

Uncertainty Reduction and Technologically Mediated Communication: Implications to Marital Communication during Wartime Deployment

Margaret C. Stewart

The experience of deployment is a common occurrence in contemporary American military culture, and these tours of duty are often trademarked by stress, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty for the service members and their loved ones. Coping with frequent geographic separations, coupled with the intensity and turbulence of these events, forces the constant readjustment in domestic roles and communicative norms in military marriages and families. Further, this era of war coincides with the implications of utilizing Internet-based technologies to maintain relationships. Social media platforms allow for more frequent communication and increase the flow of information, which raise questions about the role of technologically mediated communication in marriages during deployment. This study provides the findings of interviews with ten military wives to discuss their experiences with using select new media platforms to communicate with their husbands during wartime deployment. Uncertainty arises as a leading theme in the study, and is discussed in the context of uncertainty reduction theory. Next steps and future directions for continued research are discussed.

Introduction

The current study examines how military spouses maintain their relationships during deployment using select Internet platforms, namely Facebook and Skype, and attempts to learn more about their experiences. Interviews with ten military wives reveal uncertainty as a leading theme within the data. As such, the implications that using select new media platforms potentially have on military marriages regarding uncertainty are discussed, along with future directions for ongoing research in this area. This article attempts to balance the discussion between the summary of the previous research and plans for next steps of research on this subject.

Review of Literature

This review of literature spans several areas of communication studies research. By examining a range of studies about military culture, family communication, deployment, relationship maintenance, coping strategies, technologically mediated communication (TMC), long-distance relationships (LDRs), and more, several distinctions regarding communication processes for members of the military constituency arise. In addition, the critical role of new communication technologies and social media for technologically mediated communication is beginning to emerge. Current research shows its challenges in capturing the dynamic shifts in military life and culture with the progression of technology. For these reasons, it is important to view studies on these intersecting variables as a means to capture a point in time for how technology is used to better understand the ongoing implications under a variety of circumstances. These include changing conditions of deployment for the military, different communication needs by family of the deployed, and the continuing evolution of technology.

Background and Relevancy of the Study

Existing studies report negative effects of deployment on military couples and families and acknowledge the complexities and strains that are unique within military communication paradigm (Maguire, Heinemann-LaFave, & Sahlstein, 2013; Merolla, 2010). American military families cope with uncertainty, transiency, and geographic separation during deployments as a regular part of domestic life, and the contemporary military lifestyle is hallmarked by recurrent and lengthy deployments (Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). The norms and roles among the family adjust when a loved one deploys, and all members are forced to recalibrate for the duration of the time apart (Spera, 2009). There is an interest in the well-being and satisfaction of military spouses and

Margaret C. Stewart (Ph.D., Indiana University of Pennsylvania) is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies in the Department of Communication at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. Special thanks to Dr. Robyn Defelice and Maria Atilano for their assistance with editing. For correspondence please contact m.c.stewart@unf.edu.

families, as research shows that familial satisfaction towards life in the military can potentially impact retention of the enlisted (Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008; Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003).

As such, since September 11, 2001 there have been over 2 million American service members deployed to date, and an estimated 60% of these individuals are considered to have family obligations (Rossetto, 2015; Siegel, et al., 2013). According to the Profile of the Military Community Report published by the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (2014), “nearly one-half (49.6%) of Active Duty enlisted personnel are 25 years of age or younger, with the next largest age group being 26 to 30 years (22.1%), followed by 31 to 35 years (14.0%), 36 to 40 years (8.8%), and those 41 years or older (5.6%). Overall, the average age of the Active Duty force is 28.6 years. The average age for Active Duty officers is 34.8 years, and the average age for Active Duty enlisted personnel is 27.3 years” (p. iv).

Social networking sites have allowed military families to communicate and maintain their relationships online, which is found to have a positive impact on satisfaction in military families and marriages (Rea, Behnke, Huff & Allen, 2015; Matthews-Juarez, Juarez, & Faulkner, 2013). Two social media platforms that are popular among military for communicating with spouses and family are Skype and Facebook. Skype is a voiceover internet protocol (IP) telecommunications application specializing in video chat and voice calls from computers, tablets and mobile devices via the Internet (Skype, 2017; Rea et al., 2015). Skype’s platform provides real-time, interactions for personal and professional exchanges. In comparison, Facebook creates user-defined interactions with individuals and groups through real-time and latent communications.

According to the Pew Research Center (2017), 88% of American adults between the ages of 18-29 and 79% of adults between the ages 30-49 are active on Facebook. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them” (Facebook, 2017). Facebook users create profiles and utilize them to establish a personal online presence, share posts, send messages, upload photos and video, and communicate with other uses who may range from intimate to impersonal connections (Facebook, 2017; Rea et al., 2015).

The intersection of popularity of social media use, the age of active duty military personnel, and the recent era of armed conflict involving American troops provides the background and rationale for the present study.

Relational Maintenance in Military Marriages

Deployed military, their spouses, and family inherently rely on communication technologies to interact while separated. Technologically mediated communication (TMC), which includes online, written, and electronic interaction, is an essential tool within the military family unit (Maguire et al., 2013; Rabby & Walther, 2003; Walther & Parks, 2002). Lange (2004) notes that encouraging ongoing development of intimacy and family unity is critical in military relationships. Rossetto (2013) describes several relational coping strategies that emerge for managing communication during deployment including, maintaining a mediated interpersonal connection and choosing open versus restricted communication.

Additionally, Rossetto (2015) observes that providing information and reassurance is an important influence over managing uncertainty during deployment. Uncertainty encompasses feelings of staying connected, intimacy, and well-being of the deployed. Participants attribute their mediated interpersonal connection to positive relationship maintenance and behaviors which contribute to satisfaction.

Theoretical Frameworks of Uncertainty

For these reasons, utilizing uncertainty frameworks to explore military family communication, and, in particular, its intersection with TMC, is clear. Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) states that uncertainty creates an uncomfortable feeling, which is alleviated when action is taken to reduce or manage it (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Although URT was initially utilized to study first-time interpersonal encounters, scholars have subsequently come to rely on the framework to examine uncertainty in relationships (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988). Dainton (2003) and Dainton and Aylor (2001) concluded that uncertainty predicts the use of maintenance behaviors in relationships, so for military spouses, these findings suggest that more frequent and distinctive maintenance behaviors are important in military-affiliated relationships (i.e. family, friends) because of the inherent characteristic of uncertainty.

By definition, relational uncertainty is an individual's confidence in his/her perceptions about the relationship's status (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Dainton (2003) determines that relational uncertainty and inequity can predict the level of relational satisfaction in romantic relationships. This research suggests that with uncertainty elevated by underlying stress and fear that their partner may potentially not return, perhaps military spouses will be less satisfied than civilian spouses within their marriage, due to the intensified and varying levels of uncertainty and inequity (Dainton, 2003). Due to the implications of familial satisfaction on reenlistment decisions of service members, concern for the effects of uncertainty is paramount.

Wheeler and Torres-Stone (2009) discovered that reliance on mediated communication was one of the ways the participants dealt with being apart, revealing that using technology to communicate as a means of feeling closer to their spouse during deployment. Merolla (2010) found that military partners acknowledged establishing communication routines during deployment, many of which involved using the Internet. For example, some couples set aside a specific time each day to interact online (Merolla, 2010). Some respondents recognized that with the presence of online technology and computer-mediated communication they were better able to stay emotionally connected (Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2009).

Convenience and Accessibility of Mediated Technology

In Merolla and Steinberg's (2007) study, many of the wives indicated that it was easier to communicate using Internet than telephone. These findings suggest that the Internet plays an increasingly important role in contemporary deployment experience when it comes to relationship maintenance and mediated communication experiences while separated. Common maintenance strategies that military spouses use on social networking sites include family, peer, and community support ("using one's network to reinforce bonds with one's partner"), family and peer updates ("talking to one's network about one's partner"), network integration/preoccupation ("socializing with one's network members"), and military-facilitated support ("getting advice or information from official military sources") (Maguire et al., 2013, p. 256).

Rae et al. (2015) reveal that "respondents reported a range of purposes for using social media and online communication as a military spouse, with the two primary uses being: staying in touch with the deployed service member (all ten participants) and a means to staying connected with family and friends (8 out of 10). Many spouses expressed the following sentiment, as captured by one participant: "If social media didn't exist, I don't know how I would communicate with my spouse [during deployments]" (p. 332).

Technology Maintenance Paradox

A maintenance paradox occurs when a relationship maintenance strategy is utilized out of necessity, when there is no way to foresee or control the outcomes. For instance, the way a couple uses technology to facilitate marital communication during deployment and the ways that social media may be helpful or harmful to their communication (Maguire et al., 2013; Maguire & Sahlstein, 2009). Interviews with 40 military wives with deployed husbands yielded six paradoxes regarding stressors and coping strategies. Among them, avoidance and perceived impending loss, release of emotions and communication issues, providing support and emotional contagion, and seeking support and social network issues (Maguire & Sahlstein Parcell, 2015).

More evidence towards paradoxes within the communication culture among this group include the findings of Knobloch, Basinger, Wehrman, Ebata, and McGlaughlin (2016) study on the changes, challenges, and benefits in communication of military couples during deployment among 236 spouses (118 couples). The findings yielded a curious result in that the sample ranged across positive neutral, and negative changes about how their marital communication changed during deployment. According to the data, 44% of the couples reveal constructive communication and improved relational dynamics, while only 35% state that their communication was more destructive or benign (Knobloch et al., 2016). With a focus on marital and familial satisfaction's influence on military enrollment and retention, uncertainty during deployment is a subject of interest for military leaders, individuals in charge of military family programs, and to various community leaders who work with members of the military constituency. Examining relational maintenance during these times, through the use of social media platforms, may reveal effective TMC strategies to support families during time of great uncertainty.

Research Questions

This review and analysis of the collective findings presented in the existing literature invite two research questions for exploration:

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

RQ2: How do military spouses perceive the availability of Facebook and Skype to enhance their communication during wartime deployment?

Methodology

Instrumentation and procedure

This study approaches the data gathering and analysis procedures using hermeneutic phenomenological interviews to achieve two specific outcomes. First, the goal is to explore the narrative of mediated communication experiences during deployment in context to the idea of relational uncertainty. Secondly, this study examines the interplay of social media platforms to those mediated communication experiences. The data gathering procedure used a series of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with a small group (n=10) of civilian spouses who are married to active or former members of the United States military. Participants had to meet the inclusion criteria of being active users of Facebook and Skype platforms and their spouse had to have been deployed at least once between the years of 2007-2012 to Afghanistan or Iraq to qualify for the study. This small sample is suitable for phenomenological methodology, according to Creswell (2009).

The instrument contained a three-part interview sequence, consisting of demographic and relational inquiries and information regarding the participants' use of social media and online platforms. Such as, a series of questions on how they use new media channels (i.e. Facebook, Skype, and other mediated tools) to communicate with their spouse during deployment, as well as the frequency, norms, and patterns of their interactions.

More specifically, the first phase of the interview included questions such as: (1) In what branch of the service does/did your spouse serve?, (2) How long has s/he been enlisted in the military?, (3) When and where (year(s) and general location) was your spouse deployed?, (4) What new media platforms do you use? Your spouse?, (5) During the deployment(s) and/or military separation(s), how did you contact your spouse?, and (6) During deployment and separation, do you notice any change in frequency or any patterns of communication with your spouse using these platforms.

The second phase of the interview was a line of inquiry about the perceived impact that Facebook and Skype potentially have on communicative behavior among the military partners. Sample questions from this portion of the interview include: (1) Describe how you use Facebook and Skype to communicate with your partner during deployment?, (2) How often are you communicating?, (3) Describe the level of consistency of your communication exchanges, (4) What norms exist within your relational communication with your spouse?, (5) During deployment(s) to war, do you experience topic avoidance around any particular discussion items? Are there any topics that are "off limits" for discussion?, (6) How do you feel about having the ability to communicate using these new media during deployment?, (7) How would your communication during deployment(s) differ without the availability Facebook and Skype?, and (8) Have you communicated during deployment(s) without those platforms? If so, how?

The third and final phase of the interview asked a series of questions about the differences in communication between wartime compared with other types of military separations (training operations, disaster relief, and peacetime deployments) and speculative questions about the potential absence of these platforms during wartime deployment. Example questions include: (1) What changes do you notice in your communication habits and behaviors between communicating during wartime deployment and other types of military separation? And (2) How do you feel your spousal communication as a military spouse would be different without the presence of Facebook and Skype?

The interviews took place over three months and were predominately conducted via telephone due to geographic constraints. Using the multi-stage thematic analysis procedure presented by Creswell (2009), this narrative data is analyzed for the derivation of themes based upon the experiences of these military spouses.

Participants

The participants are all women (n=10, 100%) between the ages of 21 and 37 years (mean = 27 years old). The average length of marriage is 3 ¾ years, with marriages ranging from 6 months to 6 years. Most of the spouses were dating for an average of just over 3 years before getting married. Out of the couples, six have children (60%), ranging in age between 10 months to 5 years; four of the couples (40%) do not have children.

The sample includes four spouses who served in the Army (40%), four in the Marine Corps (40%), one in the Army National Guard (10%), and one in the Marine Corps Reserves (10%); none were in the Navy or Air Force. The average length of time enlisted is 6 years and 4 months, ranging from 2 ½ years to 17 years. A total of 6 spouses are on active duty (60%) and 4 are honorably discharged (40%). Since 2007, these 10 wives have experienced a total of 14 deployments; 11 with their partners doing tours in Iraq and/or Afghanistan, 1 tour in Japan, 1 tour in Kuwait, and 1 tour in Norway. The tours ranged in length from 6 months to a year. The average tour lasted for 9 ½ months.

Findings

The spouses interviewed in this study provide rich narrative revealing insights in response to the questions contained in the interview protocol. This section summarizes the highlights of these conversations as related to the posited research questions.

Outcomes of Results

In response to the two research questions posed in this study, when it comes to the theme of uncertainty, three conclusions arise within this study: (1) the expediency and opportunity of the Internet and the communication platforms it affords are valued by the military spousal constituency, (2) military spouses appreciate ready-access to information that they can acquire with and without direct contact in attempts to reduce uncertainty, and (3) indeed, it is more socially-acceptable to monitor behavior and information online (than in-person), which is conducive to the military lifestyle and its reoccurrences of geographic separation. While these findings are relevant to the military-affiliated constituency, they ironically echo the findings of other social media and relational research that examines the civilian population which describe the complexities of mediated communication in romantic relationships and for relationship maintenance (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011; Stewart, Dainton, & Goodboy, 2014).

Findings in this present study echo the results of Rossetto (2013) wherein spouses describe the duality of social media and mediated communication deployment. It is apparent that military spouses recognize social media as a channel to both enact maintenance activities of communication to build trust and intimacy, while simultaneously facing the reality that their partner may not return from deployment and that regularity to their interactions is entirely unpredictable. These and other findings of the current study mirror those found by Rea et al. (2015) wherein “participants in this study had strong and varying opinions of the impacts of social media for each couple” (p. 333).

TMC Duality

“One spouse reported that ‘social media can be a double-edged sword’ that both helps and hinders communication among military couples” (Rea et al., 2015, p. 333). Utz and Beukeboom (2011) propose that displays of affection online between partners may contribute positively to relationship satisfaction; their findings show that the majority of romantic partners are happy about online displays of affection. Their results also reveal that online monitoring behavior in romantic relationships occurs more commonly and is more widely acceptable than traditional monitoring behavior (i.e. looking through their partner’s phone or planner).

Most likely this is attributed to the ease of access to and publicity of information. The lack of privacy, coupled with the copious amounts of information and updates that are publicly available online, establish a complex venue for relational communication, proven to have both amazing benefits and potential costs to relationships.

Overall, romantic partners were more likely to be satisfied with Facebook use than threatened by its possibility of causing jealousy within their relationship (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). The military-affiliated participants in this present study concurred with these results in acknowledging their frequent use and positive accolades regarding Facebook, while barely acknowledging the pitfalls.

Muise, Christofides, and Desmarais (2009) discovered that the use of Facebook might increase partner uncertainty, noting a significant relationship found between Facebook-related jealousy and frequency of Facebook use. This standpoint is supported by subsequent research by Craig and Wright (2012) and Stewart et al. (2014), who concluded that mediated communication and use of Facebook might simultaneously increase and decrease a partner's ability to understand the behaviors of others, thus having a complicated impact on satisfaction and uncertainty. The results of this current study align with these other recent investigations and support the notion that the Internet as a means for relational maintenance can simultaneously be the causes of uncertainty and the means for reduction.

Several of the wives in this present study testify that although they did not experience jealousy within their own marriages, they are aware of other military couples who had marital conflict resulting from Facebook activity. In some cases, the online interactions caused the couples to separate or even divorce, highlighting the serious consequences that platforms can incite. Their shared testimonies imply that jealousy may be a catalyst for uncertainty for military spouses, and perhaps within romantic relationships more generally. The spouses in this study clearly indicate awareness as to how Facebook activity could trigger jealousy. According to Afifi, Dillow, and Morse (2004), knowing too much information about a partner can promote jealousy and ignite negative relational consequences. Thomas (2010) stated that 25% of unfaithful partners used Facebook as a means to communicate with the partner of their infidelity, thus validating a cause for concern within military marriages. The presence of uncertainty among the spouses in the present study, and the paradoxical complexities identified in previous studies, warrant the need for ongoing research among military spouses and families. While the participants discussed some of the complexities with social media in the contexts of military marriages, they overwhelmingly valued mediated communication platforms to communicate with their partners during deployment.

Social Media Preferences

In addition to the collective sentiments about the varied patterns of communication, the spouses also indicated that a myriad of platforms are used to augment their mediated communication. Predominately from this research Skype and Facebook were discussed, but Yahoo Messenger, traditional e-mail, and texting/messaging also emerged as common TMC modalities. One couple manages to Skype roughly once a week in addition to talking on Facebook daily and texting via iPhone apps. According to the wife, her husband does not favor Skype, and she speculates that him seeing her through the video triggers his emotions about being apart from her. She predicts that other media they use (i.e., Facebook messaging and text messaging) are less visual and therefore do not cause the same effect.

On the other hand, another wife had a very positive experience with Skype and used it as the primary channel of communication when her husband did his tour in Japan. She shares, "During Afghanistan, we weren't allowed to Skype at all. The Japan deployment, Skype was our main way to communicate. It was every day, sometimes more than once a day. He had his laptop with him in Japan, so it was pretty easy to connect." A particularly compelling preference for Skype arose when a spouse shared an intimate life moment with her husband, as she virtually introduced him to their child for the first time online. An experience that was shared by two of the other couples as well.

Yet another couple preferred using Yahoo Messenger instead of Skype to facilitate their video chats. At times, presumably due to bandwidth, the signal would cut out, or the image quality was poor, which would compromise their ability to communicate effectively. Nonetheless, the pair appreciated having a platform like Yahoo Messenger to communicate and interact. This suggests that it was comforting and reassuring for the couple to see each other while communicating by video. A challenge with using Skype as described by another spouse had to do less with the platform itself and more to do with her daughter sitting still to "talk to daddy." Hence, her preference was to upload lots of videos and pictures of their daughter for him because it was her belief that it made him feel more connected to their growing daughter than Skype chatting.

Reflecting on a different new media platform, Facebook provides a way for spouses to reduce uncertainty. For example, a participant admits that she and her spouse would monitor each other's Facebook pages occasionally during deployment, but largely their primary communication channels were satellite phone and Yahoo Messenger. In addition to checking in on her husband on Facebook directly, she became Facebook friends with her husband's Battalion Commander. She and the Battalion Commander did not communicate directly with one another using Facebook (i.e. exchanging private messages or sharing wall posts); however, the platform served as a valuable resource to acquire information by following his posts of online status updates. This surveillance greatly helped to reduce her uncertainty.

Another wife acknowledges that her husband's unit was strongly discouraged from using Facebook to communicate information and had very strict about posting information online. For this reason, and because they had alternatives, the couple typically relied more on Yahoo and Yahoo Messenger to facilitate their mediated communication instead of Facebook, Skype, or other platforms. In another couple's case, they preferred sending traditional emails as their primary means of communication during deployment. Yet another wife admits that it was easy to monitor the Facebook profiles of her husband's comrades. She also became online friends with the spouses of her husband's comrades as observing the other married couples interactions were reassuring.

Although the wives report positive and significant experiences using Skype and Yahoo Messenger, Facebook emerges as the most commonly used communication channel during deployment. Facebook acts as an instrument for interacting with their husbands, sharing pictures, making connections with other military spouses and their husbands' comrades, and monitoring Facebook activity to reduce uncertainty. One wife reveals, "If he is able to talk, he typically will Facebook me all day long. Pretty much, if he can talk, we talk, and we will talk all day. And he will try and contact me all day... because you never know when the next time is going to be that he'll be able to talk like that again."

Yet another spouse explains, "When he's training and stuff, I'm less obsessed about speaking with him every day and stuff. I mean, of course I still miss him, it's not that--it's just that I don't want to speak to him every day anyway, but the amount of feeling of stress I feel to talk to him is different when he's deployed." One participant uses the word 'uncertain' in response to the question about how their communication would be different without the presence of these new media platforms. She feels as though it could potentially cause strain on the relationship and that her life as a military spouse would ultimately become fraught with even more anxiety about her husband's well-being without ready-access to communication.

Communication Inconsistency and Uncertainty

Variations in communication patterns emerged in the findings, not only from tour to tour, but within a single tour of duty as well. One of the spouses experienced a noticeable disparity between the first and second halves of her husband's Afghanistan deployment. During the first part of the tour, he was not on an established base so their communication was inconsistent and infrequent. When he went back for his extension after his "R&R" (his leave to travel home during his tour), he was stationed on a major base. There, the Marines were able to use the Internet and also had access to phones, so the pair communicated much more frequently at that point.

Another of the wives notes that the consistency of her and her spouse's communication also varied from tour to tour. She states that during the "Afghanistan deployment we never knew when we would talk. Sometimes it was every few days, other times it was every few weeks. Japan was pretty much daily, several times a day even, sometimes." The couple relied on Skype to facilitate their communication while her husband was in Japan. She reveals that once during her husband's Afghanistan deployment, the Family Readiness Officer (FRO) scheduled a "Skype-like" video-conferencing session for the family members where they got to chat on webcam with their spouses. Other than that, she states that they primarily relied upon Facebook messages or phone calls to communicate whenever her husband was available and had access during the Afghanistan tour.

A third participant regards the differences both among and during the individual tours as well. During the first deployment, the couple only communicated about once every 5 or 6 weeks. Then, during the second deployment, their communication patterns initially started out slowly. She reveals:

At the beginning, (we spoke) hardly at all, but then after that, it just would always depend on if he was on base or if he had to go out for missions and what not, so I would say about, by the third or fourth month,

we were Skype-ing almost daily when he was on base, for like 30 minutes to an hour each time...Just depending on what he was doing.

Value of Mediated Communication during Deployment

In all ten interviews uncertainty surfaced as a leading theme given their use of mediated communication on social media platforms. In the findings to follow, specific examples of the wives mediated communication experiences are detailed. To begin, the participants described various reasons for why they found the opportunity to engage in mediated communication valuable. For example, one of the wives deems the Internet as being a vital asset to coping with deployment because of the ability to keep communication open. She regards this as being important when a spouse is gone for a long period of time.

Another participant reflects on the importance of creating emotional intimacy through relational communication in sharing, "A relationship is based off of you being able to communicate and speak with a person and share things. And if you don't have that communication with them, then, what is your relationship? It would pretty much be you by yourself over here and them by themselves over there, and that wouldn't be good. So, it just makes it a lot easier to communicate with one another." These comments suggest that ready access to mediated communication channels online allows military couples and family members to build and maintain their relationships while apart, as well as in uncertain circumstances.

For instance, one participant praised the Internet, but is quick to also describe it as a "double-edged sword." While she credits Facebook with keeping her and her husband connected during the deployment, she reveals about uncertainty resulting from communication blackouts, when online communication activity would "go dark" because of an occurrence that transpired in the combat theatre. She acknowledges challenges brought on by the transparency and visibility of an online platform like Facebook. She goes on to speak about the sense of family and community that develops within the military culture and explains the perils of having such a tight sense of community among the spouses and comrades within the military lifestyle include the ability to monitor and exchange information online more frequently. The transmission of information becomes overwhelming at times, which adds to the stress of the situation, and she insists this is among the most unnerving aspects of life as military spouse.

Another perspective on the value of mediated communication came from a spouse sharing her appreciation for having modern day communication channel at her disposal, as she reflects on sentiments expressed through the generations in her family. She reveals:

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

This final example draws together and highlights the potential benefit of mediated communication during a time of uncertainty, such as wartime deployment. The anecdote also helps to express that each deployment, each war, and each evolution of mediated communication platforms creates its own context of uncertainty.

Through these findings, mediated communication demonstrates a valuable benefit to relationship satisfaction of military spouses and families during times of deployment. While these findings capture a moment of time history, due to the transient nature of social media and the inconsistent shifts in military assignment, there is a need for ongoing research.

Discussion

As previously stated in the Methodology section, the research goals were two-fold. First, the goal is to explore the narrative of mediated communication during deployment in context to the idea of relational uncertainty. Secondly, this study examines the interplay of social media platforms to those mediated communication exchanges. Uncertainty emerges as a unanimous theme within the study. The spouses reveal how these mediated platforms both contributed towards and reduced uncertainty during deployment. An unpredictable situation, such as deployment, is prone to increasing uncertainty; in addition the diversity for mediated communication per social media platform also creates circumstances for clarity, assurances, and uncertainty and its features. These circumstances present challenges to developing a concrete understanding about the role and impact of mediated communication among the military constituency. These pre-existing assertions are upheld and reinforced by the findings within this current study.

Spouses of this study acknowledge Facebook, Skype, and Yahoo Messenger as their leading platforms for communication during the wartime separation. Most of the spouses praise the convenience of communication promoted by the Internet, while others noted the complexity and paradoxical nature of communicating using social media during deployment.

Uncertainty appears to be simultaneously created and reduced through the use of TMC during deployment. These findings of the present study indicate that the role and impact of social media is critical to the spouses and their marital maintenance within the military culture. Uncertainty and the use of social media as communicative agents in relationships represent a challenging and complicated paradox, one which researchers have struggled to completely understand (Muisse et al., 2009; Stewart et al., 2014; Utz & Buekeboom, 2011).

A maintenance paradox may occur when military couples are forced to rely on their less-preferred technology platforms, or when they engage in challenging interactions online during the inherently stressful and uncertain experience of wartime deployment (Maguire et al., 2013; Maguire & Sahlstein, 2009). Knobloch et al. (2016) cite the need for further research on the changes, challenges, and benefits to the communication of military couples during deployment in acknowledging that “specificity is needed to formulate effective prevention and intervention programs [for military couples]. We nominate this issue as a vital direction for future research” (Knobloch et al., 2016, p. 172).

Constructively, the Internet is a potentially beneficial outlet to foster productive and meaningful relational communication. These results suggest mindful use of Internet platforms such as Facebook, Skype, and related social media may offer a viable means to reduce uncertainty and increase comfort, which is especially critical to this military constituency faced with their transient lifestyle. Popular maintenance strategies on social media for military spouses include family, peer, and community support, family and peer updates, network integration/preoccupation, and military-facilitated support (Maguire et al., 2013). Conversely, the findings suggest that the transparency of social media may incite or increase uncertainty, or even provoke jealousy.

Future Research Opportunities and Next Steps

There are plenty of academic and pragmatic reasons to continue this line of research. In 2011, the National Military Family Association promoted the need for more research on the best practices for families. Further, several of the existing studies in the area of military communication also cite the need for continued and ongoing research in this area. These studies also acknowledge the challenges to this research, in that there is such a vast amount to explore (i.e. coping, relationship maintenance, family communication, etc.) yet it is very difficult to gather any generalizable benchmarks due to the niche nature of this research population (military spouses and families), as well as the dynamic climate of TMC (Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Maguire & Sahlstein, 2009; Merolla, 2010; Parcell & Maguire, 2014; Rossetto, 2015). Several researchers comment that experiences alter given the nature of each individual deployment, thus supporting the ongoing need for evaluation as being critical towards greater knowledge and understanding (Maguire et al., 2013; Merolla, 2010).

This evidence provides rationale to further explore uncertainty in this niche of military marriages and families, particularly as technology continues to innovate and as each unique combat situation presents its own set of conditions. This current research study is not without limitations. For one, this study may have been enhanced by expanding the breadth and scope of participants. Namely, the study lacked perspective of male military spouses,

homosexual military couples, and spouses of members of the United States Navy and Air Force Branches. Although self-reported data is criticized in many cases, it is appropriate for this particular study because of the phenomenological approach to understand the lived experience of these participants, which also validates the small sample size. This study may benefit from advancing towards a more grounded theory approach, encompassing existing data while examining new trends of popular online platforms across a larger, more diverse sample. Moving forward, this researcher intends to develop a longitudinal investigation, examining the ongoing uses and evolution of the most recent social media and Internet platforms and their role in military-affiliated relationships, especially within the unpredictable circumstances of war.

Through this study, uncertainty emerges as a leading theme among contemporary military spouses and URT surfaces as a meaningful theoretical structure for the design of future studies. In addition, several conclusions are posited about the particular lived experience, communication behavior, and uncertainty faced by service members and their loved ones alike during deployment. Presumably in times of war and peace alike, members of the United States Armed Forces and their partners and families will indefinitely face the challenges presented by separation. These unpredictable circumstances create a unique climate to explore communication behavior. Combined with the techno-cultural phenomenon as a result of global adoption of social media, there appears to be a constant opportunity to examine the intersection of these highly-exclusive variables. Gathering this data in a longitudinal capacity may potentially yield constructive contributions towards a body of knowledge that can pragmatically influence the development and sustainment of education and family readiness programs to support the partners and families of military service personnel (aka family satisfaction).

While these findings captured a relevant outlook by which to examine the interconnecting phenomena of deployment, spousal communication and relational maintenance, and the use of technologically-mediated communication (TMC) via social media among this community, there is a need to go beyond this preliminary study to elaborate this foundational research. This advances the understanding of the communicative needs and behaviors of military families. This information is essential in order to develop and provide appropriately modernized, best-suited educational programs for military spouses and family members, both when facing the deployment experience and the everyday military lifestyle.

As such, the initial task, in the second phase of the study is to bring the review of literature to present, comprised of a summary of the most recent publications presenting emerging research across a variety of fields and sub-fields; including, but not limited to communication (namely, relational, interpersonal, and family studies), new media, information and communication technologies (ICTs), technologically-mediated communication, and sociological and psychological research related to present-day deployment experiences. New research questions will be formulated to reflect the most recent trends and technologies yet will align with the scope of the pre-existing questions (i.e. exploring uses, perceptions, and effects).

The protocol will be revised for both currency and to consolidate the number of questions in order to be less redundant and more direct. Lastly, participants will be recruited using a purposive, snowball sampling method, wherein this researcher will specifically target online community networks comprised of military spouses, many of which were identified by participants in the earlier study, and utilize these spaces as recruiting vehicles for the upcoming study. Viral word of mouth was apparent among the previous sample, thus, a snowball sampling from the initial recruiting efforts is likely. Future studies invite interviewing a larger group of participants, exceeding the limitation of the size of the previous sample.

Conclusion

In closing, with the theme of uncertainty developing throughout the testimonies of the wives regarding deployment experiences, the clear emerging framework for this study is uncertainty reduction theory (URT). The results of this study reveal three distinct takeaways including: (1) the expediency and opportunity of the Internet and the communication platforms it affords are cautiously valued by the military spousal constituency, (2) military spouses appreciate ready-access to information that they can acquire with and without direct contact in attempts to reduce uncertainty, and (3) indeed, it is more socially-acceptable to monitor behavior and information online (than in-person), which is conducive to the military lifestyle and its reoccurrences of geographic separation.

This study brings about opportunities for future research and provides a wealth of valuable information which serves two purposes: (1) to better understand the needs and behaviors of military spouses deployed here and

now, and (2) establishes the foundation on which to build an ongoing body of research dedicated to this highly-exclusive juxtaposition of variables. Undoubtedly social media and TMC platforms are only going to continue to evolve, and global conflict has been a constant, yet unpredictable, historical cornerstone, thus requiring a well-prepared military ready to deploy and serve their country at a moment's notice. Recognizing the potential impact of these intersecting factors, there is value in fostering this type of ongoing exploration. Not only to the field of communication and social media studies but to the many military- and community-related stakeholders who may also potentially benefit from having access to the most recent and ground-breaking information on this unique and important topic.

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