remains consistent with Canary and Stafford's (1992) conceptualization, describing the acquaintances, friends, and relatives of relational partners. Task items in the new model no longer explicitly refer to equity and also include looking at performance. Lastly, assurances were defined consistently with the original two measures, only making the minor modification of eliminating the use of the words "love" and "commitment" in the scale items (Stafford, 2010).

Stafford (2010) concluded that modification and revision to the RMSM models were essential, and the new RMBM reduces ambiguities, eradicates conceptual redundancies, and

presents a more practical scale for future relational maintenance research. This RMBM provides both quantitative measurements and qualitative typologies for the study of spousal relationship maintenance. It is also readily adaptable to measure or describe online maintenance behavior in spousal and romantic relationships.

Maintaining Military Marriages

Maintaining relationships, especially a marriage, in the military lifestyle is anything but easy. As discussed in the previous section, spouses bear a great deal of responsibility and inherit significant stress when the unknown circumstances of the military lifestyle arise for their partners. Neven (2006) shares findings of a 2005 Army study which determined that the biggest strain on service members and their spouses is not fear of being killed in action or casualty; rather, it is losing the closeness of their relationship during deployments and separations.

Guerreo and Chavez (2005) defined relational maintenance as an ongoing process where partners respond and adapt to the needs and goals of both individuals. Merolla (2010) conducted an analysis that yielded twenty-four forms of relational maintenance, drawn from interviews with thirty-three wives of deployed military personnel. The results showed that restrictions and limitations on time, amount, and content of communication exchanges complicate the ability to carry out maintenance behavior. Merolla and Steinberg's (2007) study consisted of forty-three semi-structured interviews with partners in military-affiliated romantic relationships. These individuals involved spouses and significant others of deployed servicepersons. Merolla and Steinberg's (2007) research revealed key insights to topic avoidance and conversational positivity. The findings indicated that in conversations during deployment, the at-home partners have a tendency to avoid stressor topics, such as problems with household upkeep, or their child struggling to make good grades at school.

The same topic avoidance occurs on the part of the deployed serviceperson who withholds sharing information with loved ones about casualties or fatalities in combat (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007). Respondents also acknowledged engaging in “small talk” as a mechanism during deployment to maintain a level of interaction normalcy. Small talk is conceptualized as simple and easygoing conversations about stress-free day-to-day matters, (Merolla and Steinberg, 2007). Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, and Weiss (2008) revealed that respondents acknowledged that their loved one was guarded in information disclosure perceivably to reduce worry and stress during communication exchanges.

Relational Maintenance and Technology

Some of the wives interviewed in Merolla’s (2007) research noted there was easier access to communicate using Internet as opposed to the telephone in some cases, depending on the available technologies and reliability of their connections. Some wives revealed they would start their day with the routine of sending an email to their husbands during deployment. In today’s technological climate, this daily greeting may potentially be exchanged via Facebook instead of email. Partners may opt to speak with one another via Skype rather than to pick up the telephone. Depending on the location of the deployment or assignment, it may be easier to access a computer with Internet than it is to get to a phone with a reliable connection.

In 2007, Merolla and Steinberg interviewed forty-three romantic partners of enlisted and reserve military personnel who were deployed at the time or had been recently deployed. Their study examined the communication and maintenance behavior of individuals in military-affiliated romantic relationships (MARRs), described as spouses, fiancés, and romantic partners of active or reserve duty military personnel. Using Sigman’s (1991) theory of relational continuity as a foundation, the data revealed that assurances were commonly exchanged via

telephone or mediated channel, and that positivity and topic avoidance were also present in communication exchanges. Topic avoidance was described to be, at times, required by the military partners, such as when a comrade was killed in the field or when under orders from commanders.

Merolla (2010) mentions the influence of culture and how it is overlooked at times in relational maintenance studies. The more mobile society becomes the more essential it is to consider the cultural variations of scale, sequence and rhythm of co-presence in niche relational groups, such as the military. Typical military couples model society's pattern of adoption of new technologies; however, since new technological platforms such as social networking sites can be used to communicate during deployment, the adoption pattern may be expedited or reinforced based on the needs of any particular military family (Schumm, et al., 2004). While Merolla and Steinberg were not examining the channels of the communication specifically, their study did reveal that instant messaging, e-mail, and webcam were each common and popular media used, each with their own features. The ability of these channels to augment the spousal communication was met favorably and with great appreciation. Merolla and Steinberg's findings also echoed the notions that availability and accessibility of mediated channels is both a gift and curse for the deployed service member and his/her loves ones.

The negotiation between openness and topic avoidance is a difficult balance to strike and may aggravate the flow between the open and closed communication systems. Withholding information can affect trust as information gets revealed delinquently, yet revealing too much can cause feelings of frustration and helplessness for the deployed partner and perhaps even lead to feelings of uncertainty or insecurity (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007). Houser, Fleuriet, & Estrada (2012) conducted an analysis of relational maintenance using CMC. Their study revealed that

maintenance behavior remains consistent in light of technological innovation, and that different platforms yield the use of different maintenance strategies. Openness and assurances were found to be used more by spouses online and women tended to use more strategies than men when maintaining their relationships through the use of CMC (Houser et al., 2012). Their study sought to determine whether maintenance strategies translated into the online mediated environments.

William Schumm, et al. (2004) posited the idea of tele-family commuting to illustrate the contemporary changes in the lives of military families and spouses during the current technological climate. Merolla (2010) describes the characteristics of maintaining relationships in varying co-presence and long-distance relationship communication, particularly among the wives of deployed soldiers. Wright and Webb (2011), like many other researchers, mention how technological innovation has outpaced the research on how it affects human communicative behavior and interpersonal relationships. There are 2 distinct classifications regarding how CMC is used for relational maintenance: long-distance (LDR) or proximate relationships. Proximal partners are co-located in the same geographic area whereas LDRs are geographically and physically separated (Wright and Webb, 2011). Arguably, military spouses are in relationships that straddle both of these exclusive categories, because for a period of their relationship they live together and for another time they are apart, and these separations are unpredictable and vary in duration.

A Marriage of One

Kohen's (1984) opinion is that the most standard characteristic of military duty is its irregularity. As if the maintenance game among military spouses is not already challenging enough, it is recognizable that military spouses have to maintain a good portion of their relationship while geographically separated. The spouses rotate between being geographically-

close and long-distance under alternatively and, at times, under intense circumstances. This variation carries on for the course of their marriage through the duration of the military career. In many cases, the relationship is not only operating at a stress-inducing distance, but potentially under life-threatening circumstances.

Dainton and Aylor (2001) found reinforcing evidence that there are varying degrees of long-distance relationships (LDRs), and the communication patterns that exist are influenced by variables, including length of separation, regularity of time apart, length of relationship, and patterns of communication. Dainton and Aylor's (2001) findings suggest that significant differences exist between LDRs with periodic face-to-face contact and relationships that go extended lengths of time with no in-person contact. As such, these findings suggest that mediated communication, such as that which takes place via Skype or Facebook, may alter the separation qualities of the LDR experience and constitute a one-of-a-kind experience, rather than a homogenous relationship type (Dainton & Aylor, 2001).

Stafford, Merolla, and Castle (2006) studied the transition that long distance romantic relationships undergo when the spouses reunite from their separation. One-third of the partners terminated their relationships within three months of reuniting, citing challenges to autonomy and time management, as well as increased conflict and jealousy. Stafford, et al.'s (2006) findings revealed that length of time apart and length of time together prior to separation impacted the reunion transition. Age of the relational partner is also found to affect reconnecting and relational resilience after separation. Ninety-seven percent of participants in the research study acknowledged experiencing relational change(s) associated with the transition from maintaining at a distance to being in a geographically close relationship (Stafford et al., 2006).

Aylor and Dainton (2007) surveyed one hundred and seventy-nine married individuals to examine the relationship and variance among relational equity, attachment reciprocity, and uncertainty for the purpose of gaining insight into how these factors conjoin in the relationship maintenance process. Aylor and Dainton's (2007) study indicated findings that contradicted Dainton's (2003) initial postulations that uncertainty mediates the relationship. The researchers speculate that the different findings may be as a result of the varying samples; Aylor and Dainton (2007) only surveyed married people while Dainton's (2003) sample consisted of married and dating partners. They also note that uncertainty fluctuates throughout the tenure of relationships, and suggest that perhaps this disparity is as a result of uncertainty present more readily in dating relationships than marriages (Aylor & Dainton, 2007).

In her book *Separated by Duty, United in Love*, former soldier and long-time Army wife Shellie Vandevoorde (2010) explains how challenging the communication process can be during separation and deployment. She emphasizes the appreciation for emerging technology in the unique relational context of military life. Vandevoorde reflects on the importance of non-verbal communication when speaking by phone, further reinforcing the need to understand how new media may affect communication exchanges. She recognizes the difficulty of how to communicate with one another as she describes the "game" of "whose life is more miserable" that can occur during available communication flow (Vandevoorde, 2010). Her narrative suggests that the prevalence of new media may perpetuate the availability of communication flow and frequency of exchanges. If this is the case, it begs the question: are new media helping or hurting military spouses when it comes to relational communication during deployment?

Deployment Communication

The unique variable of military deployment is a trait exclusive to this culture. Being called upon at a moment's notice to defend the country on foreign soil is an overwhelming event; one that military spouses have become all too familiar. Merolla (2010) states that in order to study relational maintenance in the context of military deployments, a cyclical model of co-presence exists for behaviors enacted before, during, and after a single deployment tour. This is represented by prospective (pre-deployment), introspective (during deployment), and retrospective (post-deployment) phases, representing co-presence, non-co-presence, and reuniting co-presence.

Merolla acknowledges the delineation in the changes to routines and durations of togetherness and time apart in "multi-co-present" relationships, such as those found in the military culture. Further, Merolla cites the difficulty in conceptualizing relational co-presence and multi-co-presence due to the traditionally dichotomous classifications of long distance and geographically close relationships. Merolla's discussion highlights the findings of Canary et al. (2002) in how relational maintenance behaviors contribute to relational resilience in light of stressful life experiences.

Relationship maintenance communication is different during military deployment in part because of the nature of the conversation content changes. For example, the urgency to communicate about daily activity and schedule arrangements is eliminated during deployment; however, a summary of day-to-day events and ongoing occurrences become functional to maintain small talk (Faber, et al., 2008). During deployment, communication exchanges between military relationship partners are kept upbeat and positive. Some of the conversational topics would include reminiscing about happy memories within the relationship, use of humor,

exchanging pleasantries, and sharing positive information about day-to-day experiences (Merolla, 2010).

Rotter and Boveja (1999) indicate that use of CMC provides servicepersons with an opportunity for consistent contact with relationships back home, thus allowing more frequent expression of emotions as opposed to being forced to bottle them internally for the duration of the deployment. La Bash, Vogt, King and King (2009) indicate that in intense combat situations, the need to restrain use of force can result in an individual feeling angry, fearful or resentful, which can later translate into unnecessary violent outrage. For this reason, the ability to have the emotional outlet of communicating with loved ones who are compassionate and sensitive about what is being experienced by the service member is invaluable (La Bash, Vogt, King & King, 2009).

Deployment-based separation is rooted in uncertainty and high stress, not to mention sporadic communication that conflicts with the ability to maintain regularity. As a result, many spouses are striving to balance communication patterns with improvisation which will allow their marital relationship to be effectively maintained while deployed. Social norms are engrained within the behavioral contexts in which the users live. Existing research proves that new media users are hyper-vigilant about others monitoring their self-presentation online (Muisse, et al., 2009; Utz & Buekeboom, 2011). In the military spousal culture, it may be normal to share information; Vandevoorde (2010) cautions that members of the military culture, including spouses and loved ones, need to be vigilant about communicating anything that may related to OPSEC, or Operational Security, such as location or unit(s) involved. While some civilians tend to be more liberal about what they discuss online, military spouses have to be extremely cautious so as to not compromise the safety and mission of their spouses.

The communication environments available during deployment and separation may present challenges in and of themselves. For instance, webcams, Internet and telephones may be available in an area where the service members tend to congregate, resulting in a lack of privacy for intimate conversation (Merolla, 2010). Additionally, Internet and/or telephone connection(s) may be disrupted or have poor signal, interfering with the ability to have a clear conversation. Several participants in Merolla's study shared stories of rapid loss of communication and interrupted exchanges, but in kind said that they were at least fortunate to have the interaction with their spouse and preferred broken communication over no communication at all (Merolla, 2010). The ability for spouses to adapt to the military culture and lifestyle is necessary. Understanding more about the communication interactions of this group can lead to more effective development of educational, training and support programs for this constituency (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007).

The Deployment and Separation Experience

Off to War

The response of the U.S. Military to the 9/11 terrorist attacks has resulted in ongoing conflicts and increased deployments in both frequency and length (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007). Deployments typically last about four months for the Air Force, 6 to 7 months for the Marines and Navy, and one year or more for the Army and National Guard (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007; National Military Family Association, 2006). Military spouses have reported that the deployment experience yields feelings of role-changing, concern for partners, safety, loss of emotional support, loneliness, and personal overload (Faber et al, 2008; Bell & Schumm, 1999). The deployment experience has proven to be taxing on service men and women, their families and their spouses. The divorce rate for veterans of war is 62% greater than that of their civilian

counterparts (Lambert & Morgan, 2009). Although their research was focused on military families with children, Fitzsimons and Krause-Parello (2009) identify five stages of deployment: (1) pre-deployment, (2) deployment, (3) sustainment, (4) redeployment, and (5) post-deployment. Each stage is characterized by a unique set of emotional challenges (Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009).

Pre-deployment is a variant time frame prior to deployment that commences with the notification of deployment orders. It is characterized by anticipation, anxiety, arguments, handling of affairs, distraction, intense training and preparation (Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009).

Deployment is the time of the actual deployment through roughly the first month of being away. This stage is met with a mixture of emotions ranging from anger to abandonment to numbness about the experience. Other typical hallmarks of the deployment phase include anxiety and abnormal sleeping patterns (Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009).

Sustainment is the middle stage that initiates after the deployment adjustments and lasts until the penultimate month of the deployment wherein new routines are established, independence and confidence is built, and new support systems fall into place (Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009).

Re-deployment occurs during the last month of the deployment before homecoming. This stage is usually marked by grand anticipation and waves of extreme emotions. Many face difficulty with decision-making, as the independent identity is now transforming as the partner's return home draws near (Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009).

The last and final stage is called post-deployment. This stage commences at homecoming and lasts for an indefinite amount of time. There is a loss of independence as

decisions move to being made collectively instead of individually. There is also a reintegration of roles and a negotiation of space that occurs now that both partners are present (Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009).

Rotter & Boveja (1999) also present a 3-stage model that describes the phases of stress caused by separation due to deployment. Stage 1 is anticipation, categorized by the expectations of separation wherein partners feel fear, resentment, hurt and denial. Often, they begin undertaking activities like financial planning and making car and home repairs. Towards the end of this phase, as the deployment date grows closer, some partners experience emotional withdrawal, marked by feelings of ambivalence and confusion (Rotter & Boveja, 1999).

Stage 2 is separation, which has three sub-phases – emotional confusion, adjustment, and expectation of reunion. Emotional confusion is the initial onset immediately following departure, characterized by a sense of abandonment, loss, emptiness, disorganization, sleep deprivation, keeping busy, and being hyperemotional. Adjustment lasts for the majority of the deployment tenure. Its hallmarks include hope, confidence, less anger and loneliness, a sense of independence and self-growth, comfort in routines without their partner, and an increase in connections and communications with individuals other than their spouse that comprise their social network. The expectation of the reunion begins 6 to 8 weeks prior to homecoming. The emotions that accompany this phase are apprehension, excitement, expectations, worry, fear, uncertainty, planning, cleaning, getting things in order, and reestablishing former routine to include their partner (Rotter & Boveja, 1999).

Stage 3 is the reunion. It begins with the honeymoon, which initiates after the reunion and homecoming, usually on or around the second day. The honeymoon phase lasts until the first argument. Reunion is often a mixed bag of emotions, ranging from euphoria and excitement

to blurry and awkward. This time is spent by the partners talking, reestablishing intimacy and connection, and readjusting roles. About a month or so after the homecoming, the readjustment period commences and is marked by role confusion, satisfaction, negotiating relationships, redefining and modifying roles, and allowing new routines to set in (Rotter & Boveja, 1999).

Dealing with Deployment

Faber et al.'s (2008) study revealed that deployment forced the spouses to alter their communication patterns and as a result their communication exchange became more discretionary. Subjects admitted to carefully considering information for relevancy before sharing with a spouse in theatre. Such forms of boundary setting exacerbated the challenges to joint decision-making. Faber et al. (2008) acknowledged the spousal transition from what the researchers called a closed communication system to an open communication system when the reservist came back from deployment. Drummet et al. (2003) concluded that direct and honest communication was necessary to promote relational cohesion during separations, among family members and loved ones, and between military families and military personnel.

The multidimensional nature of deployment communication exists not only between the spouses, but also in how the military communicates with the spouses or next of kin during time apart. The rampant nature of rumors (particularly during combat deployments) can add unnecessary stress and cause the dissemination of inaccurate information. It is critical that a clear information flow and chain of information be developed and implemented to ensure that spouses and families are informed of occurrences in a timely and accurate manner to avoid hearsay and speculation.

Wheeler and Torres-Stone (2009) conducted a qualitative study using a convenience sample of 9 wives of Army Reserve National Guard soldiers who were interviewed for a

grounded theory investigation. The participants were 21-46 years old, and had been married for between 1 and 25 years. At the time of the interviews, 7 of the 9 respondents had a spouse who was deployed; one's spouse had returned home less than two months before the interview; and the final respondent's spouse had been home for almost 2 years from deployment. During the study, the wives were asked a series of 7 open-ended questions about the impact of deployment on themselves, their spouse, their marital relationship, and their children (if applicable). They were also asked to identify what they found to be helpful in coping with their spouse's deployment, who they found to be helpful, and any additional factors that may have helped them cope with their spouse's deployment.

When it came to the coping strategies of deployment, 5 items emerged: Expressive activities, support from family and friends, religion and spirituality and faith, reliance on technology for communication with the deployed spouse, and avoidance (Rotter & Boveja, 1999; Wheeler & Torres-Stone, 2009). All 9 respondents in Wheeler and Torres-Stone's study acknowledged that the use of technology such as the Internet caused them to feel closer to their spouse during deployment (Wheeler & Torres-Stone, 2009). While communication is essential between spouses, the concept of honest communication can become blurry as spouses evaluate what information to disclose or to withhold from the partner when apart (Neven, 2006).

Dealing with deployment is not limited to the time that the spouse is gone; rather, it lasts long after they return home and while readjusting. Faber et al. (2008) interviewed 34 military reservists, spouses and parents within a year of their return home from deployment to Iraq. The spouses reported that the shift in responsibilities and the redefinition of roles was challenging, as was being the sole decision-maker in all relational and family related decisions in their partner's

absence. Subjects expressed similar hardship readopting their roles upon return home from deployment and expressed frustration at times with the readjustment (Faber et al, 2008).

Dimiceli, Steinhardt, and Smith (2010) conducted a survey of 77 military wives that looked at and evaluated their stressful experiences and coping strategies. Length of deployment was among the most important factors perceived to cause stress in the military lifestyle. The wives also acknowledged feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and difficulty in the readjusting roles within their relationship during deployment experiences. As is consistent with previous research, military spouses in this study reported a variety of issues surrounding deployment and coping with the stress of the experience. Among them, feelings of loneliness, role overload, adjusting to long-distance relationship maintenance, concern over partner safety, and separation anxiety were typically present. This study did not examine relational satisfaction as a variable to stress and coping, and this was acknowledged as a limitation to this study and an opportunity for future research.

Spera (2009) cites a 2005 survey of Army families, wherein Army spouses who reported shorter deployments (three months of separation or less) indicated that they were more satisfied living among the military culture than spouses who were separated for 18 months or more, which was 40% of the cumulative sample. Spera's analysis of marital status indicated that 67% of his participants were married; 30% of those married less than three years indicated that they perceived that their spouse would have a serious or very serious problem coping with deployment compared to only 10% of those military couples who have been married for more than 20 years. Spera noted the finding that the longer the marriage lasts within the military lifestyle, the more competent the coping abilities become with the stresses that are part of it.

Psychological Implications

Length of deployment is a key element in anticipated stress factors that military spouses experience. One study indicates that military spouses usually feel capable of dealing with stress during a short deployment of less than 4.5 months; however, they feel unequipped to cope with loneliness, responsibility and change of family dynamics for a longer time period. The resulting effects include intensified feeling of stress, anxiety, and depression with the experience of associated physical health symptoms in some cases (Dimiceli, et al., 2010). Dimiceli, et al.'s (2010) study confirms previous research indicating that coping with military deployment is among the most stressful occurrences in the tenure of a military marriage. The psychological impact on those who have been involved in war is estimated to account for 1 of every 6 returning military service members who are reported to experience anxiety, depression or PTSD. This estimation substantiates the need for military families to be able to maintain an adaptable level of consistency in their interactions during deployment (La Bash, et al., 2009).

Military separation and deployment(s) to war are involuntary and unpredictable. In the current climate where the durations and reoccurrences of deployments are increasing, servicepersons and their families expect increased availability of technologies to communicate when they are apart (Schumm, et al., 2004). Mmari, et al. (2009) found that media and technology were influential factors for several participants of their focus group. Despite some of the negative aspects of constant exposure to war occurrences through news outlets and Internet media, the use of new media platforms were helpful in keeping the members of military families feeling close during deployment separations (Mmari, et al, 2009). There are both positive and negative factors that emerge from spousal separation in military life. On the bright side, separation marks independence, increased time with friends and family, and confidence that

comes with being the lone decision-maker at home. The negative effects include challenges to intimacy, financial troubles, loneliness, hyper-anxiety, and inability to adjust or cope with stress (Drummet et al, 2003).

How to Cope

Several programs and resources have developed to support spouses and families in the military, such as family support groups (FSGs) in the Army and human service delivery programs offered by the Air Force. These groups acknowledge the critical role of counseling, community support, and social support in coping with their partners' deployment and military commitments (Spera, 2009; Faber, et al., 2008). Mentoring military spouses on how to cope with the stress and culture of military life is essential for long term relational satisfaction. The more familiar the spouses are with the military lifestyle, the easier it becomes to manage.

Spouses who were born and raised in military families themselves tend to have a bit more ease coping with the stresses than those who have to acculturate to military life. Padden, Connors, and Agazio's (2010) findings concurred with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping, accepting that deployment classifies as a stressful event that warrants a coping response. Their findings also show that wives who were raised in military families and/or had experienced previous deployments with their spouse or loved one were more capable of coping with the stress than others. Lack of knowledge about the military lifestyles and experience within the culture can yield overwhelming stress for a spouse.

Padden et al. (2010) examined a sample of 105 female spouses of deployed active duty military personnel to evaluate stress, coping, and well-being. Their study found differences in coping among spouses based on military rank of their partner, those who grew up in a military family themselves, and those spouses with previous deployment experience when compared with

spouses who were dealing with their first deployment. Merolla and Steinberg (2007) acknowledged the value of researching communication and relational maintenance in the context of deployment and separation because of the findings that spousal satisfaction and support for the military lifestyle are key variables in a service member's long-term career plans and reenlistment decisions. To retain trained and experienced military personnel, the families and spouses need to be kept in mind and carefully understood so that they can be properly supported.

Communication Technology Innovation

Technology of the Times

Over time, relational partners, including spouses, have maintained contact using a variety of media to support face-to-face and written interactions. The emergence of telephone technology afforded couples a more immediate channel to support communication exchanges, particularly during instances of geographic separation (Ramirez & Broneck, 2009). Subsequently, mobile technology and the Internet have only perpetuated the advancement and immediacy of interpersonal communication exchanges, which influences how spouses engage and interact (Merolla & Steinberg, 2007).

Today, the innovation of new media has afforded ground-breaking channels of communication that were previously nonexistent. These mechanisms are actively utilized by members of the military to maintain their relationships and open the door to considerable scholarship opportunities in the communications media field. New media platforms allow for increased communication with family members and loved ones at home, which is met with both positive and negative implications. A characteristic of war has been the military serviceperson's separation and isolation from loved ones (Schumm, et al., 2004); therefore, the availability and use of communication technologies has become a normal part of relational communication; use

by military families and the related impacts and outcomes is pertinent to research as military deployment escalates in a technologically-inundated world (Bayum, Zhang, Kunkel, Ledbetter, & Lin. 2007).

A 2005 study indicated that dependence on technology to communicate assisted in coping with the deployment separation (Wheeler & Torres-Stone, 2009). All respondents in the study mentioned that technology was employed and is essential in feeling closer to their spouse, specifically use of telephone and Internet, with many citing daily use to achieve a greater feeling of connection (Wheeler & Torres-Stone, 2009). This data indicates that a relationship exists between emerging means of communication and military relationship functionality (Schumm et al., 2004). Further, existing research shows that media communication during deployment is integral relational maintenance for partners in military-affiliated relationships and members of military families (Merolla, 2010). Much like the unpredictable nature of deployment for spouses, Rabby & Walther (2003) contend that technology affects people's lives in equally unpredictable ways.

As communication technologies emerged, they have been employed during wartime to facilitate communication with loved ones on the home front. During World War I and World War II, servicepersons communicated with loved ones back home by writing letters and sending them using the postal service. By the Vietnam Era, military service members were able to use two-way radio communication to speak with their families. Today, with the prevalence of communications media in American households, including computers with Internet access, the expectation exists that these technologies will be available and accessible to deployed service members (Schumm, et al., 2004). Merolla (2010) indicated that participants in his study

acknowledged establishing communication routines during deployment, such as setting aside a specific time each day to engage online and have a synchronous or asynchronous exchange.

Communication Consistency

Faber et al.'s study (2008) revealed that participants indicated a sporadic, rather than consistent, nature of communication as a result of the reticent capabilities of the communication structure where their loved ones were deployed in Iraq. Wheeler and Torres-Stone (2009) found that reliance on technology for spousal communication was one of the ways they dealt with being apart (Wheeler and Torres Stone, 2009). All of the study participants (N=9) indicated that they used technology such as the Internet as a means of feeling closer to their spouse during deployment. Some respondents acknowledged that without the ability to partake in CMC via online technology they would not have been able to stay as connected (Wheeler and Torres Stone, 2009). The immediate connection provided by ready access to Internet, new media platforms, and social networking sites can be uplifting yet stressful at the same time. Having this instantaneous link can cause the deployed service member to indirectly experience the stress of issues at home and vice versa (La Bash, et al., 2009).

Walther (1992) refers to CMC as both synchronous and asynchronous means of communicating. CMC has evolved with the times from traditional online platforms such as chat rooms and e-mail, to instant messaging, SNSs, and Skype (Houser et a, 2012). Bryant and Marmo (2009) indicate the overwhelming increase in Facebook use by young adults, noting its influence over the relational communication behaviors of this population. New technologies such as Facebook and Skype continually change the communication landscapes and thereby alter communications channels and relational maintenance strategies as a result (Bryant & Marmo, 2009).

In 2009, Walther and Ramirez argued that there was room for social networking research to be maximized in the context of their potentially dramatic effects on relational maintenance. Facebook is among the most groundbreaking communication trends to emerge. The social networking site developed in 2004 and affords users the ability to “friend” one another and facilitate communication online among users via their online profile components. Facebook’s site also has instant messaging features for synchronous chat, thus allowing both synchronous and asynchronous methods of communication (Bryant & Marmo, 2009). Consistency of communicating with online media can be tricky, because digital media provide fewer interpersonal social cues (Baym, 2010).

Expectations of Access and Availability

To make sense of new media, Baym (2010) suggested that researchers consider its technological features in conjunction with its personal, cultural, and historical implications. She reminds us that how communication is transacted online is shaped by online and offline social forces, and that all mediated exchanges are relevant within the historical backdrop in which they occur. Relational and group contexts are significant variables in mediated communication. As such, understanding the niche of military spouses and how they utilize new media and perceive it to affect their relationship when apart is valuable.

Specifically in the context of relational maintenance, Bryant and Marmo (2009) found that different types of “friends” on Facebook warrant different types of online maintenance behavior. They recognized that romantic partners use Facebook as an additional means of communication in addition to their offline maintenance behavior. Romantic partners have been found to use more Facebook maintenance strategies with one another than with other types of friends. Even when the intimacy in a relationship intensifies, the expectation still exists for

Facebook maintenance strategies to remain enacted in addition to increased offline relationship development and maintenance behavior.

Military family members desire a dependable, opportune, and inexpensive method of communication, such as type of social networking experience provided by Facebook (Drummet, et al., 2003). A challenge presents in the use of online platforms because of the technological support and maintenance required for Internet structures. In some cases these cannot be readily available for access by deployed service members based on location, resources and vulnerability to enemy interception (Drummet, et al., 2003). Faber et.al. (2008) indicate that 70% of military spouses report technical and logistical problems in communicating with his/her deployed loved one.

Despite wanting the availability of modern communication technologies to keep in touch with a spouse, sometimes this access can lead to potentially negative consequences. One soldier describes his concerns with new media used by deployed comrades in acknowledging that the ability to send and receive information instantly can lead to distraction from their mission. Based on the nature of their work in the field such distractions are not welcome and are a cause for safety concerns (La Bash, et al., 2009). Emotions experienced during military separation are pervasive in romantic and martial relationships of military unions. On the positive side of deployment implications, it is believed that relationships that were strained prior to deployment may be strengthened by the separation in that previous mounting issues are set aside to recalibrate and keep a positive tone during the time apart (Drummet, et al., 2003).

Technological Determinism

Although this study is inductive, it is important to note that technological determinism is a popular and useful framework to explore the relationship between technology and human

communication. It makes the assumption that significant social and historical changes are primarily caused and/or carried out by technology at the macro- and micro-social levels, they have subtle, but significant, psychological and social impacts. Among its core assumptions, the technological imperative recognizes technological innovation as an inevitable, ever-evolving, ongoing and irreversible process (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2008). Baym (2010) references the milestone set forth by Marshall McLuhan that “medium is the message,” implying that the characteristics of the technology are transferred to its users. Today, technological determinism is more readily symbolized by its direct consequences brought about by use, choice, and function of modern media, particularly for the use of relationship maintenance (Baym, 2010). Existing research has proven that a leading driver in the use of Facebook is to maintain personal relationships (Craig & Wright, 2012; Ellison et al., 2009).

Research Opportunities

There are seemingly endless opportunities for new media scholars to pursue research that examine social media, especially in the context of relationship maintenance. Williams (1987) explained 6 dimensions for research to examine the behavior of using technology to facilitate human communication: (1) attitudes, (2) time and space, (3) connectivity, (4) mobility, (5) increased choice, and (6) socialization. The themes and corresponding theories identified within the findings of this dissertation, each of these dimensions is relevant and supported. Baym (2010) identified 7 factors that encompass how new media influences personal connections: (1) interactivity, (2) temporal structure, (3) social cues, (4) storage, (5) replicability, (6) reach, and (7) mobility. These factors emerge in the themes concluded in this dissertation, providing corroboration for Baym’s notions. Carr (2011) mentioned that the Internet and its platforms differ inherently from other media in that they are fundamentally interactive.

As new media continues to penetrate the relational communication space, there are implications to interpersonal relationships and associated maintenance strategies. The evolution of communication technologies changes the rules of engagement for relational communication behavior, particularly in the online context. There is significant opportunity to develop research that seeks to uncover conclusions about new media's effects, and investigate them within the specific group of military spouses.

War is unpredictable, inconsistent and historically unique, and technology, likewise, is constantly evolving. This dissertation will look carefully at the impact that the new media platforms, particularly Skype and Facebook, have on communication in military spousal relationships. Through an examination of the actual communication experience between military spouses, and the relevant themes that emerge about its effects on that experience, this dissertation sought to learn more about the essence of new media's role in military spousal communication. The series of research questions in this study will address the following: the effects of using Facebook and Skype on the communicative behavior and patterns between military spouses; the perceptions by military spouses about the availability of Facebook and Skype to support spousal communication during wartime deployment; and what, if any, differences exist in the role and priority of Facebook and Skype as communication channels during deployment compared with other forms of military separations (i.e. training operations, disaster relief, and peace-keeping efforts).

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This study utilizes an empirical phenomenological method, rooted in the worldview of social constructivism. This method allows for analysis of the lived experience of the participants from their perspective in order to understand the essence at a personal level of detail (Creswell,

2009). This approach allows for data collection of robust descriptions, which leads to structured and reflective analyses that will capture the essence of military spousal communication using new media. This approach attempts to gather data without interference to the natural user experience (Creswell, 2009). Among the benefits of this study are its ability to determine the prevalence and realize the experience of using Facebook and Skype for spousal communication during deployment and separation. This exploratory study has potential value in that it will capture a timely picture of the role and effects of the selected new media as they are used by military spouses to sustain their communication under circumstances that are distinctive and non-replicable.

Research Questions

This study will inductively examine the following set of research questions:

RQ1: What are the effects of using Facebook and Skype on the communicative behavior and patterns between military spouses?

RQ2: Do military spouses perceive that the availability of Facebook and Skype enhances their communication during wartime deployment?

RQ3: Are there differences in the role and priority of Facebook and Skype as communication channels during deployment compared with other forms of military separations (i.e. training operations, disaster relief, and peace-time deployments)?

Research Design

Qualitative research approaches allow for inductive data analysis, meaning that the themes and categories that emerge in the results are derived organically, without the creation of a priori hypotheses (Creswell, 2009). Organizing the data in a strategic manner, starting with the specific details from the interviews and aligning them with overarching patterns allows for

constitution of the experience to emerge freely from the descriptions provided by the participants. Participant meaning is essential to the value of data gathered through qualitative approaches. This researcher's agenda is removed from the investigation, allowing for the detail of the subjects' vantage point to reveal (Creswell, 2009).

Phenomenology presents a holistic method to defining and describing an experience based on personal descriptions (Almeida, 2012). This approach allows for the development of a complex picture of what the subjects' experience entails. The subjects in this study have differences or variations in how they utilize new media and how they perceive these platforms to affect their spousal communication. Each separation and deployment is inherently distinct. In approaching this research inductively, this researcher draws together multiple perspectives of the intersecting phenomena of using new media for CMC in military spousal relationships in the context of deployment and military separation (Creswell, 2009).

Validity of Study

Creswell (2009) defines qualitative validity as the procedure(s) used by the researcher to ensure accuracy of the findings. The validity strategies used in this study include engaging in crystallization and triangulation procedures, practicing phenomenological reduction or bracketing, and reporting data with integrity.

Creswell (2009) and Almeida (2012) both encourage the use of triangulation when approaching research in the qualitative paradigm. Triangulation incorporates the use of different sources of preexisting data and research to be examined concurrently with data collection and analysis to build out appropriate and relevant themes. Gathering data from multiple sources provides justification and rationale to support ongoing research; triangulation uses this converging information as a foundation on which to build the current study (Creswell, 2009).

This study will ensure validity by engaging dendritic crystallization as part of the research method. By allowing for rich descriptions and overarching themes to be reported in the findings, a comprehensive “tree” was built. Due to the complexity of new media, and the uniqueness of deployment and separation experiences, this study not only pulls together research from many diverse areas outside communication and media studies, but also engages many facets within this broad field. Dendritic crystallization will support the detail and soundness of the study and provide a rich picture as to the communication experience under consideration.

Ellingson (2009) contributed a graphic representation of the qualitative continuum to social science research, wherein middle ground approaches exist between opposing impressionist and realist research design paradigms. She explains the crystallization of qualitative research in 5 core principles of crystallization: (1) offers in-depth, detailed descriptions of complex interpretations of meaning and perspectives of a phenomenon or group; (2) represents a model for producing knowledge across multiple points of the qualitative continuum and affords a balance between constructivist and interpretive approach; (3) allows for the author to utilize multiple genres of writing; (4) includes a degree of reflection in the process in the role of the researcher in the design, collection of data and presentation of the findings; and (5) avoids positivist claims to objectivity in honor of seeking truth that is constructivist, embodied and developed. Crystallization of this research study should prove to be a resourceful way to generate comprehensive and meaningful findings from the data gathered in the interviews.

Crystallization is a valuable strategy to ensure accuracy within a multi-dimensional exploration using the phenomenological approach. Additionally, researcher bias needs to be clarified and eliminated from influencing the findings and report. Creswell (2009) recommends that the researcher clarify all pre-existing biases by offering an honest self-reflection in the form

of a narrative within the research report. Creswell (2009) also states that effective qualitative scholars bring their comments into their report, acknowledging how these items affect the interpretation of the results of the study. Moustakas (1994) discusses *epoche*, a Greek word that means to refrain from judgment. Moustakas contends that to distinguish and describe an experience in essence, researchers must adhere to a new way of looking at the world around them, and to see what stands before them genuinely and without pre-conceived notions.

Van Manen (1990) describes bracketing, which is also known as phenomenological reduction, the act of suspending judgments in order to study phenomena in their natural structures. Practicing phenomenological reductionism requires the researcher to withhold personal opinions and biases when describing and interpreting the details of the experiences of the participants. Bracketing was initially proposed by Edmund Husserl, known as the father of phenomenology. Husserl believed that effective researchers are able to remove themselves from the experience at hand and examine it in such a way that reduces subjectivity and allows for open revelation of the experience. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological reduction allows the researcher to move beyond the everyday perceptions of what might be, and learn about the experience as if it were brand new. Moustakas (1994) reveals that Husserl notes that intersubjectivity exists in the connection between a researcher and perceptions of reality.

Trustworthiness is attained by following several procedures highlighted by Creswell (2009). First, this researcher utilizes member-checking, by providing a copy of the data to the participant for review and discuss any errors or discrepancies in the reported information. Also, this researcher will conduct the interview over a period of several months. By spending prolonged time gathering the data through a series of interviews, this researcher developed a keener understanding of the experience to describe and report.

Methodology

Population

The population for this study is military spouses who are married to an active- or reserve-duty member of the United States Armed Forces (Marines, Navy, Army, Air Force). As described in Chapter 2, this group represents a unique co-culture under the American cultural umbrella. Military spouses and families have their own communicative needs, dictated by their indefinite separation(s) and deployment(s). There is a great deal of uncertainty caused by the separation and deployment experience that is an inherent trait of this group, and the accessibility to select new media can assist in fostering their relational communication when apart. Knowing that new media have yet to be explored exclusively in the military spousal context, this study interviewed a small group of young, somewhat newly married military spouses in order to comprehend the essence of how these new media impact their spousal communication patterns within their military lifestyle.

Participants

To participate in this study, subjects had to meet several criteria. The participants needed to be civilians (non-military) between the ages of 18-35 years old at the time of the deployment who have been married to an active- or reserve- duty member of the United States Armed Forces for duration of 5 years or less. Participants' spouses must have experienced at least one wartime deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan during the tenure of their marriage (2007-present). This study is limited to this time period for relevancy, due to the evolving nature and growing popularity of the Facebook and Skype platforms, coupled with the intensity of troop surges to the wars during this era. Participants were active users of either or both the Facebook (social networking site) or

Skype (voice-over IP video chat) platforms during the pertinent period of deployment and/or military separation.

Data Collection Procedures

These participants were gathered by contacting the Family Readiness Officers (FROs) and Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) of currently or previously deployed units within the respective branches of the United States Armed Forces. They were asked to distribute information about the study to help recruit voluntary participants who meet the inclusion criteria. The researcher reviewed public artifacts (i.e. online news artifacts) to identify Armed Forces units that were deployed to a combat theatre (i.e. Iraq or Afghanistan) since 2007. Using this information, FRO and FRG contact information was obtained using publicly available online information. The letter in Appendix A is a sample of what was sent to these constituencies via e-mail requesting assistance in disseminating information about this dissertation to recruit qualified subjects. In addition to these recruiting efforts, this researcher also contacted an existing convenience sample of 6 qualified participants seeking their participation, and 4 of them were able to participate in the current study. From these groups, word of mouth proved to be a viable recruiting tool, as half of the spouses recruited through initial means referred another qualified subjects for participation.

Creswell (2009) indicated that using a small number of participants is acceptable in phenomenological research; therefore, a target sample of 5 to 10 subjects was initially sought. Once enough qualified volunteers were recruited, the following procedure was followed for interaction with the subjects during the investigation. A total of 10 participants were interviewed for this study.

First, this researcher contacted the subjects via email (see Appendix C) and provided them with a letter of informed consent (See Appendix B). Then, a 3-part series of interviews with each of the subjects was scheduled during a three month period between January-March, 2013. The interview instrument (see Appendix D) was designed to gather basic demographic data, and information regarding the participants' use of Facebook and Skype to communicate with their spouses during the military separation and deployment, communication patterns and behaviors, frequency, and perceived effects.

The interview questions were designed based on the 5 characteristics presented by Moustakas (1994) and listed in Chapter One to guide this investigation of human communicative experience(s). Van Manen (1990) states that hermeneutic phenomenological interviews have 2 specific purposes: (1) to serve as a means for exploring and experiencing narrative material as a resource to understand a human phenomenon, and (2) to serve as a vehicle to facilitate a comfortable conversational relationship and bond between the researcher and the subjects. This is significant in order to draw as much information about the experience that the subject is willing to share.

Interview sessions were recorded to be transcribed by this researcher and participants were made aware of this as a part of providing informed consent for participation. Upon conclusion of the series of interviews, a letter was sent via e-mail to each participant providing necessary debriefing instructions. Interviews were mainly conducted by telephone with only one interview conducted in person. The protocol for face-to-face and distance interviews was identical.

Data Analysis Procedures

Van Manen (1990) reminds researchers that the emphasis for phenomenological research focuses on meanings of lived experiences. So-called “borrowing” from other people’s experiences and reflections allows for a deeper meaning of the human experience within military spouses and the phenomenon of how they communicate using new media in this dissertation. This study presented the need for data and thematic classification, so rather than rely on grounded theory, this phenomenology borrows ideas from Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach for reflection and writing a qualitative report. In particular, his insights on interviewing and establishing results by way of coding and classifying the units of analysis into themes were useful as the results were discovered.

Langsdorf (1994) established that a phenomenological researcher works within 4 realms when investigating communication behavior: (1) constitution, (2) reflexivity, (3) interpretation, and (4) meaningfulness. As such, this researcher observed how social reality developed from human interaction and determines what kind of social reality is constituted based on the environment and interaction. Also, within this study variations of experiences are accounted for within the sample, how interpretation influences the description is explained, and an understanding is derived based on cultural norms, morals and values, and societal standards (Langsdorf, 1994). The focus of this dissertation was toward uncovering themes that are holistic and complex in order to understand the experience, prompted by the search for meanings and essences, rather than formulating pre-conceived research ideas (Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell (2009) provides a 6-step analytical model for qualitative data analysis that was used in this dissertation to evaluate the results. Step 1 was to organize and prepare the data for analysis by transcribing the interviews, typing up notes, and arranging the data into groups based

on the subjects' information. Step 2 was to read through all of the data to get overall sense of the meaning of the information. This researcher paid careful attention to the tone of the material and general ideas that emerged from the narratives shared by the participants. Step 3 involved coding the data by organizing it into categories and grouping similar topics together. Step 4 generated descriptions which divided the categories and topics into themes based on common information about the characteristics of the subjects, events, or patterns of behaviors. Step 5 involved describing the themes using a qualitative narrative that included detailed information from the participants. Lastly, step 6 was the final interpretation where this researcher addressed what was learned, how it related to existing theories, and what new questions arose as a result of the study.

Research Ethics

Role of the researcher and structure

There are several benefits to using the proposed phenomenological method for this study. This approach supports the use of semi-structured interviews, comprised of open-ended questions to gather a pool of potentially crucial information. Meloy (2002) acknowledges the rich experience for the researcher in conducting in-depth interviews as the data collection instrument. In undergoing this process, the researcher gets to build a unique rapport with the participants and gather information by way of a dialogue, created in words and concepts that could not be developed and captured within the limitations of quantitative survey or potentially under-developed questionnaire. As such, this dialogue creates collaboration between the researcher and the participants as the observation unfolds during the study. Additionally, the ability to bracket the personal experience of the researcher and view the phenomenon from the lens of the of others' experiences is essential (Creswell, 2009).

Confidentiality

This interview protocol did not request any personal identifying information about the participants, nor their spouses. The protocol collected basic demographic information, as relevant to the study. Participants offered to have their first name included in any publishable reports. Files containing the data transcripts of the interviews are being stored on a secure server for 3 years in compliance with the standards and regulations set forth in IUP's Information Protection Policy.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Results

The goal of this exploratory study is to glean information about the use of new media and its impact on relational maintenance in the context of contemporary military marriages. The findings of this study yield details about the experiences of 10 women whose husbands were all deployed 1 or more times during the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The results of this study reveal 5 themes: (1) mobility, (2) monitoring and surveillance, (3) community, (4) utility (access and preference), and (5) urgency and uncertainty. The derived themes all correspond with the investigation's research questions, which prompt consideration of how each of them lends to 1 of 4 well-known communication theories: (1) media richness theory, (2) social capital theory, (3) uses and gratifications theory, and (4) uncertainty reduction theory.

This study utilized the phenomenological method to investigate the use of new media by military spouses in order to draw back several types of information. First, this research seeks to qualify how Internet-based new media outlets are used to augment computer-mediated communication from the theatre of war. Furthermore, this researcher hopes to learn about and understand how this particular co-cultural niche supports communication between military spouses under the distinctive circumstances that they endure. Next, the research examines the

perceived effects of using these platforms to communicate during deployment and derive meaningfulness about the communication process between military spouses in their lifestyle.

This study analyzed the data gathered from 10 (n=10) subjects to examine the role and impact that platforms such as Facebook, Skype, and Yahoo Messenger have within military marriages. The actual deployment communication experience and the essence of wartime relational maintenance are constructed using these findings. The perceptions, feelings, and opinions of a small subset of the military spousal constituency are represented herein as 3 research questions are explored: (1) What effects do Facebook and Skype usage have on the communicative behavior and patterns between military spouses? (2) Do military spouses perceive that the availability of Facebook and Skype enhances their communication during wartime deployment? and (3) Are there differences in the role and priority of Facebook and Skype as communication channels during deployment compared with other forms of military separations (i.e., training operations, disaster relief, and peace-time deployments)?

Methodological Recap

Borrowing from Van Manen (1990), this researcher was careful to consider for data gathering that hermeneutic phenomenological interviews are conducted to achieve 2 specific results: (1) to explore narrative material about individuals' experiences as a resource to understand a human phenomenon, and (2) to facilitate a comfortable conversation between the researcher and participants in order to illicit as much information about that actual experience directly from the participant. This procedure was comprised of a series of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with a small group of civilian spouses married to active or former members of the United States military.

The instrument contained a three-part interview sequence, consisting of questions

intended to gather demographic and relational data, and to learn about participants' use of social media and online media platforms. The protocol also contained a series of questions about their use of new media to communicate with a spouse during deployment, the frequency and patterns of their communication interactions, behavioral norms, and their opinions about these platforms. The interviews were conducted with the participants between January 2013 and March 2013. All interviews were recorded using an Olympus DP-201 Note Corder and an Olympus VN-7200 Digital Voice Recorder. Following the conclusion of the interviews, these recordings and corresponding notes were transcribed by this researcher. Digital copies of the transcript files have been archived by this researcher, and the audio files containing the interviews have been destroyed.

Description of Participants

The participants were all women (n=10) whose ages were between 21 and 37 at the time of the interviews. The average length of marriage among the women was 3.75 years. The couples had been married between 3 weeks to several years when they became separated by deployment, which is usually preceded by a 6-week-to-3-month training exercise. The couples dated for an average of just over 3 years before getting married. A summary of key demographic is provided in Table 1. A brief description of each of the subjects and her spouse is provided in addition to Table 1 to better equip the readers to understand the spouse's stories as they unfold in this chapter.

Table 1

Summary of Participants in Study

Subject Name/Age	Spouse Name/Age	Branch	Deployment(s)
Tiffany (26)	Joe (23)	Army	Afghanistan – 2008-2009 Afghanistan – 2010-2011
Jenna (31)	Danny (30)	Army	Afghanistan – 2010-2011
Natalie (23)	Vlad (22)	Marine Corps	Afghanistan – 2009-2010
Carrie (28)	Dan (33)	Marine Corps	Afghanistan- 2009 Okinawa, Japan – 2011
Audrey (22)	Alex (27)	Marine Corps	Afghanistan – 2010-2011 Afghanistan – 2012
Cara (37)	Eric (39)	Marine Corps Reserves	Afghanistan – 2011
Rachel (24)	Daniel (23)	Army	Afghanistan – 2010-2011
Tiernan (32)	John (32)	Army	Iraq – 2009-2010
Laura (21)	Todd (24)	Army National Guard	Kuwait – 2012-2013
Tara (23)	Al (26)	Marine Corps	Afghanistan – 2011-2012

Tiffany is a 26-year-old Army wife and mother of a 5-year-old daughter and a 3-year-old son. Her husband, Joe (23), has deployed twice to Afghanistan, once from 2008-2009 and again from 2010-2011. Tiffany and Joe relied heavily on Facebook and Skype to communicate with one another during both of his deployments, yet their usage patterns changed between deployments for a variety of reasons to be discussed herein. Their son was born when Tiffany's husband was deployed, and Joe met their baby for the first time virtually using Skype.

Jenna (31) and Danny (30) have been together for over 12 years, but have been married for only 5 of those years. They were married throughout Danny's entire career in the Army, starting with basic training and all the way through his discharge. During his deployment to Afghanistan from August 2010 to July 2011, the couple used Facebook as their primary channel of communication. A distinction in their story is that Danny actually started his Facebook page because he was deploying, specifically for the purpose of maintaining communication with Jenna, who describes Facebook as her "lifesaver" during deployment.

Natalie and Vlad (Vladimir) were engaged in 2009 when he deployed for Afghanistan as a United States Marine. Natalie, now 23, dated Vlad for almost 4 years before becoming engaged in March 2009, just 1 month before Vlad deployed. The pair did not speak for the first 3 months of his tour. During this time, she was on the home front planning their wedding. Vlad extended his tour of duty, but the second half of his deployment was somewhat different than the first, due to his location and his increased access to Internet. She relied heavily upon the use of MotoMail to write to Vlad on a daily basis. This is an electronically printed mail service for overseas Marines to receive letters (Marineparents.com, 2012). Occasionally, they also utilized Facebook, but preferred to talk by phone whenever possible.

Carrie, a 28-year-old, and her husband, Dan (33), are the parents of 18-month-old Anthony. When Anthony was born in 2011, Dan was serving in Okinawa, Japan, in the United States Marine Corps. He also did a tour in Afghanistan in 2009-2010, just a short time after they were married. They were unable to use Skype when Dan was in Afghanistan, but Skype was their main source of communication during the Japan deployment. In a story that echoes Tiffany's, baby Anthony met his father for the first time via Skype within minutes of his birth. Carrie also notes that the biggest differences between the Japan deployment and the Afghanistan

deployment (besides the means of communication) had to do with frequency of communication and the degree of uncertainty experienced.

Audrey, 22, is a Marine wife married to Alex, 27. They have a 1-year-old son together and have been married for 3 years. Alex has deployed to Afghanistan twice: the first time in 2010-2011 and again in 2012. They used Facebook, Skype, and MotoMail whenever they could during both of the tours. During Alex's second deployment, Audrey gave birth to their son. Alex first saw pictures of their baby in theatre when a friend in his company saw Audrey post them on Facebook and printed them out and delivered them to Alex in the field. In a familiar story, the father and son met when the baby was 3 weeks old via Skype.

Cara is presently a 37-year-old wife and mother of two children, 3-year-old Abby and 15-month-old Jack. She and her husband Eric, now 39, were married for 4 years when his reserve unit of the United States Marine Corps deployed to Afghanistan in 2011 for 6 months. They were also dating in 2004 when he was deployed to Iraq for the second time on an 8-month tour of duty. She acknowledges e-mailing him every day and using e-mail as their primary communication channel, but not Facebook or Skype, for reasons to be divulged later in this chapter. She acknowledges that her experience as a wife of a Reservist may be different from many of the traditional wives of enlisted Marines who live on base and are surrounded by others living the military lifestyle full-time.

Rachel, 24, and Daniel, 23, are an Army family, with a 5-year-old daughter and a 10-month-old son. They have been married for 3 years and were newly married when Daniel deployed to Afghanistan in 2010-2011 for a 1-year tour. The two relied on Facebook, Skype, and Yahoo Messenger to maintain their communication during the deployment. Their young daughter appreciated the experience of being able to wave to Daddy and see his image as they

would communicate using Yahoo Messenger. Rachel admits marital longevity and career decisions (i.e., decisions to reenlist or get discharged from the military) are both influenced by the use of communication technologies.

Tiernan is 32-year-old Army wife married to John, 32. They have been married for 6 years to date, but had only been married for 2 ½ years when John deployed to Afghanistan in 2009-2010 for a year. The two primarily used Yahoo Messenger to communicate, along with e-mail and minimal use of Facebook. Despite Facebook's minimal role as a direct communication channel between her and John, it served a vital purpose, as Tiernan would acquire information and status updates on the unit from John's Battalion Commander, with whom she was Facebook friends.

Laura is 21 and has only been married to her husband, Todd, 24, for 6 months. Todd is in the Army National Guard and just deployed to Kuwait in October 2012 after marrying Laura in August 2012. The young couple is just starting out and uses Facebook almost daily to facilitate their spousal communication as they work to get their marriage off the ground while living apart. They also rely heavily on text-messaging via a mobile application on Todd's iPhone and Skype to stay in contact with each other. Laura appreciates the visual nature of a platform like Skype to be able to show Todd how their marital home is coming together and is glad to wake up almost every morning to a text message from Todd checking in.

Tara and Al were engaged during his deployment to Afghanistan in 2010-2011. The 23-year-old former Marine wife acknowledges that Facebook was the couple's main method of communicating while he was deployed. She said that the two would also supplement their communication with calls, e-mails, and traditional letter writing when they could. They were in the midst of planning their wedding, scheduled upon his homecoming, so the young couple had a

task at hand that they were working to achieve as they coordinated remotely with one another.

Analysis Overview

According to Van Manen (1990), the emphasis for phenomenological research is to understand the essence of lived experiences. He claims that this is achieved when a researcher borrows from the experiences of others, drawing from their reflections to grasp a deep-seated and intimate understanding of the intersecting phenomena at hand (i.e., using new media to communicate, communicating during deployment to war). This study relied on thematic classification, establishing the results by coding and classifying the units of analysis into themes that serve to respond to the research questions posed in this study.

This analysis employed the 6-step analytical method for qualitative data analysis presented by Creswell (2009). The first step organized the data in preparation for the analysis, through transcribing the data and field notes. Second, the data in the transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to determine the overall sense of the information acquired and see the “big picture” of what the data represented. Third, the data was placed into categories by bundling similar topics and ideas together. Step four assigned the themes to each of these categories based on their contents. The fifth step narrated the themes using the contributions from the participants. Finally, these findings addressed the stated research questions and aligned with relevant theoretical frames.

Findings

Demographics and Psychographics

The participants in the interviews were all women (n=10, 100%) between the ages of 21 and 37 years (mean = 27 years old). The average length of marriage among the women at the time was 3 ¾ years, with marriages ranging from 6 months to 6 years. Most of the spouses had

been dating for an average of just over 3 years prior to getting married. Of the couples, 6 have children (60%); 4 of the couples (40%) did not have children at the time of the interviews. The present-day ages of the children range between 10 months to 5 years.

The sample comprised of four spouses who served in the Army (40%), 4 in the Marine Corps (40%), 1 in the Army National Guard (10%), and 1 in the Marine Corps Reserves (10%); none were in the Navy or Air Force branches of the United States military. The average length of time that a spouse was enlisted is 6 years and 4 months, ranging from 2 ½ years to 17 years. At the time that these interviews were conducted (January-March, 2013), 6 of the spouses were on active duty (60%), and 4 were honorably discharged (40%).

Since 2007, these 10 wives have experienced a total of 14 deployments; 11 with their partners doing tours in Iraq and/or Afghanistan, 1 tour in Japan, 1 tour in Kuwait, and 1 tour in Norway. The tours ranged in length from 6 months to a year. The average tour lasted up to 9 ½ months. The specific deployment schedule of the spouses from 2007 to present is as follows:

- Tiffany's husband Joe, a soldier in the United States Army, served in Afghanistan from October 2008 until October 2009. He deployed again to Afghanistan in October 2010 and returned home in July 2011.
- Jenna's husband Danny, a soldier, deployed to Afghanistan from August 2010 until July 2011.
- Natalie's husband Vlad, a United States Marine, was most recently deployed to Norway (2012) and is preparing to go back shortly. Vlad also served an extended tour of duty in Afghanistan, from April 2009 to April 2010.
- Carrie's husband, Dan, a Marine, deployed to Afghanistan for 8 months during 2009 and for 6 months to Okinawa, Japan, in 2011.

- Audrey's husband, Alex, a Marine, deployed to Afghanistan twice. First, he was gone for 6 months, from September 2010 until the end of March 2011. He deployed again in January 2012 and returned home in July 2012.
- Cara's husband, Eric, a reservist in the Marine Corps, was deployed to Afghanistan from January until July 2011 on a 6-month tour of duty.
- Rachel dealt with her soldier, Daniel, being away from August 2010 until August 2011, as he served on a year-long tour in Afghanistan.
- Tiernan's husband, John, also a U.S. soldier, deployed to Iraq for just under a year, between August 2009 and the end of June 2010.
- Laura's husband, Todd, is presently serving in Kuwait. He is on the eighth month of what is scheduled to be a 12-month tour of duty with the Army National Guard.
- Tara's husband, Al, a United States Marine, deployed to Afghanistan in February 2011 and returned home in February 2012 after a year-long tour of duty.

During these deployments, the longest that any of the couples ever went without talking was 3 months (Natalie and Vlad); the average frequency of communication ranged from daily contact to once every 3 months. All of the wives stated that the communication varied greatly from deployment to deployment and from day-to-day and week-to-week during each deployment, based on where their spouses were stationed and what they were doing. Most indicated that the communication exchanges were inconsistent, meaning that sometimes they would communicate daily; yet, at times, they would not be able to communicate for much longer periods of time. For example, Tara and Al communicated daily for most of his deployment, but did go occasionally without talking for longer durations when he was out in the field. On one isolated occasion, he went out on a mission, and the two could not communicate for 6 weeks.

Similar reports about this type of inconsistency were common among the wives as the details of their deployment stories emerged.

In addition to these deployments, the spouses are often apart for other types of military separations as well. These times apart for reasons other than deployment usually occur when the spouse is attending basic training, performing training exercises, getting ready for deployment, or “in the field” for routine field exercises. These separations ranged anywhere from a few days to several months. The longest period of time apart for military separation was reported by Tiffany and Laura as 3 months when their spouses participated in pre-deployment training exercises. These pre-deployment training exercises were followed closely in duration by the separations during basic training, which were experienced by Jenna, Natalie, and Rachel. Cara, Laura, and Audrey also all reported lengthy separations for pre-deployment training exercises, ranging from 3 to 8 weeks. The most common form of military separation usually only lasts a few nights to a week in duration; this is when the spouses go out “in the field” for routine field training. This happens frequently, and, interestingly enough, the spouses rarely communicate with one another during these separations.

When asked about the new media platforms and other communication technologies that they utilized to communicate during their partner’s deployment, the spouses acknowledged using a myriad of Internet-based platforms, including: Facebook, Skype, Yahoo Messenger, Gmail, and MotoMail. Facebook emerged as the leading communication channel during deployment, with 6 (60%) spouses reporting it as their primary method for communicating with their spouse abroad. The next section reports the particular variables of the study and their corresponding interview questions and findings.

The New Media Experience and its Impact on Military Marriages

When asked to describe their experiences using Facebook to communicate with their spouses, the wives largely reported that they utilized Facebook frequently as a communication channel. Facebook acts as an instrument not only for keeping in touch with their husbands, but also for sharing pictures, making connections with other military spouses and their husbands' comrades, and monitoring Facebook activity to reduce uncertainty.

At present, with Todd away in Kuwait, he and Laura talk daily using Facebook. He uses the Wi-Fi (wireless Internet access) on base to access the platform on his iPhone. Although they suspended his texting and calling plans due to his remote location abroad and the associated cost and limits to connection, the iPhone device itself has proven to be an efficient tool for military spouses to facilitate their communication exchanges. Having the iPhone with Wi-Fi available to him allows Todd to use not only his Facebook app to communicate, but also a mobile app for text messaging. These messages are sent from his device via the Wi-Fi Internet connection directly to her phone, just as standard text messages shared between two mobile devices would be.

Jenna admits that her husband, Danny, only began using Facebook because he was preparing to deploy and knew that they would be apart for some time. Danny had not used Facebook as a civilian or to communicate with Jen during any prior separations. She reveals that under the circumstances of Danny's deployment, it was actually easier to communicate on Facebook than by any other means.

Rachel and her husband Daniel used Facebook, along with Yahoo Messenger, to communicate when he was deployed to Afghanistan in 2010-2011. They would send more abbreviated private messages and post to each other's Facebook walls, whereas they would use

Yahoo to send each other longer notes, exchange pictures, and video chat, in place of Skype. Rachel acknowledged that Facebook was great as a quick means for Daniel to notify her to preempt a phone call, letting her know that he was planning to call. Tara says that she and Al spoke via Facebook daily, with the exception of when he was out on missions. He had one long mission that lasted roughly 6 weeks, but otherwise they never went longer than a week without being in contact with one another on Facebook.

Reflecting on a different modality of usage, Tiernan admitted that she and John would monitor each other's pages on occasion during deployment, but that by and large their primary communication channels were satellite phone and Yahoo messenger. In addition to checking in on John on Facebook, Tiernan became Facebook friends with John's Battalion Commander. While Tiernan admits that she and the Battalion Commander did not communicate directly with one another using Facebook (i.e. exchanging private messages or sharing wall posts), the platform served as a valuable resource to acquire information by following his status updates online. This greatly helped to reduce her uncertainty and put her at ease. Tiernan admits that her husband John's unit was strongly discouraged from using Facebook to communicate information and they were very strict about posting information on the SNS. For this reason, and because they had alternatives, Tiernan and John typically relied more on Yahoo and Yahoo Messenger to facilitate their computer-mediated communication instead of Facebook, Skype, or other new media platforms.

Tiffany claims that she felt as though her husband Joe knew more about what was going on through Facebook than by communicating through any other channel. She states, "It wasn't just us talking, but sometimes I would just make general posts, like talking about running to the store, or the kids being cranky. I feel like I posted more when he was gone for some reason,

probably just so he can see, and then I put a lot more pictures up, and videos, the whole nine yards, so that he could see everything that was going on at home.” She identifies this sort of transparency as a form of maintaining connection and providing relational assurances while her husband is away.

Natalie’s experience was also different and unique among the group of military wives. She serves as a primary example of a spouse who utilized these outlets for monitoring and surveillance of not only her spouse, but her fellow Marine wives. She claims that she would write to Vlad daily, primarily using MotoMail. Yet 3 months went by when she received no correspondence in return, nor had any other communication with him. Finally, after months of waiting, she admits that her mind began to play tricks on her and she wrote him a callous letter fueled by her distressed emotions. By that point, she had discovered that on MotoMail, much like Facebook, there is a feature where people can form a group a chat or post. People would ask questions such as “Is so-and-so in your husband’s battalion?” and learn more about who they were and how they were connected. Through this feature, Natalie linked up with some spouses so that she could talk to the wives whose husbands were in Vlad’s unit. She discloses that when they revealed that they had spoken to their spouses most recently (within weeks), she became irate. Natalie awkwardly reveals, “When I would talk to the wives, and they would tell me, ‘Oh yeah, I spoke to my spouse two weeks ago,’ well, then I would just get mad. I was like ‘What the heck?! Where is Vlad?’ So it did get me upset, because I really thought that he was ignoring me, but in reality it was because he couldn’t get access to a phone or computer to reach me for a while.”

Vlad extended his deployment, and Natalie recounts that the second half of the deployment was an entirely different experience. She began to rely less on MotoMail and more

on Facebook. For the first month, they would talk on Facebook once a week. Slowly it became more common, up to twice or maybe even three times a week around the second month. As the tour progressed, it then became easier for him to get a phone, so the couple began to talk by phone as often as possible.

Natalie provides a detailed account of some of the benefits and pitfalls to using Facebook that she experienced. Facebook was positive for the couple's ability to share pictures, so that he could see things that were going on in her life on the home front. Yet, on the downside, the Internet connection issues and her preference to hear his voice were some of the drawbacks to communicating online. She acknowledges:

It [computer-mediated communication] sometimes caused static in the communication, just because you're writing back and forth instead of talking. And it was difficult at times for him to get good Internet service too, so it was more so writing [private] messages back and forth as opposed to chatting [on pop chat/IM]. But its biggest thing was the pictures, and being able to post and look at them, and make comments. And also videos. I could send him videos via Facebook too. I preferred to private message on Facebook and it was good for, if like, I thought of something randomly that I wanted to share with him; I could just drop him a quick message. Honestly, it meant more for me to hear his voice than to see him typing. He's not a very fast typer, like, I am a VERY fast typer, but since he's not a fast typer it's just easier for us to communicate by phone, so Facebook was our secondary. We would use it when we had to, when he couldn't use the phone.

Cara was the only wife without any Facebook experiences to share. Although she uses the platform, she never used to it communicate with her husband in theatre, and she feels that it

is a terrible platform for military spousal communication due to its public nature. She feels that the more private a communication channel is to communicate with the spouse while away, the better it is. She admits that she is just not “a Facebook person,” recognizing its value to keep in touch with different people from different stages of life and people who are farther away, but expressing her own hesitation about applauding Facebook’s role.

Audrey shares both the positive and negative anecdotes about her experiences using Facebook and Skype that highlight each platform’s unique attributes. Her first story is endearing, as she describes giving birth 3 weeks after her husband deployed. Although they spoke by phone on the day of the birth, Alex first met their infant son via Facebook and Skype. Audrey shares a heartwarming story:

...And that’s where Facebook comes in, because of course we were all posting pictures and the family was all posting pictures of our son, and so my husband was out on a mission at this time, but one of his friends was back on base, and so he printed out these pictures from Facebook, and had another guy run them out to my husband in the field and that was how he was able to see what our son looked like for the first time, even before we Skype-ed. So, I would say there has been a pretty big impact there.

Roughly 2-3 weeks later, the couple communicated via Skype for the first time since the baby’s birth, and the father virtually met his son for the first time.

In another story more critical and heart wrenching in nature, Audrey’s husband Alex lost a comrade who was killed in action during their tour. Before this incident the couple commonly communicated via Skype, yet after the loss of their friend the couple’s communication patterns shifted. Audrey discloses:

Another big impact [of the new media] this time [during this deployment; her

husband's second tour] was that we had a friend that got killed during this deployment.

And after we lost him, it was like a way for us to communicate, and we would talk a lot just to make sure that he was okay, and so finally getting to talk on Facebook after that happened was a relief to know that everything was alright.

She shares that, curiously enough, after their friend was killed, the couple never used Skype to communicate again; they only communicated using Facebook.

The spouses were asked to describe their experiences using Skype. Overall, several of the spouses had very significant stories about their use of Skype. For instance, 3 out of the 10 women gave birth with their husbands deployed, and the spouses first met their children via Skype. However, many of the wives also expressed frustration in using the platform, mainly due to bandwidth and connection issues. Although Skype was not used as commonly as Facebook by the couples due to this lack of reliability, it still proved through their experiences to be a very valuable platform.

Tiernan and Cara each admitted failed attempts at trying to use Skype to communicate with Eric and John. Where Eric was stationed was in an area that was too remote for the Internet connection to support Skype, but could accommodate e-mail transmissions. Such a challenge limited Eric and Cara's communication to e-mail. In John and Tiernan's case, the few times they were able to Skype, they were only able to use the audio feature of the call, but not the video, which, she remarked, degraded the value of using the Skype platform more frequently. Tara admits that they only Skype-ed one or two times throughout Al's year-long deployment. Due to bandwidth issues where he was stationed, Skype proved to have service issues that included the images being dark and blurry and freezing up during their conversations.

Similarly, Rachel and Natalie never used Skype to communicate with Daniel and Vlad,

respectively, during their separate deployments. Rachel revealed that the Internet connection where Daniel was stationed was fairly reliable; however, they preferred using Yahoo Messenger instead of Skype to facilitate their video chats. At times, presumably due to bandwidth, the signal would cut out, or the image quality was poor, which would compromise their ability to communicate effectively. Nonetheless, the pair appreciated having a platform like Yahoo Messenger to use to communicate by video; Rachel revealed that it was comforting and reassuring to actually see Daniel on the screen. Tiffany's challenge using Skype was more about how long her young daughter could sit still to "talk to daddy," and so sometimes having Skype conversations was difficult even if the connection was fine. Hence, her preference was to upload lots of videos and pictures of their daughter for him because it was her belief that it made him feel more connected to their growing daughter than Skype chatting.

In addition to daily Facebook use and texting via iPhone apps, Laura and Todd manage to Skype roughly once a week. Todd does not favor Skype, and Laura speculates that seeing her through the video actually complicates his emotions of being apart from her, whereas the other media (i.e., Facebook messaging and text messaging) are less visual and do not cause the same effect. Carrie had a very positive experience with Skype and relied on it as the main channel of communication between her and Dan during his tour in Japan. She shares, "During Afghanistan, we weren't allowed to Skype at all. The Japan deployment, Skype was our main way to communicate. It was every day, sometimes more than once a day. He had his laptop with him in Japan, so it was pretty easy to connect." In a story that is similar to Tiffany's, Carrie's husband also "met" their child for the first time online. Although he was unable to view the birth (he was on the phone the entire time), father and son did have their virtual meeting in short order. Carrie mentions, "I had my laptop with me, and so they were able to set up Skype after he was born,

and so Dan first saw Anthony on Skype within minutes after he was born.”

The next set of protocol questions inquired about the consistency and frequency of the spouses’ communication exchanges. The responses to these questions were connected by one unanimous theme--uncertainty. The lack of predictability during deployment as opposed to non-combat separations influenced the inconsistency in the frequency and patterns of communication. The heightened urgency, the ever-changing duties of their spousal roles, the challenges presented by locations, shared resources, and limited access to reliable technologies all contributed towards fostering uncertainty during these experiences.

Rachel shared that the communication frequency between she and her husband varied from week to week. Sometimes she would hear from her husband roughly every 2 to 4 days and then other times they would go much longer durations with no contact. When someone was killed in action or if there was a casualty in the unit, the Army would have a communication blackout, so that the information did not leak out before the families could be officially notified. As a result, she claims she was usually able to tell when something occurred based on the lengths of his silence, particularly if she did not have advanced notice that he would be unavailable for a period of time.

While Todd is available to speak daily when he is on base, there have been a few occasions during his deployment when he has had to go on “hot shifts,” during which time he will be unavailable for longer than his standard 24-hour communication window. Typically, he knows of these rounds in advance and alerts Laura that he may not be available for a little longer than usual, but he also has made his expectation clear that he anticipates her to remain in constant contact with him, even when he is unavailable to respond. This norm in their relationship most primarily stems from the fact that Laura is diabetic, so he is always concerned

about her health and wanting her to check in to let him know that she is okay. If he returns and is able to see a chronological stream of messages from her, this satisfies his concerns.

Cara would e-mail daily, and although Eric's responses were more sporadic (which she attributed to lack of predictability in his schedule), she estimates that she heard from him by e-mail on average about every other day. Natalie also discussed writing daily notes to Vlad even though he could not always reciprocate, much like Eric, due to his work. Natalie often used MotoMail in place of traditional e-mail for the daily exchanges during deployment. Since Eric is a Reservist, Cara indicated she did not have access to the MotoMail platform, which is why they had to rely on traditional e-mail. Using standard e-mail turned out to be beneficial for the couple because Eric was able to asynchronously respond to her e-mails, whereas the MotoMail system is designed to only allow messages to be sent one-way.

Jenna discloses that her communication with Danny was inconsistent during his deployment. She describes the unpredictable communication in great detail when sharing:

He was not in the greatest of areas, and they would go back and forth between two different locations. One was a more established FOB [Forward Operating Base], the other was like a hut-in-the-road kind of outpost, so there were times when I wouldn't get the chance to talk to him for like 7 to 10 days, but then there were times when I spoke with him for a week every day. So, it really just varied.

She also acknowledged a time when Danny needed to get a root canal, so the Army flew him out to see the dentist after being in excruciating pain for 3 weeks. Danny was there for 5 days, and Jenna admits that there actually came a time then where she remembers telling him that she had nothing more to say, "(laughs) ...because we had been communicating for 24/7, practically."

Natalie experienced a huge transition between the first and second halves of Vlad's

Afghanistan deployment. During the first part of Vlad's tour, he was not on an established base, so their communication was not only inconsistent, but infrequent. When he went back for his extension after his R&R (his leave to travel home during his tour), he was stationed on a major base. There, the Marines were able to use the Internet and also had access to phones, so the two communicated much more often during that part of his tour than when he initially deployed.

Carrie noted that the consistency and frequency of her and Dan's communication varied from tour to tour. She states that during the "Afghanistan deployment we never knew when we would talk. Sometimes it was every few days, other times it was every few weeks. Japan was pretty much daily, several times a day even, sometimes." They relied on Skype to facilitate their exchanges when Dan was in Japan. Carrie reveals that on one occasion during the Afghanistan deployment, the Family Readiness Officer (FRO) scheduled a Skype-like video session for the family members where they got to chat on webcam with their spouses. Other than that one time using video, Carrie states that they were limited to all Facebook messages or phone calls when Dan was available to do so during the Afghanistan tour.

In a similar account, Audrey acknowledges the frequent changes to communication patterns and channels used. She regards that the differences exist both among and during the individual tours, a common experience shared by several of the wives. During the first deployment, she and Alex only communicated about once every 5 or 6 weeks. During the second deployment, their communication patterns started out slowly. She reveals:

At the beginning, (we spoke) hardly at all, but then after that, it just would always depend on if he was on base or if he had to go out for missions and what not, so I would say about, by the third or fourth month, we were Skype-ing almost daily when he was on base, for like 30 minutes to an hour each time...Just depending on what he was doing.

Probably from March to mid-May is when we would Skype frequently. And then that was when they had went out on that mission where his friend was killed. So that was the last time we Skype-d during that deployment. After that, it [all of our communication] was on Facebook.

Despite the variation in the frequency of spousal communication, the nature of their exchanges was more or less consistent. The spouses acknowledged the context of their communication to include “keeping it positive” and “always ending things on a happy note” when they would have the chance to communicate. Always asking how their spouses were doing and reassuring them that they were loved and missed also became part of deployment communication norms. They shared several specific examples of behaviors that they enacted and routines that they adapted while their partner was away to keep their relationship connected, including always ending their communications with positive content.

Although she was frustrated by her lack of communication reciprocation from Vlad during the early stages of his tour, Natalie always strived to be encouraging because she claims to never know what he was really going through. For this reason, no matter how she felt, she always tried to keep it positive and end conversations on a happy note. It was also important to Natalie for Vlad to know that she really missed him and felt sad and alone. She expresses:

It’s not just that you miss that person because they are gone; you miss them when you have happy moments and when you have a good day. I would be like, ‘Man, I wish I could share it with Vlad,’ but, sadly, more often than not I couldn’t. And that was hard. So I would just always let him know that I missed him, mostly.

Audrey acknowledges that she, too, used MotoMail daily to maintain a supportive communication presence for her husband. She explains:

I would use this program called MotoMail. It's basically this website where you can type up a letter and it sends it electronically to your spouse so that the letter gets there faster than by the mail. And so it gets printed and hand-delivered to them physically, but it's a lot easier and faster than sitting down to hand-write a letter, going to the post office to have it mailed, and waiting for it to get there. And I used that pretty much every day just to write to him. He couldn't get back on and communicate with me, but I could keep in touch with him and keep him informed using MotoMail, so that was great. And, that way, he was getting something from me every single day, and I was just trying to keep his spirits up.

Audrey knew when Alex was out on missions or back on because of the changes in frequency to his online activity. He would typically be online in the early morning time for her--nighttime in Afghanistan. She says that the content of their conversations was rather standard, sharing:

Pretty much every day, I would tell him that I love him. We would usually just try to keep a normal conversation, tell him how my day went, so that way he still always knew what was going on at home. I would always ask about his day too, but knowing that I was often unable to really get an intimate reply but at least to show him that I cared to know and was here for him and letting him know that I was interested in what was going on with him. Pretty much just making sure he always knew what was going on and how I was doing, so that we stayed emotionally connected, I guess.

Tiernan says that she and John "pretty much always said I love you," along with their discussions of household issues, family, news, experience of deployment (within reasonable security parameters), expectations of what they would do upon redeployment, intimate topics,

and health issues. Rachel's norms included always asking whether Daniel was OK and providing frequent assurance that they loved each other, missed one another, and were satisfied in the relationship. Sharing, quite seriously, with her husband how happy she was with him transitioned to a friendly and good-natured banter regarding their fidelity; it was not an uncommon element of their conversations for them to inquire of one another about "the guys coming around" or "the Army ladies." Maintaining normalcy and keeping one another up-to-date emerged as important priorities in the dialogue among the couples.

Aside from the assurances and daily updates, another common topic was the spouses' homecomings. Tara's conversational norms with Al focused mainly on his homecoming, which included making plans for their upcoming wedding, scheduled for less than 6 months after his planned return. Additionally, at the time of Al's deployment, he was approaching the end of his 4-year commitment to the Marine Corps and contemplating reenlistment. During their conversations, they would communicate to evaluate the decision and discuss the potential logistics if he chose to stay in the service, such as Tara moving down to base when they got married and how she would go about finding civilian employment near base. They also provided each other with assurances: saying "I love you," sharing that they missed each other and talking about daily updates were some of the items that comprised the couple's conversations during their time apart.

Cara's norms were communicating daily via e-mails that contained updates on the family, speculation about plans for after his homecoming, and replies to any questions or other items from Eric's e-mails to her. When Eric deployed, their youngest child was an infant, so he really struggled with being away from his family with the baby at home and leaving Cara with the responsibility to manage the children on her own. Laura's norms include her daily messaging

via Facebook or texting (via the mobile app) mostly just to “check in” and appease her husband’s worries about her diabetic condition. She also said that her norm is to wake up on an almost daily basis to a text message from Todd, since they are on opposite schedules.

Tiffany’s norm was to use Facebook to post pictures and videos of their infant baby for Joe. Jenna’s norm was to send Danny messages on Facebook, as well, giving him updates on anything that was going on. Although the couple does not have children, she shares that the couple got a puppy that was 5 ½ months old a week before Danny deployed. Jenna would put all of the pictures of the puppy up on Facebook and confesses that “probably two or three times a day, I would post pictures of Boomer. I know that people probably got sick of it. It was at Danny’s request that all of those pictures went up!” Like Tiffany and Audrey, Carrie also gave birth to a child during deployment. She recounts, “During the Japan deployment, I was pregnant and had our son, so a lot of times the topic would be about how I was doing through the pregnancy or how the baby was doing once he was born.”

The wives were asked to discuss whether there were any instances of topic avoidance during any of their conversations. They noted that while nothing was “off limits” between them, they did have preferences about their discussion topics and also acknowledge having to be mindful of and compliant with operational security (OPSEC) guidelines. In many cases, the husbands were vague and strategically ambiguous, seemingly on purpose, likely in an attempt to reduce worry. Nonetheless, the unknown in many cases contributed to the women’s uncertainty. The women also admitted to trying to keep home front stresses from affecting their spouses while deployed.

In Laura’s case, Todd does not tell her exactly what he is doing when he has to go out on his “hot shifts,” rather, he will just say that he has to “do something.” Knowing that his

circumstances are not necessarily the most desirable, she tries to cope with the duties of being a newlywed on her own, avoiding discussing items of stress such as home front housing arrangements, buying furniture, decorating their new place, and managing their finances and bills. For Audrey and Alex, Audrey admits:

A lot of times we didn't really talk about what was going on over there. He kept things very, like, private. I know that a lot of wives would know, like, when they were going out on mission and what they were going to be doing. And my husband was very quiet about all of that. I know that it was really more of a security thing, so I knew he wasn't like trying to keep something from me as much as it was just trying to make sure that we didn't talk about it, but it was both security and also to ease my mind. He would never tell me, 'oh, I'm going into a dangerous place for 3 weeks'--he would never tell me that.

Couples react differently to sharing information. For instance with Cara she did not inquire about what Eric was doing, and he rarely told her; they focused their communication exchanges mainly on their family. Rachel expressed feeling frustrated at times with the uncertainty related to what went on downrange. She revealed that she knows her husband so well that she could always tell in his voice when something was wrong, but he was often unable to share it with her. He would always say that everything was fine and that nothing was going on, even when she would have inclinations that that may not have been the case.

While Joe was gone in Afghanistan during his second tour, Tiffany became caught in the crosshairs of a vicious family feud. She admits to trying to keep the drama from affecting her husband, and attempting to minimize its impact on her while he was gone. She shares a detailed anecdote about the situation:

When we first moved out here [to Kentucky] from NJ, his family thought it was all my

fault, like, the reason why we were living far away was because of me, but it was like no, I'm not the one who joined the Army, it's not my fault. They were not understanding at all, and weren't supportive at all. They didn't get it; they didn't care. I strongly agree with the statement that I am a single mother when he deploys, not financially, but physically and emotionally, I am a single mom. He is not here helping, and he's emotionally not here, and they felt like that was crazy that I felt that way with him gone. They accused me of just sitting home and collecting his check.

She explains that she would try to keep him out of it, while his family would try to get him involved. Joe felt the need to protect his wife and family and take Tiffany's side, so there was an influx of drama.

This was a very different experience, she explains, than Joe's first deployment. During his first tour, Tiffany reveals that there was not nearly as much drama within the family. She attributes the tranquility to her pregnancy and their first child being born, particularly because their daughter was the first grandbaby born into the family. She feels that they were more supportive at that time due to the fact that they were able to be "hands-on" by doing things like babysitting while she was in school and spending time with the baby due to their close geographic proximity. She indicates that the drama sparked when they were PCS-ed (permanent change of station; ordered by the Army to relocate to a new location). Their move from New Jersey to Kentucky incited the family drama that plagued the entire second deployment. Tiffany discloses, "When they found out we were actually leaving the state with the grandbabies--that's when it all blew up."

Danny preferred to keep the conversations with Jenna as normal as possible, despite the circumstances. She confesses that, "I would say that he kept me in the dark, I would say. I

mean, I learned more details from other soldiers and other soldiers' wives, because you know, I knew a lot of them and was Facebook friends with them, so they would even pop chat me, and I would talk to them as well; it wasn't just my husband." In spite of their attempts to achieve normalcy, they did experience a difficult loss while Danny was deployed. "My grandmother got sick and actually died within two weeks of diagnosis, so that was a tough conversation to have with Danny, because we have been together for a long time, at that time it had been about 12 years, so my grandmother was like his grandmother, and that was really tough conversation to have with him, you know, to tell him that she's passed," Jenna shares. When asked whether she kept him informed of the illness the entire time or withheld information about her condition, Jenna replied, "I wouldn't hold anything back from him; um, I thought it was better to tell him than to, all of sudden, be like, 'oh by the way, Gram's dead.'"

Tara and Al did not purposely avoid any topics, but were mindful, as other wives have expressed, that they could not discuss the details of his missions, nor could they discuss predictions about specific homecoming information. She knew only of a timeframe for his return, but not a specific date. As Tiernan notes, she and John were pretty open with one another, but never discussed anything operational that could endanger his mission. Natalie reveals that this is one of the reasons that she was cautious about using Facebook to communicate with Vlad. She states, "I was so leery about using it at times, because of Operation Security. I didn't know what I was or wasn't allowed to say, and I didn't want to write anything that could potentially get him in trouble or me in trouble or anything like that, so there was a lot of things that I wouldn't put out on Facebook for people to see, and that's mainly also why I preferred phone communication."

Carrie divulges that during Dan's tour in Japan, she actually experienced OPSEC issues. "We actually had sort of an OPSEC (Operational Security) incident with Skype," she shares. "After I downloaded it when Dan deployed, an unknown person contacted me on it and began asking me questions." Carrie alerted the FRO of Dan's unit, and she was advised not to respond to the message. After that, everything was fine, but she admits to it being a scary experience. Carrie was mindful and sensitive as to how to handle it, keeping in mind the weekly reminders at the bottom of the FRO's e-mail updates regarding OPSEC. Carrie acknowledges less restriction on their conversations based on OPSEC during the Japan deployment than Afghanistan, due to the nature of Dan's mission. She states, "In Afghanistan, we couldn't talk about what exactly he was doing there, where he was, or when he thought he'd be coming home. In Japan, there were no topics off-limits, because it was a training deployment and they weren't in theatre." After examining the effects of using Facebook and Skype to communicate in military spousal relationships, this dissertation looked at the variable of perception of these platforms.

Perceived Value and Effects of New Media

When presented with a series of questions about how their communication would be different during deployment without these channels, the wives overwhelmingly respond positively and enthusiastically about having these platforms at their disposal. Without access to Internet-based communication platforms, the military spouses recount that they believe their experiences of being apart from their spouses would be much more difficult. Some of the wives even question what the status of their relationship would be today without access to communication technologies and without the ability to enact computer-mediated communication.

Laura feels that her relationship with Todd would be very different without the access to new media that they have. The young couple has been married for less than a year, and the

majority of their marriage has been spent with Todd deployed. She described her feelings toward being able to communicate using new media as being “grateful and blessed.” She feels that waiting for weeks to hear from each other would be straining on both sides of the relationship and that things would be “totally different”—meaning that the two of them would not be as close. She associates these platforms and his access via iPhone with positively aiding them in building their connection at this stage of their young marriage.

Tara feels that without Facebook, she and Al would have had to rely more on letters, or would have used e-mail to communicate in the absence of new media platforms if the Internet was available. She divulges skeptically that she is not sure how well that would work for their communication, especially with planning the wedding, because on the few occasions in which she and Al did exchange letters via “snail mail” (the U.S. Postal Service) or when she sent care packages, there was usually a delay of more than 3 weeks for letters and packages to arrive back and forth.

Audrey feels that she and Alex would have talked less overall without the presence of Facebook. She would have continued to use MotoMail, but she notes the autonomous nature of this modality, in that her husband cannot respond to her messages. Much like what Tara described, Audrey also states:

Whenever he did send letters back--actual letters--they were always months old. This last time, I think, from the whole time he was gone, he only sent maybe 3 letters the whole time throughout the entire deployment, and the time before that, the deployment before that, it was maybe 6 to 7 letters; so, if it wasn't for Facebook and Skype, we would probably have rarely even heard from him and, that's difficult, because you're always worried and things like that.

Tiffany cited a huge difference between her husband's first and second deployments due to her ownership of a "smart" mobile device; when asked about the experience, she admits to having been afraid to leave the house the first time that Joe was deployed. "During the first deployment, there were times where I really wouldn't leave the house unless I absolutely had to, just because I knew he could come on(line), but then during the second one, I left whenever I needed to or wanted to," she states. Rachel expresses feelings of gratitude and thanks when asked to share her feelings about having these new media channels at her disposal. She anticipates that her relationship may have suffered without the available technology and questions whether her husband would have made the choice to reenlist without it. She speculates that without the connection fostered by their ability to communicate when apart, their marriage may not have stood the test; if he did decide to reenlist and they had to go through entire tours lacking efficient communication channels, she admits that may have been a relational "deal breaker" for her.

Jenna implies that the separations and deployments have the potential to strengthen the bond between military spouses, rather than weaken it. Jenna says that deployment is a very unique experience, but notes that she really noticed the closeness between them when they were apart for several months for Danny's basic training in Fort Benning, GA. She reports:

When he was deployed, it was a very different experience. The biggest thing that I noticed was that when he went away to Benning for training, it really did bring us closer together; it just made us closer. You go from being with someone every day, day in and day out, and basically being around them and with them all the time, and by that point we had been together, what? 8, 10 years... and then suddenly they are gone. I think it made us appreciate having each other, because before we were so used to each other and being

away reminded us of how lucky we are. The separation did bring us closer. Deployment also made us stronger, too; I mean, all of it did, even though at times we were further apart. During separation, it was definitely more ‘everyday chatter,’ but during deployment, it would be more ‘I love you, I miss you’ kind of thing.

The difference between everyday talk during separation and increased use of assurances during deployment indicates that the deployment experience is truly different and has an effect on military spousal communication. When Jenna was asked if she felt that communication as a military spouse would be different without the presence of Facebook, she explains that, in her opinion, she and Danny would have talked a lot less, if at all while he was deployed, and that would have made the deployment experience more impersonal.

During Danny’s basic training, Jenna shares that she and Danny had to rely primarily on letter writing and the occasional phone call. She explains, “I probably got a phone call from training once a week if I was lucky. Toward the end of training, that was basically when we were able to communicate more. But our situation during training was weird, too, because Christmas fell during his 18-week training schedule, so he got to come home for about 10 days from training for Christmas.” If there was no such thing as Facebook, she says that she probably would have been waiting for snail mail, noting that is dependent on whether her husband even had time to write to her. She states, “He wrote me when he had time during training, but I don’t really know if he would have had time to write while he was there [in Afghanistan].” She emphasizes the crucial role of Facebook in her experience and noted that if that platform was nonexistent, but she still had Internet access, she would prefer to reply via e-mail exchanges than by sending letters through the mail.

Tiffany shares that the challenges of spousal communication have been expressed through the generations in her family. She reveals:

My aunt always tells me, because my uncle is a Vietnam vet, and she always tells me how blessed that I am to have this technology, because she said she rarely heard from him, maybe got a letter like once a month. She would always send out letters and wouldn't even know if he got them. She feels like there must be more pressure now, because we all know what's going on, but then, back in her day, they had no way of knowing anything, because it was kind of like 'out of sight, out of mind,' so but I wouldn't have liked it. Even during basic training, they can only call once a week, and you can send letters back and forth, but it stunk really because when he went to basic training the first time, I was pregnant with our first, so I had to go to ultrasounds, and even by the time I would get him the ultrasound images in the mail, it would almost be time for another one, so that was kind of annoying.

Tiernan contends that military spouses are adaptable and will adjust to any new challenges and benefits brought about by emerging communication technologies. Cara sums it up best by saying, "Without Internet, we would use phone; without phone, we would write letters." With the perception of the wives examined, the protocol next inquired about the availability of new media and the value on the couple's relational communication.

For Better or Worse

The final items in this part of the interview protocol were a series of questions that asked the wives to share their opinions on two matters. First, they were asked how they feel about having the ability to communicate using these new media during deployment, and then whether they feel that the availability and access of these platforms are valuable for relationship

maintenance of military spouses. By and large, the responses were very favorable, although several of the wives also noted pitfalls to having the platforms available.

Tiernan's response to these items was met with an overwhelming, "YES!" She claims to have felt very positively about using Yahoo and Yahoo Messenger to communicate with John when they were apart, noting that she believes that it helped them to stay in touch--but goes beyond that. It was a very positive experience for the maintenance of their relationship to have the ability to communicate with one another while apart. According to Tiffany, she has no complaints or negative thoughts about new media and thinks that use of these platforms is terrific. She emphasizes the critical role of mobility as she shares, "Especially being able to do it all on your phone now, it just makes it so much easier, because during the first deployment, the smart phones were just coming out, so I didn't have one."

Tara feels positively about having Facebook and other forms of new media available to communicate during deployment. She claims that it eased her mind to know that Al was okay and that her ability to know what was going on by using social media assisted in reducing the overall level of stress she experienced as a result of the deployment. Laura expressed that using new media to communicate with her husband has made them more connected and allows them to build more trust with one another while apart--a critical development for a young, newlywed couple. She sees the value in these platforms, as she contends that they make her feel as though she and her husband are not "drifting [apart]."

Natalie, too, felt the new media were valuable within her relationship. She contends that, "A relationship is based off of you being able to communicate and speak with a person and share things. And if you don't have that communication with them, then, what is your relationship? It would pretty much be you by yourself over here and them by themselves over there, and that

wouldn't be good. So, it just makes it a lot easier to communicate with one another." Ready access to communication allows the couple to build and maintain their relationship while apart and in the midst of stressful and uncertain circumstances.

Rachel perceives these platforms as valuable, because people are online all of the time. It became easy to monitor the profiles of her husband's comrades and their spouses with whom she was also friends, and to observe their interactions. Seeing their activity provided comfort and reassurance during a most stressful and uncertain experience. Audrey, too, described them as valuable, because of the ability to keep communication open, which she regards as being important when a spouse is gone for a long period of time.

Rachel's marriage at the time of deployment was very new. The couple married in May, and her husband deployed less than 5 months later, in September. She reflects:

During the first deployment, he had a hard time being away from me, too, and wanting to make sure that my feelings hadn't changed at all, especially if he wouldn't hear from me for a time, because sometimes my MotoMail [messages] would not always arrive on time and stuff like that, so, if time would pass, whatever, so on both parts it's good to have that communication so that you both know that that other one is still there emotionally and physically, and so especially when we got married in May and he left in September, early September, for deployment, and he was at training in between, so we hadn't had a lot of time to really establish our marriage together before he was gone. We spent maybe 2 months together our first year of marriage, before he was training and then deployed. So, it really mattered a lot to us to keep communicating and keep growing our connection during that first year of marriage, because that time is so important. I think it's definitely an important asset to military relationships.

Cara was alone in speaking against platforms like Facebook. She claims to “just not be a ‘Facebook person,’” and feels that it is too invasive and lacks privacy and intimacy. She feels satisfied communicating with Eric using e-mail as their primary communication channel.

Although Jenna was an avid user of Facebook to support marital maintenance and overall, praised the medium, she was quick to label new media as a “double-edged sword,” as she spoke in great detail and length about the pros and cons of these platforms in military marriages. Jenna credits Facebook with keeping her and Danny connected during the deployment. What she did not enjoy were the communication blackouts, when they would “go dark” because something had happened. Jenna also struggled with the visibility that Facebook provided, allowing her to know more about where they were and their living conditions abroad. She attests:

The only thing that I didn’t like was when there would be blackouts, because that would be scary and seeing other people post pictures and videos up. That is a downfall to it, because without any pictures or videos, it would be kind of like ‘out of sight, out of mind’ kind of thing. And that might be better, but, obviously, you don’t want be in denial and avoid it, but it makes you I guess feel better when you don’t see these things. Just seeing the pictures of where they were in the desert with these little huts and people with camels and donkeys and a very different culture and way of living... it becomes very realistic for you when you see that. Obviously, you’re not there, but it does make it more real for you. And then you realize, too, the danger that they’re in.

Jenna goes on to say that there were perils to having such a tight sense of community among the spouses and comrades within the military lifestyles, because the ability to monitor and exchange information could become overwhelming at times, and would add to the stress of the

situation. It became routine, Jenna explains, for other wives to pop chat (the instant messaging feature on Facebook) with one another on Facebook or send text messages asking about occurrences in theatre such as, “Oh! did you hear what happened?!” and disclosing, at times, shocking or troubling information. She describes in great detail the stress associated with their communication blackouts, in saying:

When you finally get to speak to your spouse and you know you don’t get that phone call, you’re relieved, but then, at the same time, you feel guilty and sad, because you know that someone else did get that phone call. And when someone... when its someone in the unit that dies, you still get that phone call even if it’s not your spouse--you still get a phone call to notify you that it’s not your spouse. And that hits close to home, because if it’s someone in the same company and their orders are in the same area, then, you know, the reality is that they are all in the same vicinity...just a matter of miles from each other.

This type of experience, she insists, is one of the most terrifying and unnerving aspects of life as military spouse.

Nonetheless, Jenna agrees with the majority of the spouses in this study who have positive sentiments about the availability of new media and its role in their spousal communication. She acknowledges:

As far as communication in my experience, I would say that it was valuable. I know some people who had issues because of things like cheating and seeing other guys saying things to their wives online and on Facebook pages and stuff like that and those kinds of jealousy aspects. I didn’t experience anything like that ever in my experience, so I would say its valuable in my opinion, and would say that it was valuable for me, but I can see

why some others might not say the same. You know, for me and Danny, it was a little different. We were older by the time he joined the Army and deployed, and we had been together for a long time, and you know some of these people are really young, maybe 18, 19 years old, and they are in a different mindset. Even though we hadn't been married for all that long, we had been together for a lot of years by that point, and some couples they never grow on or develop that trust or mature in their relationship. But me and Danny, because we've been together forever, we had developed. When we were younger, I'm not going to say there weren't jealous bones a little bit, but, at this stage of the game, we trust each other, so it really is very different for us versus a couple who is just starting out. I know of a few cases where they (spouses/couples from the unit) got separated or divorced already because of cheating and trust issues, and Facebook drama... cheating while they were gone, and then it unraveling, all because of Facebook. Instances such as this provoke questions about whether platforms like Facebook and similar SNSs and the transparency they evoke are of benefit or harm to this constituency.

Deployment v. Separation

Deployment is a one-of a kind experience, hallmarked by worry, stress, fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Separation becomes a routine aspect of life as a military spouse. The couples remark that they have adjusted to spending time apart, and express that they are somewhat used to their husbands leaving for days at a time to train. Despite the time alone being common, the unique circumstances of deployment and the underlying emotions that go along with it represent a different type of experience for the spouses, and there is no consistent report on how they manage and globally reduce the negative effects of the deployment experience.

Based on the findings, the use of new media is more prevalent during deployment than

when the spouses are separated for other purposes. During separations, the spouses tend to speak by phone, text message, or not speak at all, whereas during deployment, Facebook, Skype, and Yahoo Messenger prove to be the leading platforms for communication. In fact, so few of the wives relied upon new media to communicate during separations that they had difficulty answering the series of questions inquiring about new media use during these periods. On the other hand, during deployment, new media were predominant communication channels among the couples.

For example, both Natalie and Tara were planning their weddings while their husbands were deployed. Natalie described Vlad's deployment to Afghanistan as:

...the most hectic time ever! It was seriously the worst experience of my life. I was in school full time; I was taking 15 credits. I was working two jobs at the time, one full time and one part time. And then I was planning a wedding with my soon to be spouse deployed to war. But you know what? I wanted to do all of that because I wanted to stay busy. I didn't want to be sitting at home thinking about what he was doing, but, as far as planning the wedding? I mean, it was fun to, you know, plan the wedding, but getting his advice was very difficult.

Tara also acknowledges that a primary focus of the communication exchanges between her and Al were wedding planning and post-wedding logistics. She mentions that she would use the private messaging feature on Facebook to send him links to different items pertaining to the wedding and to share information with him about the status of the planning. Like many of the other wives, Tara reports that during Al's pre-deployment training and other operations in the field, they were only able to talk by phone and did not use any Internet-based platforms to communicate. She acknowledges that, while they tried to avoid talking about work, there are

typically no security issues to be concerned with when it comes to communicating during a separation, as compared with the security issues that exist related to deployment.

Facebook and Skype were not used to facilitate the spouses' communication during training exercises. Rather, the majority of the wives shared that their husbands used cell phones to text or call if and when they were available. Several of the wives acknowledged that the level of stress is different when they are gone routinely "in the field," compared to when their husbands are deployed to theatre. As a result, the wives acknowledge that they are, at times, "less concerned" about hearing from their spouses when they are gone for training compared to when their husbands are deployed. Many of the women shared how cherished and critical each communication exchange was when their spouse was deployed and engaged in potentially dangerous interactions.

As with deployment, there is no consistency during separations in terms of the frequency of contact. When the couples do speak, they reported that they did not experience any topic avoidance in the conversations with their spouses. In some cases, the wives note that the tone of the conversations is more laid back, and, at times, less intimate, when the spouses are separated versus when they are deployment. Among some of the variances they noticed in their communication behavior between deployment and separation, one of the most common was the challenges based on the time zone differences between them and their spouses abroad. The couples were living on essentially opposite schedules while apart for deployments, so several of the spouses assumed the habit of sleeping with their cell phones and having them set to the loudest possible ring.

During her interview, Jenna comments, "Honestly, there were times when I would catch myself thinking that I do not know how women did this back in like the '40s, and the '60s, and

the '70s, because if I spoke to him and only had to rely on the times that I would speak to him on the phone, that would be terrible! At least I got to communicate with him when he was gone in some form or fashion.” Carrie shares that she feels that the communication would be more rushed without new media and Internet-based communication channels available. She believed that she would feel more anxious and would struggle to say as much as possible when they would speak by phone, if they could, or to include as much as possible in one sitting when writing a letter. She admits to fear of missing out on sharing important things with Dan if that were the case.

Audrey shared a curious observation, saying, “He [her husband, Alex] actually has greater access when he is on deployment, which seems weird. But when he’s out in the field, he really only has his cell phone, which he isn’t really allowed to use when he’s training, so it would seem like we would be able to communicate more during training, but we actually don’t, we communicate less.” She also acknowledges that the urgency to speak with him is reduced when they are separated compared to when he is deployed. She confesses, “It’s like, I would know he would just be training, so I *wanted* to talk to him but it’s not like I *needed* to talk to him to know he’s OK, and I think that is kind of how it is the whole time of deployment, and he even looks at it that way, too. I think he knows he doesn’t have to try to make contact with me as often, because at least here, I know he’s perfectly fine; whereas, whenever he’s deployed, he knows I’m worried all the time, so he would try and contact me more.”

According to Rachel, what makes the deployment experience so different is that both she and her husband are more emotionally heightened than when he is off doing his training. She notes that their contact is less frequent when he is training, and they never communicate using the Internet. She reveals that they are very “lovey dovey” when he is away deployed, and they

never allow any fighting or bickering to creep into their conversations, because of always trying to keep the tone positive and encouraging when he is in theatre.

Audrey notes that life as a military spouse would be different without Facebook and Skype, because it would be a lot harder to communicate, and in her case, having an infant child at home, the channels help the two of them deal with being apart. She divulges, “He would use Skype to still interact with us while he was gone; whereas, if he couldn’t, it would be that he [Alex] would be probably a lot more anxious or nervous about interacting with him [their son] than in person if they hadn’t met online first through Skype and Facebook pictures.” This couple, similarly to Tiffany and Joe, and Carrie and Dan, experienced expanding their families with the birth of a child while their husbands were deployed. The use of new media proved to be integral in facilitating their spousal communication during this life-changing event. Overall, military separations were described unanimously by the spouses as being less stressful, and, as a result, communication was less urgent than during deployment.

Predictions for the Future

The final question asked in the interview protocol requested the wives’ predictions about the future role of new media in military spousal communication and how it may be used during deployments down the line. Some of the women felt that many changes were probable, whereas others expressed a sentiment that the development of new media has already been maximized. Although their visions all differed, the women were in agreement that Internet-based communication platforms are here to stay and are an integral part of their ability to maintain their marriages while separated.

Natalie reveals that she and Vlad have just upgraded their phones in preparation for Vlad’s upcoming deployment to Norway. She hopes to be able to use Face Time (Apple

iPhone's video messaging platform) with Vlad now, using their new phones. If that does not prove to be viable, they will rely on video chatting through Gmail (Google's electronic messaging platform), a feature that is new since the last time that Vlad was deployed. Tiffany's predictions also involve the advancements of smartphones, as she reveals:

I just downloaded Skype on my phone and, now, with Face Time, I think it's just great. I think that with the way technology is today, it will make soldiers and their families left at home able to feel as close as they possibly can be, because I don't think they'll miss each other quite the same way if they can communicate like that. And it just keeps getting better and better. The difference from the first deployment to the second deployment in my experience, it just got better, and I can't imagine how good it will be for the next one!

Tara echoes the positive sentiments and anticipates that what is coming next for communication for military spouses will be beneficial. She feels that the ease of communication is most important and that faster, more efficient ways of communicating are preferred, particularly during deployment because of the urgency. She references the progression from letter-writing to phone calls to communicating via online platforms, so she is certain that evolution will continue. Tara feels that without the ability to have connection with your spouse and communicate when apart, the greater the strain is on the marital relationship. She believes that ultimately the lack of communication among marital partners during deployment is a variable that can influence the likelihood of infidelity and similar marital setbacks.

Jenna supposes media that facilitate the most conversation-like experience will fare best. She acknowledges, "With Facebook, it feels more real-time and more like a one-on-one conversation. Because it's almost more like texting... you don't text through e-mail, because it's

a pain, but with the pop chat, it's easy. And, plus, remember, too, that with the time crunch, they only have a half hour tops on the computers, it's faster, and you can say more chatting on Facebook than e-mail. It makes you feel more one-on-one with somebody, for sure." Jenna did not have anything groundbreaking to offer about what could potentially be in the evolutionary pipeline for military spouses, saying:

Basically, you always have stuff that is evolving. It's very hard for me to say what's next or what it will be like, because I only know what I've been through and what that experience is like. I mean, you can make the argument that once upon a time there was AIM and all that, so I really don't know what it would be like at any other time, and I have no idea what else there can be or where else it will go... I mean, we have pop chat, which is basically instant messaging, private messaging, and posting and commenting on statuses, pictures and videos, so what else is there? I have no idea what else there could be.

Natalie predicts that with more interactive media like Face Time and Skype available on smartphones, a platform like MotoMail will eventually go extinct and that a platform like Facebook and whatever is coming subsequently will become increasingly more pervasive. She shares:

I've heard of bases where there are actual Skype rooms set up and web cam rooms set up, and I think that's what deployment communication is going to become, really. I think the reality is that people aren't going to be willing to sit around endlessly and not hear from their spouse, so I think things like this will become increasingly important because that ability to see someone visually and hear their voice... it's so important. And that's

what will be the next big thing... the ability for us to see our spouse when they are deployed, as well as just knowing that they are okay.

As the communication technologies and new media continue to evolve, the spouses remain steadfast about security awareness. Carrie raises the issue of OPSEC again when asked about her predictions. She anticipates that the frequency will continue to develop using these kinds of platforms and technologies in war zones and that this will ultimately result in more communication back home with the families. She emphasizes that the only real concern is increased caution because of their locations and keeping it from being revealed. Audrey predicts that the communication channels will become “better and faster.” She also notes that too much transparency can be a bad thing for security reasons, but the access is comforting to a spouse.

Rachel predicts that the future holds more global implementation of Face-Time-like platforms that will augment video calls right from a smartphone device. At the time of her husband’s deployment, both of their iPhones lacked Face Time capability, and he probably would have been unable to use the phone for Face Time regardless, due to location and cost. She posits that down the road, these mobile technologies will be more reliable and affordable and will assure better quality communication than anything seen to date. Tiernan’s predictions are brief, but insightful, as she shares, “I think we’ve peaked, and, again, military wives will adapt and survive.” The information gathered from the interviews resulted in 5 themes derived using Creswell’s (2009) analytical procedure.

Derivation of Themes and Research Questions

Comprehensive analysis of the data gathered using the protocol of Creswell (2009) yielded a total of five (5) themes: (1) mobility; (2) monitoring and surveillance; (3) community; (4) utility, access, and preference; and (5) uncertainty and urgency. Each of these five themes

correlates with multiple research questions, and contributes towards the understanding of the examined phenomena in such a way that provides meaning and derives essence. These deployments are each one-of-a-kind moments in history and the intersection between these experiences and the availability of developing communication technologies (i.e., new media) afford rich assessment. Each of the five themes will be discussed briefly, followed by an explanation of how the themes correspond with the research questions posed in the dissertation prior to gathering the data. Additionally, the associated theoretical frameworks that these themes and units of discovery impact upon are also mentioned, and will be acknowledged in greater detail in Chapter 5.

At least 6 of the spouses (60%) regarded the mobile capability of the platforms as contributing to their deployment communication experiences, making mobility a leading theme in this study. For instance, Tiffany revealed that Joe would use his iPod to go on Facebook through the Wi-Fi access where he was stationed, while Laura's husband would use his deactivated iPhone for the same purpose. Laura credits the mobility of the communication with helping to make things feel normal. For instance, she and Todd will engage in apartment showings on Skype, in which she will walk him around their new apartment which he has yet to see in person, to observe how their home is coming together.

Jenna describes the mobility of her communication using Facebook on her Blackberry as "lifesaving!" Danny would send her a message, and it would pop up on her phone as a notification and initiate a conversation. Rachel thinks that the mobility of communication technology today is "AWESOME!" She notes that without it, she probably would never have left the house, spending the entire deployment by the landline and home computer waiting for word from her husband. She was in school full time and working two jobs during her husband's

tour, so she found the use of notifications to her mobile phone to be incredibly helpful. Due to the difference in time zones, there were instances where she would be in class, get a notification from Daniel via Facebook that he would be calling in 10 minutes, and then she would be able to discreetly leave class to step outside and speak with him. Mobility as a theme is hallmarked by feeling liberated.

The second theme that emerged in this data is monitoring and surveillance. Although the spouses did not have any experience with this situation themselves, some shared examples in their narratives of the negative stories about when things seen on Facebook caused marital friction, or, in some cases, demise. In many cases, the wives used Facebook to enact monitoring behavior, where they would screen the pages of their husband's comrades and their spouses in search of activity and information. Much like civilians utilize the platform for "Facebook stalking," which is seen as a less intrusive form of surveillance than in-person stalking, military spouses rely on it for information-seeking and assurances of safety and well-being. Audrey admits that she would use Facebook to connect with the other wives and girlfriends who had talked with their husbands or boyfriends in order to get information from them. Natalie acknowledges connecting with other wives in Vlad's unit using the group features on the MotoMail platform.

When it comes to the experience of monitoring and surveillance, Rachel shares her experience of "knowing" when someone was killed in theatre before receiving any formal notification and without having heard anything from her husband. She reveals that she friended "all the guys" (in his unit; her husband's comrades), and so, even if she did not hear from her husband on a given day, she was able to check their Facebook pages to monitor for activity. When she would notice several days of no activity from anyone in the group, she would always

know that they had suffered a loss or casualty and were awaiting family notification before they would be able to reconnect. She expresses the horrible feeling that is associated with that kind of worry, plagued by constant checking of the phone, and cautiously looking out the window to see whether a notification unit was coming to her door. The more time that goes by, she says, it does get a little bit easier, and then, it just becomes a waiting game until spousal communication can resume, all the while hoping it is not a friend who suffered the loss. Following this, the community of spouses back home begin sharing information and comparing notes on what they knew in an attempt to put the pieces together; this sense of community is significant in the military family lifestyle.

Community is a pivotal theme in the military lifestyle. In this study, 7 of the subjects (70%) discussed items that related to the overarching category of community and the sense of community that exists in the military lifestyle. They revealed forming close, strong ties with individuals in their network who share similar experiences within the military spousal role. The spouses rely on those in their network for information, updates, and support. Laura relayed that Facebook is not just great as a channel for she and Todd to use, but that she also uses it as a platform to communicate with his entire family, so that she can share information and updates with them as she hears from him. Natalie revealed that being able to talk with the spouses in Vlad's unit was both reassuring and frustrating; particularly during the lengthy communication gap (3 months) they experienced during the initial phase of his Afghanistan tour. Rachel admitted that having the ability to use new media allows her not only to communicate with her husband when he deploys, but also to remain in touch with her "family" in the Army when they PCS-ed to Hawaii from Kentucky this year. The military spouses are indicative of a concrete and deep-rooted network of people who share a mutually exclusive experience and participate in

a one-of-a-kind co-culture.

Utility, which represents the purpose, access, and preference of the communication outlets also proved to be a dominating trend in the data. In total, 5 of the spouses (50%) separately acknowledged having a “preferred” means of communication among the available platforms, and the wives unanimously (n=10, 100%) agreed that they would use whatever means available to communicate with their spouses in theatre. Jenna shares that the younger men in her husband’s unit were pressuring Danny to set up Facebook while they were at training prior to deployment. She reveals, “Towards the end, they were letting them have their phones more, as like awards or whatever, so he had his phone, but he wasn’t getting a good cell signal there, because they were in cinderblock rooms, but they could get enough signal to get on to FB so that is when he created the FB account; plus, all the kids, ha, ha--well, the guys, you know they were practically kids because they were so much younger than us--they were pressuring him to get it too, so that’s pretty much how and why he got it.”

When it comes to the theme of utility and the associated veins of access and preference, Natalie claims to prefer phone to Facebook, but Facebook was among their most dominant communication platforms during the latter part of Vlad’s tour in Afghanistan. Carrie, Audrey, and Tiffany all relied upon Skype to facilitate interactions between their husbands at war and their newborn babies. The ability to share pictures and videos of the infants and chat online with their husbands so that they could see the babies was helpful both in the coping process of being apart during such a life-changing experience and for reducing uncertainty, which emerged as the final theme.

Uncertainty and urgency surfaced unanimously in each of the subjects’ responses (n=10, 100%) in some form or another, as it appeared to be a trait that was common in the deployment

experience. Tiffany revealed, “If he is able to talk, he typically will Facebook me all day long. Pretty much, if he can talk, we talk, and we will talk all day. And he will try and contact me all day... because you never know when the next time is going to be that he’ll be able to talk like that again.” Natalie explains, “When he’s training and stuff, I’m less obsessed about speaking with him every day and stuff. I mean, of course I still miss him, it’s not that--it’s just that I don’t want to speak to him every day anyway, but the amount of feeling of stress I feel to talk to him is different when he’s deployed.” Laura actually used the word *uncertainty* in response to the question about how their communication would be different without the presence of these new media platforms. She feels as though a compromised connection would cause strain on the relationship and that her life as a military spouse would ultimately be fraught with even more anxiety about her husband’s well-being than is already the case.

Each of the research questions relates to particular themes that also correspond to relevant theoretical frameworks within communications media. The first research question asks about the effects of using Facebook and Skype on the communicative behavior and patterns between military spouses. The two corresponding themes that relate to this research question are mobility and utility. Regarding both mobility and utility, Tiernan admits that having access to communicate with John by mobile phone instead of having to wait by a landline for his calls was liberating. Laura’s husband’s use of his deactivated iPhone to communicate daily using Facebook and a mobile text messaging app is another example of mobility and utility pervading the deployment experience. Tiffany admits a loss of fear about leaving the house when Joe is deployed. Audrey, Jen, and others admitted to sleeping with their cell phones to receive notifications from their husbands, due to their opposing schedules.

On utility, Tiernan remarked that her and John’s preference was primarily driven and

influenced by safety and security. She admits that her husband's (John's) unit was strongly discouraged from using Facebook to communicate information and was very strict about posting information on the SNS. She states, "They were strict [about use of Facebook]... at least, our unit was." For this reason, and because they had alternatives, Tiernan and John typically relied more on Yahoo and Yahoo Messenger to facilitate their computer-mediated communication instead of Facebook, Skype, or other new media platforms. Furthermore, related to utility, Rachel and Audrey both commented on the ability to use video messaging via Yahoo messenger and Skype to facilitate communication interactions between their spouse and their young children. Because the children were too young to type or even hold a meaningful conversation by phone, using these platforms allowed their children to talk with their parent in an interactive and visual way, which was seen as beneficial. Two theories correspond with the first research question, derived from themes of mobility and utility: media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) and uses and gratifications theory (Cantril, 1942; Lazarsfeld, 1942; Herzog, 1944).

The second research question asked how the military spouses perceive the ability of Facebook and Skype to enhance their communication during wartime deployment. Four themes that emerged from the data address this particular RQ: community, monitoring and surveillance, uncertainty, and utility. Carrie acknowledges that the biggest difference in her communication with Dan was the uncertainty experienced during the tour in Afghanistan because he was in more danger, so there was more worry present; whereas, in Japan, because they spoke so frequently, she admits to being much less worried about him. When it comes to monitoring and surveillance and the theme of uncertainty, Tiernan admitted that she and John would occasionally monitor each other's pages during deployment, but she became Facebook friends with John's Battalion Commander in order to stay informed and reduce her uncertainty. Using Facebook, she

determined, served as a valuable resource to acquire information, which helped manage her uncertainty and put her at ease. The corresponding theories that relate to the second research question are social capital theory (Putnam, 1995) and uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

The third research question addresses whether or not there are differences in the role and priority of Facebook and Skype as communication channels during deployment compared with other forms of military separations, such as training operations, disaster relief, and peace-time deployments. The associated themes with this research question emerged as mobility, utility (access and preference), and uncertainty and urgency. The wives unanimously agreed that the deployment experience is undeniably more stressful than being separated. There is no predictable or normal set of circumstances when it comes to deployment; each tour is different, and the activity and behavior during each tour are varied. When it came to the theme of uncertainty and urgency, the experience that Audrey and Alex underwent when their friend was killed in action was particularly significant. Audrey reveals that although they communicated more frequently after the death, the couple never Skype-ed again. She believes, “I think that’s because it was just getting harder and harder to be apart... they weren’t too far off from getting home... and I think it was just getting harder on him. So, what we actually did was we just Facebook-ed for a couple months.” The emotional roller coaster that comes along with a spouse being deployed leads to greater certainty sought in forms of mediated communication channels. As such, this RQ relates potentially to uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and uses and gratifications theory (Cantril, 1942; Lazarsfeld, 1942; Herzog, 1944).

After gathering and analyzing the data from these conversations, the inductive approach to this phenomenological study proved to be appropriate, allowing the themes of the research to

develop organically. This inductive method recommended avoiding *a priori* integration of theoretical frameworks by which to couch this study in advance of data collection, in order to preserve the true essence of the experiences as shared by the participants. The coming chapter elaborates on the relevant communications media theories that emerged upon analyzing the data and discussing the derived themes.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Verification and Validity of Data

Using the phenomenological method, this researcher gathered information by engaging in building a conversational and relational rapport with the subjects in order to truly understand their experiences. Through the use of open-ended questions, this researcher sought information to construct the essence of the participants' individual experiences (Meloy, 2002). The researcher is required to appropriately bracket his or her own experiences in order to interpret the data in a trustworthy fashion; researchers who follow hermeneutic traditions must practice phenomenological reduction in order to separate their own opinions and experiences from contributing to that of the participants.

In this case, the bracketing was simple to enact: this researcher is not a military spouse, one of the core inclusion criteria for the study. Due to not belonging to this target group of eligible subjects, this researcher's ability to engage in conscious reductionism during the analysis of the data was simplified by the fact that the role of being a military spouse is an unfamiliar experience. The fact that this researcher used new media to communicate with close family members when they were deployed has no bearing on the findings presented, since phenomenological reduction was carried out and made easy by the differences in the type of relationships carried on by the researcher and the population investigated (Van Manen, 1990).

Naturally, this fundamental difference in the relationship type is going to influence the type of communication enacted and, potentially, the frequency and preferred channel of communication.

By engaging in detailed conversations with the subjects, this researcher was able to constitute a clearer understanding about the military spouses' communication behavior, deployment experiences, and their use of new media. These exhaustive, anecdotal findings may not be equivalently captured through other data gathering methods, such as surveys or questionnaires. The dialogue affords a more informative outlet to gain meaningfulness and understanding about the communication patterns and behaviors of the military couples, and to learn more about the challenges of having a spouse deployed through the lenses of the wives (Creswell, 2009). The wives interviewed were transparent and willing individuals were eager to discuss their experiences and cooperate with the interview process. Some of the participants in the study divulged more detail than others, yet overall most of the wives provided sufficient detail and elaborate explanations during their interviews. The ease with which the women described these highly personal experiences--such as being pregnant and giving birth with their husbands away at war, and losing a friend who was killed in action--was truly amazing and demonstrative of the challenging relational norms of military family life.

In addition to bracketing, dendritic crystallization and trustworthiness procedures ensured validity of the study (Creswell, 2009; Ellingson, 2009). Creswell (2009) and Almeida (2012) both support use of triangulation procedures to validate qualitative data, which is conducted by the researcher during analysis to ensure accuracy of the reported findings. Regarding triangulation, Creswell (2009) and Ellingson (2009) encourage using different sources of existing research to be examined in conjunction with the data found in the existing study, in order to build upon comprehensive and relevant themes. In this case, using crystallization

supports the same type of exhaustive procedure, by allowing both detailed descriptions and overarching themes to be included in the explanation of the findings. Dendritic crystallization is well-aligned with Creswell's data analysis procedure that was used to analyze the data in this study. Crystallization afforded increased credibility to the data gathered in such a way that both "big-picture" themes, their corresponding theories, and the intimate details of the individual experiences contributed toward the construction of a broad and deep essence about the intersecting phenomena examined. Crystallization proved to be an effective strategy in order to verify the data integrity given the multidimensional nature of this investigation.

Trustworthiness was the final measure used to validate this exploratory study. Trustworthiness was attained by following the member-checking procedures presented by Creswell (2009). This researcher provided a copy of the findings report and debriefing materials to the participants for their review to ensure accuracy. Participants were asked to review these materials and indicate any discrepancies found in the details. This member-checking strategy serves as a perception-checking mechanism for the researcher to also ensure appropriate bracketing measures and enhance the *epoche* to ensure data integrity in the reporting.

Theoretical Realizations

This study explored the intersecting phenomena of military spousal communication, the deployment experience, and the use of new media to facilitate their experience using an inductive method. Through the analysis of data gathered in an attempt to examine three research questions, five themes and four corresponding theories were subsequently identified. The theoretical frameworks that emerged from this study may prove to be useful in future investigations that explore a similar set of variables using deductive methodological approaches. In the section to follow, each research question and its related themes and theories will be

discussed in greater depth, and the results that have been discovered are elaborated upon.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications research spans across decades and various contexts of use, including mass communication, media effects, sociological and psychological research (McQuail, 1994). Scholars of communications media attribute the earliest frameworks of uses and gratifications theory dating back to the Payne Fund Studies, when, in the late 1920s, when a team of psychologists and sociologists explored the effects of films on children, namely, the motivations for how children attended to films, and subsequently the effects of viewing the content (Ruggiero, 2000). The 1940s marked a pivotal era in uses and gratifications research, with three milestone researchers contributing to its theoretical development. Cantril (1942) contended that uses and gratifications were based on what keeps audiences attracted to particular types of media and content. Around the same time, Lazarsfeld (1942) looked at the different preferences for media and content for information dissemination. Shortly thereafter, Herzog (1944) began to examine the gratifications of radio programming and its effects on listenership.

During the 1980s, researchers challenged and reevaluated long-standing ideals of uses and gratifications and new developments in the framework began to manifest. Researchers began to reconsider both the uses and effects of various mass media and their influence on captivating audiences and communicative behavior. Rubin and Perse (1984) criticized the historical conceptualization of the theory, suggesting that audience activity is a single variable in the ability to truly understand uses and gratifications, but does not constitute a holistic understanding of the entire communicative exchange. Levy and Windahl (1984) concluded that individuals display distinctive frequencies and types of activity in different communication settings. In the context of this dissertation, these more recent uses and gratifications findings

help to explain the variation in responses. The military spouses proved to be actors in the communicative process due to the frequency of their interactive engagements online and their use of preferred platforms to facilitate communication exchanges. Their partners also can be considered to be an active and captive audience as they await communication from the home front when they are away. As such, the variable of actor/active audience that relates to uses and gratifications theory emerges in these research findings and is proven to be a relevant and influential motive for communicative behavior among military spouses.

Windahl (1981) contended that the most effective uses and gratifications research would conjoin several vantage points, which this dissertation strived to satisfy. Perspectives for consideration when reporting the findings include: (1) a knowledge that the perceptions and expectations of media guide people's behavior, (2) understanding that motivation develops from a combination of interests and externally imposed constraints, (3) recognition that alternative selections of new media platforms and emerging communication technologies are available, and (4) awareness that the content available within the media influences its uses and effects (Ruggiero, 2000; Windahl, 1981). According to Rubin (1994), the uses and gratifications perspective is described as (1) individuals' needs and motives to communicate, (2) the psychological and social environment they utilize, (3) the functions of the mass media and associated alternatives for use, and (4) the communication behavior and its related consequences. The findings within this dissertation validate several areas of these previous studies. First, the results support that availability of new media influences the perceptions and expectations of the couples' behavior. Second, the findings reveal the unique physical and psychological circumstances imposed by the deployment experience. Third, they acknowledge the external constraints imposed by the circumstances of separation in the field (training) and deployment in

theatre (at war) and how this affects the availability of communicative options. Lastly, the wives indicate preferences of modality based on features, design, and availability, while also revealing the comprehensive variety of possible alternatives in emerging new media.

Kayahara and Wellman's (2007) cultural research classifies media gratifications into two categories: process and content. Process gratifications are experienced during the performance of rewarding activities, such as chatting online casually with a friend, scanning pictures of a fun evening out on someone's Facebook timeline, or watching YouTube videos. Content gratifications occur from the ability to use the Internet for the purposes of acquiring information (Kayahara & Wellman, 2007). In the case of this study's findings, process gratifications were experienced by the spouses when the mobility of the platforms afforded them the opportunity to communicate synchronously with their spouses. Further, proven gratifications were also revealed when the couples shared content online, such as pictures and videos of babies, pets, and/or new homes. Content gratifications occurred when the spouses were able to use Facebook and MotoMail to monitor the activity of their spouse and other military service members and their spouses who were affiliated with the deployed unit, and to monitor their contact and activity patterns to make determinations about their spouses' potential safety and availability.

In later research, Rubin (2002) indicates that uses and gratifications research focuses on how media are used to satisfy cognitive and affective needs of individuals. This was the predicate for research conducted by Stafford and Gonier (2004), in which they identified several gratifications relating to Internet use believed to motivate users' behaviors, including: (1) browsing the Internet; (2) acquiring information online; (3) engaging in interpersonal communication exchanges with others; and (4) socializing with others. The list of mediated gratifications that emerged in Stafford and Gonier's research were replicated in this study's

findings as well. All of the wives who participated in this research acknowledged being heavy Internet users, even if they were not largely active with new media. For example, Cara and Natalie both admitted to not having a preference for Facebook, but utilized other online platforms such as G-mail and Yahoo Messenger to facilitate communication exchanges with their partners. Each of the participants admitted not only to interacting with their spouses and others online, but making connections for social and monitoring purposes. Each also engaged in interpersonal interactions in a variety of mediated contexts most commonly influenced by availability, rather than preference.

Leung (2009) posits that the Internet is an interpersonal utility designed to facilitate relationship building and social maintenance, in addition to serving entertainment and information-seeking functions. These postulations are reinforced by the findings of Leung's study as well, in that the wives are motivated by several influential variables: (1) monitoring and surveillance capabilities, (2) their ability to expand their community with other spouses, and (3) the utility that the medium serves in their spousal communication. The testimonies of Jenna and Audrey, among other wives, support these claims. Participant's narratives help to explain the popularity of SNSs among this group, as the wives describe enthusiastically the value of these platforms within their relationship and during the context of the deployment experience.

The military wives applauded the role of social media in their military marriages and commended its value in their relationships. Many of them used the platforms for a variety of purposes and interactions, ranging from talking with their spouses on pop chat (Facebook's instant messaging feature), posting pictures and videos, sharing statuses, to conducting surveillance. Based on the predictions shared by the wives, it appears that they foresee a long relationship between emerging new media platforms and military spousal communication during

deployment. These findings suggest that as alternatives for SNS and other related forms of new media continue to develop, so will the popularity of their use to fulfill cognitive and affective needs, maintain relationships, conduct interpersonal surveillance, and access information (Leung, 2009).

Although uses and gratifications is a popular theoretical construct, it is also plagued with various criticisms and questions regarding its soundness. Criticisms have been made towards uses and gratifications, including: (1) its reliance primarily on self-reported data; (2) its naïveté towards the orientations that motivated the audience to their chosen media; (3) its little regard for the implications of individuals and society based on certain audience responses; and (4) it's being overly enthralled with the creative breadth of audiences to make adequate observations about the limitations of content presented in the messages (Ruggiero, 2000; Katz, 1987).

Ruggiero (2000) stands by the notion that, despite such notions, uses and gratifications is a relevant and imperative theory with a robust history and significant contribution towards historical and on-going communications media research. His contention is that uses and gratifications provide a critical cornerstone in researchers' ability to understand mass media and mediated communication. He asserts that it continues to be an effective framework for communications media research and that the ongoing evolution of communication technologies and the pervasiveness of computer-mediated communication only reinforce the theory's value. He speculates that uses and gratifications models should focus on four characteristics: (1) interactivity, (2) demassification, (3) hypertextuality, and (4) asynchronity.

The data gathered in this dissertation speaks to each of these four areas and complements Ruggiero's outlook of the importance of the uses and gratifications framework within this particular niche. He makes the argument that future research rooted in the uses and gratifications

framework should seek to explore interpersonal and qualitative aspects of mediated communication in order to grasp a more detailed understanding. He believes that using a more holistic research approach is beneficial to the depth gleaned about these experiences. The findings of this dissertation respond to that research gap identified in Ruggerio's analysis, having approached the data gathering in an inductive and inclusive way, in order to acquire comprehensive detail about the wives' experiences. The results yielded deep insight into the phenomena of using new media to communicate during deployment and how military spouses facilitate their computer-mediated communication online.

This researcher concurs with Ruggiero's assessment and supports his claims that contemporary research conducted in the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms may reveal potentially valuable contributions for ongoing uses and gratifications research. Additional findings derived from diverse research approaches may contribute towards the ever-developing understanding and ever-evolving contexts of uses and gratifications as research framework. This is particularly important to consider as the communication landscape continues to evolve or when looking at niche groups such as military spouses and examining their use of new media.

Media Richness Theory

Several of the findings in this study were conducive to the media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984). Daft and Lengel (1984) originally developed this construct to describe different purposes of communication media for use in organizational communication. Since its origin, scholars have also explored the theory's application to relational communication, particularly as new media continue to innovate. More recently, media richness theory has been adapted to include new media and Internet-based communication channels specifically. Channels that allow for communication exchanges to be clear, globally understood, and efficiently delivered are

deemed as rich; less timely and more ambiguous communication interactions are seen as not being rich (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). For this reason, certain channels are preferred to others, depending on the purpose of the communication exchange. However, during deployment, findings of this dissertation indicated that the majority of time the channel is chosen based on utility, comprised primarily by access and function, and, secondly, by preference for use.

Media richness theory states that all communication channels have distinct features and characteristics that qualify them as being more or less rich. Simple messages can typically involve communication using less rich means; however, more substantive exchanges are better-suited for richer media. The richest engagements are still concluded to be face-to-face interactions, yet online alternatives such as videoconferencing and chatting on Face Time may be highly beneficial alternatives to face-to-face conversations (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Dennis & Kinney, 1998). Military spouses are forced to rely on mediated channels during deployment. Many of the wives in this study expressed a preferred method of communicating in their responses, which was surprisingly not always the richest form of engagement. In some cases, this was a deliberate choice, such as when Alex avoided Skype-ing with Audrey after their friend got killed in action, opting to only use Facebook to communicate for the remainder of the tour. In other cases, the spouses relied on less enriching media to foster their interactions simply on the basis of utility and accessibility, such as Cara and Eric relying exclusively on e-mail and Natalie using MotoMail during her communication gap with Vlad.

Daft and Lengel (1984) contended that the more information and cues that can go out over a medium, the richer the medium becomes, and, although this research may seem dated, their postulations are still rational in the contemporary communications media climate. They identified several characteristics associated with media richness, many of which were noted in

the responses by the military wives in the current study. First, rich media have the bandwidth to communicate multiple cues and/or content simultaneously. In the testimonies about the use of Skype, its functional shortcomings (caused primary by bandwidth issues and service interruptions), devalued the platform's potential use. Second, rich media are able to facilitate timely responses, such as how the pop chat feature on Facebook allows for real-time instant messaging within the platform. Rich media also have the capability to allow for personalization, much in the way that the couples would publicly post pictures to share and/or assurances on each other's pages to reflect relational openness (Daft & Lengel, 1984).

Daft and Lengel (1984) noted that while it is not the primary determining factor, available resources do influence the choice as to which media platform is used to communicate. As such, it becomes clear that while the wives appreciated having choices and using enriching media, they relied most readily on what was accessible and functional. This is where the theme of utility is highlighted, with many of the wives pointing to one particular platform as being more or less accessible and/or reliable than another, and these resources drove their media decisions more than preference in many cases. The wives more so appeared during deployment than separations, to gravitate towards utilitarian new media, with the richness of the platforms being more of a peripheral concern. Although richness may not be the leading influence among this particular group, it certainly influences the preferential area of their utility. Thus, media richness theory may be a worthy framework on which to base future research that explores spousal communication in the military constituency.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

In this study, the theme of uncertainty and urgency were universal in the deployment testimonies. A relevant theoretical framework that is related to this theme is uncertainty

reduction theory (URT). URT was first used with regard to studying initial interpersonal encounters, but scholars have subsequently come to rely on URT to look at uncertainty in relationships over time as well (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988). URT posits that when an individual is unable to predict or explain their relational partner's behaviors, that person experiences uncertainty.

According to URT, uncertainty creates an awkward and uncomfortable feeling, which is sought to be alleviated by enacting behavior to reduce and manage uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Berger (1979) describes one possibility to reduce uncertainty as a passive strategy which involves inconspicuous surveillance and monitoring online. A second uncertainty reduction strategy is interactive and involves engaging in openness maintenance behavior and direct contact with the individual causing the uncertainty. Dainton (2003, 2011) and Dainton and Aylor (2001) concluded that uncertainty is a solid predictor of the use of maintenance behaviors in relationships. Thus suggests that for military spouses, for whom uncertainty is an inherent characteristic, more frequent and distinctive maintenance behaviors may be enacted.

Previous research supports that increased maintenance enactment may be one of the ways that romantic partners might reduce uncertainty, implying that, as is the case in this study, the spouses felt more assured by their use of selected new media to communicate during deployment. The findings of this dissertation concur that the role and impact of the new media platforms discussed proved to be crucial to the spouses and their marital maintenance (Dainton, 2003, 2011; Dainton & Aylor, 2001). Uncertainty and the use of SNSs to communicate in romantic partnerships represent a challenging and complex relationship, one which researchers have struggled to completely understand (Utz & Buekeboom, 2011; Muise et al, 2009). Constructively, SNSs are an outlet for spousal communication and a public forum for relational

maintenance; as such, using these platforms may be presumed to reduce uncertainty within a relationship. On the other hand, the transparency of online interactions may incite jealous behavior, especially for young married couples apart during deployment or separated for military assignments. In some cases, the spouses in the current study spent less than 2 months physically together during their first year of marriage. It is difficult to imagine the relational disadvantages that can occur when the initial phase of one's marriage is stifled due to being apart for deployment, and how the homecoming adjustments must be compounded due to the newness of the marriage.

Muise et al. (2009) found that the use of Facebook might increase partner uncertainty as a result of the significant relationship found between Facebook-related jealousy and frequency of Facebook use. This negative perspective is supported by fellow researchers Craig and Wright (2012), who concluded that computer-mediated communication might simultaneously increase and decrease a partner's ability to understand the behaviors of others. Consistent with primitive URT research, this suggestion echoes the initial creation of URT by Berger and Calabrese (1975) in noting that communication behavior and relational maintenance can be both the source of uncertainty and the means for reduction.

This makes logical sense when considering the testimony of a few of the wives who mentioned that, although they did not experience it in their own marriages, they knew of other military couples who had experienced conflict as a result of Facebook behavior. In some cases, the online interactions caused relations to become so strained that the couples separated or even divorced, highlighting the most serious consequences caused by the platform. The spouses clearly indicated, that Facebook activity could trigger jealousy and that this was heightened during extended times apart. In some cases, the spouses would exchange lighthearted banter with one another about infidelity in theatre or on the home front during deployment, but more

often the communication centered on providing assurances and openness exchanges about the relationship. Although this group of wives experienced more positive outcomes using new media than negative, their testimonies include cautious acknowledgements of both the security and the pitfalls of monitoring and surveillance capabilities afforded online.

For instance, uncertainty can initiate as a result of knowing too much or too little information about a relational partner. According to Afifi, Dillow, and Morris (2004), knowing too much information about a partner can increase jealousy and promote negative relational consequences. Increased use of Facebook and feelings of jealousy have been repeatedly proven to have a positive relationship, perhaps due to the reduction in context of messages and content, coupled with the enhanced ability to monitor online (Muisse et al., 2009; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Thomas (2010) revealed that 25% of unfaithful partners used Facebook to communicate with the partner of their infidelity, thus validating cause for concern when it comes to the prevalence of Facebook and how it may impact military marriages. This type of empirical evidence warrants further exploration of the variable of uncertainty in the particular niche of military marriages. In accordance with the uncertainty reduction framework, greater detail can be learned about the effects of uncertainty on military marriages. Uncertainty reduction is a viable framework with which to design future empirical investigations that more closely examine the particular group of military couples and examine their techniques to manage uncertainty within the unique context of their relationships and under the unpredictable circumstances brought forth in the military lifestyle.

Social Capital Theory

Uses of SNSs, like Facebook, appeared to have an impact on interpersonal relationships and an individual's perceived social capital value within the military spousal community. Social

capital theory was presented by Richard Putnam in the 1990s. Putnam (1995) postulated in the theory that quality-of-life variables, such as social networks, trust, civic engagement, political participation, memberships and associations, life satisfaction, confidence, and trust in government and society, all make contributions towards effective democracy (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2008). Social media have been proven to contribute to the development of social capital. The survey data from Kavanaugh et al. (2005) reveals that amplified involvement with people, issues, and community due to increased online activity supports the argument that Internet use strengthens social contact, community engagement, and attachment. In this study, community surfaced as a predominant theme among the military wives.

In local geographic communities, people typically get to know each other in face-to-face settings and then maintain their relationship with the support of communication technologies. Introduce the Internet, and people and community groups have the option to turn to various forms of social media to enhance communication within their relationships and exchange information (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). The findings from a study that looked at a sample of college students from Texas support these ideas of connection-forming, relationship maintenance, and the resulting growth in social capital. The study yielded data from a random web survey of over 2,000 college students and found a positive relationship between intensity of Facebook use and students levels of life satisfaction, social trust, civic participation, and political engagement (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2008). A separate study yielded a similar result, concluding that a positive relationship exists between Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). These findings may have bearing on young military spouses and their ability to expand their military community using online engagements. Also, the results of the current study are indicative that the use of Facebook and other new media

are valuable in facilitating spousal communication and surveillance and for connecting with other spouses for the same purposes.

In 2007, Ellison et al. examined the relationship between use of Facebook and formation of social capital in a study that surveyed 286 college undergraduate students to examine three types of social capital: bridging, bonding, and maintained social capital. Bridging social capital is defined as the extent to which people were integrated into their communities and their willingness to get involved as participatory members. Bonding social capital relates to relationship-building and the creation and formation of online and offline connections, or bonds, with others. Maintained social capital is when people uphold their personal and acquaintance relationships that may be geographically local or remote. Their study concluded that since bridging social capital provides benefits (such as increased information flow and social opportunities), they predict that active Facebook participants are able to leverage more out of their college experience (Ellison, et al., 2007). Bridging, bonding, and maintaining social capital are all apparent in varying degrees among the military spouses interviewed in this study, as became apparent with the theme of community emerging within the findings.

Due to bonding being linked to higher self-esteem, there proved to be a greater level of satisfaction with the experience at the university for students who were actively engaged with others in shared social networks online (Ellison et al., 2007). As such, the findings herein suggest that the greater bonding social capital created and sustained through spousal and peer communication, the better the wives may feel about remaining committed to the military lifestyle. Also noteworthy is that the increased information flow and communication opportunities are critical to the deployment experience for the spouses and facilitate their relational maintenance and community-building with peers. The wives revealed that while the

deployments are stressful, unpredictable, and uncertain, having the ability to communicate more often synchronously and asynchronously using new media platforms was of tremendous value and had a positive impact on their marital relationships. When asked how deployment would have been different without these platforms, many of the wives remarked that they are unsure how well they would have dealt with this experience if they had to rely on non-mediated channels exclusively.

Of interest when examining research in social capital is the development of both strong and weak ties and how they are sustained within the military culture. Donath and Boyd (2004) postulated that online social networks may not increase the number of strong ties a person has (i.e., long-term, sustained interpersonal interactions), but may increase the volume of weak ties, or infrequent, inconsistent, casual interactions. This is due to the fact that new technology and social media are well-suited to maintain these ties easily and with minimal effort and resources (Valenzuela, et al., 2008). These trends were apparent in the way that the military wives were able to readily connect with their husbands' comrades and other military spouses who were previously unknown to them and begin forming relationships and engaging in communication activity. Social capital theory also highlights the link between online and offline relationships, a transition all too common for the spouses.

Social media have implications on the relationship between online and offline connections. In examining the differences and similarities between online and offline social networks, the impact that social media have on relationship connections are visualized. Existing research illustrates that young people are motivated to join and use SNSs to retain strong ties with friends, to strengthen ties with new acquaintances, and to meet new people online (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2008; Gross & Acquisti, 2006). Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini (2007)

revealed that that online and offline identity and sociability are central themes in the current research climate of Internet-based media. In the case of the military spouses interviewed, the couples were forced by the cyclical rotation of deployment and homecoming to transition their relationship maintenance between online and offline interactions. The agility that this changeover requires is likely linked to the theme of utility (access and preference) that emerged as a dominant theme when the data was analyzed in this study.

Offline relationships are said to have built-in norms of reciprocity, rules, and roles of participants that transfer into their online interactions (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Donath, 2007). These norms are maintained by the military couples when their spouses are stationed at home and require transitioning to mediated contexts when apart. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to evade online responsibility when there is the expectation for interaction, based on the established norms in the offline relationship (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). These expectations became apparent in the way that many of these wives would send daily messages to their husbands in theatre, even if there was no response, simply to say 'I love you' or provide a daily update on the family or home.

Tuckle (1995) argued that it is appropriate that people use the Internet for social capital building activities when they are building value towards their online or offline connections and interpersonal relationships (Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001). These conclusions connect to the finding in this study that indicated how quickly the wives built up their own social and support network of other spouses, mainly formed through online engagements. Further, many were able to transition that online community interaction into offline relationships with spouses sharing the deployment experience by becoming personal friends. Many wives remarked on the value of staying connected within the military spouses' network, even after their spouse was discharged

or they were PCS-ed to a new location, at which time they would transition the relationship back to an online context. As such, social capital appears to be an effective framework on which to couch forthcoming military family and military community research efforts.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations and, as is common with exploratory research, prompts great reflection and additional research questions. The main limitations to this current study involve the narrow longevity of the research due to the youth of new media, the gap of available research involving the communication behavior of military spouses, unintended restriction to the sample based on the location of deployments, and the use of self-reported data to analyze and generate results.

The examination of new media is essential to the field of communications media research, yet due to its “newness,” there are limits to the research available. First, the rapid advancement in technological growth and innovation makes it challenging to obtain timely data on usage and effects. The ever-changing nature of platforms, features, applications and mobile devices has made it difficult to make sound predictions that are well-supported by credible and relevant evidence. These challenges made designing a study in well-grounded and solid academic traditions difficult, as not all traditional communication theories can be applied globally to new media behavior and effects. Also, the minimal longevity presents challenges for researchers in terms of understanding the best practices and most effective approaches for conducting research on new media in the constructivist paradigm.

Another limitation to this particular study stemmed from the lack of availability of research in the area of military spousal communication. Only a very few communication-based studies were uncovered that looked at the military constituency; most of the research reviewed in

advance of this investigation came from psychology and other fields. This affords tremendous opportunity for future research to be conducted that looks in great depth and breadth at the communication trends and behaviors within the particular niche. However, this study could not use a grounded theory approach, for example, due to the minimal amount of empirical data available to be analyzed which draws conclusions about this particular population and set of variables.

The sample was limited to spouses of United States Marines and Army soldiers and did not include spouses of Air Force and Navy service members. The exclusion of these individuals was unintentional, yet is likely a result of the locations of the contemporary wars [in Iraq and Afghanistan] and the increased ratio of Marine Corps and Army presence in these locations, compared to Air Force and Navy.

Lastly, one of the obvious limitations in all non-experimental research is the potential bias brought about through self-reported data. Although this researcher took measures to bracket her own experiences from influencing the results, the testimonies shared by subjects and anecdotal details of their experiences were personally generated, meaning that the accounts may be flavored with preconceived and/or personal biases, as well as reflective of their own individual experiences and how favorable or unfavorable they were. In spite of this limitation, this exploratory study sought to construct an essence of an experience, and borrowing from their personal stories was the appropriate method, according to the phenomenological procedure followed, to attain this desired understanding.

In the future, if this study were to be recreated, there are several suggested revisions to improve the quality of the study. The first suggestion for improvement is to conduct the phenomenology in real-time of the deployment, rather than asking participants to reflect back on

their experiences. Instead of conducting the interviews with the spouses post-deployment, after a period of time has gone by and the experience has become more removed, the study may perhaps be improved by correlating its execution with a live deployment experience. This would require learning in advance of a deploying unit and targeting those spouses to be recruited to participate in the study. Then, the protocol of the study would need to be restructured to execute one interview during the pre-deployment phase, one interview during deployment, and a final interview within 6 weeks of homecoming during the post-deployment phase. The rationale supporting this revision is that deeper essence about the experience may be captured if the experience is on-going, as opposed to being based on reflective testimony, as this investigation was.

Aside from the recommendation of realigning the timing of the study to correlate with a deployment, another criticism against the existing study and recommendation for the future was the lack of a pilot study. This study should have included a pilot study in advance of the actual data collection process to make the interview protocol more precise. As data gathering was underway, several factors were realized. For instance, there were opportunities to add a few items within the instrument, assimilate several similar questions, and reduce the overall number of protocol items, while maintaining or perhaps even improving upon the quality of the solicitation of information. For example, upon further review of the protocol and reflection of the interviews, several of the items in the protocol were somewhat redundant. Using fewer items that made broader inquisitions may have improved the efficiency of the interviews. A pilot study may have captured some additional items for inclusion, such as asking a question specifically about mobility of the platforms. Also, it would have pointed to areas to eliminate or reduce, such as only asking a single item about their spouses' deployment and separation experiences, rather

than asking multiple and separate questions for that overarching area. Although there was room to improve the protocol, it is unknown as to whether or not these adjustments would have any bearing on the quality of the data gathered, because the data proved to be valid in response to the variables being explored in this investigation.

There are other ways that this existing study could be expanded upon or enhanced. Additional interviews may be conducted, or focus groups can be conducted to gather additional data and build upon the essence of the experience of the intersection among military spousal communication, new media, and deployment. In reality, this study can be converted to a quantitative format, comprised of a survey inquiring about their experiences, and also contain a series of open-ended questions to gather data to do further thematic and narrative analysis. As more research is gathered in the communications media field that examines military spousal communication and their use of new media, a grounded theory investigation can be undertaken, such that the detailed, interpretive findings can be analyzed based on framework of preexisting multi-methodological findings. The goal of this dissertation is to develop this project into a future scholarship agenda by pursuing one or several of these research opportunities realized through the work of this exploratory study which, based on its very nature, provoked a number of questions and carved a number of potentially viable paths for additional exploration.

Future Research Opportunities

There are seemingly endless opportunities for new media scholars to examine the relationship and implications among new media, military spousal communication, and the deployment experience. It is resourceful for communication researchers to embrace this area of research, because it is predicated in the findings of this study that new media will continue to develop and innovate and have bearing on the particular group examined. This researcher

contends that there is value in developing a greater understanding of the powerful experiences warranted by using new media platforms and exploring this behavior in the niche constituency of military marriages.

In summation, existing research is emergent and presents powerful ideas on the new media concepts represented in social media formats such as Facebook. There is significant opportunity to develop research that will substantiate future scholarship and uncover conclusions about social media effects. This can be accomplished much in the way the existing media effects research has examined each emerging form of mass media throughout history or in the description of the application to the niche area of military-affiliated relationship exploration. It is empowering to realize the many applications that social media can support. Likewise, it is encouraging that the current research acknowledges that the positive outcomes of using new media are starting to outweigh the “dark side” of its uses.

Generally speaking, there are limitless opportunities, not only for the existing research study to be improved upon and redeployed, but also for the undertaking of tangent investigations pertinent to the variables explored in this investigation. These variables may include looking at the specific maintenance behaviors enacted within military families and marriages, or how new media and emerging communication technologies are used for relational maintenance, particularly in long-distance, remote, and/or stress-inducing contexts such as the deployment experience.

Conclusion

It was May 2009, just a few short weeks after my younger brother, Richard, a United States Marine, had deployed to Afghanistan. When I saw that my mother was calling my cell phone, I felt my usual wave of warmth and happiness, followed by what had become my new

normal: deep-seated feelings of panic and worry. Was she calling with news about my brother? Would this be good news? ...Or is this an average, everyday call between mother and daughter? I answered the phone. "Hello?"

"We got an e-mail from your brother!" she chirped in an excited voice from the other end of the line.

Suddenly, I felt warm and happy again, as we chatted about what the e-mail contained and shared a fleeting moment of relief together, knowing that he was OK. In the e-mail, Richard mentioned that he had sent me and our youngest brother a MySpace message. I eagerly logged into MySpace, the then larger-than-life (and growing) social networking site in 2009, to see the little message icon indicating that I had mail. I opened the message to find a brief and heartfelt note from my brother, from theatre, letting me know that he was well and missing us back home. He would be in touch again when he could. I immediately went over to my "Top Friends" list, where his profile icon was located, to look for the little flashing light indicating that he was still logged in (to MySpace). He was not. After sharing the message with my mom and hanging up the phone, I sat back in my chair and found myself contemplating the reality that I had just been contacted from a war zone via the Internet.

As a child, I spent many holidays listening to my grandfather, a Navy veteran of World War II, and my father, a former United States Marine, debate the finer points of the military, recount battles, share touching moments, and discuss memories about their days in the service and the era of military history from those time periods. My grandfather shared his experiences of being deployed in the WWII era; about waiting on mail to arrive and writing letters to send back home. There is something incredibly personal and emotive about the sentiment behind a hand-written letter. While the accounts of these experiences were touching, there is certain

meaningfulness to the reality that, in today's technologically-forward time, the inefficiency of letter writing and even sending e-mail messages that seems old-fashioned. Couple the outdated modalities with the prevalence of the Internet and mobile Smartphone devices and it becomes increasingly more apparent that the landscape of how we communicate is changing.

Furthermore, these emerging technologies foster remote communication capabilities, and a group such as military couples can transition from sending letters to 'liking' status updates.

"What's on your mind?" Facebook asks, as you log in to check your news feed. As a result of this series of interviews, it is clear that the military wives have a lot on their minds. Their conversations were enriching, and borrowing from their personal experiences of trials, treasures, tribulations, and transitions offered inspiring contributions toward research in the communications media field. Among the benefits of this study was the ability to actualize the prevalence and experience of using Facebook, Skype, and other selected new media for spousal communication during wartime deployment. This exploratory research contributes to a barometer in the field of communications media that examines how new media contribute towards a specific group of people, such as the military spouses, partners, and families, and augment relational communication on their behalf during geographic separation. These findings may have potential implications to military agencies responsible for developing educational programming and informational strategies for how to decrease anxiety and stress during deployments.

Several curious observations were made in this study that did not have a direct relationship to any of the variables or research questions. For one, it must be noted that the communication between the researcher and the subjects relied heavily on the use of Facebook and e-mail. The wives preferred to make arrangements and communicate back-and-forth using

Facebook messaging than to speak by phone in advance of the interview. As they passed information of the study on to their friends and connections, it was not uncommon that other wives would ‘friend’ this researcher on Facebook and inquire about participation, citing our mutual connection to another member of their military network.

Word of mouth proved to be an interesting trait among the wives that further represents the community that exists among them. For instance, in collecting data, many of the initially recruited subjects passed along word of the study to their network of military friends. This assisted in reaching viable subjects for the study and better yet, supported the theme of community that arose within the study. It was apparent when interacting with the wives that they are a close-knit group. It is clear in their narratives that they rely on each other for information, friendship, and support. They acknowledge comfort in knowing that someone else understands their experience, especially when they struggle with being away from their families and the lack understanding by their peers who are not military-affiliated. Many revealed a particular closeness and interdependence among fellow military spouses and a family-like camaraderie that emerges as they spend time around one another and live the military lifestyle. These military families look out for one another and form lasting bonds.

Two of the wives, Tiffany and Rachel, mentioned an online social network for Army wives when discussing their perceptions of new media. They shared that the Facebook page for “Fort Campbell Army Wives” proved to be a valuable social resource, support mechanism, and channel for connecting with other spouses. From a research perspective, joining some of these online networks and groups may serve as a positive maneuver to facilitate relationships with the constituency that is sought after for research of this particular niche with which they are associated.

Mobile technology and mobility surfaced as such a strong theme that the women realized they had a significant impact on their communication experiences during deployments. The ability to communicate with their spouses in theatre and on-the-go made an impact on the lives of the military spouses, both in terms of their own relational maintenance within their marriages and in their ability to interact with others in the military community. In addition to learning more about mobile technologies, this study's findings also beg the question about which features of the platforms are most dominant to support communication exchanges. Many of the wives revealed a preference to private messaging for their personal communication, but appreciated the use of content posting and status updates for purposes of monitoring and surveillance.

Aside from capturing the five themes of mobility, monitoring and surveillance, community, utility, and urgency and uncertainty, this study also captured a glance of the experience of what life is like as a military spouse during deployment, and the unpredictable nature of communication exchanges under those circumstances. This dissertation sought to look at the combined phenomena of military spouses communicating through new media during wartime deployment. The findings of this study helped to qualify the true essence of this one-of-a-kind experience and proved to have potential contributions towards several relevant communication theories.

In the initial chapters of this study, the phenomenological method was rationalized by relying on Langsdorf's (1994) four areas of focus: (1) constitution; (2) reflexivity; (3) interpretation; and (4) meaningfulness. According to Langsdorf (1994), phenomenology is used in communication research to offer a detailed description about: (1) the homogeneity of the lived experience, (2) the structure and organization of that experience, (3) the patterns of the activity in response to the context of the environment, and (4) a knowledge of the experience from the

viewpoint of the individuals who have undergone or participated in it. Upon analysis of the data found in this study, this researcher feels confident that the purposive goals proposed by Langsdorf were satisfied and explained thoroughly throughout this phenomenological investigation and within the substantiating reports.

The interviews proved that the deployment experiences are inherently distinctive. Thus, there is minimal uniformity to how these communication experiences are undertaken during deployment. The experiences are inconsistent and unpredictable, thus compounding the element of uncertainty present during deployment and reducing structural and organizational understanding. At best, a set of norms on behalf of the spouses on the home front constituted for how they enact their communication and maintenance behaviors. The patterns of communication revealed a relationship between the environment and context in which they occur. Hence, if the spouses are in the field or out on missions in theatre, they may be inaccessible for an arbitrary length of time; yet, when they are stationed where they have access to communication channels, they will utilize them as needed and able. Lastly, this study established the essences of these experiential accounts of this group of wives based on their actual, lived experiences, maintaining their marriages with their spouses who are at times in potentially grave danger and/or out of reach.

Overall, the results of this study lend to research in the areas of new media, cultural, and social phenomena and relational maintenance and go beyond basic spousal maintenance behaviors. To further emphasize the importance of community in the military lifestyle, Rachel reveals that she is relying extensively on new media to ease her transition during her PCS to Hawaii and keep her in touch with her network back in Fort Campbell. Jenna, Carrie, and Tara all noted that although their husbands have left the service, they remain closely tied to the lives

of their comrades using platforms like Facebook and other new media and mediated communication channels, and also augment these exchanges using mobile media.

In closing, the infancy and constant innovation of new media, coupled with limited availability of established research on both new media and military spousal communication yield challenges while also offering incredible opportunity for future research. The swift advancement in technological innovation may make it difficult to capture a relevant and accurate picture of new media usage and effects; still, frameworks including social capital, media richness, and uses and gratifications are helpful in pursuing these explorations. Although this study took an inductive approach to data gathering, it was worthwhile to find several theoretical constructs that connect to this study's findings and validate the value of the information discovered through the interviews. The themes and theories that were derived in the findings indicate significance and the presence of a relationship among the intersecting variables that will only continue to be understood through expanded exploration of this developing agenda for some time to come.

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Appendix A: Sample Recruiting Letter to Family Readiness Officers

[Date]

Dear [Insert Name] or Family Readiness Officer,

I am conducting a research study for a doctoral dissertation about the experience of using Facebook and Skype to communicate in military spousal relationships during combat deployments. I am seeking your permission to contact military families for the study and for your assistance in identifying eligible civilian spouses who I may interview for the purpose of this academic research.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience and the effect(s) of Facebook and/or Skype on the communicative behavior between military spouses, measure perceptions of the impact of these platforms, and identify if there are differences between using these channels during wartime deployments and other types of military separation. To be eligible for participation, the following criteria must be met:

- Subjects must be between the ages of 18-35 years old.
- Subjects must be a civilian spouse that is currently or was married to an active duty member of the United States Armed Forces for a time period of 5 years or less.
- Since 2007, their spouse must have served in at least one tour of duty to an area of wartime conflict (Afghanistan or Iraq).
- The subject and spouse must both currently be, or have been, active users of either or both the Facebook and/or Skype platforms during the time of deployment(s).

Participation in this study involves participating in a three-part interview series to be scheduled at mutually convenient times over a three-month time period during late 2012-early 2013. Each interview will range in time from 20-60 minutes. There are no known or expected risks by participating in this research. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Subjects do not have to answer all of the interview questions if they decide to participate and there are no incorrect answers. They are free to end their participation at any time and refusal to participate will not result in any penalty.

The potential benefits of this study involve gaining a deeper understanding about the role of Facebook and Skype in military spousal relationships during deployment and its impacts on their communicative behavior and relational communication. This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects and has ensured compliance with all standards.

Any efforts that you can make to distribute information about this study to qualified participants and how to contact me to volunteer would be most appreciated. Thank you for your time and consideration of my request. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at m.c.stewart@iup.edu or (215) 279-2201.

Sincerely,

Margaret C. Stewart, M.A.
 Department of Communication Media
 Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP)
m.c.stewart@iup.edu
 (215) 279-2201

Appendix B: Sample of Informed Consent Form

[Date]

Dear Participant,

This research study is being conducted to learn more about the experience of using Facebook and Skype to communicate in military spousal relationships, to examine their effect(s) on the communicative behavior between military spouses, measure perceptions of the impact of these platforms, and identify if there are differences between using these channels during wartime deployments and other types of military separation. Participation in this study involves participating in a three-part series of in-depth and comprehensive interviews to be scheduled at mutually convenient times over a three-month time period. Each interview will range in time from 20-60 minutes. To participate, you must be between the ages of 18-35 years old and be a civilian spouse that is currently or was married to an active duty member of the United States Armed Forces for a time period of 5 years or less. Since 2007, your spouse must have served in at least one tour of duty to an area of wartime conflict (Afghanistan or Iraq). You and your spouse must both currently be, or have been, active users of either or both the Facebook and/or Skype platforms during the time of deployment(s).

There are no known or expected risks by participating in this research. The potential benefits of this study involve gaining a deeper understanding about the role of Facebook and Skype in military spousal relationships during deployment and its impacts on their communicative behavior and relational communication. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer all of the interview questions if you decide to participate. There are no incorrect answers. You are free to end your participation at any time. Refusal to participate will not result in any penalty for you.

The information gathered from your participation will be kept confidential in accordance to IUP's Information Protection Policy and is reported anonymously or with limited identifying information (i.e. age, sex, first name if desired) in research reporting. Interviews will be recorded strictly for the purpose of transcribing the data. Audio recording and transcripts will be securely stored on a password protected network. Be mindful to not discuss any identifying information during the interviews so that there will be no way of identifying your specific information in the transcripts. This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (724.357.7730) and has ensured compliance with all standards.

Please execute the acknowledgement of being provided with this letter of informed consent below. Thank you for your participation in this research. If you have any questions, please contact Margaret Stewart at m.c.stewart@iup.edu.

Sincerely,

Margaret C. Stewart, M.A.
Department of Communication Media
Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP)
m.c.stewart@iup.edu
(215) 279-2201

I acknowledge that I have received and reviewed this letter of informed consent and authorize my participation in this research study:

X _____

Appendix C: Email to Accompany the Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. This study is being conducted to learn more about the experience of using Facebook and Skype to communicate in military spousal relationships, to examine their effect(s) on the communicative behavior between military spouses, measure perceptions of the impact of these platforms, and identify if there are differences between using these channels during wartime deployments and other types of military separation. This study is being done as partial fulfillment of degree requirements for Ph.D. in Communications Media & Instructional Technology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (PA) and the information gathered from your participation will be shared exclusively within the academic profession.

Attached, please find a form of informed consent that explains the study in more detail. Upon an acknowledgement of review, we can move ahead with scheduling the interviews at mutually convenient times over the next three-months. If you have any questions about the contents of the attached letter or about participation in the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at (215) 279-2201 or m.c.stewart@iup.edu.

Thank you again for your interest and I look forward to hearing from you!

Margaret C. Stewart, M.A.
Department of Communication Media
Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP)
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(215) 279-2201

Appendix D: Interview Protocol Instrument

Part I: Interview Opening Script

Hello! Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

As you know, this interview is being conducted for the purposes of academic research. At any time, feel free to decline answering any of the questions or ask clarification about questions before choosing to respond. For the purpose of being transcribed for analysis, this interview will be recorded. Please keep in mind to not disclose personally identifying information in our conversation. You are welcome to refer to you and your spouse on a first name basis, or simply as “me/myself/I” and “my husband/wife/spouse”. Do I have your permission to record our interview?

Great! Let’s get started...

Part II: Interview Scripts and Protocols

Interview #1

Today, I am going to ask you a series of questions about your basic demographic, your spouse’s military service and deployment(s) and about your use of Facebook and Skype.

Demographic questions:

- Sex of subject and spouse.
- What is your age? The age of your spouse?
- How long have you been married to your spouse?
- How long were you in a romantic relationship with your spouse prior to getting married?
- Do you and your spouse have any children and/or step-children? If so, how many and what age(s)?

Military service questions:

- In what branch of the service does/did your spouse serve?
- How long has s/he been enlisted in the military?
- Is s/he currently on active duty?
- When and where (year(s) and general location) was your spouse deployed?
- Since 2007, has your spouse been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan? When (year(s))?
- Since 2007, what other military separations have you and your spouse experienced (i.e. training operations, peace-keeping missions, off-site duty, and disaster relief)?

Facebook and Skype questions:

- What new media platforms do you use? Your spouse? (Provide examples such as Facebook and Skype if needed for prompting).
- During the deployment(s) and/or military separation(s), how did you contact your spouse?
- How often do you use these platforms and for what purposes?
- During deployment and separation, do you notice any change in frequency or any patterns of communication with your spouse using these platforms?

Thank you for your time and information today! In the next interview, we will discuss more about the perceived effects of Facebook and Skype on your communication with your spouse. It was great speaking/meeting with you and I will speak/meet with you again on {next scheduled time}.

Interview #2

Today, I am going to ask you a series of questions about the perceived impact and effects that using Facebook and Skype have on your communicative behavior and patterns with your spouse.

Interview questions:

- Describe your experience using Facebook to communicate with your spouse during deployment.
- How often and to what extent do you use Facebook to communicate?
- Describe your experience using Skype to communicate with your spouse during deployment. How often and to what extent do you use Skype to communicate?
- Describe the level of consistency of your communication exchanges?
- What norms exist within your relational communication with your spouse?
- Discuss the nature of your communication exchanges. Is it consistent or varied?
- During deployment(s) to war, do you experience topic avoidance around any particular discussion items? Are there any topics that are “off limits” for discussion?
- How do you feel about having the ability to communicate using these new media during deployment?
- How would your communication during deployment(s) differ without the availability of Facebook and Skype?
- Have you communicated during deployment(s) without those platforms? If so, how?
- How would you communicate if you did not have these platforms available?
- In your opinion, is availability and accessibility of those platforms valuable for relationship maintenance of military spouses? Why or why not?

Thank you for your time and information today! In the next interview, we will discuss more about the difference in communication using Facebook and Skype during wartime deployment when compared with other forms of military separation. It was great speaking/meeting with you and I will speak/meet with you again on {next scheduled time}.

Interview #3

Today, I am going to ask you a series of questions about the differences in the role of Facebook and Skype as communication channels during wartime deployment compared with other types of military separations (training operations, disaster relief, and peace-time deployments).

Interview questions:

- Outside of the named wartime deployments, describe the type and frequency of other types of military separations that you and your spouse experience or have experienced?
- Describe your experience using Facebook and/or Skype to communicate with your spouse during these military separations.
- Describe the frequency and consistency of your communication exchanges during military separations?

- Discuss the nature of your communication exchanges. Is it consistent or varied?
- During these separations, do you experience topic avoidance around any particular discussion items? Are there any topics that are “off limits” for discussion?
- How do you feel about having the ability to communicate using these new media during separations?
- How would your communication patterns differ during separations without the availability of Facebook and Skype?
- How would you have communicated during separation(s) without those platforms?
- What changes do you notice in your communication habits and behaviors between communicating during wartime deployment and other types of military separation.
- How do you feel your spousal communication as a military spouse would be different without the presence of Facebook and Skype?
- What predictions do you have for how other new media platforms will change the way military spouses like yourself communicate during deployment and separations in the future?

Thank you for your time and information today! This was our last interview for this study. It was great speaking/meeting with you while doing this research. Thank you for your overall participation in this research study and for your contribution to my dissertation research project. Your involvement and insights were most appreciated!

Appendix E: Research Topic Approval Letter



Indiana University of Pennsylvania

www.iup.edu

Office of the Assistant Dean for Research
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Stright Hall, Room 113
210 South Tenth Street
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705-1048

P 724-357-7730
F 724-357-2715
www.iup.edu/research

August 17, 2012

Margaret C. Stewart
701 Oak Street
Bloomsburg, PA 17815

Dear Ms. Stewart:

Now that your research project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, I have reviewed your Research Topic Approval Form and approved it.

Your RTAF indicates your anticipated graduation date as May 2013. You must apply for graduation by May 1, 2013. This means that your thesis or dissertation must be submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research by April 15, 2013 if you desire to graduate by your anticipated date. For deadlines for subsequent graduation dates, please access <http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=16683>.

The Thesis/Dissertation Manual, additional resources, and information to help you start writing can be found at <http://www.iup.edu/graduatestudies/thesis/default.aspx>.

Also, The Applied Research Lab provides free assistance with statistical analysis and research design--both quantitative and qualitative--to all IUP students. The ARL can also provide assistance in the use of the features in Word and Acrobat you'll need to correctly format your dissertation. For more information, please visit their website: <http://www.iup.edu/arl/default.aspx>.

You are now eligible to receive a FREE copy of Adobe Professional! This software will help you to create an electronic thesis or dissertation. It can be picked up at the IT Support Center, G35 Delaney Hall. If you live off campus, you can send an email from your IUP email account to it-support-center@iup.edu. Please indicate you are a graduate student requesting Adobe Professional and include your Banner ID, mailing address, and which version - Windows or Mac.

Finally, if you change your topic, the scope or methodology of your project, or your committee, a new Research Topic Approval Form must be completed.

I wish you well and hope you find this experience to be rewarding.

Sincerely,

Hillary E. Creely, J.D., Ph.D.
Assistant Dean for Research

xc: Dr. Edward Nardi, Interim Dean
Dr. B. Gail Wilson, Graduate Coordinator
Dr. Mary Beth Leidman, Dissertation Committee Chair
Ms. Julie Bassaro, Secretary

HEC/bb

Appendix F: IRB Approval Letter



Indiana University of Pennsylvania

www.iup.edu

Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Stright Hall, Room 113
210 South Tenth Street
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705-1048

P 724-357-7730
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irb-research@iup.edu
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August 2, 2012

Margaret C. Stewart
701 Oak Street
Bloomsburg, PA 17815

Dear Ms. Stewart:

Your proposed research project, "Examining the Impact of Selected New Media on Spousal Relationships in the Military," (Log No. 12-160) has been reviewed by the IRB and is approved as an expedited review for the period of July 31, 2012 to July 31, 2013.

It is also important for you to note that IUP adheres strictly to Federal Policy that requires you to notify the IRB promptly regarding:

1. any additions or changes in procedures you might wish for your study (additions or changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented),
2. any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects, and
3. any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in (2).

Should you need to continue your research beyond July 31, 2013 you will need to file additional information for continuing review. Please contact the IRB office at (724) 357-7730 or come to Room 113, Stright Hall for further information.

Although your human subjects review process is complete, the School of Graduate Studies and Research requires submission and approval of a Research Topic Approval Form (RTAF) before you can begin your research. If you have not yet submitted your RTAF, the form can be found at <http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=91683>.

This letter indicates the IRB's approval of your protocol. IRB approval does not supersede or obviate compliance with any other University policies, including, but not limited to, policies regarding program enrollment, topic approval, and conduct of university-affiliated activities.

I wish you success as you pursue this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

John A. Mills, Ph.D., ABPP
Chairperson, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Professor of Psychology

JAM:jeb

xc: Dr. Mary Beth Leidman, Dissertation Advisor
Ms. Brenda Boal, Secretary