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How is Social Media Used by Military Families to Communicate During Deployment?

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How is Social Media Used by Military Families to Communicate During
Deployment?

by

Lisa Bittner, B.A.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas
St. Paul, Minnesota
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is Conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

As the construct of today's military has progressed and changed over time to include a more diverse representation of the United States culture, so have families progressed in how to maintain connectedness during periods of absence. The challenge of maintaining communication despite distance and extensive time differentials is often subsidized today through the utilization of social media or electronic forms of communication. This form of communication often serves as a supplement to traditional mediums of communication such as letters, care packages, and telephone calls, offering a more immediate and interactive communicative process to occur between deployed service members and their families.

This research examines how social media and electronic forms of communication are currently being utilized by service members, veterans and their spouses, partners, significant others, or adult children to maintain communication during deployment periods ($n = 28$). The focus in this research is on the Post 9-11 conflict period (Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn), identifying which communicative devices or mediums of preference are currently being utilized and at what frequency. Additionally, examination of conflict resolution and the engagement and resolution of difficult topics through the utilization of social media is explored.

Results indicate a high level of accessibility, satisfaction, and frequency of utilization of social media for communication between service members and their family members during deployment. Social workers are presented with the challenge of meeting the needs for facilitation of supporting these communicative efforts, as well as examining how social media as a communicative medium effects the reintegration process.

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Utilization of Social Media by Military Families during Deployment

Introduction

Since the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) began following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, millions of military service members and their families have been impacted by deployment. Understanding the impact these deployments have upon families can be gained through the examination of statistical data. Approximately 2.2 million men and women have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (2001-2011) and Operation Enduring Freedom (2001-present) [(Department of Defense (DoD), 2011)]. Approximately 44% of active duty service members are parents, encompassing some 1.2 million children (DoD, 2011). Additionally, approximately 54% of today's service members are married (DoD, 2011).

Military families today comprise a unique subculture within our country, posed with challenges both similar and different to those experienced by previous generations during wartime deployment. Consistent with previous wars, deployments among service members have caused varying degrees of stress, disruption, and modification within familial constructs. In addition to the separation and adjustment-related challenges traditionally faced during deployment, military families during this conflict have also endured effects of repeated and extended deployments, as well as the positive and negative effects associated with the utilization of social media to maintain contact with one another during these periods of absence.

For a variety of reasons, post-9/11 military families have increasingly begun to utilize social media to communicate with one another during deployment. One contributing factor is that communication by way of social media is preferred among pre-teen and teenage children, regardless of parental deployment status (Comstock & Scharrer, 2007). A second factor is that increased accessibility of social media (e.g., Facebook, Skype, text message, email) allows for ease of information exchange to occur regardless of distance or time differential. Finally, while acknowledging these trends to utilize social media for means of communication during periods of deployment, research also indicates that its utilization can have both positive and negative effects upon familial construct and interactions. However, the precedent for access to and availability of social media during deployment to maintain contact with family and friends has become an expectation of both service members and their families (Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010).

Despite increased reliance upon social media for communication by the Department of Defense, service members, and their family members, the role and impact of these technologies is not yet known. Social media utilization within military families has been pivotal in the maintenance of relationships during periods of deployment. However, little research exists evaluating the extent and use of social media communication by family members and service members during periods of deployment related absence.

The purpose of this study is to examine the various means, and extent in which social media is utilized to maintain connectedness and communication among family members during periods of wartime deployment. Specifically, this study will be

examining families whom have experienced the deployment of a service member in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and Operation Iraqi Freedom post September 11, 2001. The hypothesis being examined is: How does the utilization of social media impact the quality or frequency of communication between service members and their families during periods of deployment?

Literature Review

“A major characteristic of war has been the soldier’s isolation from spouses, family, friends, and the larger society” (Ender & Segal, 1998)

This literature review examines how service members and their family members are affected by the utilization of social media during deployment. In this section relevant history, definitions, theories, and research that promote an understanding of how social media is utilized during deployment will be examined. First, the definitions and the history of communication during deployment will be examined as a means to understand the progression and utilization of social media over time. Second, the impact and influence of social media upon the military family subculture shall be briefly examined to identify communication patterns, potential areas of need, and areas of future analysis. Third, relevant military family-related concepts will be identified and defined. Forth, the effects of deployment both in general and specific to each member of the military family shall be briefly explored. Finally, implications for social work practice shall be reviewed.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that utilization of social media during periods of deployment has upon maintaining connectedness and familial communication during periods of absence. In the following literature review, five empirical studies will be examined that pertain to these issues and concerns. The first study to be examined relates how utilization of social media for maintenance of communication is reflective of the construction and configuration of today’s military. Brief examples of how the military’s steady progression and adaptation in its efforts to assist service members and their families to maintain communication over time appears reflective of construct and demand embodied within to maintain morale. Second, service member’s perspectives regarding the impact of deployment upon their familial

relationships will be examined followed by the impacts of deployment upon spouses and children to include a brief analysis review of the deployment cycle. Third, communication during deployment in relation to how it has evolved from previous conflicts will be examined. Fourth, the impact of communicative tools within society, (more specifically during periods of deployment) specifically examining social media within modern society will be evaluated. Last, an analysis of how the utilization and role of social media during the examined conflicts influences family members' experiences with feelings of ambiguous loss. This section will conclude with the evaluation of current research.

Families

When considering how communication occurs within periods of conflict, it is important to understand the nature of the events that surround that period of time. Several paradigm shifts have occurred within the time frame of the cited six major conflicts. For example, service members deployed in the Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn conflicts are more likely than Vietnam War service members to have children, be married, single parents, or in a family where both parents are in the military and could potentially deploy together (U.S. Department of Defense, 2007). Additionally, today's Armed Forces are comprised of a broader range of age of service members and are represented by more diverse populations (such as women and racial minorities) than in previous conflicts (Castaneda et al., 2008; DoD, 2007; Sollinger, Fisher, & Metscher, 2008). Statistics regarding marital status of active duty service members cite concern regarding marital discord and above national average divorce rates within the military connected families. Further research and

analysis of military connected families and service members in relation to how they maintain communication and connectedness during periods of absence could pose an invaluable resource to military families in their efforts to remain intact through the multitude of adaptations deployment and military connectedness often requires.

Communication During Deployment

The rewards and challenges of maintaining communication between service members and their families during times of separation from one another is not a new concept, and has been present throughout the history of deployment separation. Communication between service members and their families has been shown to boost morale, with modern means of communication allowing for a more timely exchange of information to occur than had been accessible during prior conflicts (Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010). In the next section, the transition of communication during the six major conflicts in the history of our country are explored, beginning the examination of how social media is utilized currently within military connected families.

Previous conflicts. Deployment is not limited to active duty orders overseas for engagement in foreign conflict. There are peacetime and other relevant reasons service members have been deployed both stateside and nationally, including the utilization of Reserve and National Guard Units for assistance in state and national disasters orders which provide time limited funding for service members to perform specific jobs such as pre-mobilization preparation and state full time Honor Guard positions hired to organize and facilitate military funeral honors. However, for the purpose of this study, international deployment specific to the post-9/11 conflicts shall be examined.

There have been six major conflicts in the history of our country prior to current (post-9/11) conflicts. Service members and their families have long been faced with the challenge of maintaining communication during periods of absence due to deployment. During the Civil War communication primarily occurred through the utilization of the telegraph delivered in person from sender to recipient. Technology slowly progressed during World War I and World War II with the introduction of the wireless telegraph, television and radio, allowing more frequent and timely information to be exchanged with family members (History.com, 2013). During the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, service members were able to access two-way communication via the Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) to communicate with their families (Schumm, Bell, Ender, & Rice, 2004). Media coverage of events occurring during these conflicts was beginning to take form, through the utilization of still frame photographs as well as videos. However, it was not until the invasion of Grenada that service members gained “uncontrolled access” to telecommunications, from which time forward telephone availability became an expectation during deployments (Schumm et al., 2004). It was not until the engagement in Operation Desert Storm that service members had access to modern technologies such as fax, email, and videotapes in addition to the traditional communicative devices of mailing letters. As technology continued to develop throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, military installments developed within their organizational construct the implementation and utilization of modern technology to facilitate and maintain familial connectedness during deployments, allowing for more regular communication to occur.

Current Conflicts. As societal norms have changed and progressed throughout the conflicts engaged in by the United States, so has the construct of our military. With the integration of women, minorities, and a large age differential, today's military is comprised of a unique milieu of service members (Castaneda et al., 2008; Clever & Segal, 2013; DoD, 2007; Sollinger et al., 2008). When activated or placed on military orders, these service members leave their family members behind to fill their roles within the familial construct. To ensure effective and timely communication can occur during these transitions, ease of access and frequency of communication between service members and their family back home is of utmost importance.

The introduction and development of satellite-based technology, high speed internet, international cellular phone coverage, texting, and video conference calling has offered a variety of options for familial communication between service members and their families during international deployment. Today's military families have become increasingly reliant upon social media for communication during periods of absence, allowing for communication and connectedness to occur despite varying distance and time differentials separating them.

Unique to this conflict in comparison to the previous six major conflicts our country has engaged in is the frequent and steady utilization of National Guard and Reserve Units in support of and supplemental to Active Duty Units. Additionally, deployments during this conflict have extended to the longest ever, with the longest occurring in the years of 2006 to 2007 with the Minnesota Army National Guard serving for a period of 22 months. Since that time, subsequent efforts have been made to keep and maintain deployment periods to 12 months or less. During these extensive times of

absence, families are separated, relying upon the utilization of modern technology to maintain contact.

Impact of Social Media as Communicative Tool

Through the introduction and further development of telecommunication access, landline and postal means to communication between family members and their deployed service member has transitioned to a more immediate form of communication through electronic mail, instant messaging, live video links, and social media. The immediacy offered by these forms of communication offer families and service members more options for maintaining communication during periods of absence than in prior conflicts.

Social media and modern family communication. Today, families have become accustomed to the utilization of social media both within and outside the context of deployment as a means to maintain contact for employment, social, and familial purposes regardless of time and distance separating individuals. During deployment, family members and their service members have come to expect access to social media to be provided. When the reality of theatre interferes with preconceived expectations that both service members and their family members may hold, varied emotional responses can occur. The National Military Family Association has recommended secure websites be created for family access, to ensure basic communication regarding whereabouts and relevant news is relayed (Greene et al., 2010). Subsequently, this allows for service members to have increased direct contact with their families by freeing up lines of communication otherwise used to facilitate such information (Greene et al., 2010).

Social media and society. While social media is a growing communicative tool that is utilized globally to transmit desired or current information within seconds, its

impact upon familial function, specific to the maintenance of relationships during deployment has received little clinical research attention. With the founding of MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004 social media has gained a great deal of societal awareness and utilization. Facebook has been estimated to have some 1.4 billion users throughout the world (Statistic Brain, 2014). Through social media utilization, family, friends, associates, and colleagues are able to maintain contact around the globe with some amount of immediacy. This is a vast difference from pre-modernization of communication through electronic means.

The United States military has taken notice of societal trends regarding communicative preferences, often providing service members access to electronic communicative devices such as internet and Wi-Fi access during periods of international deployment as a means of maintaining contact with family and friends, thereby allowing service members and their families to maintain connectedness and communication during periods of absence.

Military Families

The benefits of social media utilization during deployment can be impacted by a variety of stressors. Research findings indicate that the pros and cons associated with the ease of access between service members and their families facilitated through the use of social media can be impacted by a variety of factors including the frequency of contact, pre-existing relationship status, age, and definition of the relationship prior to deployment. These factors tend to predict family members overall satisfaction of the effectiveness of social media utilization during deployment. Additionally, absence due to deployment can produce symptoms of stress both within service members and their

families as evidenced by the development of mental health symptoms commonly associated with loss, anxiety, and depression. Family members struggling with these concerns may have difficulty expressing their needs via electronic communication, at times causing misconstrued messages or misinterpretation of information provided.

Family: Communication during deployment. The utilization of social media as a communicative device during deployment has been shown to greatly mitigate the strain of maintaining relationships during periods of service member absence by both the service member and their family remaining at home. Literature suggests that the emotional state and occupational functioning of deployed service men and women can be related to their access and utilization of social media to facilitate communication with family and friends (e.g., more contact equates more stability, with decreased contact equating increased stress and anxiety).

Social media utilization can result in positive relational effects among both family members and service members, often dependent upon the frequency and depth of communication occurring. Research conducted by Schumm and colleagues (2004) conducted in August and October of 1994 of the US Army 4-505th Infantry Battalion regarding their expectations of telecommunications use during their upcoming deployment scheduled from January to July of 1995. In May of 1995 researchers surveyed soldiers regarding their actual use and including the advantages of different types of telecommunication (Schumm et al., 2008). This research concluded that military service members who engaged in “tele-family commuting” (e.g., using social media to maintain and enhance family relationships and friendships while deployed) found that the

utilization of electronic communication was assistive in their ability to maintain connectedness to their family remaining at home during their deployment.

Research conducted by Hinojosa, Hinojosa, and Hognas (2012) studied 20 Reserve component and Army National Guard men deployed as part of OEF/OIF. Findings from this study concluded that the most beneficial communication between couples and families during deployment is open communication (e.g., sharing thoughts, feelings, daily activities, personal information, and opinions), where both parties exchange information in an honest and non-biased and non-protective manner. In doing so, Hinojosa et al. (2012) found that role assimilation was more easily attained by the non-deployed family member allowing for a more naturally evolving and developed mutual understanding of roles during periods of absence.

Engagement in open communication between service members and their family allows for optimal familial resiliency during deployment. Utilization allows for communication to occur with ease and flow, discussing and including the absent service member in familial activities throughout the deployment period, thereby assisting the service member in the reintegration process, due to the service member having felt connected to the family throughout the period of absence (Hinojosa et al., 2012). Further, service members reported utilization of social media as a medium in which to engage in open communication with family members could “reduce boredom, maintain morale, and reduce isolation,” easing the loss experienced with missing special events or activities (Greene et al., 2010).

Social media, while beneficial and positively impacting and reaching billions, in the face of war can have negative impacts upon familial relationships. Information

exchanged that is unintended or inaccurate may at times cause strife among family members, within an already strained relational circumstance. Additionally, communication occurring via social media may be misinterpreted or misunderstood by the recipient due to a multitude of factors including time limitations, limited access to communicative devices, and potential security measures such as ‘black-out’ periods following specific events (limiting or denying access to communicative devices for a specified period of time).

Inconsistent information exchange, or frequent conflict during communication with home can be a significant source of stress among both the service person and non-deployed family members due to ambivalence, or the limited ability of the service member to effectively engage in problem solving or offering of support due to physical distance and feeling disconnected or powerless in the situation at hand (Greene et al., 2010; Hinojosa et al., 2012). Additionally, service members may feel the need to “protect” their family members by withholding information from them, thereby providing limited information about their in theatre experiences (Baptist et al., 2011; Greene et al., 2010). When information is attained by family members by another means other than their service member, the lack of information can be perceived as negatively reflective upon their familial or interpersonal relationship, causing conflict.

Resolution of conflict or clarification of information can be delayed or placed on an impasse in part due to the varying consistency and clarity of electronic connections, expenses affiliated with the use of these services, as well as potentially limited accessibility of communicative devices. Potentially this can complicate and add strain on relationships and leave concerns unresolved, building tensions and causing increased

stress and potential for the development of mental health symptoms for both service members and their non-deployed family members (Greene et al., 2010).

Due to the unique stressors military families face during deployment, many families reportedly are at an increased risk for experiencing mental health symptoms. Military families are at “higher risk for experiencing crisis” than their civilian counterparts due to deployment related separations and subsequent related stressors (Baptist et al., 2011). In the absence of their soldier spouse, the remaining spouse is placed in a single-parent role through the extent of the deployment, often causing increased stress to that parent (Ashbury & Martin, 2012).

Spouses of deployed soldiers often report experiencing loneliness, sadness, anger, worry, anxiety, headaches, eating and sleeping disruptions, concentration problems, and nervousness (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011). Research conducted by Esposito-Smythers and colleagues (2011) and Eaton and colleagues (2008) found that military spouses link increased mental health symptoms such as those associated with depression and anxiety during deployment of a spouse. Additionally, research indicated family members stated that they had tried to seek information about their loved one as a means to alleviate stress during deployment, struggling to find accuracy and timeliness in the information exchanged (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008).

Currently, the most time effective means to derive and disperse information has been through the utilization of electronic communication such as social media. In research conducted by Baptist and colleagues (2011), spouses of deployed service members found that communication during periods of absence allowed for families to build trust, provide relief of stress through information exchanged, as well as engagement

in the opportunity to support each spouse's circumstance. Significance was found in the act of staying connected as opposed to the content of actual information exchanged.

Communication challenges pose an additional unique stressor upon couples experiencing deployment (Sherman & Bowling, 2011). For a soldier in combat, maintaining emotional control is essential to maintaining the success of a mission. However, within a home and familial environment, failing to communicate emotional need causes significant interpersonal strain upon relationships (Sherman & Bowling, 2011). Although dispersing of information through social media is an effective tool in maintaining contact with family during periods of absence, its utilization allows for information to be exchanged in a manner lacking personal interaction, hand written word, and nonverbal gestures, offering the potential for miscommunication (Hinojosa et al., 2012). Although engagement in communication via social media may be beneficial for a service member's need to maintain emotional control by limiting personal connectedness, for some family members this could pose challenges in their perceptual understanding of their service members' lack of emotional investment.

Children of service members additionally face unique challenges during deployment. Children's resiliency during periods of deployment is largely impacted by presence of prior existing behavioral and/or emotional concerns, in addition to parental emotional stability and response to stress (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011; Lincoln & Sweeten, 2011). Research shows many military children have a "heightened risk" for experiencing behavioral and emotional difficulties when engaged in the deployment cycle (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011). Feelings of anger, sadness, sleep and eating disruption, social withdrawal, worry, irritability, disrespectful behavior, problems at school and

home, engagement in risky behaviors, acknowledgement of fantasy thinking, as well as excessive worry regarding their parents safety has been found in research conducted by Esposito-Smythers and colleagues (2011) and by Lincoln and Sweeten (2011).

Teenagers' and adolescents' primary form of communication with one another occurs through the utilization of social media. For children of deployed service members, social media as a socialization tool is easily transitioned into their interactions with their deployed parent(s). Interviews of the children and spouses of service members' who had been deployed to Iraq in support of OIF found that teenagers reported that the level or depth of communication occurring was most significant in the maintenance of their relationship during absence, with "deep" communication resulting in higher experiences of stress than "engaged" or "somewhat engaged" levels of communication (Houston et al., 2013).

Regardless of age, research indicates that children benefit from ongoing communication with their deployed parent, but unlike their parents, attention should be given to the quality and type of communication engaged in, with less information and more interaction regarding the child's experiences being of greater benefit.

Conclusion

Social media has become a means in which to parent, facilitate decision making, offer support, and maintain familial connectedness during lengthy periods of absence and physical distance service members and their families often endure during periods of deployment. Through the utilization of social media—such as Facebook, instant message, blog, text, and email—"Online Fathering" is becoming a new means for fathers specifically to continue involvement in their children's lives during periods of absence

(Schachman, 2010). The resulting question posed is what types and at what frequency is social media currently being utilized to maintain communication and connectedness between service members and their families during periods of deployment, and how is that communication currently being utilized and implemented to maintain relationships and resolve conflict during periods of absence?

Conceptual Framework

In order to gain an understanding for research conducted, one must first gain perspective and understanding regarding the theoretical framework in which the research is conducted. Grounded social work is formulated by building upon prior research and theories allowing for the development for new understanding of human behavior. For purposes of this research, the theoretical framework approached will be that of the Applied Ecological Theory.

Ecological Theory

In the field Social Work there are several individuals who paved the way for current practices. However, the most well-known example for this concept is Urie Bronfenbrenner who presented a model of human development based upon a non-stage approach to life's course. He suggested that human development is influenced by biological and cultural factors that impact an individuals' psychological processes including perception, emotion, motivation and thinking on their interpretation of life experiences (Forte, 2007).

Ecological theory is a theory based upon the assumption that individuals develop and grow from the experiences that they incur. As such, *ecological theory* compares human beings to living organisms such as plants and animals by examining their life processes and how humans similarly interact and respond to their physical and social environments, and the significance of psychological factors upon development (Germain, 1987). The application of this model in regards to the utilization of social media to communicate during periods of deployment has been defined by Germain (cited in Bloom, 1992, p. 408) stating: "the unique paths of development people take and their diverse life experiences in various environments" defines their "life course". The

experience of deployment, the complete removal of a family member for an undeclared period of time, with the unknown promise of return, often to perform an unclear job in an undefined war zone, can be defined as a unique path in which development occurs physically, cognitively, and emotionally for both service members and their families. Each person's experience is individualized, dependent upon a variety of internal and external stimulus, and their responses to them. In this study, the medium being examined for interacting and responding to the changes in an individual's physical and social environments during deployment is social media.

Ecological theory affects military service members and their families within micro-, mezzo-, and macro- system contexts. Macro (societal) level systems affected have been described as greater society including communities and organizations. Within a non-deployed spouse, partner, or child this could include churches, schools, community organizations, and governmental organizations. Within the military sub-culture this could include military bases, churches, schools or civilian communities. For a spouse, partner or child of a deployed service member this could be composed of military affiliated organizations such as Military One Source and the regional Family Support Group, their church, school of attendance, or local Yellow Ribbon affiliate. Whereas a deployed service member seeking support at the macro level might do so from their leadership and unit commander.

The meso (formal) level systems is a less formalized, more direct and accessible supportive network. For a non-deployed spouse, partner, or child, this could be their church pastor, teacher, community leaders, co-workers, classmates, or social acquaintance. For a spouse, partner, or child of a deployed service member this could

include their Family Readiness leader in addition to the already identified supports. A deployed service member seeking support at the meso level would connect with members from their unit, squad, battle buddy, or other social acquaintances.

On the micro (natural) level individual relationships with family, friends, and those who are close and intimately involved with the person have the greatest impact upon how the individual responds to their environment. Regardless of military affiliation, for all members in society these are primarily the same in construct, those individuals are close friends, family and individuals with whom interpersonal relationships have been formed. They are trusted friends and family. For deployed service members and their spouses, partners, and children, this is often the ecological level most significantly impaired and impacted due to the nature of deployment as these are the most intimate and personal relationships engaged in by both service members and their family. The implementation and collaboration of all three of these systems together form an individual's perspective and experiences within life, determining how they maintain and progress through specific circumstances as they may arise.

The theory of Person In Environment (PIE) views human behavior as the result of intrapersonal and interpersonal forces interacting with one another in some manner. The reasons for these forces form an individual's life experiences, molding perception and understanding laying the groundwork for interpretation of future life events. It is through this approach that social workers examine how behavior and personality are influenced by biological factors that cannot be controlled such as age, race, abilities or disabilities, and genetics. Psychological factors such as intelligence, personality, and sociological influences like nuclear family construct and the community in which one was raised also

influence an individual's perceptual groundwork (Ashford, Lecroy, & Lortie, 2001).

Military families exhibit a unique milieu within our nation, with a PIE that during periods of conflict often fluctuates and adapts in accordance to governmental demand, resulting in displacement, relocation, and separation of families for extended periods of time. This influx in the macro, mezzo, and micro level systems of care influence familial function, the extent of which is not fully known.

These theoretical constructs were considered in the development of the survey administered, and taken into consideration during interpretation of the data collected. I believe in order to gain a full understanding of an individual, one must gain a complete picture or profile of what has influenced their processes and interaction with others. Or in other words, how do they see themselves within society and why. Why do some service members engage in a great deal of communication with family during deployment, while others engage in minimal? What is the differentiation? For example, is a service member who is engaging in minimal communication with family doing so to protect their family, or themselves, or are the relationships too difficult to maintain at a distance?

By understanding the interactions between the micro-, meso-, and macro- levels of organization, one can gain a greater understanding of the military spouses', partners', dependents, and service members' behaviors and responses to specific circumstance, and determine why individuals respond differently under the stress of deployment absence.

Personal Lens

Because my husband is currently deployed in a yearlong deployment, my motivations for developing this research project were personal. Specifically, my interest

in the utilization and effectiveness of social media for communication stems from my desire to gain a deeper knowledge and appreciation for the impact his deployment will have on our familial construct in his absence. In examining how my husband and I would maintain communication through the deployment period I began to discover the need for research on this topic to explore how and to what extent families currently utilize electronic communication and social media to maintain communication and connectedness during deployment. Additionally, I am curious about the challenges my family—and others whose loved ones are currently or have been deployed—will face when utilizing social media to communicate, and how each individual's experience will differ and why.

Professional Lens

Professionally I have worked with children and families within their homes for over ten years. I have experienced the growth of social media in popularity and significance among our youth, in addition to witnessing both the positive and negative impacts of its utilization upon familial relationships. My interest lies in gaining an understanding regarding specifically the military population, if the frequency of social media use increases, stays the same, or decreases during deployment, and what influences those changes. Ultimately of interest is examination of how the utilization of social media during periods of extended absence impacts familial resiliency, how relationships are maintained during absence, how conflict is resolved, and if those experiences are predominately positive or negative in nature.

Methodology

In this study, a cross sectional research design was administered via the development and utilization of an online mixed methods survey that was developed and conducted based upon the results of previous research conducted, and noted gaps. This survey was created as a means to gain an understanding on how social media is utilized to maintain communication between service members and their families during deployment. Recruitment was conducted through the utilization of social media, implementing the snowball method to attain participants. The data was analyzed utilizing Qualtrics, with demographic information and data automatically calculated with each survey completion. Employing a mixed method approach to this research was advantageous as a framework for this study, as it can effectively embody the unique needs of the examined military population.

Generally, mixed method research allows for questions (1) to be posed before a large sample of people in a fairly short period of time at a minimal expense (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009); and, (2) a pragmatic approach to research allowing the researcher to “draw upon what works, using diverse approaches, giving primacy to the importance of the research problem and question, and valuing both objective and subjective knowledge” (Creswell, Klassen, Clark, & Smith, 2010). Use of this type of research gives voice to the experience of research participants and, in the current research specifically, was used to outline the frequency and type of social media utilized by service members and their families. Data garnered from this research was compared to the study’s hypothesis and a summary is offered in the findings section. The research question for the current study is: How is social media currently being utilized during

periods of deployment to facilitate communication between service members and their families?

Research Design

The current study's aim was to address the question "How is social media utilized by service members and their families to communicate during deployment?" Survey participants were asked to reflect upon questions regarding their access to, utilization of, preferred medium utilized, perceived thoughts regarding use of social media to resolve conflict/difficult situations, as well as overall satisfaction regarding the use of social media to maintain communication during periods of deployment.

In this research, service members, their spouses, partners, significant others, and adult children were asked to complete a mixed methods online survey composed of thirty-eight quantitative questions and six qualitative questions (see Appendix D).

Respondents were required to consent to participation in the research (see Appendix C). Next, respondents were requested to complete inclusive questions. Those who did not meet inclusion criteria were brought to the end of the survey. Respondents who met inclusion criteria continued completion of the survey. Respondents who met inclusion criteria were asked four questions specific to deployment (e.g. number of deployments and dates if known, location of deployment(s), length of deployment(s), and years served). Respondents were asked three questions specific to family construct and location of family during the most recent deployment (e.g. who resided together during the service members deployment, did they reside on a military base or in a civilian community, or 'other'). Respondents were asked twelve questions regarding accessibility, frequency of use, preference of medium utilized, and overall perceptions

regarding utilization of social media to maintain communication during deployment. Respondents were asked seven questions pertaining to social media utilization as a means to communicate conflict/difficult situations, and overall satisfaction with results attained. Finally, fourteen demographic questions and a general feedback question was posed regarding the survey and any remaining feedback the participant wanted to provide.

Reliability and Validity

Questions for the interview and survey were developed from current research literature, which had been deemed relevant and concurrent with theoretical framework in order to assure validity of content occurred. Additionally, the research committee reviewed the survey questions to verify that questions posed determine the face validity, or are reflective of and clearly related to the research question (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). Finally, survey questions were reviewed by this researcher and the research committee for issues of sensitivity in order to protect participants.

Procedures

Recruitment. A *convenience sampling method*—used when the research being conducted is either difficult or impossible to attain a complete sampling frame (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011) — was employed to recruit military service members and their partner/spouse/significant other or adult children to participate in the study. Convenience sampling was conducted by seeking and requesting permission from social media websites such as Facebook to post a link for the survey. Facebook was chosen due to the popularity of its utilization, and ease of access to public sites in addition to the number of sites potentially available or supportive of such research.

Monette and colleagues (2011) described this as *snowball sampling* or “a type of nonprobability sampling characterized by a few cases of the type that we wish to study, which lead to more cases, which in turn, lead to still more cases, until a sufficient sample is achieved” (Monette et al., p. 507). This type of sampling allows for *interactive* sampling or the ability for participants to interact with one another (Monette et al., 2011). Once approval of the project was gained, the researcher contacted public social media websites with interests specifically directed to service members and their families, requesting permission to post information for a link to an online survey. It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of contacts made regarding sharing and exchanging of information regarding the survey due to the snowball and interactive approach this sampling style projects.

To access qualitative information regarding this population, a combination of a convenience and snowball sample was utilized, comprised of active or prior service military members, their spouses, partners, significant others, and adult children through the utilization of Qualtrics. The researcher attached the letter of introduction (see appendix A) in addition to the informed consent (see appendix B), and survey (see appendix D) to those social media websites who responded to requests for permission to utilize their website to connect with potential research respondents.

Protection of Human Subjects

Due to the desired attainment of general knowledge regarding frequency and type of social media utilization occurring during deployment, there is minimal risk associated with this study, and it went through an expedited review process. Precautions were taken in regards to broaching deployment related topics as veterans and their families are

considered to be a vulnerable population. Participants needed to be at least 18 years of age to participate and complete the survey, which was one of the exclusion criteria to gain entrance into the survey. Further precautions were taken within the survey to address the chance that participants could potentially gain entrance despite their age being under 18, through an embedded question posed later within the survey clarifying specific participant age at various points during the deployment period. There were no participants under the age of 18. However, consideration for future study of this population is to will be considered. Likewise, information attained regarding family members other than service members, spouses, partners or their adult children will also be considered for future research. In this study, in order to gain current and accurate information pertaining to current and rapidly changing technology, respondents must have experienced deployment since September 11, 2001 having served during Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, or Operation New Dawn.

Review of the survey was vital to ensuring that the validity and applicability of the information attained is beneficial and applicable to military service members and their families. The research was reviewed and approved by a research committee prior to conduction or publication of any online survey tools. The study was also determined as a minimal risk study and approved by the institutional review board at the University of St. Thomas prior to any contact being made with potential participants. The institutional review board helps ensure the safety of participants is maintained. Finally, careful consideration and care was taken when deriving the order, wording, and content of the online survey questions to protect participants from experiencing strong emotions during the survey completion process. Additionally, the research committee reviewed the

survey questions prior to its utilization to ensure further protection from undue emotional distress placed upon participants.

Participants were provided and were required to authorize consent with an electronic informed consent form prior to their completion of the survey. Within the construct of the consent form, clarification and permission to withdraw from the survey or skip questions if discomfort or distress occurs during completion was stated. A resource sheet was constructed and made available to respondents availing them to nationally linked supportive organizations for military families.

Data Collection

Recruitment was attained through the utilization of social media. The researcher contacted eight public social networking websites inviting them to participate and publicize the link for the online survey. Two of the contacted websites declined this request, and six did not respond. The researcher then posted the link to the survey on this writer's personal social networking webpage, inviting potential participants to share the online survey with family or friends. Next, twelve emails and messages were sent to social contacts of this writer, inviting them to participate in and distribute the survey link as deemed appropriate. Subsequently, this survey was attached to two closed group social networking Family Readiness Group websites, allowing for family members of service members' access and ability to continue to share its use.

The data was collected via mixed methods survey utilizing the Qualtrics online survey tool and consisted of 46 questions. Questions addressed deployment experience (e.g. location, year, and length), accessibility and utilization of social media mediums during deployment, frequency of utilization, how social media is utilized to resolve

conflict, and demographic information. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected through these questions (see Appendix D). Participants were prompted and required to complete the informed consent prior to gaining access to the survey (see Appendix C). If participants did not meet inclusion criteria they were exited from the survey.

Quantitative data was collected within the survey through the utilization yes/no and Likert Scale questions. Examples of these questions include: “Have you/your spouse/partner/significant other/parent deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan/Pakistan October 7, 2001 to present date), Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq between October 7, 2001 through August 31, 2010), or Operation New Dawn (Iraq between September 1, 2010 through December 15, 2011)?” (yes/no); and “I had access to social media during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.” (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree).

Qualitative data was collected within the survey through the utilization of open-ended and semi-structured questions. Examples of qualitative questions used include: “Please reflect upon the reasons for frequency of contact (e.g. based upon average use, did specific events result in increased connectivity, etc.). (fill in the blank)” and “Did you find resolution of the conflict/difficult conversation constructive? Can you please describe how the difficult conversation/conflict was resolved through utilization of social media (e.g. what medium was utilized and to what end)?”

In total, 38 potential respondents attempted to access the survey for this research, with 36 respondents consenting to participate in the study. Of these, 30 respondents were able to gain access to the survey after meeting criteria for this study established within the two exclusion criteria questions at the beginning of the survey.

Data Analysis

This study utilized a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data analysis as a means to interpret results of the information attained through the survey. *Qualitative data* has been defined by Monette et al. (2011) as “data in the form of words, pictures, descriptions, and narratives”. Qualitative data allows for information to be gathered and interpreted when existing theoretical data is limited, allowing for exploration of data to occur through the identification of concepts, variables and hypothesis (Monette et al., 2011).

In analyzing the qualitative data, segments of scripting were analyzed by the researcher for initial concepts and presenting themes by utilizing the interpretive approach. The researcher utilized a summative content analysis process to inductively examine common phrases and themes transforming them into a quantitative or systematic form (Monette et al., 2011). *Open coding*, which Monette and colleagues (2011) defines as “unrestricted coding to produce concepts and dimensions that seem to fit the data fairly well” was utilized to determine themes present in the data collected. The researcher read through the responses to the qualitative questions, identifying recurring words, phrases, and themes. The frequency of these phrases and themes were recorded using an open coding method by sorting them into conceptual categories. Those conceptual categories that were closely related were then grouped together allowing the researcher to explore the latent meanings within the themes found (Monette et al., 2011). The data and thematic findings were revisited at a later date to note potential commonalities or themes that the researcher might have initially missed.

Statistical results of quantitative data were followed by qualitative quotes or themes supporting or refuting the quantitative results (Creswell et al., 2010). Most emphasis in the final report was given to the predominant themes gathered from the data sets. Results were compared to existing literature, and recommendations made for further research. *Quantitative data*, has been defined as “research that uses numbers, counts, and measures of things” (Monette et al., 2011). This data was analyzed utilizing descriptive and inferential statistics in order to gain an understanding of the population that the respondents are representative of, specifically examining the relationship between demographic information provided and how/to what extent social media is being utilized during deployment.

The link to the survey was sent to twenty-seven contacts, with thirty respondents choosing to participate in the survey ($n = 30$). The mean completion rate for the survey was 66%, with the most significant completion drop off occurring following the exclusion questions, resulting in a 23% drop off rate. Additionally, the average drop rate between completion of quantitative and qualitative questions was an average of a 46%.

Confidentiality and Data Storage

Review of the confidential nature of this study, and how documents were managed was discussed within the consent form attached and completed prior to accessing the online survey. Confidentiality and anonymity of respondent was ensured throughout the process of reviewing survey questions, as well as prior to distribution of the survey for public use. Further, the researcher ensured that results from this research remained confidential by maintaining the documents associated with the research on a password protected and locked computer stored in a secure location. Information

attained through the research was reviewed by the research committee as well as within a peer review construct.

Description of Respondents

Respondents in this sample were between the ages of 15 and 49 years of age at the time of their first deployment experience, and between the ages of 20 and 54 years of age currently. The current sample included women ($n=13$; 54%) and men ($n=11$; 46%). The breakdown of participants by race and ethnicity included: Caucasian ($n=23$) and Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native ($n=1$). The sample included current or prior service military service members ($n=13$; 54%) and their family members ($n=11$; 46%). The sample included Active Duty ($n=11$), Reserves ($n=2$), and National Guard ($n=19$) military connected respondents. All service branches (e.g. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard) were represented in this sample. Demographic details about the participants are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1

Gender Demographics of Survey Respondents

Gender	<i>n</i> (%)
Male	11 (46%)
Female	13 (54%)

Note. This table reflects participants' answers to the questions "What is your gender?"

Table 2

Ethnicity/Race Demographics of Survey Respondents

Ethnicity/Race	<i>n</i> (%)
Caucasian/white (non-Hispanic)	23(96%)
Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native	1(4%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question "How would you describe your ethnicity/race?"

Table 3

*Current Military Affiliation of Survey Respondents**Active Duty*

	(<i>n</i> =24)	Yes	No	Mean
Army		6	18	1.75
Navy		1	23	1.96
Air Force		1	23	1.96
Marines		3	21	1.88
Coast Guard		0	24	2.00

Note. This table reflects participants' answers regarding if their reported military connection is "Active Duty".

Reserves

	(<i>n</i> =24)	Yes	No	Mean
Army		0	24	2.00
Navy		0	24	2.00
Air Force		0	24	2.00
Marines		2	22	1.92
Coast Guard		0	24	2.00

Note. This table reflects participants' answers regarding if their reported military connection is "Reserves".

National Guard

	(<i>n</i> =24)	Yes	No	Mean
Army		18	6	1.25
Navy		0	24	2.00
Air Force		1	23	1.96
Marines		0	24	2.00
Coast Guard		0	24	2.00

Note. This table reflects participants' answers regarding if their reported military connection is "National Guard".

The respondents in this research came from varying demographic backgrounds and familial situations. The reported age range of respondents was thirty-four years, ranging from 20 to 54 years of age at the time of the most recent deployment. Current age of respondents was reflective of this data as well. Additionally, ages of respondents at the time of their first deployment experience ranged from the ages 15 to 49 years of age. This likely indicates more service members and their family’s experience deployment at a younger age, or mid-career (see Table 4, and 5).

Table 4

Respondents Age at First Deployment

Age	n (%)
> 14	0 (0%)
15 – 19	2 (8%)
20 – 24	6 (25%)
25 – 29	8 (33%)
30 – 34	3 (13%)
35 – 39	3 (13%)
40 – 44	1 (4%)
45 – 49	1 (4%)
<50	0 (0%)

Note. This table reflects respondents’ answer to the question “What was your age at the time of you/your spouse/partner/significant other/parent(s) first deployment?”

Table 5

Respondents Age at Time of Most Recent Deployment and Current Age

Age	n (%)	Current Age	n (%)
>20	0 (0%)	>20	0 (0%)
20 – 24	5 (21%)	20 - 24	2 (8%)
25 – 29	9 (38%)	25 – 29	10 (42%)
30 – 34	4 (17%)	30 – 34	4 (17%)
35 – 39	3 (13%)	35 – 39	3 (13%)
40 – 44	2 (8%)	40 – 44	2 (8%)
45 – 49	0 (0%)	45 – 49	2 (8%)
50 – 54	1 (4%)	50 – 54	1 (4%)
<55	0 (0%)	<55	0 (0%)

Note. This table reflects respondents’ answers to the question “What was your age at the time of you/your spouse/significant other/parent(s) most recent deployment?” and answers to the question “What is your current age?”

Many respondents indicated that they had some, completed, or exceeded some form of post-secondary education at the time of this research. Some indicated completion in programs not indicated within the survey. Such programs included: AAS in Law Enforcement, Private Security School (ESI), AAS in Criminal Justice/currently enrolled in a welding program, and one respondent indicated having completion of a technical course (see Table 6). Additionally, the variable total years of military service varied greatly, from four years to thirty-one which accurately reflects the diversity reported in the ages of the respondents (see Table 7).

Table 6

Highest Level of Education Completed for Respondents

Level of Education	<i>n</i> (%)
GED	0 (0%)
High school diploma	4 (17%)
Some college (has not completed degree program)	4 (17%)
Bachelor's degree	7 (29%)
Some post-baccalaureate coursework	2 (8%)
Master's degree	1 (4%)
Doctorate degree	1 (4%)
Other	5 (21%)

Note. This table reflects participants' responses to the question "What is your highest completed level of education?"

Table 7

Total Years of Military Service

# of reported years of service	# of respondents reporting that year <i>n</i> = 24
1 – 5	4
6 – 10	10
11 – 15	5
16 – 20	1
21 – 24	3
25 – 30	0
31 – 35	2

Note. This table reflects respondents’ answers to the question “How many total years have you/your spouse/partner/significant other/parent served in the United States Armed Forces?” Also, note that there are 25 responses and 24 respondents. One respondent reported the total amount of service for both the respondent and their spouse, which is reflected in the chart.

Deployment Length and Location

Slightly more than half of survey respondents were current or prior service military service members (*n* = 13; 54%), while (*n* = 11; 46%) of respondents reported not having served in the military. Of the twenty-eight survey respondents, twenty-one reported having served during Operation Enduring Freedom, thirteen served during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and three respondent having served during Operation New Dawn. There is representation of multiple deployments, as indicated by the number of total responses to each of the three theatre option exceeding the number of participants completing this survey question (see Table 8). The length of deployment that service members and their families experienced ranged from six months to twenty-four months (see Table 8). Largely, respondents in this survey reported experiencing three or fewer deployments, with most respondents reporting experiencing one deployment. No respondents reported experiencing four or more deployments (see Table 8). Respondents were a fairly equal blend of either current or prior service military or their families,

reported having experienced deployment most prominently during OEF, with the average deployment length reported occurring for a period of up to twelve months (see Table 8).

Table 8

Deployment Theatre and Length

		<i>n (%)</i>		
Deployment theatre	(<i>n</i> = 28)	Yes	No	Mean
	Operation Enduring Freedom	21	7	1.25
	Operation Iraqi Freedom	13	14	1.52
	Operation New Dawn	3	24	1.89
Length of deployment (<i>n</i> = 28)				
	0 – 6 months			3 (11%)
	7 – 12 months			16 (57%)
	13 – 18 months			8 (29%)
	19 – 24 months			1 (4%)
	25 + months			0 (0%)

Note. This table reflects participants’ responses to the survey questions: “Which of the following did you/your spouse/significant other/partner deploy in support of?”, and “What was the length of the longest deployment (including pre-deployment training, and demobilization) that you and your family experienced?”

Summary

This research was conducted through the utilization of social media websites such as Facebook, and email, posing questions to potential respondents regarding general demographic information, military affiliation, current and prior military deployment experiences during the OEF/OIF/OND conflicts, the utilization of social media as a communicative tool and its impact upon their relationships. This researcher had the goal of recruiting no less than 30 to 40 respondents, but ultimately was able to attain an overall sample size of 28 participants. Results were analyzed utilizing the Qualtrics database system, with findings based upon those results.

Findings

The research conducted through implementation of the mixed methods survey generated both quantitative and qualitative results. The qualitative data resulted in three main themes. The themes that developed from this research included: 1) respondents' utilization of social media during deployment, 2) respondents conflict resolution via utilization of social media during deployment, and 3) respondents perspectives regarding social media as a successful means to maintain communication with family during deployment.

Within the theme of utilization there were three subthemes including the accessibility of technology, preferred mediums of use, and frequency of contact. Within the theme of conflict resolution there were also three subthemes including type of conflict, ability/means of resolving conflict, and limitations. Within communication there were two main subthemes, positive attributes and negative attributes. These themes are outlined in Table 9. Respondents offered similar viewpoints within each theme and subtheme, offering reflection of their individual experiences regarding the utilization of social media during deployment.

Table 9

Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses

Theme 1: Respondents' utilization of social media during deployment

Accessibility 2003-2004-Beginning of Iraqi Freedom. My wife and I had limited access to computers. Could stand in line for phone call for 30-45 minutes for a 5 minute call. Could use the Marines satellite phone for 5 minutes each month. Remote locations with slow mail location. Presently deployed Enduring Freedom 2014-Internet in my room, computer access in my living quarters with a fairly regular work schedule so I have time to communicate to family at home. Can also get a cell phone for approximately \$60 a month with text and call capabilities to the states at any time. So many more abilities to communicate this deployment.

Daily computer access.

Husband was able to get internet connection and use iPhone.

Preferred Medium Most frequently contact via texting. Face time was used with our children to keep them connected to daddy's voice and face.

Instant messenger and MySpace.

Skype and Facebook were very useful.

Frequency of Contact

A daily email was sent to my husband to keep in him the know of daily activities.

Facetime my family most nights and receive texts from my spouse almost daily.

He was able to call and use Skype and Facetime almost every single day.

Theme 2: Respondents conflict resolution via utilization of social media during deployment

Type of Conflict I was able to talk about a difficult situation with my daughter through video chat.

	Hard to talk about. Didn't want to bring up bad situations at home.
Means of Resolution	<p>It's difficult to resolve conflict period. Having your soldier on the other side of the world makes it even more difficult. But social media at least helped to communicate to each other.</p> <p>It was the most accessible form of prompt communication.</p> <p>It opened open conversations about any issues that may have presented themselves.</p> <p>Texting was a good way for us to tell each other how we felt.</p>
Limitation	<p>The hardest thing for me with a newborn is just the fact of not being home with the newborn. My wife could be having a bad day or night and getting minimal sleep and I would feel that I am not fulfilling my duties as a parent to my newborn child.</p> <p>Only had email available so it made it difficult to communicate thru the email.</p> <p>Often the connection was lost prior to coming to a resolution.</p>
<i>Theme 3: Respondents' perspectives regarding social media as a successive means to maintain communication with family during deployment</i>	
Positive Attributes	<p>She can see that I am ok.</p> <p>It allowed us to feel sane, still connected to the real world.</p> <p>It was easy to keep up with the lives of my family members.</p>
Negative Attributes	<p>People put things out there that are false or misleading and it ends up all over the web.</p> <p>Potential OPSEC violations, finding out about infidelity.</p> <p>The delay in information.</p>

Familial Construct and Location During Deployment

Quantitative. In response to the familial construct of military families during the OEF, OIF, OND conflicts the vast majority of respondents reported having family during the time of deployment. Family reported was most often constructed of children, spouses, parents, siblings and friends (see Table 10). Respondents in this study primarily reported residing in the community during their family's latest deployment, with the remaining residing on a military base (see Table 11). Families participating in this research were constructed of both service members and their family members who predominately reported living in the community with their children, spouses or other family members during the time of most recent deployment.

Table 10

Respondents Reported Familial Construct During Deployment

	Yes	No	<i>n</i> = 18 (%)
Son(s)	16	12	<i>n</i> = 28 (57.14%)
Daughter(s)	10	18	<i>n</i> = 28 (35.71%)
Step-son(s)	3	24	<i>n</i> = 27 (11.11%)
Other: wife	3	24	<i>n</i> = 27 (11.11%)
Father	2	25	<i>n</i> = 27 (7.41%)
Mother	1	26	<i>n</i> = 27 (3.70%)
Mother-in-law	1	26	<i>n</i> = 27 (3.70%)
Father-in-law	1	26	<i>n</i> = 27 (3.70%)
Brother(s)	1	26	<i>n</i> = 27 (3.70%)
Step mother	1	26	<i>n</i> = 27 (3.70%)
Friend(s)	1	26	<i>n</i> = 27 (3.70%)
Sister(s)	1	26	<i>n</i> = 27 (3.70%)
Step-daughter(s)	1	26	<i>n</i> = 27 (3.70%)
Brother-in-law	0	27	<i>n</i> = 27 (0.0%)
Sister-in-law	0	26	<i>n</i> = 26 (0.0%)
Cousin(s)	0	27	<i>n</i> = 27 (0.0%)
Step father	0	27	<i>n</i> = 27 (0.0%)
Step siblings	0	27	<i>n</i> = 27 (0.0%)
Half siblings	0	27	<i>n</i> = 27 (0.0%)
Grandparents	0	27	<i>n</i> = 27 (0.0%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: Which members of your military-connected family resided together (e.g., permanent residence was under the same roof as you) at the time of the latest deployment? Data does reflect multiple persons possibly residing within a single household.

Table 11

Physical Location of Respondent During Most Recent Deployment Experience

	In the community	Other
<i>n</i> = 28 (%)	<i>n</i> = 28 (%)	<i>n</i> = 28 (%)
Yes <i>n</i> = 10 (35.71%)	<i>n</i> = 18 (64.29%)	<i>n</i> = 1 (3.70%)
No <i>n</i> = 18 (64.29%)	<i>n</i> = 10 (35.71%)	<i>n</i> = 26 (96.30%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: Where did you live during your family's latest deployment?

Communication During Deployment

Social Media as Communicative Tool.

Quantitative. Overall, respondents in this research predominately reported that they had access to social media during their most recent deployment.

Ninety percent of respondents reported that they had access to social media during their most recent deployment further reporting that they had utilized their access to social media mediums to maintain communication with their family members during deployment periods of absence (see Table 12 and 13). Additionally, those respondents who utilized social media based mediums to stay in touch with their military connected family during deployment were very likely to report satisfaction in the utilization of social media to maintain communication (see Table 14).

Table 12

Respondents Access to Social Media During Most Recent Deployment

	<i>n (%)</i>
Strongly agree	17 (61%)
Agree	8 (29%)
Neither agree nor disagree	1 (4%)
Disagree	1 (4%)
Strongly disagree	1 (4%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: "I had access to social media during my or my family member's most recent deployment."

Table 13

Utilization of Social Media to Communicate with Family During Deployment

	<i>n (%)</i>
Strongly agree	16 (59%)
Agree	10 (37%)
Neither agree nor disagree	0 (0%)
Disagree	0 (0%)
Strongly disagree	1 (4%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: "I used social media to communicate with my family during my or my family member's most recent deployment."

Table 14

Overall Satisfaction in Use of Social Media to Maintain Connections With Family

	<i>n (%)</i>
Strongly agree	20 (77%)
Agree	4 (15%)
Neither agree nor disagree	2 (8%)
Disagree	0 (0%)
Strongly disagree	0 (0%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: "Overall, I think social-media based mediums helped me to stay in touch with my military-connected family during my or my family member's most recent deployment."

What Types of Social Media are Used?

Quantitative. Respondents of this research reported preferring the utilization of a blend of 'traditional' and 'electronic' means of communication to maintain connectedness with family during deployment (see Table 15 and 16). Findings indicated that communication via social media not only warranted a broader variety of options for communicative means, but also more diverse outcomes. Most often with service members and their family's engaging in communication via written letters, care packages, telephone calls, Email, Facebook, and Skype, followed by texting, Face time, and utilization of various video chatting sites such as Google Talk. In this research, primarily internet based mediums of communication, in addition to care packages and letter writing, were the preferred medium utilized by both service members and their family during deployment. Results also are also indicative of multiple mediums of communication utilized by respondents. Those mediums with responses of zero are likely not available/accessible in theatre, do not meet OPSEC standards, or were not the respondents preferred means of communication engaged in during deployment by. The utilization of these means, and the types of means chosen tended to vary depending upon

accessibility, preferences, and reliability of services available at the time of deployment (see Table 17-19).

Table 15

Conventional Means of Communication Utilized During Deployment

	Strongly agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree nor disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly disagree <i>n</i> (%)
Written letters	8 (29.63%)	12 (44.44%)	0 (0%)	5 (18.52%)	2 (7.41%)
Care packages	12 (44.44%)	12 (44.44%)	0 (0%)	2 (7.41%)	1 (3.70%)
Telephone	8 (29.63%)	12 (44.44%)	3 (11.11%)	2 (7.41%)	2 (7.41%)
Fax	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (11.11%)	3 (11.11%)	21 (77.78%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (3.85%)	7 (26.92%)	2 (7.69%)	16 (61.54%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: "I used _____ --or 'conventional' approaches to communicate with my family during my or my family member's most recent deployment."

Table 16

Electronic Means of Communication Utilized During Deployment

	Strongly agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree nor disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly disagree <i>n</i> (%)
Email	13 (46.43%)	9 (32%)	2 (7.14%)	3 (10.71%)	1 (3.57%)
Texting	5 (18.52%)	3 (11.11%)	1 (3.70%)	3 (11.11%)	15 (55.56%)
Facebook	13 (48.15%)	5 (18.52%)	1 (3.70%)	2 (7.41%)	6 (22.22%)
Skype	10 (37.04%)	4 (14.81%)	1 (3.70%)	4 (14.81%)	8 (29.63%)
Twitter	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.70%)	4 (14.81%)	22 (81.48%)
Blogs	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.70%)	4 (14.81%)	22 (81.48%)
Google Talk	4 (14.81%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (11.11%)	20(74.07%)
OoVoo	1 (3.70%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (14.81%)	21 (77.78%)
Snap Chat	0 (0%)	1 (3.70%)	1 (3.70%)	3 (11.11%)	22 (81.48%)
Interactive					
Video Games	1 (3.70%)	1 (3.70%)	1 (3.70%)	4 (14.81%)	20 (74.07%)
Face time	4 (14.81%)	5 (18.52%)	2 (7.41%)	2 (7.41%)	14 (51.85%)
Other: Viber, Magic Jack, Air National Guard Chat	4 (14.81%)	0 (0%)	4 (14.81%)	3 (11.11%)	15 (55.56%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: "I used _____ --or 'electronic' means to communicate with my family during my or my family member's most recent deployment."

Social Media and Family Communication During Deployment

Quantitative. Respondents in this research report utilization of both 'conventional' and 'electronic' means of contact to engage in communication with their family as frequently as one or more times per day to as infrequently as three to four times

per month (see Table 17). The frequency of contact was often dependent upon a variety of factors such as accessibility, remote location of the service member, and cost versus quality of service differentials (see Table 18). Additionally, the types of communicative devices utilized by service members and their families often vary, dependent upon a variety of factors, including the preference of both the communicator and receiver (see Table 19).

Table 17

Number of Contacts Engaged in by Respondents with Family During Deployment

	<i>n = 27(%)</i>
1 time daily	6 (22%)
2 or more times daily	8 (30%)
2-3 times per week	1 (4%)
4-5 times per week	1 (4%)
6-7 times per week	2 (7%)
1-2 times per month	3 (11%)
3-4 times per month	5 (19%)
Did not use	0 (0%)
Other: almost every day	1 (4%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: Using one of the above 'electronic' and 'conventional' means for communication, on average, how often did you communicate with your family during deployment.

Table 18

Factors for not Utilizing Social Media as Communicative Device

	Strongly agree <i>n (%)</i>	Agree <i>n (%)</i>	Neither agree nor disagree <i>n (%)</i>	Disagree <i>n (%)</i>	Strongly disagree <i>n (%)</i>
Limited finances	0 (0%)	1 (3.70%)	4 (14.81%)	3 (11.11%)	19 (70.37%)
Remote location	6 (22.22%)	8 (29.63%)	2 (7.41%)	1 (3.70%)	10 (37.04%)
No access/services	8 (29.63%)	12 (44.44%)	1 (3.70%)	1 (3.70%)	5 (18.52%)
Personal preference	2 (7.41%)	5 (18.52%)	4 (14.81%)	3 (11.11%)	13 (48.15%)
Other:	4 (15.38%)	0 (0%)	7 (26.92%)	2 (7.69%)	13 (50.00%)

OPTEMPO

Poor service vs. cost

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: "When I did not use social media to communicate with my family during my or my family member's most recent deployment, this was due to..."

Table 19

Contributing Factors to Choosing Medium in which to Maintain Communication

	Strongly agree <i>n (%)</i>	Agree <i>n (%)</i>	Neither agree nor disagree <i>n (%)</i>	Disagree <i>n (%)</i>	Strongly disagree <i>n (%)</i>
Expense	3 (11.54%)	1 (3.85%)	4 (15.38%)	6 (23.08%)	12 (46.15%)
Ease of access/service	19 (70.37%)	6 (22.22%)	1 (3.70%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.70%)
Convenience	15 (42.31%)	7 (26.92%)	1 (3.85%)	1 (3.85%)	2 (7.69%)
Personal preference	11 (42.13%)	7 (26.92%)	1 (3.85%)	3 (11.54%)	4 (15.38%)
Dependability	13 (50%)	9 (24.62%)	0 (0%)	2 (7.69%)	2 (7.69%)
Preference of deployed family member	9 (24.62%)	5 (19.23%)	5 (19.23%)	2 (7.69%)	5 (19.23%)
Preference of at-home partner/spouse	7 (26.92%)	3 (11.54%)	4 (15.28%)	5 (19.23%)	7 (26.92%)
Preference of child(ren)	8 (30.77%)	3 (11.54%)	5 (19.23%)	4 (15.28%)	6 (23.08%)
Familiarity	6 (23.08%)	5 (19.23%)	6 (23.08%)	3 (11.54%)	6 (23.08%)
Medium facilitated desired conversation	7 (26.92%)	6 (23.08%)	6 (23.08%)	4 (15.38%)	3 (11.54%)
Other	1 (4.17%)	0 (0%)	10 (41.67%)	2 (8.33%)	11 (45.83%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: "Overall, I would say _____ contributed to the types of mediums I used to stay in touch with my military-connected family during my or my family member's most recent deployment."

Qualitative. Respondents in this research indicated that the frequency or type of communication engaged in through the utilization of social media was impacted by a variety of factors including: remote location, no access/services available, personal preference, as well as other factors described in response to the question "Please reflect upon the reasons for frequency of contact (e.g. based upon average use, did specific events result in increased connectivity, etc.). Respondents cited reasons for variation in contact such as: "My last deployment, daily contact was available, so I used it. First deployment had no options other than mail," specifying the differences and improvement

in technology over time. Additionally, spouses and service members reported experiencing adjustments due to time differentials stating:

Once we figured out each other's schedules with the time difference it was easier to plan times to communicate. He has internet access anytime he is in his living quarters. When he was available I made myself as available as possible. Face Time would usually happen early in the am or late at night!

Because of the significant time differences, Facebook and email worked well to carry on dialog with my wife. My mother doesn't use social electronic media so I wrote her at least 1-2 times a month. My daughter is learning to read so I'd send her a couple letters a month for her to read herself.

Respondents reported limitations associated with the utilization of social media for communication during deployment primarily due to the need to engage in job duties that remove the service member from access to 'electronic' communication capabilities with service members describing "*Lots of time deployed in regions with no access*" (see Table 19). One respondent described this experience, and reason for decreased communication as such,

Patrols and duty came before communicating back home. Combat operations could last days, weeks, even months before we'd get back to base. As such, communication was often sporadic.

Family members' perspectives on the amount of communication with their deployed service member varied, from confusion and frustration in the lack of resources, to understanding reflective in this respondent's reflection, "*Soldier in the field a lot, unable to have access to communication. I also think that the deployed person avoided contact from home, made them sad*". However, most service members and their family's expressed ease of access to social media resources, allowing for consistent communication with their service member during absence:

A daily email was sent to my husband to keep him in the know of daily activities, as when he would call I would often forget what was going on because I was so excited to hear his voice.

Was easy to stay in contact with family back home because we were given plenty of time throughout the day and week to keep in good connection.

Social Media Communication Outcomes

Quantitative. Ninety-two percent of survey respondents reported that social-media based mediums helped them to stay in touch with their military-connected family during their family member's most recent deployment. Survey respondents were asked to reflect upon the degree in which they believed that the following factors either positively or negatively impacted their ability to communicate with their family member: reliability of technology, accessibility of technology, frequency of contact, content of the information exchanged, as well as the ability to remain connected to the service member and/or family member (see Table 20 and 21). The frequency of contact and ability to maintain connected to family were the two most reported positive ways in which the use of social media impacted respondents ability to maintain connected, while technological difficulties and limited access to technology were most often reported as having negatively impacted a service member and/or family member's utilization.

Table 20

Positive Factors to Utilization of Social Media for Communication

	Strongly agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree nor Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly disagree <i>n</i> (%)
Reliability of technology	4 (156%)	12 (48%)	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	2 (8%)
Accessibility of technology	7 (28%)	10 (40%)	1 (4%)	5 (20%)	2 (8%)
Frequency of contact	11 (44%)	10 (40%)	1 (4%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)
Content of the information exchanged	7 (28%)	9 (36%)	6 (24%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)
Ability to remain connected	12 (48%)	7 (28%)	1 (4%)	3 (12%)	2 (8%)

Note. This reflects respondents' answers to the question: "Overall, the _____ aspect of social media positively impacted my ability to stay in touch with my military-connected family during my or my family member's most recent deployment."

Table 21

Negative Factors to Utilization of Social Media for Communication

	Strongly Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree nor disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly Disagree <i>n</i> (%)
Technological difficulties	3 (12%)	12 (48%)	3 (12%)	6 (24%)	1 (4%)
Limited access to technology	2 (8%)	8 (32%)	3 (12%)	9 (36%)	3 (12%)
Infrequency of contact	0 (0%)	4 (16%)	5 (20%)	11 (44%)	5 (20%)
Content of information exchanged	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	7 (28%)	11 (44%)	5 (20%)
Feeling disconnected	1 (4%)	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	11 (44%)	5 (24%)

Note. This table reflects respondents' answers to the question: "Overall, the _____ aspect of social media negatively impacted my ability to stay in touch with my military-connected family during my or my family member's most recent deployment."

Qualitative. Respondents in this research reported a mixed view of positive and negative comments attributed to the utilization of social media to maintain communication with family members during deployment. Spouses, partners, significant

others, and their adult children were appreciative of the communication with their service member, often citing the utilization of social media such as email and interactive video/conference calling as a means to maintain connectedness with their service member,

The daily emails not only helped me to express the daily activities and struggles, but kept my soldier connected making the reintegration a slightly easier process.

Even though he was outside of the base he was able to call and use Skype and Facetime almost every single day...He was even able to stay up late and watch the kids open their Christmas presents on Christmas morning.

In this research, service members additionally reflected significant validation and appreciation of having consistent communication and technological access, enabling the ability to maintain communication with their family at home. Often, service members cited that access to social media “*Made my deployment easier. To be able to talk with family*”. However, many service members reported having mixed views on the access and utilization of social media, primarily citing technological difficulties as the main concern.

Having only limited areas that you can be connected to the internet to stay in contact with your family is very sparse. Not being able to connect freely over a wireless internet is challenging at times.

The internet service was expensive and intermittent but worked just well enough to have a decent conversation with my family. Peak times in relation to bandwidth use were very limiting, it seemed that all Soldiers were using the service at once and it made communication slow and sketchy at times.

Negative comments, or challenges faced by families who utilized social media to maintain communication included challenges of children residing with other parents, hearing difficult information, and misinterpretation of information received.

Maintaining communication with children living with their other parent due to divorce was difficult and infrequent at times due to their lack of access.

It was very comforting for my family to have contact with me while in Iraq. On the other side of this, they would have increased anxiety when I would go on special missions that would require no contact over a given amount of time.

It seemed that sometimes social media made things difficult because it's easy to misinterpret information/pictures/etc. seen on Facebook or other forms of social media. Because I was so wrapped up in what I had going on during my deployment, I often jumped to conclusion unnecessarily.

Despite reported challenges that the utilization of social media/electronic means of communication poses, respondent's predominately reportedly positive and continued use of such mediums of communication to maintain relationships with family during periods of deployment.

Conflict and Social Media Utilization

Quantitative. This survey inquired about the occurrence of difficult conversations occurring during the utilization of social media for communication. Approximately 64% of respondents indicated that they had engaged in a difficult conversation or conflict while utilizing social media as a communicative device during the deployment of a family member. Respondents' most often reported difficult conversations or conflict regarding the topics of parenting concerns, finances or grief/loss (see table 22).

Table 22

Most Difficult Conversations to Engage in Via Social Media

	Strongly agree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree nor disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly disagree <i>n</i> (%)
Finances	2 (8.33%)	5 (20.83%)	2 (8.33%)	7 (29.17%)	8 (33.33%)
Parenting concerns	3 (12.50%)	7 (29.17%)	4 (16.67%)	6 (25%)	4 (16.67%)
Grief/loss	2 (8.33%)	5 (20.83%)	7 (29.17%)	5 (20.83%)	5 (20.83%)
Daily activities	0 (0%)	4 (16.67%)	7 (29.17%)	7 (29.17%)	6 (25%)
Other	3 (12.50%)	1 (4.17%)	9 (37.50%)	4 (16.67%)	7 (29.17%)

Note. This chart reflects respondents’ answers to the question: “Overall, I found communication regarding _____ most difficult to engage in through the use of social media mediums during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

Qualitative. Overall, respondents expressed difficulty of engaging in conversations that were difficult or conflictual regardless of the communicative device utilized as this respondent indicated, “(I) didn’t want to bring up bad situations at home” wanting to focus on positive interactions when able to communicate with their loved one as opposed to addressing concerns that may be occurring. However, many respondents reported positive responses to their utilization of social media in their ability to address difficult conversations in a manner similar to how they would have addressed it in person, “It allowed open conversations about any issues that may have presented themselves” while others expressed the importance or validity of engaging in face-to-face conversation via video conference calls “I was able to talk about a difficult situation with my daughter through video chat” as assistive in managing or working through difficult conversations or circumstances.

As indicated and supported in the qualitative data, difficult conversations regarding parenting, or the limited ability to parent due to ages of the children or inability of the children to understand the circumstances were addressed as well, “The hardest

thing for me with a newborn is just the fact of not being home with the newborn. My wife would be having a bad day or night and getting minimal sleep and I would feel that I am not fulfilling my duties as a parent to my newborn child”.

Many respondents addressed concerns regarding limitations being able to maintain a conversation via social media as opposed to communication that may have occurred in the same circumstance had the service member been home, *“It was constructive, but difficult. Just maintaining the conversation was what would help us to ‘talk’ it out and come to a resolution.”* Likewise, many respondents also discussed the importance of communication, and maintaining connectedness as a means to decipher information received, and to gain a greater understanding of what was and was not accurate. The use of social media in this manner both created and disseminated misconstrued and misinterpretation of information.

If I got frustrated by something I saw on social media, it usually needed to be resolved via a phone call. It’s really tough to understand tone and sarcasm/genuine care over social media. I needed to be able to see my family member’s face or hear their voice to really get what the issue was and determine if I was overreacting or not.

Sixty-seven percent of respondents reported satisfaction in how social media based mediums assisted them in resolving conflict/difficult situations with their military connected family member. Respondents reported that the immediacy of social media and electronic communication was assistive in conflict resolution in that it allowed for *“The ability to discuss the conflict with my SM via texting assisted in the resolution”* *“I feel that this was very positive in assisting in our conflict”.*

Conversely, respondents largely reported that they did not feel that utilizing social media to resolve conflict or difficult situations warranted the same results as personal

interactions would have, that through the use of social media often there can be misinterpretation, *“The basic problem with conflict resolution via social media is the loss of context and meaning that cannot be conveyed with words on a screen. Certain inflections, phrases, even tones define a verbal statement. It’s more difficult and a higher chance of misinterpretation when trying to understand statements and questions on a screen”* misperception, delayed resolution, and limited ability to show emotion *“we would be able to talk about the certain conflicts that would come about, but time is limited to when or how long you can talk”, “Due to the time difference and availability of internet, it would be a day or so before we could discuss what needed to be discussed leading to anxiety at home”, “longer resolution time due to inability to show emotion”, and the inability to physically connect, “it took longer to resolve things, emotions were more intense and there was no overall satisfaction of a hug to ‘make up’ at the end”*. Some respondents discussed feelings of presence yet absence of their family member, *“There is still an aspect of presence that is unreachable especially when I had to scold my children and when I wanted to demonstrate my affection to my wife. I am a physical touch communicator, I can say those things and mean it but it is hard for me to confirm without an embrace with my family”*.

Satisfaction with Outcomes

Quantitative. In this research respondents were predominately satisfied with their experienced outcomes when utilizing social media to resolve conflict engage in difficult conversations (see Table 23).

Table 23

<i>Satisfaction of Conflict Resolution When Using Social Media</i>	<i>n (%)</i>
Strongly agree	3 (13%)
Agree	13(54%)
Neither agree nor disagree	4 (17%)
Disagree	2 (8%)
Strongly disagree	2 (8%)

Note. This chart reflects respondents’ answers to the question: “Overall, I am satisfied with how utilization of social media based mediums assisted me in resolving conflict/difficult conversation(s) with my military connected family during my or my family members’ most recent deployment”.

Qualitative. Respondents who had experienced more than one deployment were asked to respond to the question: “Please reflect upon any differences in availability, accessibility, or utilization of social media communicative devices if multiple deployments have been experienced (e.g., change over time of specific types utilized, and frequency of use)”. Many of the respondents reported a significant increase in the utilization and availability of social media mediums throughout the three specified conflicts to present date as reported in the following explanations:

(Social Media Access) Greatly increased from the onset of the war in Iraq. All we had to start with was a satellite phone for emergencies only. Snail mail was the only other option, as 2004 came about, the phone trailers and internet cafés were appearing. When I returned to Iraq in 2011, access was everywhere, but you wouldn’t expect less since they had 8 years to improve all functions of soldier life.

I know that one major difference between the two deployments was that many people that did pay for the internet service (on my second deployment) used the “Magic Jack” so they had the ability to call home through their rooms. I didn’t hear of anyone using that on the first deployment. Also, as Facebook became more popular, it seemed that more people were using it as a means to communicate with their families... On my first deployment, I had a Kuwaiti cell phone so I was able to use that to text back to my family/friends. It was expensive, so I didn’t use it much, but I didn’t need to because I used social media/email to communicate regularly and had access to land-line phones in my office.

Location, and MOS (e.g. how often they would have access to social media mediums based upon their job) also posed challenges to the amount and frequency of communication,

Again, the frequency of communication back home has multiple factors. First, patrols could last hours, days, weeks, even month long operations. There was never a set schedule. It was always if we had time and access. Sporadic, but available sometimes. Additionally, for security reasons, outgoing communication is strictly limited due to OPSEC.

However, respondents cited great improvement in services in the onset of the war, *“Technology has helped a lot in the last 5 years with how families communicate when apart. And it is much easier, I almost talk to my wife too much and run out of things to talk about”*.

Lastly, respondents were asked to respond to the question: “Can you please describe one positive and one negative aspect of utilizing social media to maintain communication with your family/service member during deployment?” Respondents tended to speak to the engagement and ongoing communication with family as positive for both service members and their families, *“It helped my family a lot to be able to see me in video chat and know that I’m ok. Also they were able to see pictures of what I’ve been up to in theatre”*, and reflecting connectedness, *“It was easy to keep up with the lives of my family members. I enjoyed being able to see pictures and loved their posts; it made it seem like I wasn’t so far away after all”*. Affordability was also a main competent to the utilization of social media expressing the importance of the costs associated being made affordable for utilization: *“being able to have reliable and a cheap means of communication back home”* as invaluable to maintaining communication.

However, negative components to its utilization can also be associated. Misconceptions and misinterpretations can occur, *“When I text, things can be taken the wrong way and misunderstood”* resulting in difficulty for the service members adjustment in being absent from their family, *“I wasn’t always very resilient and would jump to conclusions based on what I thought was happening. It’s sometimes hard to see those same pictures (even though you love them!) because it feels like your life stops while everything goes on at home without you”*. Frustration also was found in the reliance of technology, *“Having to rely on available technology was frustrating”* or the ease of connectedness resulting in undue strain when communication cannot occur, *“the spouse or family back home feel like you should be able to stay in contact better and get upset when you are busy and don’t have very much time to put into social media”*.

Summary

In summary, social media during deployment as a means to maintain communication between service members and their family members was determined to be of value both in maintaining connectedness, as well as increasing the frequency of communication during absence. Additionally, accessibility and feasibility of services available to service members during deployment in this research appears to be of less relevance in the inability to utilize this medium of communication than the impact of theatre and complications of remote location poses upon service members.

Inferential Statistic

The inferential statistic is used to examine the relationship between two variables and generalize from a sample to a population from which the sample is drawn. The research chooses two variables to analyze, one nominal and one ordinal. The independent variable, an ordinal variable in this study measures whether the respondent

has utilized social media during their most recent deployment. This was operationalized by asking the respondent “I used social media to communicate with my family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment” with the respondents choosing “Strongly Disagree”, “Disagree”, “Neither Disagree nor Agree”, “Agree”, or “Strongly Agree”. The dependent variable, also an ordinal variable in this study measures the respondents’ perception of how utilization of social media allowed them to maintain communication with their family during deployment. This was operationalized by asking the respondent “Overall, I think social-media based mediums helped me stay in touch with my military-connected family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment” with respondents choosing “Strongly Disagree”, “Disagree”, “Neither Disagree nor Agree”, “Agree”, or “Strongly Agree”. The hypothesis for this study is: How does the utilization of social media impact the quality or frequency of communication between service members and their families during periods of deployment? The null hypothesis for this study was: Social media does not assist service members and their families to communicate during periods of deployment.

The p-value for the variable utilization of social media as an important communicative medium to maintain communication between service members and their families during deployment is ($p=.01$). Since the p-value is less than .05 the researcher accepts the hypothesis, and the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating that there is a significant relationship between the utilization of social media during deployment and the maintenance of communication between service members and their families.

Discussion

This research study examined the utilization of social media as a communicative device to maintain connectedness between service members and their families during the Post 9-11 conflicts. While information attained through this research significantly supported that found within existing literature, there were findings that challenged and encouraged potential growth, offering new perspectives not currently available in literature. Themes explored within this research include: the accessibility of social media during deployment, the utilization and preference of social media mediums utilized, the frequency of contact and potential influencing factors of utilization, and how social media was utilized to negate conflict and difficult conversations during periods of absence. Lastly, respondents' perspective regarding overall satisfaction in their experiences with the use of social media to facilitate the above themes was examined.

Military Families: Experiences with Technology, Change Over Time

Technological advances and accessibility in theatre. Findings in this research align with those found in earlier studies conducted by Schumm et al. (2004), who reported that over time service members have gained greater access to telecommunications while deployed. The improved access to telecommunications over time has allowed for service members to engage in more frequent communication with family members remaining at home, thereby increasing connectedness and the ability to maintain relationships during periods of absence.

This study identified the advances in, and progression of accessibility to assistive communicative technological devices since the onset of this conflict, as observed and experienced by respondents both in theatre and by their family members who remained at home. Service members reflected that during the onset of the war in Iraq, traditional

methods of communication such as mail, were the primary form of communication with family remaining at home. At that time, access to telecommunications was limited to the utilization of satellite phones designated for emergency use only. By 2004, progression towards and increased access of telecommunications for service members was made available through internet cafés and phone trailers, allowing service members and their families more frequent communication capabilities. During the years of 2011 to present date deployed service members (when physically located on a military base, and not remotely located) are able to access telecommunications and Wi-Fi capabilities “everywhere,” including for purchase within service member living quarters or rooms. However, progression of technology during this time has not been limited to internet based communicative assistive devices or mediums (i.e., Magic Jack), as service members are currently provided the opportunity of purchasing international cell phones capable of not only calling their family at home, but also texting internationally. These advances have allowed deployed service members and their non-deployed family to engage in more frequent communication, thereby maintaining connectedness within these relationships during absence.

Research has consistently shown that utilization of technology has assisted military connected families in maintaining relationships during periods of absence, and that doing so not only builds service member morale but encourages resiliency among family. Greene et al. (2010) and Maguire et al. (2013) found that technological advances increase service member morale by allowing more frequent and faster exchange of information between family members and other supports during deployment, thereby

reducing the gap of time in which communication of information occurs, and increasing connectedness, thereby easing maintenance of relationships during periods of absence.

Meeting The Demands of Today's Military: Person in Environment.

Military family. A common misperception of the military family's progression over time is reflective of this statement attributed to the 1970s adage "if the military wanted you to have a family, it would have issue you one" (Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010). Findings reflect that this adage is no longer applicable nor reflective of today's military, suggesting that the development and improvement of accessibility to technological advances could be reflective of the complex milieu of service members who comprise today's military.

Research conducted by Castaneda et al. (2008); Clever and Segal (2013); DoD (2007); and Sollinger et al. (2008), found that service members today were more likely to be racially dispersed, representative of a broader age range, as well as representing a greater population of female service members. Additionally, the Department of Defense (2007) reported service members of OEF/OIF/OND are more likely than those service members in Vietnam to have children, be married, single parents, or in a family where both parents are in the military and could potentially deploy together.

These findings align with the research conducted by the DOD (2007), in the demographics gathered in this research represented a broad range of age disparity, in addition to the majority of respondents reporting that they have children or other family members remaining at home. This was indicative by the age range most frequently reported, that of the ages 20 through 44, or typically the ages when individuals are beginning and raising families. In this research respondents reported children as young

as newborn, up to 16 years of age of relatively equal male to female dispersion. This research aligned that conducted by Clever and Segal (2013) which found the average age of service members to be 28 to 32 years of age, of which 43% of service members had dependent children at home.

Further, this research found that many of today's service members have engaged in or completed post-secondary education. Many respondents have attained a technical degree, specialization degree (e.g., law enforcement), Master's Degree, or even a Doctoral Degree. During deployment, these educational endeavors are often disrupted, delayed or even halted due to the displacement of deployment, resulting in the potential incompleteness of educational advancement.

Social Media as Communicative Medium in Theatre

Findings in this research align and support those discussed within research conducted by Greene et al. (2010), who discovered that improvement in service member morale was related to the ability and accessibility of service members to engage in timely exchange of information with their family, which when facilitated precipitated feelings of connectedness during the period of absence (Maguire et al., 2013).

Respondents within this study provided an overwhelmingly positive response to having access to, and condoned the utilization of social media during their most recent deployment period. Interestingly, respondents in the current study reported utilization of a variety of electronic means of communication, likely indicative of the age, gender, and economic ability of the service member and their family member with whom they are communicating. Respondents predominately indicated that the lack of accessibility or services available was the most significant barrier to ongoing utilization during

deployment, suggestive of ongoing need for the development of technological advances and accessibility for service members to maintain connectedness with their families to ensure preservation and increase morale (Greene et al., 2010).

Findings from this study suggest that in addition to electronic means of communication, service members and their families continue to utilize conventional forms of communication to maintain contact during deployment. Respondents most frequently reported the utilization of communication through care packages, written letters, and telephone calls in conjunction with electronic forms of communication, suggesting that communication through traditional communication mediums continues to be of value. Findings in this research indicated that respondents' frequency of contact was reflective of service member MOS (Military Occupation Specialties), engagement in missions, and limited accessibility due to remote location. When access to communicative devices was not limited, respondents reported as frequent as multiple daily contacts and as infrequently as three to four contacts per month with family members. Qualitative data within this research revealed that often service members' frequency of contact was reflective of their feelings of connectedness to their family. The greater the feelings of connection, the more frequent the contact.

While respondents within this and prior literature do report social media and electronic communication as assistive in maintaining relationships during absence, value is placed in finding a balance in the information exchanged, ensuring that OPSEC regulations are maintained. This can pose as challenging for some families. However, research has shown that optimal benefit and balance in communicative outcomes is found when the amount and type of information, the frequency of information exchanged, and

consideration for each individual family members need is employed during utilization (Baptist et al., 2011; Faber et al., 2008; Greene et al., 2010; Hinojosa et al., 2012; Houston et al., 2013; Schumm et al., 2008; Schachman, 2010).

Social Media and Conflict: A Means to the Same End?

Literature examining how social media has been utilized by service members and their families during deployment as a means to resolve conflict or discuss difficult topics was not available at the time of this projects completion. Therefore, any conclusions made are new findings specific to this research, concluded based upon the results of the quantitative and qualitative data gathered, analyzed and received within this data set.

Respondents to this study were posed a grouping of both quantitative and qualitative questions relative to the topic of their utilization of social media as a medium to resolve conflict and/or address difficult conversations during deployment. Findings indicated a relatively equal distribution in the type of conflict or difficult conversations respondents reported they found most difficult to discuss via social media. This finding is indicative of the subjectivity of the question, and potentially can be applied to analysis of how topic areas posed had been managed prior to deployment. Topics that were difficult to discuss prior to deployment most likely continued to be difficult to discuss via communication through social media mediums.

In this research respondents expressed the importance of having access to social media and electronic communication as a means to engage in expedited resolution of conflictual or difficult conversations. Although delays in resolution in comparison to in person resolution were noted, when compared to traditional communicative options,

electronic communication was valued for its ease of access and more timely exchange of information.

Findings in this research discovered that concerns of conflict resolution while utilizing social media primarily revolved around miscommunication and interjection of meaning. Findings in this study align with those of Hinojosa et al. (2012) in that respondents in this study reported that the inability to accurately engage and interpret the non-verbal communication of their loved one as a source of angst, which can potentially cause further conflict if misinterpreted. Further, respondents noted desires of wanting to embrace their loved one after conflict resolution, noting difficulty in not being able to offer comfort.

Despite challenges, respondents in this study overwhelmingly reported that they had engaged in and had satisfactory resolution to a conflict or difficult conversation through the utilization of social media as the primary communicative device, and had experienced the same results in their resolution via social media as in person. These findings suggest that while social media and electronic communicative devices may have challenges, as a medium to maintain communication during deployment, accessibility and utilization is of utmost importance.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths. The current study has two important strengths. First, the study simultaneously examined not only the perspectives of service members utilization of social media, but also their family members at a relatively equal percentage with ($n = 13$; 54%) reporting that they were either current or prior service military service members, and ($n = 11$; 46%) reporting that they were spouses, partners, significant others, or adult

children of service members. Despite the low number of overall respondents, this sample could be broadened and generalized to this specific military-connected population.

Secondly, this research focused specifically on social media mediums utilized during a specific conflict period (e.g., OEF, OIF, and OND), examining technological advances during this period of time, and how social media is currently being utilized by service members and their family's to maintain communication during deployment. It further examined the frequency of utilization, and what factors impact utilization.

Finally, this study examined how service members are currently utilizing social media to mitigate and resolve conflict and difficult conversations, examining what is working while identifying areas in need of growth and development. Concerns regarding length of resolution due to limitations of accessibility, as well as the limited ability to read nonverbal communication were quickly dissipated by appreciation of the ability to communicate with their loved one. Predominately respondents were positive regarding their use of social media to resolve conflict, identifying primarily concerns expected as the result of the physical removal of a family member, suggesting further research on the topic of conflict resolution and social media utilization would be beneficial.

Limitations. There are multiple limitations to this study, with the first being the study sample size. Due to the short time allotted for recruitment, and the protected status of the population being recruited, the sample size was small. Although small, the desired survey population was broad enough of a representation to generalize results as representative of a larger population.

Secondly, the respondent population responding was 100% Caucasian, restricting results to one ethnic/cultural grouping. As research has shown, today's military is

comprised of a more ethnically and culturally diverse representation of our country. This sample was not representative of the ethnic/cultural construct of today's military.

The third major limitation was the inability to include a broader scope of familial construct, thereby potentially excluding vital information. Due to time constraints of this study, a narrow definition of family needed to be utilized, excluding important family members such as parents, siblings, and grandparents of service members. All of whom may have significant influence and support upon the daily lives of service members during deployment. Integration and validation of the perspectives of these family members could offer greater insight, as those individuals often provide cares for children of single parents, or are the primary support system for single/unwed soldiers during deployment. These family members' perspectives would be of great value in gaining representation of the diversity of today's military, and the larger impact service member absence potentially poses upon these families.

Qualitative data, while assistive in gaining a deeper acknowledgement and understanding of individualized viewpoints, in this research was found to result in some drop off by respondents. Perhaps by shortening the length of the survey, or repetitious nature of some of the questions this could have been eliminated, allowing for more response.

Lastly, while quantitative data was helpful in gathering basic statistical information. However, due to the way questions were set up, respondents were forced to provide an answer for all options on all questions and additionally were allowed the option of providing multiple responses to a single question. During analysis this

appeared as inaccurate data, when it was developmental error. Answers should have been arranged in a manner allowing for one answer as opposed to multiple responses.

Implications for Research

The findings from this study support findings from previous research conducted by Baptist et al. (2011); Hinojosa et al. (2012); and Sherman and Bowling (2011) found that the utilization of social media for means of communication during deployment as both assistive and potentially detrimental to the maintenance of relationships, dependent upon a variety of factors including the type of information exchanged. Aligning with the existing research is the expressed desire and importance of continued communication and relationships regardless of the mediums being utilized. Implications for future research can be considered when examining the complexity of the topic, length and frequency of absences endured, whom is affected, and the number of transitions families often incur as a result of deployment related transitions.

For the purpose of this study, inclusion criteria for participation was limited to familial units of service member, spouse, partner, significant other, or adult child. Although considered, parents, siblings, grandparents, significant friends, and other significant persons were excluded from this study primarily due to time constraints and the need for a specific and limited focus. However, the experiences of these individuals in the support of service members during deployment is important to consider, especially for service members who are single mothers or unmarried adult children. For those individuals, their parents and siblings may be their primary source of support and limited research has been conducted on these specific individuals' supportive roles during deployment periods. It is recommended that in the future, inclusion criteria for families

be expanded to include parents, siblings, grandparents, and other potential supportive individuals.

Secondly, more research is needed specific to the topic of social media utilization within military families for means of communication. Although it is being developed, some of the topics discussed within this research did not have existing research to support a greater depth of understanding. Specifically, when developing questions related to conflict resolution via social media utilization specific to military families, no research data could be found. Further, several articles appeared to be published or released for public viewing following the completion of the literature review, limiting resources to those already existing, and not those most recently completed studies. Further research on the actual utilization and long-term impact that communication via social media has on military families upon re-integration would be helpful in gaining knowledge of how to better assist families experiencing these transitions. This would allow for development of both family assistance programs to work with family on how to communicate effectively via electronic communication, in addition to assisting service members with management of emotions and feelings of removal and hopelessness to circumstances occurring at home (Greene et al., 2010; Hinojosa et al., 2012).

Third, despite a slight drop off rate when transitioning from quantitative to qualitative questions, due to the relatively high number of service members responding to the research, it is apparent that an expressed desire to describe thoughts regarding this topic exists. Service members and their families are often at the mercy of what resources are made available to them. Through additional research in support of the effectiveness of utilizing social media for maintaining communication between military families during

periods of absence, perhaps these resources can be made more readily available, stabilized, and affordable for service members thereby potentially minimizing stress already incurred due to deployment.

Lastly, the topic of Ambiguous Loss, and the impact that the utilization of social media during deployment has on children specifically during this period of absence is an area in need of research development. Research has shown that both children and spouses are at increased risk for mental health symptomology during the deployment of a family member (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011; Lincoln & Sweeten, 2011).

Further, consideration for the potential impact that Ambiguous Loss poses upon conflict resolution could offer assistance in negating emotions service members reflected on the inability to comfort their loved ones through touch.

Conducting further research regarding the long-term effects that utilization of social media to maintain connectedness would allow for gained insight into how greater stabilization can be attained for these families, and allow for insight on how to mitigate resolution when conflict does arise.

Implications for Future Social Work Practice

The findings from this study indicate that the utilization of social media and electronic communication in combination with traditional means of communication during periods of deployment are beneficial to maintaining connectedness between deployed service members and their family. Less emphasis is placed upon the type of medium utilized, frequency of utilization, or the resolution of the conflict, than upon the actual availability of being able to engage in communication through electronic means. This is indicative of the importance expressed by both service members and their families

of having more immediate resolutions or interactions with their loved ones, or a more expressed need for communication and connectedness to occur during deployment.

There are two primary reasons that these findings are important to social work.

First is that social media represents a medium by which to address ambiguous loss often experienced by service members and their families during deployment. Social workers working with military connected families face the potential of needing to address the needs of children, spouses, significant others, partners, parents, service members, and other family members who have experienced the sense of absence yet loss of their service member or family. The needs of these family members vary and are broad, partially due to the individuals' emotional and behavioral responses to the deployment experience, in addition to the context and frequency in which communication occurred with their service member. The impact that social media has upon these factors is not currently known, but potentially could be magnified when electronic means of communication are utilized during a period of absence, allowing the service member to visually and auditory be experienced by their family and vice versa.

Children's responses to deployment often vary depending upon any predisposition or difficulties to transitions and emotional dysregulation they may have already incurred prior to deployment. Additionally, the ability of their family members to effectively meet those needs have been shown to determine outcome measurements of how children negate deployment, and periods of absence (Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011; Lincoln & Sweeten, 2011). Research conducted by Comstock and Scharrer (2007) indicates children prefer communication via social media, in the circumstance of deployment and that in the consideration for potential ensuing danger of that loved one, there are potential

mental health consequences of its utilization, specifically in the case of injury or death. Contradictory, research conducted by Schachman (2010) found significant validity to the importance of “online fathering”, or engagement in daily parenting such as continuing the waking and bedtime routines with children during periods of absence. Teenagers have been found to benefit from ongoing communication that is open, but not inundated with too many details of their deployed parents theatre experiences, but rather regarding their daily life (Houston et al., 2013).

Secondly, findings from this study offered greater insight into service members’ perspectives regarding the utilization of social media, including their perspectives on the “should” and “should not’s” of its utilization. While existing literature addresses the concepts of netiquette and protection of deployment specific security information that could potentially endanger service members and their families if exchanged, thereby placing restrictions and monitoring the exchange of information being exchanged (Greene et al., 2010), findings from this study offer deployment-specific insights into why regular contact between service members and their families are beneficial for both parties, improving the re-integration process through allowing ongoing connectedness during absence; facilitating ongoing relationships with children during absence which has been linked to a decrease in children’s adaptive behaviors; and lastly allowing for conflict resolution to occur despite time differentials and inability to engage in non-verbal communication. Suggestions are indicated, such as monitoring for implications due to potential for miscommunication due to inaccurate inferences and judgments as a result of social media utilization, yet research specific to the long term implications of social media utilization are still being explored.

Lastly, when considering PIE. A service member who is experiencing deployment, and their spouse or family member remaining home has very different experiences, and their Person In Environment experiences are significantly differing from one another. Efforts to ensure effective communication needs to occur not only during deployment, but also upon re-integration and post-deployment between service members and their families. Ensuring communication remains open, that conflictual or difficult topics are discussed and negotiated has been shown to be an essential component to preventing ongoing and potentially devastating misinterpretations. In this context, social workers must take the responsibility of understanding military culture, and learn how to assist families who may be struggling with the various aspects of communication, taking into consideration pre-existing conditions, how conflict is managed and resolved, and how to engage military connected families in positive interactions within clinical work. To ensure positive outcomes, social workers must gain cultural knowledge of all the facets that compose military connected families and what challenges they may endure.

Implications for Policy

The military has made significant strides in advocating and ensuring that service members and their families are allotted communicative accessibility during deployment (Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010). The once frequently utilized adage “if the military wanted you to have a family, it would have issue you one” appears to be phasing out as the development and increased opportunities for online presence are being facilitated during deployment periods (Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010). Service members are allotted the opportunities to purchase internet for their living quarters, have access to international cell phones, and many are interacting with their families on a daily basis.

What governs service member utilization of social media, how it is regulated, and how this information is provided to family members is of vital concern.

Currently the Army has regulations in place to oversee the online presence of its soldiers and affiliates. *Army Regulation 25-1* oversees the utilization of bandwidth and clears web content and format, while approval for individuals appointed as webmasters or site managers is addressed in *DA Pamphlet 25-1-1*. *Army Regulation 530-1* regulates and provides guidance to Army Soldiers, civilians, contractors, and conceals indicators that could result in the release of critical or sensitive information while the development of social media websites and public release of military matters is addressed in *Army Regulation 360-1* (Jonasz, 2012). The Army additionally encourages great care be taken when setting up a social media site, offering ten bullet points of how to clearly reach objectives within the context of ensuring efficacy and control are maintained (Jonasz, 2012). Additionally, the Department of Defense offers an array of social media guides offering tutorials on how to obtain a secure online presence (DoD, 2014).

Cautions when considering developing an online presence for the purpose of communication between service members and their families should be provided in lieu of OPSEC rules and regulations. OPSEC (Operational Security), is the governing document by which service members and their family members are bound when engaging in conversations specific to military affairs. During deployment observation of OPSEC is of vital importance, as negligence of its observation could potentially result in the disclosure of critical and sensitive information being disclosed. Each service member, and their respective family member is responsible for observing OPSEC rules and guidelines, which generally include not disclosing any specifics regarding the mission

specific information or the number of service members assigned to it, deployment times or locations, unit morale or personnel issues, troop movement, military intentions/capabilities or operations, the location of your family during the deployment, or your service members return date. Compromising these guidelines poses significant risks not only to the service member, but also to the family.

Existing safeguards are essential to provide for security of both family and service member. Implications for future policy could include the development of military specific social media websites, in which family members would be allowed access during periods of deployment. Such social media websites could allow for interactive exchanges between service members and their family members to be offered through social media such as Facebook with the governmental safeguards allotted in the policies described in brief above. Allowing service members and their families a safe and secure place to interact with one another could potentially decrease the need for strict OPSEC regulations, as the need for them would be dissipated. However, education for family members continues to be an area of need, specifically to address the importance of following OPSEC rules and regulations just as their service member.

Conclusion

This research explored the topic of how social media is currently being utilized by service members and their families as a means to maintain communication during periods of deployment. It examined current accessibility to social media mediums, preferred mediums being utilized, the frequency of utilization, as well as how conflict and difficult conversations are being mitigated through its use. Additionally, demographic information specific to military affiliation, gender, race, and age were gathered.

Outcomes of this research suggest that social media is an invaluable means of communication currently being utilized by service members and their family's during periods of deployment. Supplemented by traditional means of communication such as telephone calls, care packages and letter correspondence, interaction through the utilization of video chatting, texting, emailing, and social networking websites were among the most reported mediums currently being utilized. Conflict resolution through social media was found to be relatively similar to that of engagement in traditional means of communication aside from the limitations that distance limit (e.g., physical touch). The profession may benefit from the information attained within this research in furthering advocacy in ensuring accessibility to social media for students, or low-income families who may not be able to afford related expenses. Respondents suggest ongoing development of social media accessibility and stabilization of networks be established, to minimize frustration from overly strained systems unable to meet demand. Additionally, of importance is the combination of social media with traditional methods of communication, allowing for deciphering of miscommunication and misinterpretation that can occur through social media utilization.

In conclusion, this research study contributed to a small body, but the small but growing body of knowledge pertaining to the use of social media between service members and their families. Overall, this study supported findings from prior studies in regard to the importance of service members and their family's maintaining communication during deployment upon a variety of factors including improved familial stability and positive service member morale (Greene et al., 2010; Hinojosa et al., 2012; Houston et al., 2013). This study deviated from prior studies in that it broke new ground

in the examination of how the engagement in difficult conversations and conflict management occurs via the utilization of social media, and to what end.

The frequency of utilization in which social media is currently being utilized by service members and their families to maintain communication during deployment should be of utmost importance to the social work profession. As the profession continues to develop towards increased use of electronic records and engagement of social media related contact with consumers, social workers need to become knowledgeable of how social media affects families impacted by long periods of separation, how conflict is managed. Perhaps gaining understanding of the resiliency skills military families elude through their ability to effectively adapt the multitude of changes often incurred can be applied generally throughout therapeutic relationships. Specifically, considerations for the inclusion of social media mediums as mechanisms for communication between family members should be further explored.

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Appendix A: Letter to Potential Participants

Dear Military Service Member, Spouse/Partner/Significant Other or (Adult) Child,

Thank you so much for your interest in my research study. I am a graduate student in the School of Social Work at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas. I am writing a clinical research paper on the topic of the utilization of social media by service members and their families during periods of deployment. I will be focusing on spouses and adult children of service members who have experienced deployment during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF, OND, and OEF). I will be surveying service members (current or retired/prior service), their spouses/significant others/partners and their adult children (currently aged 18 years and older) regarding the ways in which utilization of social media during deployment has benefited and/or inhibited relationships during deployment.

The survey is completely voluntary. Participating will provide you with a chance to share your opinion of how utilizing or not utilizing social media has impacted you. Before participating you will view a consent form in which you will need to agree to consent to participation, if you choose to participate in my study. You can view the consent form by entering this link: http://stthomassocialwork.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_9N7But2dp64N4e9 into your web browser or by clicking on it. The consent form goes into more detail about what I am asking of you as a participant. Please review the consent form and contact me with any questions that you may have at _____. If you do not have any question and would like to participate, please select “yes” and continue on to the survey. By continuing on to the survey you are giving consent to participate in the study.

Sincerely,

Lisa Bittner

Research Advisor:
Kari L. Fletcher, PhD, LICSW

Have you, your spouse/partner/significant other or your parent deployed post 9/11? If so, I am looking for participants for my research study.

Would you like to share your experiences of communication during deployment with me? Participants are needed to complete a survey for graduate Social Work research being done in conjunction with the St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work about utilization of social media by service members and their families during deployment. The survey will take no longer than 20 minutes. To participate you must meet the following guidelines:

- Must be 18 years of age or older
- Must be married to a military service member current or prior service
- Your spouse must have served in support of the Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom conflicts.
- Must be a child or dependent 18 years of age or older and meet the above criteria.

Participation is completely voluntary and will be kept confidential. You will be asked to identify types and frequency of social media use during periods of deployment, in addition to communication outcomes. For more information, please contact researcher Lisa Bittner at _____ . **You may also pass this information along to others who may be interested in participating. Thank you!**

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CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

How is Social Media Used by Military Families to Maintain Connection During
Deployment?
IRB Tracking #547861-1

I am conducting a study about the use and communicative impact of social media utilization among deployed service members and their families. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are either a current military service member, veteran, spouse/significant other/partner of a service member/veteran, or you have a parent is/has served in a branch of the military, and you are 18 years of age or older. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Lisa Bittner, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Kari L. Fletcher, PhD, LICSW.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is: to identify how social media has been utilized during the Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan/Pakistan October 7, 2001 through present date), Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq between October 7, 2001 through August 31, 2010), and Operation New Dawn (Iraq between September 1, 2010 through December 15, 2011) conflicts, and how its utilization has impacted communication within families during periods of deployment.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: Complete an online survey regarding social media utilization and communicative outcomes. The survey will be created using the electronic survey software Qualtrics, made available through the University of St. Thomas. The expected time commitment of participants is anywhere between 5 to 20 minutes.

Risk and Benefits of Being in the Study:

This study has some potential risks. First, the survey asks for personal and sensitive information. Because of this, the survey will be completely anonymous and no identifying information will be collected to minimize risk. Secondly, the survey may illicit emotional concern for participants, or may cause distress. To reduce this risk, participants are encouraged to leave any questions blank they feel uncomfortable answering. In addition, if distress occurs the survey can be discontinued at any time. A list of resources will be provided at the conclusion of the survey for those in need of

formal support services. All charges and fees incurred from seeking professional help will be at the responsibility of the participant.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. I will be collecting some demographic information about you, but not enough that you would be identifiable through the information attained. In any report I may publish, I will not include information that would make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include computer records which will be stored both on my computer in a password protected file. Any paper generated documents will be kept in my home in a locked filing cabinet that only I have access to. The data is being collected via Qualtrics, an electronic survey software. Only my research advisor and I will have access to the records. The records will be destroyed three years after the clinical presentation date of May 19, 2014 to allow time for embargo to occur.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until completion of the survey. Should you decide to withdraw in that time frame; your data may still be used as you are free to skip any questions that I may ask that you are uncomfortable with.

Contacts and Questions:

My name is Lisa Bittner. You may ask any questions you have concerning me at _____. My advisor's name and contact information is: Kari L. Fletcher, PhD, LICSW, research advisor, can be reached at _____. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at _____.

You can print this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age and am either a military service member, veteran, spouse/significant other/partner of a military service member, or adult child of a current or retired military service member who served during the OIF/OND/OEF conflicts.

By submitting the survey, you are indicating that you consent to participate in the study.

Thank you,

Lisa Bittner

The Clinical Social Workers use evidence based research in their practice. By contributing to this research, it allows practitioners to view, assess, and possibly conduct their own research by utilizing it. Although this study cannot be generalized to the whole population, it does identify how social media impacts communication between service members and their families during deployment.

Survey of How Social Media is Used by Military Families to Communicate During Deployment

Eligibility Criteria:

1) I am one of the following:

- a) I am at least 18 years of age.
- b) I am a current or prior service military member, or the spouse/ partner/significant other of a current or prior service military service member.
- c) I am the child (18 years of age or older) of a current or prior service military service member.
- d) I am none of the above.

2) Have you/your spouse/partner/significant other/parent deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan/Pakistan October 7, 2001 to present date), Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq between October 7, 2001 through August 31, 2010), or Operation New Dawn (Iraq between September 1, 2010 through December 15, 2011)?

- a) yes
- b) no

Welcome! Thank you for participating in my study. The survey will take about 20 minutes of your time. Please feel free to leave any questions that you are uncomfortable answering blank. You are free to stop taking the survey at any time. Questions that you have answered may still be used in my study. At the end of the survey, a list of mental health resources will be available to you. Thank you for your time!

1) How many deployments have you and your military-connected family experienced from 9/11 to the present? Please complete text box with dates deployed (if known).

- 1 deployment (please fill in dates, if known) _____
- 2 deployments (please fill in dates, if known) _____
- 3 deployments (please fill in dates, if known) _____
- 4 deployments (please fill in dates, if known) _____
- 5+ deployments (please fill in dates, if known) _____

2) What was the length of the longest deployment (including pre-deployment training, and demobilization) that you and your family experienced?

- a. 0-6 months
- b. 7-12 months

- c. 13-18 months
- d. 19-24 months
- e. 25+ months

3) When did the first deployment that you and your family experience begin?

- a) 2001
- b) 2002
- c) 2003
- d) 2004
- e) 2005
- f) 2006
- g) 2007
- h) 2008
- i) 2009
- j) 2010
- k) 2011
- l) 2012
- m) 2013
- n) currently deployed

4) When did the most recent deployment that you and your family experience begin?

- a) 2001
- b) 2002
- c) 2003
- d) 2004
- e) 2005
- f) 2006
- g) 2007
- h) 2008
- i) 2009
- j) 2010
- k) 2011
- l) 2012
- m) 2013
- n) currently deployed

5) Which of the following did you/your spouse/significant other/partner or parent deploy in support of? (Please check yes or no for each option provided)

Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan/Pakistan October 7, 2001-present)	Yes	No
Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq between October 7, 2001 – August 31, 2010)	Yes	No

Operation New Dawn (Iraq between September 1, 2010 – December 15, 2011)	Yes	No
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6) Where did you live during your family’s first deployment? (Please check yes or no for each option provided)

On a military base	Yes	No
In the community (e.g. civilian)	Yes	No
Other (fill in the blank)	Yes	No

7) Where did you live during your family’s latest deployment?

On a military base	Yes	No
In the community (e.g. civilian)	Yes	No
Other (fill in the blank)	Yes	No

8) Which members of your military-connected family resided together (e.g., permanent residence was under the same roof as you) at the time of the latest deployment?

Mother	Yes/No
Father	Yes/No
Mother-in-law	Yes/No
Father-in-law	Yes/No
Brother(s) (How many?)	Yes/No
Sister(s) (How many?)	Yes/No
Brother-in-law	Yes/No
Sister-in-law	Yes/No
Cousin(s) (How many?)	Yes/No
Step Mother	Yes/No
Step Father	Yes/No
Step Sibling(s) (How many?)	Yes/No
Half Sibling(s) (How many?)	Yes/No
Friend(s)	Yes/No
Grandparent(s)	Yes/No
Son(s) (Please list ages at the time(s) of deployment).	Yes/No
Daughter(s) (Please list ages at the time(s) of deployment).	Yes/No
Step-son(s) (Please list ages at times(s) of deployment).	Yes/No
Step-daughter(s) (Please list ages at time(s) of deployment).	Yes/No
Other _____ (fill in the blank)	

Deployment/Social Media

In the following questions, you will be asked to consider how you utilized social media during deployment to communicate with your family member(s)/service member(s). Please answer how strongly you agree or disagree with statements related to this subject matter. For the purposes of this study, *social media* is being defined as a communicative device that allows for individuals to create and share personal information, ideas, and interests through the utilization of electronic communication such as texting, social networking (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, Google Hangouts, etc.), video conferencing (e.g. Skype, Facetime, OoVoo, Google Hangouts, etc.), email, and any other form of electronic communication.

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements:

9) “I had access to social media during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

10) “I used social media to communicate with my family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

11) “I used _____--or ‘electronic’ means to communicate with my family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

Email

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Texting

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Facebook

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Skype

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Twitter

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Blogs

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Google Talk

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

OoVoo

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Snap chat

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Interactive Video Game

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Facetime

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Other _____ (fill in the blank)

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

12) “I used _____ --or ‘conventional’ approaches to communicate with my family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

Written Letters

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Care packages

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Telephone

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Fax

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Other (fill in blank) _____

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

13) Using one of the above ‘electronic’ and ‘conventional’ means for communication, on average, how often did you communicate with your family during deployment?

(multiple choice)

1 time daily

2 or more times daily (fill in the blank)

2-3 times per week

4-5 times per week

6-7 times per week

1-2 times per month

3-4 times per month

Did not use

Other (fill in the blank)

14) Please reflect upon the reasons for frequency of contact (e.g. based upon average use, did specific events result in increased connectivity, etc.). (fill in the blank)

15) “When I did not use social media to communicate with my family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment, this was due to... _____”

a) Limited finances

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

b) Remote location

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

c) No access/services available

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

d) Personal preference

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

e) Other (fill in the blank)

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

16) “Overall, I would say _____ contributed to the types of mediums I used to stay in touch with my military-connected family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

Expense

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Ease of Access/service

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Convenience

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Personal preference

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Dependability

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Preference of deployed family member

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Preference of at-home partner/spouse

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Preference of child(ren)

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Familiarity

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Medium facilitated the kind of conversation we wished to have

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Other (fill in the blank)

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

17) Please reflect upon any differences in availability, accessibility, or utilization of social media communicative devices if multiple deployments have been experienced (e.g. change over time of specific types utilized, frequency of use, etc.).

Communication Outcomes: The following questions will ask about your opinion regarding how the use of social media impacted your communication with your service member/family member during deployment. Communication in this context is defined as the exchange of information between individuals for the purpose of ongoing preservation of relationships during deployment.

18) “Overall, I think social-media based mediums helped me to stay in touch with my military-connected family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

19) “Overall, the _____ aspect of social media positively impacted my ability to stay in touch with my military-connected family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

Reliable technology

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Accessibility to technology

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Frequency of contact

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Content of information exchanged

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Ability to Remain Connected to service member and/or Family Member

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

20) “Overall, the _____ aspect of social media negatively impacted my ability to stay in touch with my military-connected family during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

Technology difficulties

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Limited access to technology

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Infrequency of contact

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Content of information exchanged

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

Feeling of being disconnected from my family and/or service member

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

21) Are there aspects of your experience and using social media to maintain communication with your service member/family that you would like to talk about? Please say a little more about this? (fill in the blank)

22) Did conflict or difficult conversations arise during communication via social media?

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

23) “Overall, I found communication regarding _____ most difficult to engage in through the use of social media mediums during my or my family member’s most recent deployment.”

a) finances

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

b) parenting/concerns regarding child(ren)

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

c) grief/loss

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

d) daily activities

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

d) other _____

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

24) “Overall, I am satisfied with how utilization of social media based mediums assisted me in resolving conflict/difficult conversation(s) with my military connected family during my or my family members’ most recent deployment”

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

25) Did you find resolution of the conflict/difficult conversation constructive? Can you please describe how the difficult conversation/conflict was resolved through utilization of social media (e.g. what medium was utilized and to what end)?

26) “Overall, I felt that the utilization of social media mediums for communication with my military connected family during my or my family members deployment resulted in the same outcomes when discussing difficult topics as if I had been able to address these topics in person.”

Strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; agree; strongly agree

27) Can you please describe your experience regarding the process of utilizing social media to resolve conflict/difficult conversations (e.g. length of time, effectiveness, emotions, etc.)?

28) Can you please describe one positive and one negative aspect of utilizing social media to maintain communication with your family/service member during deployment? (fill in the blank)

And last but not least, a bit about you...

29) I am a current or prior service military service member.

- a) yes
- b) no

30) Which of the following has your family been affiliated with since post 9/11 deployments?

Active Duty	Reserves	National Guard	
Army	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No
Navy	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No
Air Force	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No
Marines	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No
Coast Guard	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No

31) During which conflict were you/your spouse/partner/significant other/parent deployed in support of?

- a) Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan/Pakistan
October 7, 2001 to present date) Yes/No
- b) Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq between October 7, 2001
through August 31, 2010) Yes/No
- c) Operation New Dawn (Iraq between September 1, 2010
through December 15, 2011) Yes/No

32) What is your military connected family members' affiliation?

- a) Full-time (Active Duty)
- b) Part-time (Reserve/Guard)
- c) Other_____ (fill in the blank)

Demographics

Personal:

33) What is your current age?

- a) 18-19
- b) 20-24
- c) 25-29
- d) 30-34
- e) 35-39
- f) 40-44

- g) 45-49
- h) 50-54
- i) 55-59
- j) 60-64
- k) 65+

34) What was your age at time of you/your spouse/partner/significant other/parent(s) first deployment?

- a) > 10
- b) 10-14
- c) 15-19
- b) 20-24
- c) 25-29
- d) 30-34
- e) 35-39
- f) 40-44
- g) 45-49
- h) 50-54
- i) 55-59
- j) 60-64
- k) 65+ (fill in the blank)

35) What was your age at the time of you/your spouse/partner/significant other/parent(s) most recent deployment?

- a) >10
- b) 10-14
- c) 15-19
- d) 20-24
- d) 25-29
- e) 30-34
- f) 35-39
- g) 40-44
- h) 45-49
- i) 50-54
- j) 55-59
- k) 60-64
- l) 65+ (fill in the blank)

36) What is your gender?

- a) Male
- b) Female
- c) Transgender
- d) Other (fill in the blank)_____

e) I prefer not to disclose.

37) How would you describe your ethnicity/race?

- a) Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic)
- b) Black/African-American
- c) Native American/American Indian or Alaskan Native
- d) Asian Indian
- d) Chinese
- e) Filipino
- f) Japanese
- g) Korean
- d) Vietnamese
- e) Native Hawaiian
- f) Guamanian or Chamorro
- g) Samoan
- h) Other Asian (fill in the blank)
- i) Other Pacific Islander (fill in the blank)
- j) Other (fill in the blank)

38) What is your highest completed level of education?

- a) GED
- b) High School Diploma
- c) Some college (has not completed degree program)
- d) Bachelor's Degree (please specify degree program)
- e) Some Post-Baccalaureate Course Work (please specify degree program)
- f) Master's Degree (please specify degree program)
- g) Doctorate Degree (please specify degree program)
- h) Other (fill in the blank)_____

39) How many total years have you/your spouse/partner/significant other/parent serve in the United States Armed Forces? (fill in the blank)

40) "Overall, I have found my military experience to be positive."

Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Agree; Strongly Agree

41) Do you have any further feedback, questions, or comments regarding this survey that you would like to include? (fill in the blank)

Thank you for your participation in this survey. All responses will be kept confidential, and no identifying information will be released. A reference guide is attached for your convenience for further information and support. Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this important research.

Thank you for taking the survey. Your time and commitment to this project is greatly appreciated. If you are experiencing emotional distress or would like to talk to someone, please consider using the resources below:

You can call:

2-1-1 (Crisis Hotline)

888-457-4838 (Military Helpline)

1-800-273-8255 and press 1 (Veterans Crisis Line)

VeteransCrisisLine.net (Chat online – free and confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, even if you are not registered with the Department of Veteran Affairs or enrolled in VA health care)

Social media books for reference:

Sherman, M. D., & Sherman, D. M., (2009). *My Story: Blogs by four military teens*. Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press.

Go to the following links:

Military One Source

www.militaryonesource.mil

Military Child Education Coalition

www.militarychild.org

Operation Home Front

www.operationhomefront.net

Wounded Warrior Project

www.woundedwarriorproject.org

Real Warriors Real Battles Real Strength

www.realwarriors.net

Joint Services Support

www.jointservicessupport.org

National Military Family Association

www.militaryfamily.org