

ABSTRACT

REA, JENNIFER KRISTINE. *The Role of Social Networking Sites in the Lives of Military Spouses.* (Under the direction of Dr. Andrew Behnke, Dr. Kimberly Allen and Dr. Nichole Huff.)

This thesis explored the impacts of social networking sites on military spouses and their overall well-being as they experienced a deployment of their spouse. The population for the study consisted of married military spouses from Jacksonville, North Carolina. Data for this qualitative research study was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews via Skype. Reoccurring topics within the data were analyzed and then categorized into three themes: social media and its purpose in the life of a military spouse, social media and its role in maintaining the relationship of the military couple, and ways in which family life professionals can use social media as an aid to assisting military spouses. The key finding within this thesis suggests a positive influence on the overall well-being of a military spouse with the use of social media during a military deployment. This thesis provides implications for future research and information for family life professionals to assist military families through deployments and wartime separations. Finally, it provides insight into the lives of military spouses and how they use social media as a means to maintain their relationships and stay connected with family and friends.

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The Role of Social Networking Sites in the Lives of Military Spouses

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Kristine Rea was born in Red Wing, Minnesota in 1990. After high school, she attended Minnesota State University in Mankato, Minnesota and earned a Bachelor of Science in Family Life and Child Development. After two years of studying Biology and Chemistry, Jennifer changed academic avenues and decided to explore the world of social sciences. Throughout her work in volunteering and researching families in community organizations, Jennifer deepened her passion for serving others. On the third year of her Bachelor's degree, Jennifer decided she wanted to continue her academic career in social sciences and then went on to North Carolina State University's Masters of Science program in Family Life and Youth Development to further enhance her skills and knowledge of working with individuals and families.

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As I pretend as if I am standing in front of a podium at the Grammy Awards, I would first like to thank my God for everything that He has given me in this life. I am blessed with several things on a daily basis and I would not be where I am today without God's love and direction for His passion and goal for my life. Second, I want to acknowledge my parents for their endless encouragement and love through thick and thin. They have always been there for me, catching me when I fall, and pushing me back up to accomplish more goals than I ever thought I could at 23 years of age. Thank you mom and dad—I love you (more). Third, I want to thank my high school sweetheart, my best friend, my partner-in-crime, and my very own Marine husband. JR, you are my gift from God. You are the one who encourages me to keep going when times are tough and love me through it all. Thank you for everything you do. I love you so much. Fourth, I cannot forget my three intellectual professors and future academic colleagues: Dr. Kimberly Allen, Dr. Nichole Huff, and Dr. Andrew Behnke. In acknowledging, Dr. Kimberly Allen, Dr. Nichole Huff, and Dr. Andrew Behnke, I want to thank you all for constant support and encouragement along the way. It has been a pleasure working with all three of you and I am thankful for each and every one of your opinions and recommendations as I completed this thesis. Last, but certainly not least, to all military service members everywhere, I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the things that you do. You all battle a humble fight every day to allow the rest of the country to sleep at peace and in freedom each night—you are our heroes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Military spouses live a life of uncertainty and excitement with constant changes and new adventures. They need to be ready for anything at a moment’s notice and to expect the unexpected. Despite these uncertainties, it is worth it to be with their loved one. These spouses have values that assist them in being strong and resilient as they are called upon to play a variety of roles and assume new responsibilities” (Eubanks, 2013, p. 97).

Extended separations in the military are associated with psychological distress among spouses (Orther & Rose, 2009). Without knowledge of the effects of military deployments on family relationships, it becomes challenging for family life professionals and military programs to assist military couples (or more specifically—military *spouses*) with their direct needs and overall well-being, especially regarding deployment. According to the Institute of Medicine (2008) there is an association between deployments and psychiatric disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, alcohol abuse, accidental death, suicide, and marital conflict. When lengthy or risky deployments occur, additional psychological tensions may come into play, including worry and anxiety about separated family members. Feelings of uncertainty about commitment to the relationships in the family, anger at the military or others, and feelings of hopelessness or boredom can also be present during a spouse’s deployment.

Based on exploration from the Pew Research Center there are a total of 73% of adults using social networking sites (Brenner, 2013). Of those individuals, approximately 71% of adults use Facebook and Skype as a means of communicating with friends and loved ones. This indicates that using the Internet for interpersonal communication is one of the main reasons for Internet use across generations today (Perry, 2010). With the increase of online communication, the question thus becomes whether technology is truly helping individuals and improving communication or resulting in poor relationships among families. In a recent study by Williams and Merten (2011) results show improved quality of communication among family members when they were using communication devices in the home. On the contrary, more time spent using the Internet within a household could result in less time spent as a family connecting. However, while some may suggest that social media influences are pulling individuals and families apart, “others contend that media has become an integral part of mainstream family life that can have positive as well as negative effects” on the operation of a family (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012, p. 426). The complexity of social media has positive and negative perspectives with various effects on families. Through several studies with military spouses (e.g., 3,000 participants in the 2011 National Military Family Association survey; a variety of Blue Star Families surveys averaging 4,000 applicants) there still seems to be a gap in highlighting the significant positive or negative perspectives that families face during deployments (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013).

According to Blue Star Families (2013), 72% of military families said that social media was important for communicating with their service member during deployment. Nearly half of adults, approximately 59% of Internet users, say they use at least one social

networking site to keep up with close social ties (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). With increased use of social media worldwide and amongst couples, individuals have concerns on the use of technology within families. Specifically, 63% of users visit Facebook at least once a day, with 40% doing so multiple times throughout the day (Duggan & Smith, 2013). This repetitive use of checking one's social networking page could possibly cause difficulty in communicating with others in-person. O'Keefe, Clarke-Pearson, and the Council on Communications and Media (2011) suggest that among adolescents there are "risks of improper use of technology, lack of privacy, sharing too much information, or posting false information about themselves or others," which can lead to risky behavior and lack of privacy (p. 802). It is particularly important for individuals to be aware of social networking sites and the items shared because these similar conducts could be reflected in young military couples as well.

Limitations due to new military base locations, limited professional experience, low paying jobs, limited educational opportunities, costs and challenges in moving from base to base, and the effects of deployments all contribute to making it difficult for military spouses to be successful in their communities. Additionally, military couples with children are challenged with finding and affording adequate childcare, oftentimes with a minimum-wage job. With the presence of high stress from the military lifestyle, military spouses start their journey with many challenges and face uphill battles. It is the job of family life professionals within military family programs to assist these individuals with their specific needs in order to prepare and encourage these spouses as they ready themselves, their family, and their active duty member. By interviewing 10 military spouses, this qualitative research study

explored the qualities and resources needed to withstand and manage the military lifestyle by using social media. This study addresses how a military wife or husband maintains their overall well-being through a deployment and the challenges they often faced in their everyday lives.

1.1 The Military Spouse

The term “military spouse” is operationalized in this thesis as an individual who has been married to a military service member for 10 years or less. In addition, “military spouse” references someone who has experienced a deployment or time of separation from his/her active duty member. The researcher agrees with the sentiment that military spouses are the individuals who “hold down the fort” on the home front, but are seldom recognized for their strong support and positive attitude. As the President Obama’s Fiscal Year Budget stated, “the strength of our troops relies on the strength and the stability of the families that support them,” which includes military spouses and their children (National Military Family Association, 2011, p. 4).

Demographics

According to Veterans United (2013), there are a total of 726,500 military spouses. Of these, 50,004 of the spouses are male and 676,496 are female. From 2012 to 2013, there was a 16% increase of military spouses (Veterans United, 2012). The pie graph illustrated in Figure 1.0 displays the number and percentages for the ages of active duty members’ spouses. Over half (54.4%) of the spouses are 30 years of age or younger, while just under half (45.6%) of the spouses are over the age of 30 (Department of Defense, 2011).

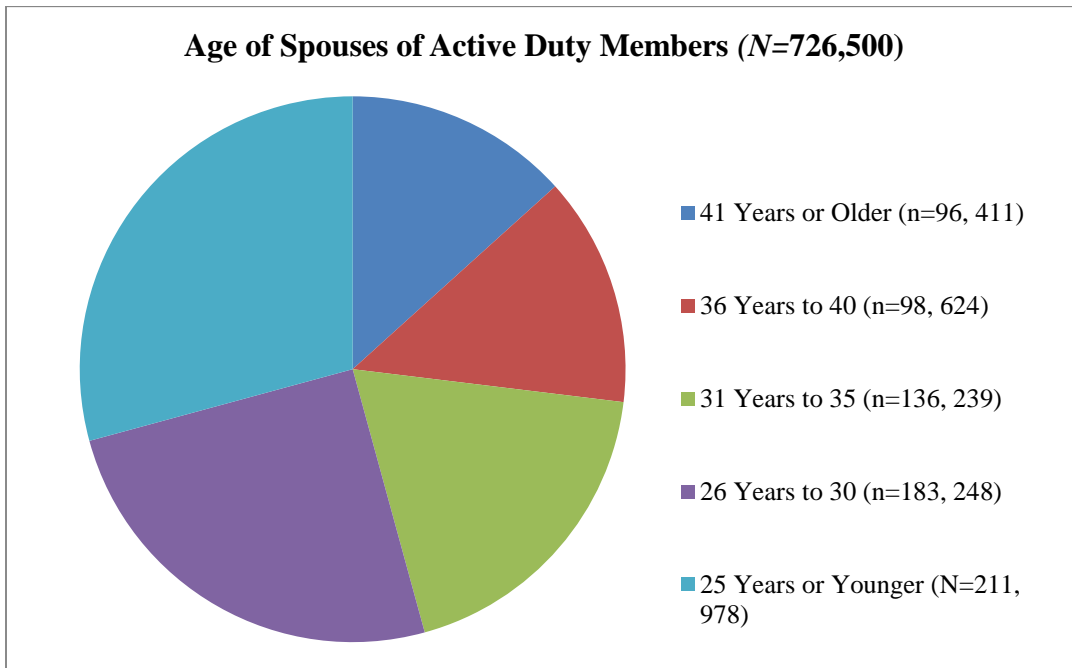


Figure 1. Age of spouses of active duty members. This figure illustrates the age range of military spouses in years, from 25 years or younger to 41 years or older.

According to the Military Spouse Employment Report (2014), 95% of military spouses are female. As seen from Figure 1, military spouses are significantly younger in age, with an average age of 33 years (Military Spouse Employment Report, 2014). Furthermore, these husbands and wives have a larger proportion of ethnic and racial minorities and are more likely to have moved within states, across states, and even internationally (Military Spouse Employment Report, 2014). They also are more likely to have children ages 18 years or under living at home (Hayes, 2011). Hayes (2011) identified military spouses to be on average 23-35 years of age, mostly female, have at least two children living at home, and married on average 6-10 years.

This research study focused on North Carolina, which is the “fourth-largest active duty military and reserve population in the United States” distributed amongst the four of the seven military installations (Policy, Research, and Strategic Planning Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2008, p. 6). The four military bases are: (1) Seymour Johnson Air Force Base; (2) Marine Corps Base of Camp Lejeune; (3) Marine Corps Air Station at New River; and (4) Marine Corps Air Station at Cherry Point which are located on the Eastern Region of North Carolina. The large population of military members and military spouses adds difficulty to supplying these individuals with availability in occupation. Many military bases and surrounding communities want to increase employment opportunities, but recent information of a sequestration will cut the Department of Defense’s budget by approximately \$85 billion (Peachey, 2013). The major cuts will include possible military base closures, reduction of operations, military training reduced by 80%, and community-support services having to adjust their hours and services due to furloughs (Militaryfamily.org, 2014). With the military cuts, a decrease in military personnel will affect the number of spouses joining these service members. The fiscal cliff has already placed 800,000 civilians who work for the military on furlough and out of a job (Moore, 2013).

Education

With the lack of readily available, supplementary financial support for the military spouse, it seems inevitable that these spouses will not have an opportunity to pursue higher education. According to National Military Family Association (2007), “military spouses clearly recognize the importance of education and believe that by attaining higher education”

it will help to improve their families' futures (p. 12). Many military spouses struggle to seek higher education because of childcare challenges, minimal education prospects, costs, frequent relocations and moves, and difficulties in juggling the balance of school, work, and military-family life (National Military Family Association, 2011). If the spouse were to go to school, he or she may experience additional responsibilities at home, financial strain, lack of childcare, and lack of flexible program development that would help meet individual needs involving professional employment opportunities and goals (Gleiman, 2013). Currently, the educational attainment rates of active military spouses are as follows: 22% have a high school diploma or less; 33% have some college credit; 12% have an associate's degree; 25% have a bachelor's degree; 7% have a master's degree; and 1% have a doctoral degree (National Military Family Association, 2011).

Employment

Whereas many military spouses struggle to attain higher education due to several obligations such as cost, location, and need for childcare, likewise these individuals have difficulty obtaining and maintaining a career. The number of jobs for these men and women has not matched the large portion of military spouses residing near the military base (National Military Family Association, 2011). With economic issues for these families as indicated by an average personal income, which is over 38% less than civilian counterparts, these spouses have the highest unemployment rates at 30% (Military Officers Association of America, 2014). Over the short term, military spouses often have to deal with multiple moves and relocations that make it difficult to hold one job for very long. According to Rosser (2012), "85% of military spouses report a want or a need to work in order to

contribute to family finances or for personal career goals, desires” and personal satisfaction (para 2). However, with 26% of the population unemployed, one in four military spouses are actively seeking work. Despite the large presence of an available workforce comprised of military spouses with diverse backgrounds, the unemployment rate for these spouses still resides as an issue today.

A study by the Military Officers Association of America (2014) revealed a total of 90% of employed female respondents (both civilian and military spouses) stating they had felt underemployed with respect to their education and experience levels. While the purpose of this study is not to compare military and civilian spouses, a concern exists between the amounts of income a military spouse earns compared to a civilian spouse. Additionally, there is a vast difference amongst the two (military versus civilian) when it comes to education and personal income. Figure 2 helps to illustrate this representation of average total personal income for military spouses (or Armed Forces spouses) and civilian spouses’ pay.

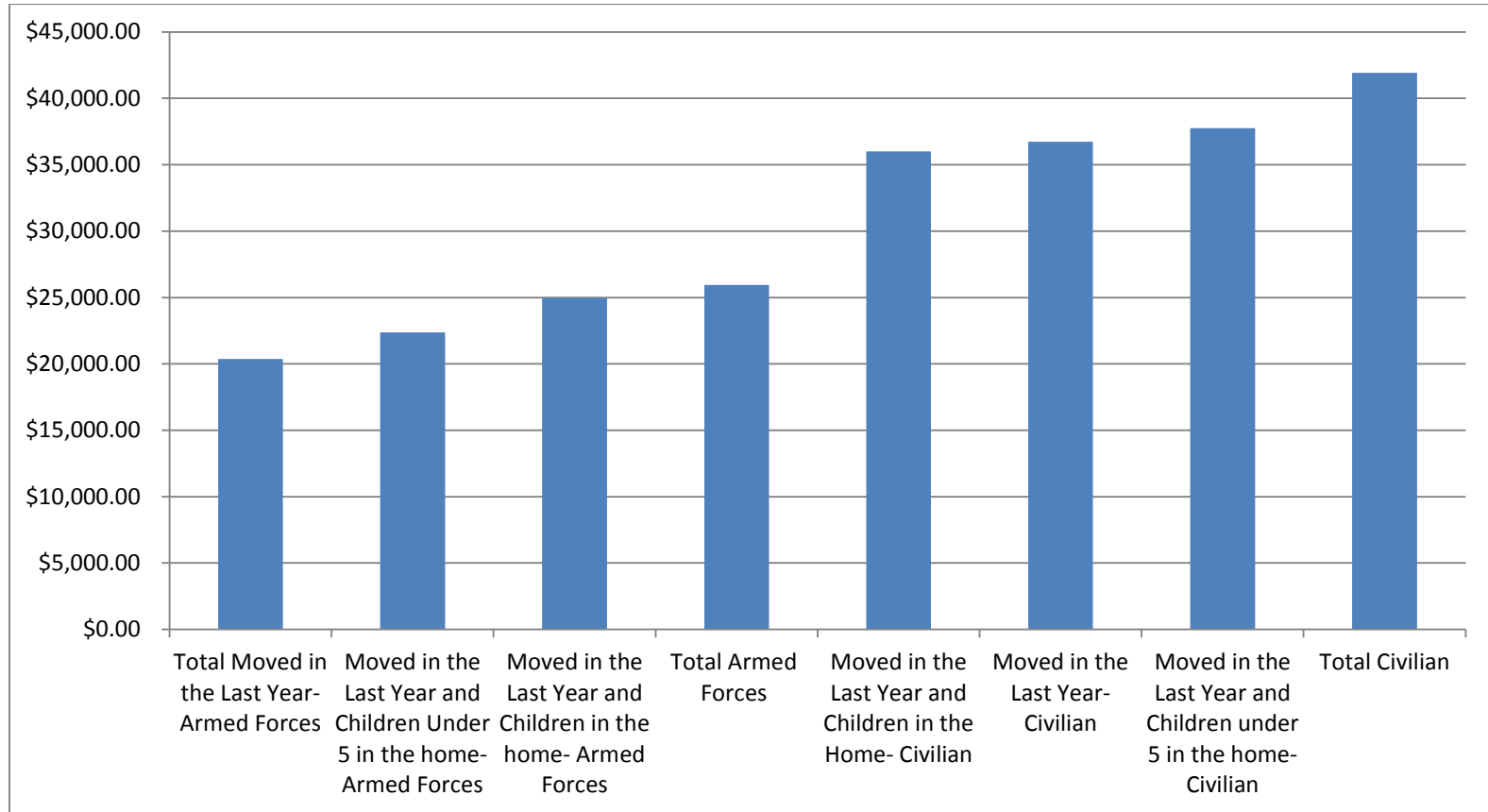


Figure 2. Average total personal income for armed forces and civilian spouses. This figure illustrates the difference in income amongst active duty military spouses and civilian spouses.

Note: The number values represented in this figure are in the thousands. Example: \$20.00= \$20,000.00

Well-being

According to Padden, Connors, and Agazio (2011), 70% of spouses were symptomatic for depression, anxiety, eating disorders, loneliness, and sadness while experiencing a deployment of their service member. Many of these emotional, mental, and physical states were related to dealing with military and everyday stressors. Wheeler and Torres Stone (2010) state that common emotional and psychological effects that were expressed by women participants in their study included fear for their spouse's safety, feeling as if they were on a roller coaster of emotions, and an inability to be able to ignore thinking about their deployed spouse while also attempting daily tasks. Real-time communication sites such as Skype and Facebook can assist military spouses with "immediacy or instant response (feelings of well-being and happiness)" as the couple communicates and connects throughout the deployment (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013, p. 770). In a study by Tolhurst, Hawkins, and Borden (2013) spouses reported using a variety of methods for communicating with their deployed spouses which allowed more frequent communication, convenience, and improved overall well-being for both the military spouse and their deployed service member.

Today, some say that during your time as a military member, if you were issued one, you would have one (in reference to a spouse); however, others believe that the military spouse is the backbone of the deployed military member because they are naturally the ones who provide direct support to their loved ones during deployments. The military spouse can be described as one of the "most resilient and flexible individuals on earth" (Gleiman, 2013, p. 2). Military spouses are individuals who come from a diverse cultural perspective and

have a large worldview when it comes to understanding life's challenges. Military spouses are genuinely motivated to assist others, eager to become more educated, and yet still are being put on the back burner when the topic arises. Regardless of the unknown challenges that lie ahead for military spouses one thing is certain: each major event represents a significant life transition, which has the potential for stress and hardship" that can affect the overall quality of life and well-being for a military spouse (Gleiman, 2013, p. 5).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Presently it not well understood how social media impacts military spouses and their overall well-being as they communicate with their active duty members through social networking sites. It is important to understand and learn about social media as it may impact individuals in several ways. Additionally, it is important to understand the qualities and challenges that military spouses face because of their large population which may include a variety of factors affecting each spouse. Military spouses' use of social media may influence factors such as employment, education and overall well-being, to name a few. Specifically, military spouses may use social media as a means to find employment opportunities, become aware of educational prospects and improve their overall well-being as they connect with family and friends. Lastly, it is key to understand the vital impact on the mission (i.e., ready military members have ready spouses) and how family life professionals can assist in improving the overall well-being of a military spouse (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez & Faulkner, 2013; Hayes, 2011; Lapp et al., 2010; & Blue Star Families, 2013).

It is important to understand how social media impacts how military spouses communicate with their service members to maintain their relationships during deployments.

According to the Blue Star Families' Military Family Lifestyle Survey Report (2012), 77% of military spouses use social media to feel connected with other military families and 63% use it to stay connected with their service member. As stated by military spouses, email is still the most popular form of communication during deployments, which helped them to stay connected (Blue Star Families, 2012, p. 37). Lapp et al. (2010) summarize five stressors that military spouses have experienced during a deployment: "worrying, waiting, going it alone, pulling double duty, and loneliness" (p. 51).

Considering the size of military communities and the significant barriers many military spouses face with educational, professional, and personal attainment, a great need is in understanding how family professionals can better the lives of military spouses, especially during deployments and times of separation. The importance of helping military couples through social media is important because "military family members rely on social media for personal communications with service members to a much greater extent" than the overall population (Blue Star Families, 2012, p. 36). While professional help is sought, some military spouses feel that it is inadequate use of assistance (Lapp, Taft, Toffeson, Hoepner, Moore, & Rivyak, 2010). It is essential that educators and researchers know why military spouses use social media in order to be able to connect with them, provide them with information on ways to maintain their overall well-being during deployments, and assist them with beneficial resources of which they need most.

1.3 Purpose of Study

The current literature encourages the ongoing exploration of how social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Skype, Twitter) are being used and military spouses' experience of

using social media (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013). The need is in addressing how military spouses use social networking as a means of communication during deployments or times of separation. Through this study, the purpose will be to gain understanding from the perspective of the military spouse through their explanation of the complex relationship and issue of social media, specifically how it can hurt, hinder, or help.

It is essential to explore how social media influences how military couples maintain their relationships and how it impacts their overall morale and management of the many stressors of a military lifestyle. This study both extends the literature on how military spouses use present day technology as a means of staying connected, as well as helps to initiate a discussion on how these help military spouses maintain their general well-being using social media. This thesis implemented qualitative research methodology and posed the following four questions:

1. What are your purposes for using social media?
2. In what ways has social media impacted you?
3. While your spouse is deployed, what are ways that social media can assist you in maintaining your relationship?
4. Through social media, how can family professionals assist other military families like yours in dealing with deployments or separations from your spouse?

In particular, this thesis addresses the gap of literature within the impacts of social media and military spouses. This study assisted in gaining a larger understanding of the current challenges that military spouses face. This thesis provides additional information for

family life professionals on how social networking sites impact the lives of current and future military spouses and how to effectively support military members and spouses to maintain successful morale during deployments.

1.4 Significance of Study

Research on a military spouse's perception of social media use during deployments impacts military communities, the cities in which they live, and multiple branches of the armed services. Through voicing their perspectives as a military spouse, the research is significant to the Department of Defense, programs who assist military spouses, and family life professionals who strive to better their lives. This study offers additional insight into a topic that could be useful for educators.

This research study has the potential to enhance the knowledge of habits and usage of social media. The increase of social media practices have resided within military families, as it is a large means of how these couples stay connected during deployments. By gaining information on this topic, it is a goal of this study to identify whether social media has a positive or negative effect on military spouses. This is significant to online family resources as they provide military spouses with tools to effectively cope and techniques to manage deployment stressors.

This study provides an understanding of the benefits and challenges that accompany the use of social media. This part of the research is noteworthy because as life challenges increase for military families, the use of social media may either heighten their relationships or hinder them and make the deployment much more challenging. During frequent and lengthy deployments, spouses may experience additional stress related to increased

responsibilities in the home, instability due to being on their own, and unpredictability of the everyday military lifestyle (Hayes, 2011). Through addressing these issues that coincide with the use of social media, family life professionals and programs can better understand how social media could be used in more healthy ways. Likewise, this study provides professionals with ways to train families to positively use social networking sites. By doing so, educators can provide knowledge to military couples on ways to decrease Internet addiction, loneliness and escape jealousy experienced through social media, to name a few.

With war and daily stressors, military members and their spouses face many challenges in adjusting to the military lifestyle. It is vital to understand the communication patterns of these military spouses in hopes to address these negative trends and potentially offer relationship strengthening and relationship education programs, possibly through social media resources to support these couples. This study has the prospective to provide family life professionals with ways to support these military families. Seeking online, social media resources may be one of the top solutions as a means of providing military couples with the help that they need. This research shares the challenges that military spouses face and how family professionals can assist them. While several military spouses have difficulty finding employment and educational opportunities, others may be struggling with loneliness and depression. Through military family professionals, it is imperative to first know if military spouses are using social media sites to seek assistance and secondly if these online resources are able to provide the spouse with knowledge and guidance throughout the course of the military lifestyle.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

Existing literature on social media and the effects on military spouses during deployments is very limited. With a large military community, there is a need to provide effective programming in these communities to help military families succeed through deployments and within their own lives. This section explores two social science theories and how they inform the way this study was designed and how the results were understood. Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Symbolic Interaction Theory (SIT) are two theories that are especially useful in understanding how communication through social media can impact military spouses and their overall morale.

Media Richness Theory (MRT) is one of the first comprehensive theories to examine the relationship between a message's content and its medium (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). Pauley and Emmers-Sommer (2007) identify different media as rich or poor based on four criteria: feedback, presence of multiple cues, language variety, and personal focus. The theory also addresses message equivocality. Other ways to receive related richness are through five different types of media used commonly in the workplace: face-to-face, email, memo, telephone, and voicemail. Of these, email scored as one of the poorest media in terms of richness. Individuals surveyed indicated that face-to-face communication is almost twice as rich as email, and telephone was also rated as significantly richer than email (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007).

In the military lifestyle, couples rely on social media as a means to communicate during deployments. This relationship of a message and its content are very important, but are something that may seem as the least important to the military couple. In reality, military

couples simply want to have the ability to communicate with their spouse during a deployment. Any form of media would work for the couple as long as they are able to connect. The richness received from the conversation would simply be a benefit in communicating to the deployed service member. Overall, the type of media used may play a role on how a relationship and a conversation through social networking sites have a rich message content. Research results are certainly not conclusive enough to make claims about the full impact of media selection in the development or maintaining of online relationships. In addition, research has not shown whether communicating through social media has resulted in self-disclosure and intimacy (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). MRT in this study will help to understand how social media is used within a military couple to maintain their relationship during a deployment. It may also provide an understanding on how military spouses receive messages, depict a message's content and understand the medium or meaning of a message received from their deployed service member.

Symbolic Interaction Theory (SIT) is used to explain the meanings of items discussed in this study (such as the communication amongst the military couple). The general concept of SIT can be summed up by one word: *meaning*. Teo and Osborne (2012) suggest that SIT is beneficial in motivating humans to create meanings to help them make sense of their life and the world around them. Meaning develops through social interaction and words may not have any communicative meaning at all unless both conversing individuals mutually understand them. Symbolic Interactional theorists believe that in order for a relationship to be effective, both communications inside and out are dependent on nurturing a culture of shared meanings amongst the individuals. Through these shared meanings and symbols of

communication in relationships, “a symbolic interactionist view emphasizes meaning constructions and understandings through continual interactions between people in diverse situations” (Teo & Osborne, 2012, p. 544). As humans engage with one another using symbols, interpretations, and ascertainment of one another’s meanings, outcomes within these relationships produce thorough dialogue and an interactive process of meaning (Teo & Osborne, 2012).

The symbolic interactionist viewpoint can be clarified by Teo and Osborne (2012):

The social actor is an active organizer or acting unit of constructed action in a situation in which he or she handles and tries to work out a line of action. Inherent in the symbolic interactionist view is the idea of agency to make change. This is key in distinguishing analyses based upon symbolic interactionist viewpoints from theories of cultural reproduction which argue that dominant rules and ideologies legitimize and perpetuate the ruling class, power, and structure. The latter implies that emergent interpretations, actions, and interactions could not form. (p. 545)

This study used MRT and SIT to assist in identifying and highlighting the information received from the military spouses themselves. Since this research study is qualitative, MRT and SIT both assist the reader in understanding the material given, in an organized manner. In order to place data on the military spouses’ viewpoints into specific categories at the end of the study, this study used MRT and SIT as guidelines to categorize the information given. SIT and MET both assist in providing future understanding of military spouses and their use of social media through an interactive and quality research-based study.

1.6 Definition of Terms

The following defined terms will be used throughout this thesis to describe core principles used to guide this study.

- *Military family or military couple:* In this thesis, a military family or military couple is referred to as two individuals, of which at least one is an active duty service member and both are joined in marriage. *Note: Military family and military couples are used interchangeably throughout this thesis.*
- *Military spouse:* An individual who is either male or female and is married to a service member.
- *Military service member or military member:* An individual, male or female, who has joined the military to serve his/her country.
- *Social media or social networking:* Websites and other forms of online tools used to communicate by sharing information to enhance and develop social and professional contacts. *Note: Social media and social networking are used interchangeably throughout this thesis.*
- *Deployment or separation:* Deployments are mentioned in this study and are referred to the “movement of a specific individual or an entire military unit to an overseas location” to complete a job or mission (Department of Instruction, February 8, 2014). These missions are routine in the military and typically involve training or efforts to assist in war.
- *Reunion:* The act of uniting again. In this study, a reunion is referred to as the time when a couple is united again after a deployment or time of separation.

- *Operations Security (OPSEC) and Personal Security (PERSEC)*: In the military, OPSEC and PERSEC are both secure and efficient ways to protect information transferred from one person to another without being intercepted and exploited to our country's enemies.
- *Command*: A command in military terms is referred to an organizational unit or individual who is in charge of and responsible for a military unit or squadron.
- *Squadron*: A designated unit of service members in the Armed Services (such as the Marine Corps) who typically have the same occupation and generally deploy together as a group.
- *Ambiguous Loss*: Ambiguous loss refers to unclear events or situations that involve a loss or separation. In this study, deployments are considered as long terms of separation with the integration of ambiguous loss it can relate in understanding military members and their families during deployments.
- *Ambiguous Absence*: This occurs when an individual is viewed as physically absent, but psychologically available.
- *Ambiguous Presence*: This occurs when an individual is viewed as psychologically absent, but physically present.
- *Family Professional*: Individual who strives to educate, support, and encourage individuals and families. A family professional engages individuals in a variety of ways, from financial management to communication tips. Through their work in civilian as well as military-based

communities, professionals can impact individuals and families in a positive way by allowing them to connect, grow, and develop as betterment for their lives.

The next chapter examines relevant literature that supports this study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

With the large size of military spouses in the United States and the given number of marriages, a great need in the military community is an increase of family-centered services, guidance, and resources. Moreover, literature on military spouses and their overall well-being is vast with a variety of information and research on the qualities and challenges in their everyday lives. However, there is a gap within the research on military spouses and their social media use. This literature review provides an overview of social media use in families, communication amongst military couples during deployments, social networking use within military families, military family professional's impact on military couples and families, and family professionals use of social media to assist families.

2.2 Social Media and Families

The majority of research on the topic of social media and families centers on individual effects to using social networking sites. Theoretically, however, "media is certainly one of many environmental influences that impact family interactions and may even play a role in redefining family processes or may be integrated" as part of conventional family rules or guidelines (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012, p. 426). Regarding the use of social media, family systems theory may suggest an interaction between individuals within a family to help create an open and continual communication system. In fact, parents and adolescents are often using media together to stay connected and structure their family routines through its use (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). With the persistent growth of families using social

media today as a means of staying connected with others, findings suggest that using social networking sites may increase “family togetherness.” Furthermore, social media provides a means for families to be joined internationally, using social networking sites such as Facebook and Skype at no cost to communicate across the world.

According to Public Radio Web (2012), the “Blue Star Families annual survey of more than 4,000 military families revealed that social media plays a large role in helping military family members connect with their service member and with other military families” throughout deployments (para 3). Social media also allows military families to access information and resources, and to feel connected to other military families. Seventy-seven percent of military family respondents indicated that social media is important or very important for communicating with their service member during deployment, while 71% reported using social media to connect with other military families (Public Radio Web, 2012). Surprisingly, while 45% of respondents said their service member’s unit uses Facebook to disseminate information, only 16% said they use social media to stay connected with the unit. Further, “the use of email to stay connected to a service member is down, while the use of Facebook and Skype increased” amongst military couples (Public Radio Web, 2012, para 3).

Social media networks and fast Internet connections in remote parts of the world are revolutionizing what it means to be deployed. Researchers are merely beginning to measure the impacts on the military and the home front, both during and after a deployment. (Chalmers, 2011). While Internet access can be a positive avenue for families to connect, some military professionals can see it as a distraction. Coyne, Bushman and Nathanson

(2012) state that “Skype, blogs and social networking sites may be the key in helping such extended family relationships thrive” during their periods of separation (p. 360).

Although “very little is known about how the use of social media by military families has impacted perceived happiness and well-being of these families or whether this perceived happiness and well-being is rooted in strengthening the family unit,” social media does have its many benefits including alleviating stress (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013, p. 773-774). Social media in relation to military personnel and their families has gone from being banned to being openly embraced, used, and promoted. In 2007, the Pentagon blocked their computer networks from accessing sites including YouTube and MySpace in an attempt to keep a tight rein on information about troop activities. Later that year, the Pentagon announced it had authorized the use of Twitter, Facebook, and other web sites across the United States military, saying the benefits of social media outweighed security concerns.

Currently, 63.7% of United States military personnel now use social networks on a regular basis (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013). Increasingly, military service men and women now use social media to connect, share, and participate in near real-time events anywhere in the world. Social media have become the means by which military families stay connected at home or during deployment. However, as life challenges increase for military families, the use of social media may heighten the emotional response or awareness of social or emotional concerns of both the servicemen and woman and of their family and friends. Family life and its dynamics may be highlighted through shared pictures and conversations on Skype, Instagram, or Facebook. These are the same social networking sites that allow families to share intimate moments and events that can heighten emotions and

alter behaviors when used to alert each other of a death in the family, discuss paying bills, finding new living quarters, child-rearing issues, or addressing mental health issues including substance abuse and domestic violence. It is also through social media that issues of depression, longing, loneliness, and other feelings of discontent are shared or experienced (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013).

Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner (2013) present the question of: “how can social media be used to maintain equilibrium and create resiliency among military personnel as they deal with these challenges and issues” in the military lifestyle (p. 771). Online video (such as Skype) and smartphone tools (such as Apple’s FaceTime) makes virtual face-to-face communication possible although thousands of miles apart. Its user-friendly nature and instant accessibility make it enormously popular and a powerful tool for communicating. These tools allow individuals to connect with their confidants, create social settings, and build online neighborhoods and public spaces that have been associated with large and diverse core networks for support. While more scientific exploration is required, the use of social media as social networking tools may reduce social isolation, expand core discussion networks, and create diverse social networks (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013). The complexity of social media is seen in one or two directions: it can either assist families who identified with having strong unity or can hinder the family unit that is weak by exacerbating their issues through social media (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013). Typically when military members have a chance to connect with their families, deployments are less stressful. However, in some cases connecting with families during deployments can

be more stressful due to social media's easy accessibility, providing couples with more ways to communicate negativity.

The idea that the use of social media can assist military families in building unity and feelings of well-being provides a new research direction for behaviorists to determine whether social media can be used as an active intervention to help families adapt to stressors and social or emotional crises that emerge during and after deployment. Continually, research is needed to determine the behaviors and conditions of social media in whether or not it can provide a positive or negative impact on the social and emotional well-being of military members and their families. The military's high demands present unique stressors for military families and can cause emotional strain on remaining partners and their children. The influence and perceptions of social media and their electronic connectedness on military families have not been examined extensively. Through human interest stories, military personnel have expressed the importance of being able to stay in touch and remain part of family lives and participate in decision making and other life events (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013).

The key is empowering individuals to build relationships by communicating the real story. According to O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, and the Council on Communications and Media (2011), "engaging in various forms of social media is a routine activity that research has shown to benefit children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection, and even technical skills" (p. 800).

2.3 Military Couples and Deployments

On average, military service members spend an estimated 30 to 50% of time away from their families every year (Hoshmand & Hoshmand, 2007). Due to the time spent away from home, active-duty service members reported high levels of stress and using unhealthy means of coping such as alcohol (Hoshmand & Hoshmand, 2007). Continually, the time a military member is deployed or separated from their family is considered the main source of stress in military families (Hoshmand & Hoshmand, 2007). Although many military families do well with the challenges they are given, these struggles can take a toll on their health and overall well-being.

Many families who go through a deployment, experience emotions in a predictable cycle called the Deployment Cycle or Cycle of Emotions during Deployment. This is represented in Figure 3. This illustration and its definitions help spouses and their military members to understand their own emotions as well as what the other is feeling before, during and after a deployment.

Stage 1: Anticipation of Loss

The first stage of the Cycle of Emotions is called *Anticipation of Loss*. In this phase, the anticipation may occur as soon as the active duty member receives word of an approaching deployment. Some experienced military families say they try to avoid the fact that the deployment is there until they have to make efforts to become prepared. Most military couples anticipate this loss four to six weeks before a planned deployment and much of the time can consist of tension and confusing emotions between the military couple (S. Harrell, personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Stage 2: Detachment and Withdrawal

The next step in the Deployment Cycle is *Detachment and Withdrawal*. This stage occurs in the final days prior to deploying. In many ways military couples find this to be the most difficult, but remind themselves that the sooner they leave, the closer they are to getting back home. Partners often complain during pre-deployment that their service member is emotionally distant. Some partners would prefer that their service member had already deployed rather than having to sit and wait for their departure (Laser & Stephens, 2011). In addition to the stress of leaving, the military professional is also trying to get all of her or his affairs in order prior to deploying (e.g., home maintenance, taxes and wills), all of which can exacerbate feelings of fear, loss, anxiety, and stress (Laser & Stephens, 2011). Continually, sexual relationships are either extremely intimate or ambivalent during this time period as the couple prepares themselves for the deployment.

During the final week prior to deployment, the couple may experience feelings of confusion, ambivalence, anger, and a sense of pulling away from each other. Fears of infidelity while apart, regardless of the couple's marital status, can cause stress and feelings of suspicion (Laser & Stephens, 2011). These fears should be openly discussed prior to deployment or time of separation amongst the couple to make clear expectations between the pair. "Military websites and veteran affairs websites now both advocate seeking counseling and to share information about coping with emotional issues" in efforts to assist military couples in communication before, during, and prior to deployments (Laser & Stephens, 2011, p. 30).

Stage 3: Emotional Disorganization

The third phase of the Deployment Cycle is *Emotional Disorganization*. This consists of the “time immediately following deployment and up to four to six weeks” after the active duty member’s departure (S. Harrell, personal communication, March 14, 2014). During this time, many couples feel unorganized, out of their routines, and are overwhelmed by their day-to-day tasks. Throughout deployments the time spent away from each other can entail loss of emotional support, loneliness, financial strain and several other challenges. The non-deploying parent may shut down emotionally and not communicate with their deployed spouse or in contrast be over-indulging in the deployed member’s life and want to communicate excessively. Military members often avoid communication with their spouse due to regulations set by their command or as a need to control their own distractions of home. The best thing that military families can do in these situations to maintain their overall well-being is to communicate between each other and through military support personnel. By making use of services that affect stigma and military culture as well as seeking casual resources, military couples can have the support they need in their community (Hoshmand & Hoshmand, 2007).

Spouses of military members have reported that deployments result in loss of emotional support, loneliness, role overload, role shifts, and concerns about the safety and well-being of the deployed military members (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008). Partners also report substantial difficulties in getting reliable and timely information about their deployed husband or wife. In addition to these stressors, spouses often face difficulties in technical and logistical forms of communicating with their deployed

military members and 80% report fears about their soldiers' safety, living conditions, and physical health.

Stage 4: Recovery and Stabilization

The fourth stage of the Cycle of Emotions is *Recovery and Stabilization*. In this stage, routines are established during some point of the deployment. The individuals at home typically have "begun to feel more comfortable with the reorganization of roles and responsibilities, communication expectations are established, and new sources of support are developed" amongst the military spouses (S. Harrell, personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Stage 5: Anticipation of Homecoming

The fifth phase of deployment is the *Anticipation of Homecoming*. "Approximately four to six weeks before the service member is due back, spouses and partners who remained at home may realize that they have not finished everything they had planned to accomplish during the separation" so spouses are busy preparing for their active duty member to return home (S. Harrell, personal communication, March 14, 2014).

Stage 6: Homecoming

Homecoming is the most exciting stage of the deployment cycle for the military couple. During this stage, last minute planning and general logistics are the main focus for the at home spouse during this time. Many couples feel excited, nervous, and sometimes awkward during this phase as they reconnect again after a long period of time apart.

Stage 7: Reintegration

The last step of the emotional cycle of deployment is *Reintegration*. While many individuals believe that the homecoming is the end of the deployment cycle, reintegration or “getting back to a normal routine” will take time for the couple (S. Harrell, personal communication, March 14, 2014). Generally speaking, most military couples will take four to six weeks after homecoming to get back to their pre-deployment state of normal. Due to a variety of factors, deployments and reunions do not affect all families in the same way. Personal characteristics and levels of social support have been found to buffer the effects of deployment (Faber et al., 2008). Typically, families that have the most difficulty adapting to deployments and reunions are thought to be those whose members are young, newly married, financially unstable, and experiencing their first deployment (Faber et al., 2008).

According to Faber et al. (2008) “military families’ adaptation to stressful events depends upon family resources and strengths” and how these additional demands on the family system are perceived through the situation (p. 223). Pauline Boss (2002) (as cited in Faber et al., 2008) is quoted for arguing that a stressor does not act directly on the family; rather, “it is the perception of the event as mediated by internal and external contexts that determines whether the family will cope or fall into crisis” which correlates well with military families and their coping mechanisms (p. 223). The concept of ambiguous loss can refer to unclear situations that may involve a time of loss or separation. The concept is useful in understanding military deployments and reunions because it goes beyond the event itself to take into account one’s perceptions of the event to help explain the changes experienced.

Psychologically, ambiguous loss can be a problem, in that it can create feelings of hopelessness, uncertainty, and confusion that can lead to depression, guilt, anxiety, and immobilization (Faber et al., 2008). Structurally, ambiguous loss can be a problem when it leads to boundary ambiguity, described as “a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family” and in military households the non-deployed parent may have difficulty identifying what roles and tasks they need to perform while their spouse is absent (Faber et al., 2008, p. 223).

Faber et al. (2008) identifies Boss' (2002) two types of ambiguous loss: ambiguous absence and ambiguous presence. Ambiguous absence occurs when his or her family member is physically absent, but psychologically unavailable. The family often becomes preoccupied with the lost or absent relative, and it becomes unclear which roles family members play. Drummet, Coleman, and Cable (2003) state family members must stretch the family boundary enough both to psychologically retain the service member as a viable family member and to temporarily reassign his or her responsibilities. Ambiguous presence occurs when a family member is perceived as being physically present, but psychologically absent. During reunion, although physically present, the family member may be psychologically absent, as a result of trauma from past experiences as well as of the distress from immediate resumption of previous roles and responsibilities. Thus, deployments and reunions may cause military families to experience ambiguous absence and ambiguous presence sequentially. Lastly, families who frequently have a member absent for periods of time due to work (such as employment as an oil rigger or as an active duty military member) may learn to tolerate ambiguous loss without boundary ambiguity (Faber et al., 2008).

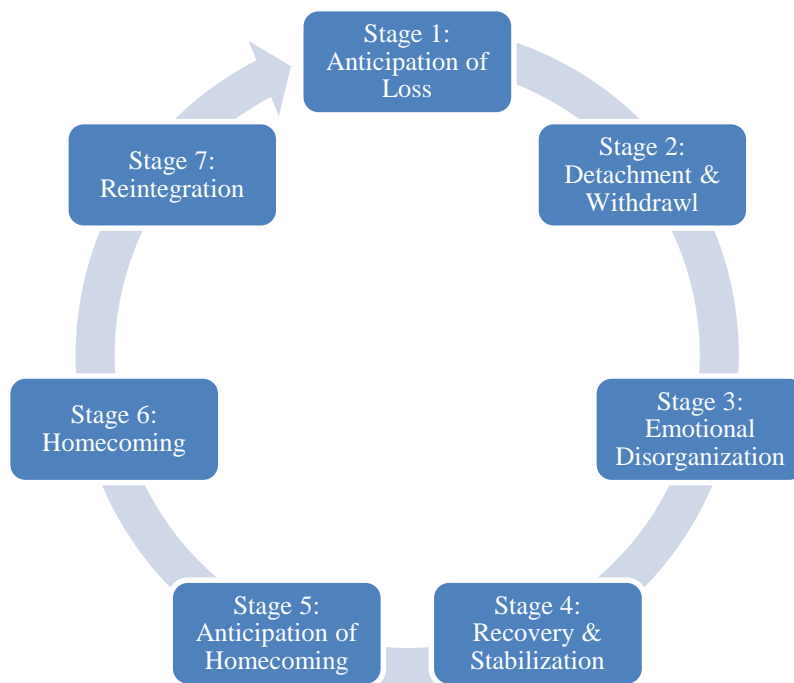


Figure 3. A Graphic of the Cycle of Emotions During Deployment. This figure illustrates the stages experienced by military spouses throughout the course of a wartime deployment.

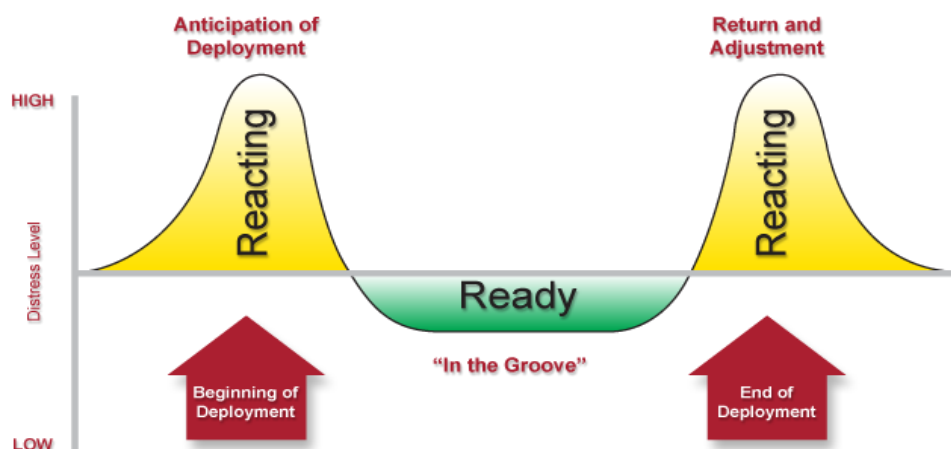


Figure 4. An Illustration of the Emotional Cycle of Deployment. This figure illustrates distress levels throughout the stages of a wartime deployment.

2.4 Communication Between Military Couples During Deployments

For military professionals, the constant stress of facing warfare danger is compounded by the addition of limited abilities to talk to their families about their daily lives, despite the 21st century technologies that make daily communication with home possible. When calling, emailing, or writing home, service members are required to use discrete language regarding specifics about their mission, responsibilities, or combat experiences. Durham (2010) identifies a few categories from Merolla's (2010) types of communication between military members and their partners during deployments, which he called maintenance in mediated partner interaction, and one of which was reassuring safety. The main thing that the spouse wants to hear while their service member is deployed is that they are doing all right and that they are safe. Military professionals face a daily challenge of wanting to communicate openly and honestly with their spouses to build emotional support,

but in return are unable to do so due to security reasons. The issue of contact and communication with home is often compounded by the communication security needs of the military members and their families back home (Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010, p. 746). This issue is commonly recognized as Communications Security or COMSEC. In some cases, commanding officers remove cell phones and other communication devices before major operations to ensure that enemy forces cannot monitor insecure communications between personnel and their loved ones, which might inadvertently contain mission essential information.

Limited communications with home can have an impact on mental health and occupational functioning of military members and their spouses (Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010, p. 746). When service members partially disclose what they are really going through, they illustrate topic avoidance. In topic avoidance, one person of the couple self-discloses more than the other, which can result in a negative result on the partner's satisfaction. Durham (2010) states that “with the increased availability of social media and personal phones to call home many spouses demand that their deployed partner will offer emotional support and advice about daily issues” that they face (p. 555). Communication with spouses or partners and family members while on deployment can reduce boredom, maintain morale, and reduce isolation. When couples disclose signs such as facial expressions and tone of voice, these cues are beneficial in that they assist in meaning making of a message beyond the actual words being uttered (Perry, 2010).

Contact with home for key family events, such as birthdays and wedding anniversaries, also makes dealing with the separation from their families much easier to

manage and helps to prevent loss of marital intimacy. However, in married military members there is a presence of higher expectations on the actual use of social media and communication with home. This can suggest that contact with home is particularly important for those who are married, but typically the amount of communication they desire is not received. When problems arose at either end, contact with home sometimes increases personal stress among each member of the couple. Home-front stressors have been the main contributing factor to the stress while on deployment, with the leading stressors of uncertainty over tour length and separation from their families coming in second (Faber et al., 2008).

Although easy access to communication with home is beneficial when home relationships are going well, it can have strong negative effects when problems arise. Easy access increases the immediacy and proximity to negative events at home for deployed military professionals, while highlighting the limited ability that troops have to problem solve or provide effective support because of their physical distance from home. The nature of online relationships may increase self-disclosure and promote strategies that reduce relationship uncertainty. However, through non-face-to-face communication, relationships may not partake in the exchange of rewards and costs due to a different style of communication being used.

2.5 Military Family Professionals Impact on Military Couples and Families

According to Drummet, Coleman, and Cable (2003), “educational programs are particularly needed to address three situations that military families commonly encounter: domestic and international relocation, deployment and family separation, and the reunion and

reorganization of families after separation” as a means to benefiting the overall well-being of the military family (p. 280). In addition to educational programs, military families are in need of social support to cope with deployment and military separation stressors. “Social support systems, including friends, children, relatives, work colleagues, church members, and support groups, have been positively linked to separation adjustment for military families and women have specifically identified children, employment, close friends, and family as their main sources of support” when parted from their military husbands or wives (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003, p. 282).

The Department of Defense and military service branches clearly recognize that the well-being of families is a crucial part of military readiness. “Given that more than 70 percent of military families around the country currently live off of the military, providing support and services to military families in their neighborhoods is critical” (National Military Family Association, 2011, p. 7). Military programs such as: Deployment and Readiness Support, Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS), Family Advocacy Program, Family Member Employment Assistance Program (FMEAP), Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP, and Navy Relief, all contribute to providing support and readiness tools for military families to have a successful and manageable military life. Military professionals within these programs assist military families with “preventing stress from becoming distress, teaching family members how to build the skills that will enable them to better cope with traumatic events, offer services and events that can help promote their physical and emotional well-being, and teach resiliency and coping skills” to accomplish the basic challenges of military life (National Military Family Association, 2011, p. 6).

For military spouses, there is a small mixture of programs that are assisting these individuals with their specific needs. Some of the needs that military family professionals are assisting military spouses with are in finding employment opportunities and providing career preparation courses, educational support, and locating adequate childcare centers. Specifically, military professionals assist spouses through providing them with the program names and information of what the program offers. Sarah Harrell, a Family Readiness and Deployment Support trainer at the New River Air Station, shared with me a list of programs that she distributes to her cliental. Those programs are: Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), Hiring our Heroes, Military Spouse and Family Educational Assistance (MyCAA), and Military OneSource. Mrs. Harrell states that she also provides information on educational scholarship opportunities (S. Harrell, personal communication, April 4, 2014). According to Blue Star Families (2013), “several veteran and service member initiatives, including the Small Business Administration (Patriot Express Loans), American Corporate Partners, Florida State University, Syracuse University, and other entrepreneurial boot camps, focus on providing resources to transitioning service members to help them engage in successful entrepreneurship”, as many more spouses and service members are seeking ways in which they can have their own business (p. 39).

2.6 Family Professionals Use of Social Media

Today, there is an increasing relationship between technology and individual’s (such as youth and adults) use of creating and maintaining friendships through online sources. According to Allen and Nelson (2013), “these relationships are integral to their [youth] development and are often supported through participation in social networking” sites such

as Facebook and Twitter (p. 567). Although a majority of youth are using technology to engage with one another, an increasing number of adults are using social networking sites to create social ties with others and are building and strengthening relationships with these individuals. With new media, youth development and family professionals can intervene and promote positive youth and family development practices via technology (Allen & Nelson, 2013).

Although limited information exists on the impacts of family professionals assisting others through social media, the minimal research reveals that in order for professionals to be successful in engaging youth and adults in positively educating them is to accommodate to advancing technology. A study on Cooperative Extension Family Economics Educators revealed that, “for those who were using social media professionally, content included: news releases, financial columns, fact sheets, articles, video links, research findings, newsletters, announcements (e.g., program marketing), pictures from events, summaries of legislative changes related to personal finance, links to eXtension and America Saves, original how-to videos on YouTube, organization meeting minutes, and quick tips”, all to benefit the individuals and families they serve (O’Neil, Zumwalt, & Bechman, 2011, p. 4). In addition, professionals who are using social networking sites are providing individuals with information on how to use social media, using social media as a marketing tool, and recruiting participants and volunteers through their webpages for events they host. Social media can also serve as a professional resource for individuals to stay connected with others (such as employees in the same field and participants whom they’ve worked with). It can also assist professionals in contacting and collaborating with other professionals in their field

to gain additional resources for themselves, their organization, and the families they serve.

2.7 Conclusion

A military spouse lives with the stresses of the military lifestyle; likewise, technology is continually changing and revolutionizing the world around us. This thesis carefully examines the impact that social media platforms (particularly Skype and Facebook) have on communication in military 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 study explored more about the core of new media's role in communication amongst military couples. The series of research questions in this study addressed the following: (1) the effects of using Facebook and Skype on the overall well-being of a military spouse; (2) communication patterns between military couples; (3) the perceptions by military spouses about the availability of Facebook and Skype to support spousal communication during deployments; and (4) items that family life professionals can discuss with these couples in hopes to improve their overall use of social media and to assist them with their needs throughout a deployment.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Qualitative research methodology was used to explore military relationships and communication styles through using social media. Military spouses whose service men/women were deployed overseas during the interviews were the focus for this study. Continually, military spouses are the individuals that “hold down the fort” on the home front, but are seldom recognized for their strong support and positive attitudes. The topic of social networking in military families is an emerging topic of research exploration (Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013).

3.2 Participants and Data Collection

The sample included 10 military spouses. This sample is a non-probability convenience sample, in which the subjects were selected based upon their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher. Some military spouses in this study were recruited first through an email sent out to a Family Readiness Officer (FRO) in the VMM-162 Marine Corps squadron, located on New River Air Station in Jacksonville, North Carolina. The recruitment letter is listed in Appendix D. Other spouses were recruited by personal connection to the researcher and sent the same recruitment letter (Appendix D), as well as the personal consent form explaining the goals of the research and how confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study (see Appendix B). Finally, some participating military spouses were part of a snowball sample method and were recruited by other spouses who had participated in the study. Once the spouse agreed to participate in the

study, he/she was also sent the participant consent form (Appendix B). North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to data collection (interview questions for the study are listed in Appendix A). Sample recruitment ended once the first 10 military spouses indicated that they wanted to participate in the study, in which they signed the consent forms and mailed them to the researcher's address. Again, confidentiality was assured with the participants prior to the interviewing process and at the end of the interviews. All confidential types of information (including names) were changed to retain anonymity for participants.

The sample consisted of 10 spouses ($n = 10$ individuals). The sample was 70% Caucasian and 30% Hispanic. Participants ranged in ages from 24 to 34 years old ($M = 26$). The majority of the spouses had been married to their service member for at least one year, with three couples being married for at least two years and eight being married for over 2 years. Below in Table 1 there is other relevant demographic information

Table 1.0 Demographic Information on the 10 Military Spouse

Participant (P)	Age	Race	# Years Married	# Deployments	# Separations Due to Training	Social Media Use	Other Communication
P1	25	C	6	1 (7 mos.)	7 (3 x 6 wks. & 4 x 3 mos.)	Facebook	Email
P2	25	C	2	2 (7 mos.)	4 (4 x 3 mos.)	Facebook, Facetime, & Skype	Email, Phone Call, & Text
P3	34	H	15	9 (7 mos.)	3 (6 wks.)	Facebook	Email
P4	24	C	3	1 (6 mos.)	3 (6 wks.)	Facebook	Email, Phone Call, & Text
P5	27	C	1	1 (6 mos.)	3 (6 wks.)	Facebook & Facetime	Email & Phone Call
P6	24	H	4	2 (8 mos. & 6 mos.)	3 (2 x 2 wks. & 1 x 2 mos.)	Facebook, Tango, Viber, & Skype	Email & Phone Call
P7	25	H	1.5	Stationed Overseas for 2 yrs.	2 (1 x 6 wks. & 1 x 3 mos.)	Facebook, Tango, Viber, & Skype	Email & Phone Call
P8	27	C	3	1 (7 mos.)	1 yr. total	Facebook & Skype	Email & Phone Call
P9	24	C	2	2 (7 mos. & 8 mos.)	5 (3 x 6 wks. & 2 x 3 mos.)	Facebook, Facetime, & Skype	Email, Phone Call, & Text
P10	30	C	10	3 (7 mos. Each)	2 (7 mos. & 4 mos.)	Facebook & Skype	Email & Phone Call

Note: C= Caucasian, H= Hispanic

Ten military spouses were interviewed using a semi-structured interview style via Skype. To increase the dimensions of social media use, the researcher was able to receive better feedback through the use of Skype's video and audio technologies. This type of approach was beneficial in that it allowed the participants to freely share their concerns relating to deployments or times of separation. In relative research, studies have found Skype to be useful in academic achievement (Strang, 2012); cost effective and time prohibitive way to conduct face-to-face interviews (Cater, 2011); and allows individuals to better express aspects of their true selves (Sullivan, 2013). Continually, using the semi-structured interview approach reinforced by McCracken's (1998) Long Interview method, a four step process that includes a (1) literature review, (2) self-analysis, (3) developing of a questionnaire, and (4) data analysis, in hopes to effectively analyze and code the information received.

Participants were interviewed at their convenience to answer the following research questions:

1. What are your purposes for using social media?
2. In what ways has social media impacted you?
3. While your spouse is deployed, what are ways in which social media can assist you in maintaining your relationship?
4. Through social media, how can family professionals assist other military families like yours in dealing with deployments or separations from your spouse?

Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and interview questions were used to provide structure, but at the same time allowing for flexibility with available probing questions. Interview and probing questions used during all interviews are provided in Appendix C. Furthermore, all interviews were audio-recorded; audio files and notes were kept confidential and stored in the researcher's personal computer and locked with a password.

3.3 Data Analysis

After the data was collected, the researcher used the Long Qualitative Interview approach and methodology to transcribe and organize all interviews, observations, and reflections. The next section explains in detail the Long Qualitative Interview process, which assisted in analyzing and categorizing the data received within the one-on-one interviews with the sample.

Stage 1: Literature Review

According to McCracken (1988) the first step of the Long Qualitative Interview begins with an exhaustive review of literature. The Long Interview method is illustrated in Figure 5. While the process of creating a literature review can be a daunting task, the information provided within them assists the researcher to be educated on past, present, and future problems and findings within their specific research topic. Continually, the literature review “helps to define the problems to be studied and helps assess data as well as aids in the construction of interview questions” within a research study (para 3).

Stage 2: Self-Analysis

The second step of the Long Interview process is to perform a self-analysis. The objective of this stage is to provide the researcher with a detailed and systematic approach with either his or her personal experience and interest for the topic in mind. The investigator should explore all of the items that relate and associate with the research topic being constructed. This review helps to “identify cultural categories and relationships that become the basis of question formation, prepares the investigator for the rummaging that will occur during data analysis, and distances the investigator” since the researcher’s familiarities and biases can cause challenges in the research study (para 5).

Stage 3: Develop a Questionnaire

“The third step involves developing a questionnaire” for the semi-structured, qualitative Long Interview (McCracken, 1988, para 7). The final list of interview questions in this study consists of demographic information as well as research questions based off of the literature review. From these questions, the researcher develops a planned form of how and when the questions will be asked, but also a list of prompting questions in the “form of contrast, category, special incident, and auto-driven” to allow the participant to feel more comfortable and willing to share (McCracken, 1988, para 8). With this questionnaire in hand, the research has a tentative schedule with which to convey the interview. McCracken (1988) states that the questionnaire does not specify precisely what will happen at every stage of the journey, but it does establish a clear sense of the direction of the journey and the ground it will eventually cover.

Stage 4: Data Analysis

The last phase of the Long Qualitative Interview is data analysis, which can be the most demanding step throughout this research method. McCracken (1988) states that “the object of analysis is to determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondent's view of the world in general” and the specific topic (para 9). Through analysis, the researcher gains a broader understanding between what the literature is saying and what the true population shares in his or her opinions. The investigator must hold on to all the material given in the interview and “be prepared to glimpse and systematically reconstruct a view of the world that bears no relation to his or her own” personal view or the one that relates to the current literature (McCracken, 1988, para 12). In this thesis, the researcher coded all of the names of the military spouses to keep participant confidentiality.

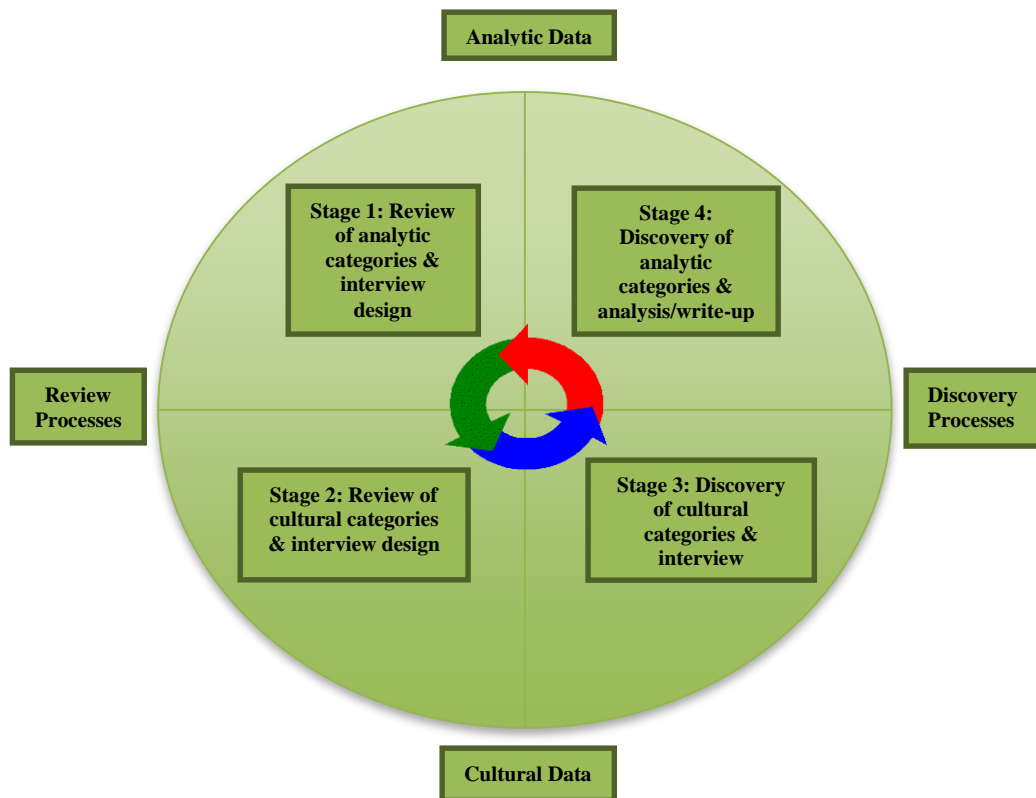


Figure 5. A Model of the Long Qualitative Interview. This figure illustrates the Long Interview process.

3.4 Researcher's Qualifications

As is common with qualitative research, this section describes the researcher's interest and qualifications for conducting the study. The researcher's competence is established by knowledge of the subject and experience drawn from being a military spouse herself, including the ability to live and experience deployments, understand the military culture and all that it has to offer. As a military spouse, this researcher has acquired a share of information and developed her own personal worldviews that have assisted her in her current professional and academic experiences. During this investigator's coursework towards a Masters Degree in Family Life and Youth Development, she acquired specialized skills in data collection and analysis including effective interviewing and data management skills. Furthermore, she acquired a year and a half's worth of professional experience as a Nutrition Educator; working one-on-one with military spouses at Women, Infants, and Children by assisting them with resources in the community. Through personal, professional, and academic experiences, this investigator gained much interest in learning about the military spouse themselves and how they deal with daily struggles during deployments. Continually, it has always been a goal of this researcher to help others in any possible way that she could. By further learning about the military spouse and the challenges they face, this examiner believes that this audience can be the individuals she assists on a daily basis, especially understanding things from their perspectives.

3.5 Conclusion

Using a qualitative case study methodology, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 military spouses in Jacksonville, North Carolina. The data was

transcribed and analyzed using an open coding methodology by identifying categories and patterns in the data, then linking the results into three different themes. Following are the results from the analyzed data, including the effects of social media on military spouses and the results from the four research questions:

1. What are your purposes for using social media?
2. In what ways has social media impacted you?
3. While your spouse is deployed, what are ways in which social media can assist you in maintaining your relationship?
4. Through social media, how can family professionals assist other military families like yours in dealing with deployments or separations from your spouse?

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

The goal of this research study was to seek further information about the overall well-being of a military spouse and their use of social media. The findings of this study provide the experiences of 10 women whose husbands have all experienced a separation due to wartime training and/or a deployment, ranging from 2 weeks to 15 months. A further summary of each spouse can be found in Appendix F. All of the participants' husbands are service members of the United States Marine Corps and are currently stationed in either Camp Lejeune or New River Air Station, both located in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Table 2 highlights the social networking sites used by the military spouses during deployments as a means to communicate with their spouses.

The key findings from this study are divided into three different themes. The first theme highlights social media, specifically its purpose in the life of a military spouse, its impact on the spouse, and any rules that are enforced when it comes to being used by the military spouse and their service member. The second theme discusses social media and its role in maintaining the relationship of the military couple. The final theme addresses ways in which family life professionals can use social media as an aid to assisting military families (and more specifically, military spouses) with resources they needed to attain overall well-being prior, during, and after deployments.

Table 1 *Social Networking Sites Used by Military Spouses and their Service Member during a Deployment*

Social Networking Site Used	Number of Participants (Total= 10)
Facebook	10
Email	6
Skype	5
Facetime	3
Tango	2
Viber	1
Ovoo	1

4.2 Results of Using Social Media

Research Question 1: What are your purposes for using social media?

There was a range of purposes for using social media amongst the respondents in this research study. Social media use ranged from using it as a means to staying connected with family and friends (8 out of the 10 participants), to staying in touch with the deployed service member (all 10 participants). Many spouses stated the following sentiment, as expressed by one of the participants: “If social media didn’t exist, I don’t know how I would communicate with my spouse (during deployments).” Continually, social media assisted the couples in maintaining their relationships during deployments and allowed the spouses to “feel a sense of connection” and less likely to feel alone. Several respondents in this study stated that they used social media as a means to communicate and connect with their family and friends. For example, one spouse referred to this as her “family plan on Facebook.” Social media was also used as a means of personal support by three out of the ten participants. Specifically,

these spouses engaged in social media as a means “to connect with other military spouses in the area or around the world to find support and helpful information from those who had experienced a deployment before.”

Research Question 2: In what ways has social media impacted you?

A consistent answer to research question two was that “social media can be a double-edged sword.” This statement can best be explained by examples of responses from the military spouses. *Note: Due to confidentiality all of the names in this study have been coded into participant numbers.*

P4: “There’s some good and some bad. You have some people that are out there just to stalk your page [in reference to Facebook] and talk bad about you, but we just went through and deleted a whole bunch of people that were not part of our lives. Now, it [Facebook] is helpful in the fact that our family can see the baby and watch him grow and keep in much better contact with them rather than using texting and email. When my husband is deployed, we have much better communication and are able to stay connected because honestly if it were a phone call, it wouldn’t get done.”

P8: “On the negative side, too much information is shared by others. For example, squadron accidents; if someone is hurt, if someone has died or if the plane has crashed, I’ve known people to hear about this information through Facebook and it’s not right.. it’s not right for people to find out that way.”

P10: “It’s a good thing and a bad thing. It allows me to stay connected with my husband and allows me to send pictures of the kids to him while he’s deployed. [Social media] is basically the only way we communicate. Something that can be hard to deal with

during a deployment, as a military wife, is almost having to literally defriend or take some wives off of my Facebook page because I cannot stand to hear them whine about the deployment.”

Research Question 3: What are rules (or guidelines) that you use when it comes to social media? If any? If none, what are your thoughts on rules for social media use?

Several military spouses in this study responded by stating they had no rules when it came to social media, however a vast majority mentioned Operations Security (OPSEC) as a rule or guideline that should always be followed when using social media and social networking sites. For example, one military spouse stated that “individuals should not even talk about the deployment, withhold from sharing personal information; especially the location of the deployed service member, for their safety.”

The top rules that were shared by the military spouses in reference to other Facebook users were:

- No more selfies;
- Do not air your dirty laundry;
- Use good judgment prior to posting or updating your status;
- Keep things positive and tell jokes;
- Try not to put anything that is degrading to men or women on your page;
- In reference to OPSEC, do not post anything about your deployed service member, even if you are their extended family;
- Always remember and practice OPSEC; and
- Learn to identify those unspoken rules with your deployed service member.

4.3 Results of Social Media and Maintaining Relationships

Research Question 4: Can you share some worries that you may have about your spouse and his social media use?

Nine out of the ten spouses in this study responded to this question as having no worries about their spouses' social media use as they felt a sense of trust for their spouse during the deployment. However, some of the spouses mentioned that they knew of other spouses who have been worried about their husbands talking to other women during deployments. One spouse, felt jealous of who her husband might be talking to on Facebook messenger. For example, participant six stated that she was "worried about who was trying to contact him [her husband] while he was deployed and what their purpose was for talking to him." Participant six was also concerned about her husband's pornography use and items that can be disrespectful and degrading to women [on his Facebook page].

Research Question 5: While your spouse was deployed, what were ways in which social media assisted you in maintaining your relationship?

P1: "It [social media] allowed us to keep communication open and strong. We stayed connected during the deployment and it allowed me to be able to talk to him and check in to see if he was okay."

P4: "I posted a lot of pictures on Facebook of my baby and he [deployed spouse] posted pictures of the workout area. Social media allowed each of us to see inside each other's worlds and have a glimpse of what his life was like over there."

P8: "Social media is a very powerful thing. It helps you feel connected and allows him [deployed husband] to see what is going on in your side of the world."

P9: “Its [social media] very bittersweet. It doesn’t necessarily mean that it will always maintain your relationship. It sometimes can irritate it due to the technical difficulties of using Skype. It’s like you can see him and you can talk to him and then the end of the conversation comes and he’s gone again. It’s like virtual reality.”

P10: “[Social media] is the only way we communicate, without it I’m not sure how we would stay connected or maintain our relationship.”

Research Question 6: When a conflict arose from social media, how did you and your spouse resolve the issue?

A conflict is something that exists within any relationship, whether you are a military couple or not. However, when conflicts arise during deployments they can be challenging to overcome and deal with. When asked how they dealt with conflicts through social media, several military spouses responded by saying something to the effect of “just apologize and move on because it is simply too difficult to fight over social media, especially when you are several thousand miles away.” Participant three said she would have her deployed spouse call and deal with the issue head on. Participant ten stated that resolving issues during deployments and through social media is “trial and error, we try not take things personally and ask for clarification.” Several spouses stated that they tried to “avoid conflict and to not bring up things that may cause a fight [such as arguing simply because you miss them]; simply just letting things go.” In resolving the issue, participant eight and her spouse try to “keep things positive, we tell jokes, especially during the deployment.” Participant six writes out her concerns in an email and proofreads it before sending it to her husband: “It allows me to share what I want to say without saying it in a rude and unorganized way.” Some of the

spouses even noticed that through distance, it was easier for them to communicate and maintain their relationships.

Research Question 7: What are some major concerns for couples while being deployed or separated?

The stereotypical and historical issues of military couples and infidelity dating back to WWII still reside today. While the military spouses in this current study did not personally experience infidelity, many spouses shared the concern of it for other couples during deployments or times of wartime separations. For example, Participant one stated that she knew of a few military spouses who have given information out on Facebook and other social networking sites with regards to seeing another man while their husbands were/are deployed. Several of the other spouses in the study shared that they have known military spouses who are not loyal and are cheating on their husbands during deployments.

Apart from infidelity, participants shared concerns on several other issues, such as: (1) whether the deployed spouse is safe or not; (2) concern over money and financial management; (3) concerns over household items and maintenance, such as the cable bill or the water heater breaking; (4) simply missing each other throughout the deployment; and (5) feelings of loneliness and guilt that the deployed spouse “doesn’t care enough about me.”

4.4 Results of Social Media and Family Life Professionals

For many of the spouses in this study, the individual that came to mind as a Family Life Professional was their Family Readiness Officer (FRO). With that said, a majority of the answers to these questions reflect upon their FRO’s work and how it relates to social media and their personal experience.

Research Question 8: Through social media, how can family professionals assist other military families like yours in dealing with deployments or separations from your spouse?

P1: “Having the FRO contact the spouses in several different ways than just through email.”

P2: “Getting the FRO to have better communication to contact and reach out to the military spouses in the squadron, especially during deployments.”

P3: “It would definitely be beneficial for the Family Professionals to be able to somehow relate to the military experience and lifestyle prior to talking with the military spouses because people in the normal world simply do not understand. As a spouse, we are worried about their safety and whether they are eating; things that someone who has never experienced it [military lifestyle or deployment] simply cannot relate.”

P5: “Family Professionals can be those individuals for military spouses to talk to and provide unbiased opinions. They can also provide trainings, personal knowledge and support outside of the military lifestyle.”

P6: “The FRO and Family Professionals could be there for encouragement, support, boost morale, check-in to see how the spouses are doing. They could assist in counseling during the deployment and manage support groups on Facebook.”

P7: “The FRO could provide more gatherings and get-togethers for the spouses and for the kids and sharing information about resources and events in the community, in efforts to help them not feel so lonely or disconnected during deployments.”

Research Question 9: What are ways in which the military can support families and service members, which could be done over social media?

Information given for this question resulted in a wide range of ideas. On one side, some spouses believed that the military is “doing a good job at providing support to military families through social media.” Conversely, other participants stated that “there could be more information provided through social networking sites.” For example, participant seven said “the military could use social media as a way to provide information to spouses. Simply offering spouses web links, websites or contact information to get in touch with someone when they are in need of something specific such as a website to handle personal finances during deployments.” Another participant suggested that “the military could provide families with material on safety [specifically, OPSEC], news of deployments, and ways to maintain your relationship via social media.” Participant ten said “the military could [also] boost morale by providing spouses with options for support before, during and after deployments.”

The participants consistently paired boosting morale and providing spouses with ideas of events going on in the community. Participant three mentioned that the “they are [military] already doing a good job. They post several things on their Facebook pages: MCCS, Camp Lejeune, and New River. Many times they will post things going on in the community and I will find a majority of these events on the Jacksonville Facebook page.” Participant one suggested spouses to look at the USO’s Facebook page as “they post events for Marines, their families and children.” While the military services within Jacksonville, North Carolina seem to be providing families with several opportunities to get involved, it was brought to the researcher’s attention in this study that “not everyone uses social media to

find out about events so, it may be a good idea for the military to also provide information on the upcoming happenings through paper form or posters to advertise to a different audience.”

Research Question 10: What efforts can family professionals do to assist other military families like yours in becoming more resilient to deployments or times of separation?

Below is a list of responses to research question 10. During the data collection process of the semi-structured interviews, as this research question was asked, many spouses in the study had a difficult time answering the question.

P1: “The FRO could email and communicate more [with the families in the squadron]. She could also provide more family fun days and more things to do, especially during the deployment.”

P3: “I have no idea. I guess I just got used it [deployment] and got used to doing it on my own, in my own process and made the best out of the situation.”

P4: “I personally believe that you are never really prepared- every situation is different. With my son, I would want the Family Professional to simply provide reassurance to help me, help him in remembering his daddy while he was gone [on deployment].”

P5: “I guess Family Professionals could provide workshops before deployments in efforts to assist military families; providing them with tools for getting through deployments and teaching them [military families] how to apply the tools to communicate during deployments.”

P6: “They [Family Professionals] could prepare them [military families] for the reality of the deployment- this came as a shock to me during my first deployment.”

P7: “I honestly do not know.”

P8: “Family Professionals could create a Facebook page that entailed light and funny posts for military families to read.”

P10: “Family Professionals could provide required classes and lessons on OPSEC for the entire military family. They could also mandate couple classes to provide information on the topic of pre-separation or pre-deployment. I also think that they could aid in recent and post-deployment anonymous counseling. With that said, I believe that it would be very important for the Family Professional to be able to relate to the military spouse- no one knows unless they’ve been through it and being a professional who has gone through a deployment before and knows how military works would greatly increase the morale of the spouse. Lastly, the FRO could set up a get together allowing other spouses to join and share their experiences of deployment. I feel that this would also boost morale and allow spouses to build relationships with one another.”

Research Question 11: In what ways can family professionals assist other military families like yours in communicating the issues of social media?

An overview of the issues presented by the military spouses in this study, in relation to social media were: OPSEC (Operations Security), a platform to communicate with people of the opposite sex which could lead to infidelity and using social media as a board to post personal or family issues. Listed below are ways in which family professionals could assist military families in communicating the issues of social media, as obtained by the military spouses in this study.

P3: “Family professionals should provide social media etiquette classes.”

P5: “Another way that Family Professionals could assist military families is through “Facebook posts on resource management; ways to spend your time and money during deployment and ways of reconnecting with your spouse after deployment.”

P6: “Family Professionals could provide spouses with ways to approach the issue that occurs through social media with their spouse, such as infidelity.”

P9: “Family Professionals could teach spouses about being smart about what they post [on Facebook], to read it before they post and to not post dates, times and locations, especially while their husbands’ are deployed.”

P10: “The Family Professional could share web links with spouses so that they can watch videos on different topics for support at their own convenience.”

4.5 Research Data Themes Defined

Reoccurring topics within the data were analyzed and then categorized into three different sections: (1) social media and its purpose in the life of a military spouse; (2) social media and its role in maintaining the relationship of the military couple; and (3) ways in which family life professionals can use social media as an aid to assisting military spouses. Within this research study, social media (specifically, Facebook) was used by 100% of the spouses and was found to have a strong purpose in the life of a military spouse. In fact, all 10 participants (100%) used social media everyday as a way to stay connected with their deployed spouse and interact with their family and friends several miles away. This type of networking allowed the military spouses to boost their morale as they communicated with others online, thus giving them a sense of belonging and purpose to get through the deployment. The main purpose of social media as found in this study was its use to connect

the military spouse to their deployed service member. Through this bond, social media bridged the gap of communication amongst the military couple and allowed them to maintain their relationships as well as their overall well-being during a deployment.

As highlighted in this thesis, social media was additionally used for allowing the military spouse to stay updated with events going on within the military base and in the community. Little was mentioned about spouses finding careers or educational opportunities, except through the Family Readiness Officer (FRO). Many of the spouses (60%) said they used websites such as Military OneSource and the USO's Facebook page for support and as a means to learn about events going on. With high interest in the community and events on the military base, military spouses' participation in events assisted them to create and build relationships with other spouses. The events and friendships created benefited their overall well-being and helped the spouses in this study to maintain positivity throughout the deployment.

The final data section discussed ways in which family life professionals could use social media as an aid to assisting military spouses during a deployment and within their everyday life. The results from the study revealed that family life professionals could be doing more for military spouses. Specifically, family life professionals could be assisting spouses with educational tools of ways for military couples to maintain their relationship during a deployment, providing guidelines on OPSEC and social media "etiquette," and to offer several avenues of support for military spouses to use on their own time. As mentioned earlier, several of the spouses within this study considered the FRO to be a family life professional. In this correspondence, the military spouses felt that the FRO should be more

involved with the squadron and create additional events for the spouses and their families to get together, especially during deployments. By creating these opportunities for military spouses, many felt that it would benefit their personal and relational health as well as provide the spouses with a sense of belonging and purpose.

4.6 Conclusion

While every situation is different, the results from this study assist in providing a glimpse of understanding into the life of a military spouse and how they maintain their overall morale during a deployment. There is one question that still remains: *How does social media affect the overall well-being of a military spouse?* Findings from the present study suggests that social media revitalizes the daunting mindset of the deployment. Basic communication and interaction via social media improves the overall happiness of couples and makes it easier to cope with the everyday military lifestyle. Social media provided an avenue for military spouses in this study to break the barrier of communication and maintain their relationship during a deployment. The next chapter will deliver the discussion of this thesis, implications for future research, and limitations of this study.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

Using McCracken's Long Interview method, the researcher gathered information by engaging in conversation and relational bonding with the participants in order to truly understand their experiences as military spouses. Through the use of open-ended questions, the researcher sought information to construct an overview of the participants' individual

experiences. Being that the researcher is a military spouse herself and could belong to this target group of eligible participants, the researcher's ability to engage in the analysis of the data was simplified and the topics discussed by the participants were easier to understand based on the fact that the role of being a military spouse is a familiar experience. In addition, the risk of researcher bias was prevented within this study by epoche through ethnography. Specifically, the researcher put all personal biases aside and viewed each participant's response with an open mind.

Researcher bias was prevented within the study by random sampling of the participants and each participant was asked the same questions. The fact that the researcher used social media, specifically Skype, to communicate with the participants may have naturally created a different type of relationship such as allowing the participant to share more freely and openly to the questions asked in the study. Performing this study through Skype may have also influenced the way in which the participants communicated and how the information was received and perceived by the researcher. For example, when the military spouse was asked a personal question, it was perceived that she was more willing to provide additional information. The fact that the participants were at the convenience of being in their own home, their own personal space, may have led them to have been comfortable and more willing to share during the interview. By engaging in lengthily conversations with the subjects, the researcher was able to establish a clearer understanding about the military spouses' communication behavior, deployment experiences, and their overall use of social media during deployment.

The richness of these findings may have not been captured through other data collection methods, such as surveys or questionnaires. With dialogue, however, more informative and meaningful data were gleaned, such as communication patterns and social media behaviors of the military spouse sample. Additionally, the researcher was able to learn more about the challenges of having a spouse deployed through the lenses of the military wives. The wives interviewed in this study were willing and eager to share their experiences. Some of the spouses disclosed more detail than others, yet overall the majority of participants provided sufficient information and elaborated on responses given during their interviews. The ease with which the women described these highly personal experiences demonstrated a glimpse of challenges that military families face on an everyday basis.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

There were limitations to this research study that impacted the outcomes of the study.

- One of the limitations of this thesis was the sample size. A small sample size in qualitative research is acceptable, but the data collected from 10 military spouses narrowed the data collected and was only a small view of the larger population.
- Selection bias (participants with unique views may be more likely to participate in the interviews) and social desirability (responding in a particular manner to impress or please the interviewer) on participant's responses.

- A gap of available research involving the overall well-being of military spouses, their use of social media, and military spousal communication.
- The sample was limited to spouses of United States Marine Corps and did not include spouses of the Air Force, Army or Navy. This study was also limited due to recruiting from similar bases in Eastern North Carolina. The exclusion of these individuals was intentional as the sample was a convenience sample.
- Non-experimental research within this study could have been the potential bias brought about through self-reported data.

Although this researcher took measures to prevent her own experiences from influencing the results, the testimonies shared by the military spouses and the details of their experiences were personally reflective on the researchers' own experiences. With this some preconceived or personal biases may have been reflective on the researcher's own experiences and how favorable they were to the participants. 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 McCracken's procedure followed, to attain this desired understanding.

5.3 Implications for Practice, Military Families, and Family Life Professionals

This thesis applies to professionals within a wide range of discipline, from family to communication studies as well as social media technology. Findings from this research may assist professionals who work with all individuals within the military family, specifically military spouses, to improve their overall deployment experience. It is key to assist military

spouses and their families with deployment needs as the stress of the military life can increase and become too stressful to overcome daily tasks. Due to the large population of military spouses, this study implies that by using social media, family life professionals can communicate and support spouses via social media as an alternative to in-person assistance. This type of collaboration between social media and family life professionals may have global impact for military spouses stationed anywhere in the world. The spouses from this study were stationed in Jacksonville, North Carolina with no friends, family, or any type of support system, as many spouses relocated from their home states such as Florida and Texas. With these findings, social media and its large support network create a platform to be used and applied by professionals who work with military spouses and their families to assist in decreasing the stress, maintain relationships, and simply be that support system for these spouses to achieve a positive deployment experience. Professionals working with military spouses could use social media as a way to send out information on events going on within their community or on the military base. Through social media, specialist can help close the gap of military spouses feeling lonely, in which could possibly decrease anxiety and depression in these individuals.

Professionals and academic scholars who study military families, communication habits, social media usage, and wartime deployments would also benefit from this study. Findings may act as stepping-stones to further research, education, and collaboration efforts geared towards better understanding the life of a military spouse and the effects of social media use. Furthermore, the Department of Defense (DoD) may incorporate findings from this study to redesign programs, events, and classes that are targeted towards this

audience. The DoD can offer suggestions via social media on topics such as military spouse education, careers, and techniques for couples to maintaining their communication through social networking sites. Lastly, specialists might deliver methods for military families to get involved with their community as many of the spouses in the study and based upon research live off of the military base. These individuals may want to become more involved in their community in which in return could allow them to form a passion for and interest in the world around them, creating a purpose in the lives of these young families.

Results from this study revealed several items of which military and non-affiliated programs and professionals may consider applying to their practice. Specifically, using social media platforms, family life professionals and/or organizations should:

- Provide information on careers and educational opportunities;
- Provide information on ways to maintain romantic relationships, specifically marriages during deployments and times of wartime separations;
- Offer classes on social media etiquette;
- Offer materials on events and classes in the community and on the military base;
- Create classes of interests for military families;
- Provide counseling opportunities open to the entire military family before, during, and after deployments; and
- Educate service men, women and their spouses and families on healthy ways to use social media during deployments.

While these implications provide avenues for a variety of professionals, additional research from this study could further assist them in understanding the life of a military spouse and their use of social media throughout the deployment experience.

5.4 Implications for Future Research

There are infinite opportunities for scholars to examine the relationship and implications among social media, the overall well-being of a military spouse, and the deployment experience. It is resourceful for family life professionals to become familiar with this area of research because, as it is predicated in the findings of this study, social media will continue to grow. The innovative and resourceful techniques used by social media can allow family life professionals to be involved in a variety of ways to connect to users within their target audience. Through this study, the researcher values the need to develop a greater understanding of the powerful experiences that military spouses face and explore them through social media platforms. As powerful as social media is, this study revealed an opportunity to understand social media and its effects on military spouses. It is empowering to recognize the many applications that social media can support. Specifically, in this study, social media provided support to almost every military spouse. Likewise, it is encouraging that the current research acknowledges that the positive outcomes of using new media are starting to outweigh the negative 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 and further exploration of the spouses interviewed in this study. These participants may include looking more in depth at the specific maintenance behaviors enacted within military families and

marriages, or how social media could connect the military spouse to employment opportunities.

5.5 Conclusion

The landscape of how we communicate is ever-changing, including communication in military couples during deployment. In today's society, technology such as the Internet and mobile Smartphone devices allow families to communicate in seconds despite distance. These emerging technologies foster remote communication capabilities and allow military spouses to transition from sending postage-paid letters to 'liking' status updates on Facebook. As a result of this thesis, it is evident that the life of a military wife is full of challenges and battles. Highlighted within their conversations, it was relevant to see that military spouses use social media as a means to communicate with others and more importantly use it as a means of support throughout a deployment. This study provides family life professionals with current research on social media and support to not only military spouses, but also the audiences of which these professionals serve.

Among the benefits of this study was the ability to actualize the prevalence and experience of using Facebook and other selected social media sites for spousal communication during deployment. This exploratory research contributes to provide implications to military agencies responsible for developing educational programming and informational strategies for how to decrease anxiety and stress during deployments. As evidenced in their narratives, the military spouses interviewed relied heavily on Facebook for information and support from family and friends. They acknowledged comfort in knowing that someone else understood their experience, especially when they struggled with the lack

of understanding by their peers who are not military-affiliated and with being away from their families. Many revealed a particular closeness and need for interdependence among fellow military spouses and a family-like camaraderie that emerged as they spent time sharing their experiences of the military lifestyle through social media. These military families look out for one another and form lasting bonds that can be held together by social networking sites.

Upon analysis of the data found in this study, this researcher feels confident that the goals proposed by McCracken's model was satisfied and explained thoroughly throughout the interview process and within categorical data coding. The interviews provided evidence that the deployment experiences are characteristically different for every military spouse. Although there is not uniformity with regard to communication experiences during deployment, there was a fair amount of consistency and predictability among participant responses. This finding suggests the shared experiences present during deployments and possibly the increasing structural and organizational understanding among family life professionals of military programs. Continually, a set of norms on behalf of the spouses on the home front was established for how participants communicated with their spouses and maintained their relationships during deployment. The patterns of communication revealed a relationship between the environment and context in which they occurred.

Overall, the results of this study offer researchers information in the areas of social media, relational maintenance in communicating with Skype and share how military spouses use social media as a means to feel connected to others. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of community in the life of a military spouse and how Facebook has allowed

several spouses to stay connected with their deployed service member, friends, and family. In closing, the ever changing process of social media coupled with limited availability of research on both social media and military spouse communication yields challenges, but also offers opportunity for future research in this area. The rapid advancement in technological innovation may make it difficult to capture a relevant and accurate picture of social media usage and effects. Although this study took a qualitative approach to data collection, it was worthwhile to use interviews as a means of receiving information and then to connect the theoretical constructs that to this study's findings. The themes and theories that were used to identify the findings indicate significance and the presence of a relationship amongst social media and the positive effects on a military spouse. With continual understanding and through expanded exploration, this topic will likely remain a subject of research inquiry for some time to come.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL**NC STATE UNIVERSITY**

North Carolina State University is a land-grant
university and a constituent institution of the
University of North Carolina

Office of Research and Innovation
Division of Research Administration

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919.515.8754 (phone)
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From: Jennifer Ofstein, IRB Coordinator
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board

Date: March 12, 2014

Title: The Role of Social Networking Sites in the Lives of Military Spouses

IRB#: 3850

Dear Jennifer Rea,

The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations (Exemption: 46.101. b.2). Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review. This approval does not expire, but any changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

NOTE:

1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU projects, the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
2. Any changes to the research must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
3. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days.

Please forward a copy of this letter to your faculty sponsor, if applicable.
Thank you.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Ofstein
NC State IRB

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

To: Military Spouse

From: Jennifer K. Rea

Date: February 2014

Re: Research study on the impacts of social networking sites (such as Facebook, Skype, & Twitter) on military spouses

I want to take a moment and thank you for participating in this study. As previously mentioned, your participation in this interview will allow for a better understanding of the following research questions:

1. What are your purposes for using social media?
2. In what ways has social media impacted you?
3. While your spouse is deployed, what are ways in which social media can assist you in maintaining your relationship (e.g. communication)?
4. Through social media, how can family professionals assist other military families like yours in dealing with deployments or separations from your spouse?

In my research study, I identify military spouses as individuals who are and have been married to an individual who is in the Armed Services. The study focuses mainly on the effects and impacts of social networking sites (such as Twitter, Skype, & Facebook) on military spouses who use these types of social media to communicate with their deployed service member. The study is not meant to diminish social media, but rather identify the negatives and emphasize the benefits between military couples throughout deployment. The hope of this study is to allow valuable discussions amongst military spouses and their experiences of using social media as a means of communication. Additionally, the goal for this study is to better the future of maintaining the overall well-being of a military spouse through communicating to their deployed spouse by means of social media.

WHAT ARE THE EXPECTATIONS FROM EACH MILITARY SPOUSE FOR THIS STUDY?

As a military spouse, you will be asked to participate in one interview and a possible follow-up interview, which I will conduct a discretion and where it is most convenient for you. The in-person interview or focus group will take between 30 to 40 minutes, with a potential follow-up interview either through a phones conversation or in-person. All interviews will be audio recorded and responses are confidential. Responses by the military spouses will be analyzed and presented in my thesis paper. The responses collected will be kept confidential by all parties involved at all times throughout my thesis and outside of the focus group interview. Interviews will be transcribed and a code will be assigned to each person before

commencing the analysis. Audio recordings will be safely deleted and destroyed once they have been transcribed.

As a participant, you will be given the opportunity to validate your responses once the interview has been transcribed. Therefore, you will be asked to provide an e-mail address where transcripts can be e-mailed to. Emailed transcripts will not contain any personal information or indicate your involvement in this research thesis and interview.

As a participant, you may choose to terminate the interview or withdraw from the study at any point.

Risks and Benefits

There are no foreseen risks to your involvement in this research study. All your answers and comments will be kept confidential at all times. The interview questions are meant to get your personal experience and knowledge as a military spouse.

It is my desire that you as a participant benefit from this research study as much as I will. Your participation will hopefully engage you in a very rich discussion about a military spouse's use of social media to communicate with their deployed spouse and may provide instructive insight to your role as a military spouse as well. Additionally, your comments and responses to the interview will deepen the current knowledge and research on the topic of the impacts of social networking sites and military spouses overall morale.

What if you have questions about this research study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedure, you may contact me, Jennifer Rea (by phone at 651 301-4230 or by email at jklance@ncsu.edu) or my academic adviser, Dr. Andrew Behnke (by phone at 919-515-9156, by email at aobehnke@ncsu.edu).

What if you have questions about your rights as a participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in this research study have been violated during the course of your participation, you may contact Debra Paxton, IRB Administrator preferably by e-mail at debra_paxton@ncsu.edu or by phone at 515-4514.

Thank you once again for agreeing to participate. Your participation will be influential and essential to the existing and future knowledge of social media and military spouses. The quest to establish online resources for military spouses possesses a strong topic that I believe more military families are looking for, especially to assist them during deployments. I hope your participation will not only help my study, but also give you an insight to your own aspirations as a military spouse.

Thank you,

Jennifer Rea, M.S. Candidate

Consent To Participate

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form and agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time.

Signature

Name (Please Print)

Date

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographics/ Experience Survey

- Male/ Female
 - Race
 - Age Range (20-25, 26- 30, etc.)
 - Number of years have been married (2-5, 5-8, 8-11, etc.)
- What are the social networking sites you use to communicate with your spouse (service member) while they are deployed (such as Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Face Time, etc.)?
- Number of deployments or times of military separations experienced

Interview Questions

Social Media

1. What are your purposes for using social media?
2. In what ways has social media impacted you?
3. What are rules (or guidelines) that you use when it comes to social media? If any? If none, what are your thoughts on rules for social media use?

Social Media & Maintaining Relationships

1. Can you share some worries that you may have about your spouse and his/her social media use?
2. While your spouse is deployed, what are ways in which social media can assist you in maintaining your relationship (e.g. communication)?
3. When a conflict arises from social media, how would you plan to resolve the issue?
4. What are some major concerns for couples while being deployed or separated?

Social Media & Family Life Professionals

1. Through social media, how can family professionals assist other military families like yours in dealing with deployments or separations from your spouse?
2. What are ways in which the military supports families and service members, which could be done over social media?
3. What efforts can family professionals assist other military families like yours in becoming more resilient to deployments or times of separation?
4. In what ways can family professionals assist other military families like yours with in communicating the issues of social media?

APPENDIX D: LETTER OF RECRUITMENT

Hi everyone! My name is Jenny Rea. I am the spouse of Sgt. Jacob Rea, in our VMM 162 squadron. I am currently working on my Master's degree and have the task to perform my thesis. I've chosen to do my thesis on the impacts of social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, Skype, etc.) on military spouses who spouse is currently or has been previous deployed.

Ana has generously forwarded this message to all of you as our spouses are currently deployed and I felt that this topic might hit closely hit home to you.

I am looking for at least 8 to 10 military spouses who are interested in participating in a 30-45 minute interview session (which the dates are to be decided). The military spouse should have already been married at least 1 year, have been through a deployment, time of military separation, or are currently going through one, and have a common use and are familiar with social media and social networking sites as a means of communicating with your deployed spouse.

Here is my abstract of my thesis if you are looking for more information:

This thesis explores military relationships through the viewpoint of military spouses and their communication styles by using social networking sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Skype, etc.) in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Military spouses are defined in this thesis as individuals who are married to a military service member and have been married for at least two to ten years. In addition, a military spouse is referred to as someone who has experienced a deployment or time of separation from their active duty member. Military spouses are the individuals that “hold down the fort” on the home front, but are never recognized for their strong support and positive attitude. Recent research shows that several military families use social networking sites to communicate with their deployed service members and is a means of maintaining their relationships. A qualitative research study was conducted with 8-10 military spouses in Jacksonville, North Carolina to further explore and understand the impacts that social networking sites have on military spouses and their overall well-being.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please send me an email or give me a call and we can set up an interview time at your earliest convenience.

Thank you!

Jenny Rea

jdklance@ncsu.edu (email)

651-301-4230 (cell)