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Women Veterans' Use of Gender-Specific, Online, Social Support Systems For Social Identity After Military Service

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Abstract

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For Social Identity After Military Service

by

Katie Michelle Baillio

MA, Walden University, 2020

BA, Capella University, 2019

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The number of women veterans serving in the military is growing. This qualitative study explored women veterans' perspectives and experiences with gender-specific online social support services, and how that contributes to their social identity after military service. A generic qualitative design was used, and data were collected through semistructured interviews for 10 women veterans who had transitioned out of the military within the last 5 years. Five themes emerged: (a) big picture: connecting with other women veterans was helpful; (b) veteran forums were used for federal or state benefits, but women used gender-specific forums for questions specific to women's issues; (c) how women veterans use the groups matters; (d) women veterans do not necessarily want to share their own stories but want to help others; and (e) identity as a woman veteran is important because women veterans felt more included in women-only groups. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis process. The results highlighted that women veterans use online forums for social support, asking for and sharing information about resources, assisting with federal or state benefits, and possibly contributing to their identity. Women veterans chose gender-specific forums for women-specific questions, offered mentorship, and identified that it helped them to feel safe when communicating with other women veterans. The results also show that not all women veterans wanted to share their private information or story online, even though they were part of the online forums and would assist others. This research may promote social change by increasing awareness of the unique needs of women veterans as they transition out of the military.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my mother, who passed away at the start of this year, but Mom, I finished the journey. There were times when she believed in me, more than my belief that I could finish it. Thank you to my family, who were with me throughout the process.

I dedicate this to all of my sisters in arms for allowing me to be their voice. To the ones whose shoulders I stand on, who dared to forge a path in the military; to those serving now; and to those serving in the future, know you are not alone. To all of my military family, thank you for your support throughout this journey.

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Thank you to God for allowing me to complete this journey. To Dr. Seabrook and Dr. Chermack, thank you for your patience and support, and for working with me while I overthought the process many times. Your constructive feedback and guidance reminded me that asking for help on the journey was okay.

To my battle buddy, Reese, thank you for your support and for sometimes talking me off the ledge throughout this process. I am blessed with a fantastic support system that reminded me they are here for me and cheered me on from the beginning. They tell you from the start that this is a marathon, not a sprint. Well, I am glad to cross the finish line.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Veterans' transition challenges have been documented through several disciplines, from psychology to social work, physical medicine, and human services. With women veterans being one of the growing demographics in the military, it is important to recognize that they may need specific resources for women veterans. Some specific transition challenges reported by women veterans are a loss to their military community and a loss of sense of purpose/camaraderie (Maury et al., 2020).

I sought to explore women veterans' social support experiences in this study as they used gender-specific online forums after military service. Exploring the experiences of women veterans using these forums may provide insight into how women veterans receive support after the military, specifically using online forums. This research could bring awareness to how veterans use online forums, aiding federal and state agencies and other veteran service-specific groups to assist transition veterans after military service. In this chapter, I discuss the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research question, theoretical framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance, concluding with a summary.

Background

Men and women veterans have different experiences throughout their service and transitioning back to civilian life. The Institute For Veterans And Military Families conducted research specific to women and found that 66% of women veterans reported having difficulty transitioning compared to male veterans at 51% (Maury et al., 2020).

Identifying a specific need, the latest update to the Women's Health Transition Training manual in 2022 created information specific to women veterans who were transitioning, covering different topics, ranging from enrolling in VA healthcare, to the various types of women-specific healthcare services, to a module focusing on transition assistance, including social support services (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022). The guide does offer many online resources, but does not explicitly address using online forums for social support.

Social support is another area of difference for men and women transitioning out of service. The social support women veterans need has been identified as a challenge and something to further research (Fletcher et al., 2022; Goldstein et al., 2018; Griffiths et al., 2020). Though the research using online forums for social support is not explicitly addressed, online forums for exchanging and receiving support continue to grow, and further research is needed. A 2023 study focused on transitioning women veterans found that social support was desired but was hard to maintain while maintaining a work–life balance (Rattray, Natividad, et al., 2023). Understanding if and how gender-specific social support impacts women veterans, as well as what type and what level of support has an impact, may bring further awareness to the needs of this population.

Problem Statement

In 2020, women made up 17.2% of the active-duty force, showing an overall increase of 2.8% compared to 2010 numbers (Department of Defense, 2020). The number of women veterans will continue to grow from 9% to 17% by 2040 (Vespa, 2020), and their needs for services will increase after their military transition with services in the

Veterans Affairs and the Community. In 2021, there were 18.5 million veterans, and 1 out of 10 was a woman (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Approximately 200,000 servicemembers transition yearly (Farrell, 2021), and 90% of active duty service members attend the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). While TAP focuses on employment and education, it does not address other factors such as financial needs, support for the individual and family transitioning, and maintaining general well-being (Whitworth et al., 2020). The period of 3 to 6 years after the military transition is essential to promoting positive postmilitary social identity (Thompson et al., 2019).

Sixty-six percent of women veterans reported having difficulty transitioning from military service, compared with male veterans at 51% (Maury et al., 2020). A 2021 Wounded Warrior Project Women Warrior Initiative Report identified that the Department of Defense should implement a transitioning process to educate transitioning service members on available resources (Wounded Warrior Project, 2021). The same study determined that there could be a crisis of identity as the women infrequently saw themselves in the veteran community and struggled to connect with other civilian women. The report highlights the impact in being around others who understand their experiences and attitudes. Social support from other women veterans could assist in reducing isolation and increasing resiliency. COVID-19 allowed for more virtual platforms for women and saw increased participation in different geographical areas; this allowed for other women-specific groups to be formed (Wounded Warrior Project, 2021). The problem is that female veterans lack the necessary support to reenter civilian life after exiting service.

Researchers identified that there might be a need to focus on social connection for those recently separated, and women veterans have the greatest need for such connection (Campbell et al., 2021). Researchers in another study highlighted that with women veterans through the transition process, there was a loss of military identity and trying to identify who they were after transitioning from the military (Boros & Erolin, 2021). A study focused on effective networks while transitioning from the military identified that networks composed of fellow servicemembers versus civilians might influence their success while transitioning and reinforcing their military identity (Alonso et al., 2021).

Researchers using the Reddit online forum identified social media as a way of connecting and supporting each other with identity crises in the military-to-civilian transitions (Zhou et al., 2022). A study on the Australian Defense Force recognized that military identity impacts social connectedness and influences well-being (Flack & Kite, 2021). Another study focused on women veterans found that after their military transition, there was a loss of identity, meaningful work, and close relationships (Fletcher et al., 2022). A different study on social group engagement and identity among the Australian Defense Force suggested that strong military identities may lead to difficulties when engaging in civilian social groups and that the veterans' social group membership may be positive and negative (Barnett et al., 2022). The problem is that women veterans may not have all of the information and support they feel they need after military service and may engage in online forums seeking support. These forums may or may not provide the necessary information and support to help women veterans transition out of the

military, and they should be researched to identify any gaps or best practices to assist women veterans transitioning out of the military.

Although the aforementioned research regarding some women veterans' use of social support systems after military service illuminates important findings, I found limited research that has explored women veterans' perspectives of online gender-specific social support systems after military service to address the documented problem of transition challenges and decreased social identity (Barnett et al., 2022). Given this, further research is warranted to explore whether women veterans lack the necessary support to reenter civilian life after exiting service.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore women veterans' perspectives and experiences with online gender-specific social support and understand how that contributes to their social identity after military service. This research will promote social change by increasing awareness of the social identity of women veterans after they transition from military service. This research will encourage service providers who may address their concerns, enabling them to serve them effectively and advocate for change in the women veterans' population.

Research Question

What are the women veterans’ perspectives and experiences with gender-specific online social support services, and how does that contribute to their social identity after military service?

Theoretical Framework

The theory that grounded this study included Henri Tajfel's original work on social identity theory (SIT) in 1974. Tajfel continued to build on his initial approach, which was initially published online in 2016 (Tajfel, 1974), identifying that members of a group may take on the overall identity of the group. This theory has three major components: cognitive, evaluative, and emotional. Tajfel and Turner (1986) further clarified how an individual's self-esteem and emotional involvement contribute to the individual and group identity of in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The cognitive component involves how the individual classifies themselves as a group member. Self-esteem, positive or negative, contributes to how individuals evaluate themselves as part of the group. The emotional portion focuses on the individual's investment within the group and their overall commitment to the group. SIT can be a factor in decision-making (Griepentrog et al., 2012). Military personnel develop a military identity, which can displace their civilian identity and impact the transition after the military; while this affects both men and women, women veterans often have a more stigmatized identity (Atuel et al., 2017).

Through the lens of SIT, I was able to develop a framework to examine how online gender-specific forums contributed to or hindered identity as women transitioned out of military service. I built participant interview questions with the tenets and components of the theory to examine participants' perceptions of online gender-specific forums and their transition from military service. The military is known to favor masculine gender norms. Adjusting to civilian life may cause difficulty if there is no or

limited social support or experience with health problems that may cause identity loss (Atuel et al., 2017).

Nature of Study

Generic qualitative inquiry was the most appropriate to address the research question. Using a generic design allowed me to interview women veterans using online forums for social support (see Lichtman, 2022). This design is the most open and exploratory (Caelli et al., 2003). The results allowed me to understand how women veterans use online social support systems. Qualitative research is interpretative and makes research questions flexible (Gavin, 2008). A generic approach was appropriate for my study because documenting the perceptions of women veterans' experiences with online support forums after transitioning from military service allowed for initial and follow-up questions based on their responses.

Data Collection Tools

For my planned research design, I recruited women veterans who had transitioned out of the military within the last 5 years using military veteran online forums for social support. Social media have also become a popular recruiting tool, with Facebook and LinkedIn as recruitment options. Social media recruitment offers access to a broader pool of potential participants without geographical limitations. I developed an interview guide with open-ended questions to address the research question and align with the purpose of the study.

Data Points

I conducted semistructured interviews using open-ended questions. The first research question was given after the inclusion criteria were verified and initial demographic questions were asked. This allowed participants to tell their stories freely. Probing questions or clarifying questions were asked as needed. Data were collected remotely through online interviews using Zoom. The platform can record interviews and make transcriptions available. The transcriptions were reviewed and revised according to the audio. The data were also manually coded. I utilized reflective journaling, analytic notes, and memos.

Definitions

Social support: "The provision of assistance or comfort to others, typically to help them cope with biological, psychological, and social stressors. Support may arise from any interpersonal relationship in an individual's social network, involving family members, friends, neighbors, religious institutions, colleagues, caregivers, or support groups" (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Veteran: "A person who served in the active military, naval, air, or space service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable" (38 C.F.R. Ch. 1 § 3.1, 2024).

Assumptions

Using a qualitative approach was appropriate for collecting information from women veterans who had experience using gender-specific online forums for social support after their military transition. With this approach, I assumed the participants were

transparent and open regarding their experiences. The assumption that all women veterans experience the same type and level of social support is a perceived bias that did not guide this study. As the researcher in this study, I sought to examine the experiences of women veterans and how social support was received in gender-specific forums to assist with their military transition.

In conducting this qualitative study, I assumed that the chosen instrument of interview questions accurately assessed the participants' experience and answered the research question. Additionally, when using the qualitative method, I assumed that the sample group selected was representative of the population. Finally, I assumed that the interview questions helped the participants answer so that the research question would be answered and the research problem would be addressed.

Scope and Delimitations

The participants were women veterans using online military/veteran forums who had transitioned out of the military within the last 5 years and have used these forums for online social support. They were recruited through veteran service organizations, women veteran support groups, and online military/veteran forums, which are gender-specific online forums. Using the snowball effect, recruitment occurred through flyers, social media announcements, and emailing women veterans currently in the local veteran network. Participants could also tell other women veterans about this study.

The women veterans' identities have been kept confidential; each participant had a pseudonym. I conducted semistructured interviews for approximately 45 to 60 minutes,

using Zoom as the meeting platform. The virtual platform allowed the recording of the interviews, with transcription completed separately.

One delimitation was the choice of the research problem. There are countless problems to be explored in military transition issues and women veterans in general. I chose this area of research based on online forums that are used for many different reasons when it comes to veterans, but there are not that many research studies that focus on this.

A generic qualitative inquiry was also chosen to investigate the veterans' opinions, reflections, and experiences on their social identity while transitioning from the military. Other methods, such as ethnography, case study, grounded theory, or phenomenology, were inappropriate because the focus of this study and the data I obtained did not fit these approaches (Percy et al., 2015).

Limitations

One limitation was the lack of literature on the subject (Kahlke, 2014). Researchers must be aware of assumptions and biases. As a woman veteran, I needed to try to remain unbiased and avoid premature notions regarding the data (Gergen, 2022). It was essential that I only address what was said during interviews and not assume or imply meaning in the information.

One limitation of the study is that women veterans were not serving in the National Guard or Reserves. There could have been a population of women veterans who had transitioned out of the military in the last 5 years but were serving in the National Guard or Reserves. This study should consider the generalizability of the findings. It

could be said that only motivated women veterans who were interviewed were recruited from a wide range of settings, including specific veteran organizations and groups. These women veterans might have had transition struggles. The study was conducted across veteran organizations, social media sites, and groups.

A purposeful sample strategy is commonly used in generic qualitative research. A small sample size depends on the information from the interview with women veterans. The sample size was suggested to be 10 interviews or fewer, with data saturation being the focus (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Other foreseen potential challenges included time constraints, scheduling participants for interviews at their convenience, the availability of participants for follow-up questions, and the dependability of participants presenting for scheduled appointments. I worked full-time and understood that I might have to take off at specific times to conduct the virtual interviews. During my research, I also knew that I should have a resource list if a woman veteran disclosed certain information. I followed the ethical guidelines of Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Significance

This study is significant because it fills a gap in understanding how women veterans use gender-specific online social services after transitioning from military service. The Department of Defense and the VA state that the number of women veterans is growing and will continue to increase over the next 10 years, but only in the last 10 years has previous research been completed. Insights from this study contribute to the body of work on women veterans' challenges. The Department of Defense and the

Department of Labor will advocate for social support online forums for women veterans transitioning from the military. While the VA has recognized the impact of social support on women veterans, the information could be combined to allow for more virtual interactions with women veterans. The Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) can use this information to justify online peer and social support groups and in-person groups to assist veterans and their families. Specific Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Legion, Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Wounded Warrior Project, and Woven could use this information to show that their online social support forums can assist veterans. Implications for social change would be for nonprofit or for-profit organizations that are veteran and nonveteran organizations to reevaluate online peer and social support forums through the lens of this research. From an HSPP lens, this research could assist women veterans transitioning from military service.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I presented the need for further research to understand the social experiences of women veterans, including the challenges and the responsive strategies used to integrate into civilian society after military service (Griffiths et al., 2020; Kent & Buechner, 2019). This study aimed to add to the needed research on women veterans. This research study examined women veterans' experience with online social support after their military transition.

In Chapter 2, I restate the problem and purpose of this study. Moreover, I provide a concise synopsis of the current literature that establishes the problem's relevance. Also,

I provide details on the research strategy, the theoretical framework, and an extensive literature review that synthesizes studies related to the research question. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary of major themes in the reviewed literature and describes how this study fills the gap in the literature related to the problem and how knowledge in the field of study could be extended.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I explore key terminology and behavioral concepts, women veterans transitioning from military service, and the study's theoretical background and framework through published literature. Existing databases relevant to the area of research were examined to identify research gaps and contribute to the existing body of knowledge. The literature review involved the collection of research from various credible databases. Furthermore, the assessment helped formulate and refine research questions based on critical concepts discussed in the peer-reviewed studies. Finally, a synthesis of the literature on the reasoning and background of this research completes this chapter.

The present research aimed to explore women veterans' perspectives on online gender-specific social support systems after military service to address the documented problem of transition challenges and decreased social identity. Women make up 17.2% of the active-duty force, with an overall increase of 2.8% compared to 2010 numbers (Department of Defense, 2020). The number of women veterans will continue to grow from 9% to 17% by 2040 (Vespa, 2020), and their needs for services will increase after their military transition within the Veterans Affairs and Community in 2021. The literature review involved collecting research from different databases, which helped refine search questions based on theory concepts and peer-reviewed articles.

This chapter provides an overview of the strategy for identifying literature relevant to the research question and the theory. The origin of SIT and previous applications are presented. The theoretical foundation and its relationship to this study are

explained. This review highlights the main concepts under consideration, what is known, and what remains to be studied.

Literature Search Strategy

I performed my literature review with articles empirically evaluated and published through databases including APA PsycINFO, Military and Government Collection, Social Work Abstracts, SocINDEX, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Walden Dissertations, ProQuest Global Dissertations, Taylor and Francis Online, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Emerald, and Springer, as well as in a Thoreau multidatabase search and Google Scholar. Current and relevant articles supported my research and key topics. In locating current articles, keywords used were *veterans, military, soldiers, service men, service members, women veterans, social support, social identity, online social support, online forums, virtual forums, social categorization, social comparison, social media, gender-specific*, and *human services*.

Keyword searches resulted in articles published from 2019 to the present day. Articles published before 2019 were only used for theoretical originality and verification support. The articles reviewed were evaluated for the relevance of my topic and synthesized into my research. Continuous assessment of articles allowed me to stay on topic with my research question: What are the women veterans' perspectives and experiences with gender-specific, online social support services, and how does that contribute to their social identity after military service? The research question contributes to this study's overall purpose of exploring women veterans’ perspectives and experiences with online, gender-specific social support services and understanding. This

research will promote social change by increasing awareness of the social identity of women veterans after they transition from military service. This research will encourage service providers who may address their concerns, enabling them to serve them effectively and advocate for change in the women veterans' population. This review highlights the main concepts under investigation, what is currently known, and what remains to be studied.

Theoretical Foundation

Social Identity Theory

The concept of social identity theory (SIT) suggests that individuals may associate themselves with the groups they believe they belong to and may take on the characteristics of the groups and compare themselves to others. Individuals normally have something in common with the group. They will be specific to the individual's social identity, even though there will be comparisons to in-groups and out-groups within the social categorization (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, 1974, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). SIT is an essential and well-studied concept used in different areas of research that can be used to examine how an individual's social identity and group dynamics shape the perceptions of the group and the individual. Tajfel further clarified that there must be a cognitive and evaluative component for group identification, thus adding awareness, value, and emotional investment (Tajfel, 1982). Social comparison is based on the individual's evaluation of the in-group/out-groups to differentiate themselves from other groups based on the groups' values and goals (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Social Categorization

Social categorization is based on the meaningful choice of the subject matter to choose to belong to a group. Tajfel clarified that groups are cognitive functions that were not defined by the previous social psychological literature, where they were objective. Groups are based on individuals' perspectives and beliefs, and lines can be blurred between self and group (Jaubert et al., 2020; Tajfel, 1974). This concept can be expanded to the social categorizing of the individual, how the individual complements the organization, and their motivation to be part of a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ding et al., 2017).

Overall, the findings from studies indicate that the individual's group choice is based on their beliefs and wanting to belong. The value function of the group will be based on the similarities and differences based on group membership (Tajfel, 1982). It is important to focus on how military veterans categorize themselves into groups. Furthermore, women veterans may see themselves as part of military groups or see themselves differently from other military groups based on their experiences.

One study within the management field identified veteran status as a specific social category (Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021). The researchers highlighted that veterans and civilians might see themselves in different social groups, hindering communication and impacting interpersonal trust. This study contributes to the overall theme that SIT applied to a workplace setting may identify that veterans see themselves differently than the civilians they work with. The same approach can also be used for an individual's social categorization within the group and the impact on their social identity. Veterans

might see themselves compared to other workers within the workplace; this contributes to how they perceive or understand whether they are in the superior or inferior group.

Social Identity

Social identity is the emotional significance that an individual attaches to the group and the symbolic relationship from an imposed informational framework (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1974). The individual will adopt the characteristics of the group with which they identify, thus building on "I think," "We think," and "It is" to create a collective identity and how they see themselves as part of the group (Ashforth et al., 2011; Conroy et al., 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

The military identity is one of a group, and the individuals within this group will recognize the values and norms as they apply to the group and individual identity (Tajfel, 1982). Research specific to strong military identities has suggested that there may be difficulties when engaging in civilian social groups and that the veterans' social group membership may be positive and negative (Barnett et al., 2022; Guerrero et al., 2021). Guerrero et al. (2021) further highlighted the social and veteran identity's impact on male veterans treated in a substance recovery home, highlighting that identity impacts their transition and overall adjustment into civilian society.

Two specific studies focused on women veterans and the impact of their identity while transitioning from military service through the lens of SIT. Researchers found that after their military transition, there was a loss of identity, meaningful work, and close relationships (Fletcher et al., 2022). Researchers also identified that the degree of military identity that remains after transition, compared to others, may impact their mental health

(Meca et al., 2021). Meca et al. (2021) identified a limitation in their research, as most of the participants were women and served in the Navy. These studies contribute to the growing body of research on the impact of women veterans' social identity as they transition from military service.

Face-to-face interactions between men and women may differ from online interactions regarding an individual's social identity. More and more communication happens online, and anonymous expressions can influence individual and collective identity; therefore, an individual's identity may differ from their social identity (Crocetti et al., 2023; O'Reilly et al., 2022). O'Reilly et al. (2022) focused on online interactions and asked participants opinion-based questions about which group they identified with based on the questions. After the study, participants' responses were shown in vignettes, consistent with whether they agreed or disagreed with the opinion. O'Reilly et al. found that exposure to other opinions allowed in-group identification, not activism. Online groups revolving around opinions may have significant social influences, where information can be exchanged with a larger group. This study contributed to my research by identifying that online collective opinions may impact an individual's social identity.

Identity may contribute to how an individual identifies and contributes to different groups. SIT has been used in recent social media studies and contributed to online identity (Hudders & De Jans, 2022; Jaidka et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022). Lee et al. (2022) focused on online forums such as Facebook and messaging apps, including WhatsApp and Snapchat, comparing U.S. media versus Japanese media focuses on partisan, polarized political identity within social media use. Jaidka et al. (2022) highlighted that

even with an anonymous social identity, there could be group conformity, which does not always decrease discussion quality. At the same time, the researchers created a specific social media platform, and they identified that anonymous features and metrics could benefit Twitter (2022). Hudders and De Jan's (2022) research focused on Instagram and gender effects and found that women identified more with the content of women influencers, which impacted brand engagement; there were no differences for men in terms of the gender of the influencers. All three studies contributed to my research because identity online may or may not be impacted by gender, platform, or even anonymous posts. In all three studies, the researchers recognized that the different groups may compare themselves to other groups.

Social Comparison

Social comparison is another component where the group members compare themselves to each other and other similar groups. Tajfel (1974) described the different groups as superior and inferior or secure and insecure groups for the individual's social identity. There can be division among similar groups, and individual participants determine who has authority within and outside the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ye et al., 2016). Groups may deal with different biases within their group, which can differ from those outside the group (Różycka-Tran, 2017; Ye et al., 2016). Within the military community, there can be social comparisons between the different branches of service and even further comparisons within active duty, reserve, and National Guard status, which are other groups within the military and may have their own identity. Within these groups are additional social comparisons between women and men and gender and sex,

which may create further social comparisons within the military community and impact their social identity.

Intergroup relationships are also crucial in a work setting. Through the lens of SIT, Shnapper-Cohen et al. (2022) researched how hospital employees' identities impacted the organizational mission, department staff, and patients. The researchers identified that in-groups and out-groups in a hospital setting directly impacted senior management and departments, and the potential need for the hospital to have a collective identity. The study's results suggested that management can create or build multidimensional teams and help understand how individual and department identities create organizational identities (Shnapper-Cohen et al., 2022). This study is relevant because the results show that social identity is that of the individual and the group. Still, factors such as leadership may impact how the organization's in-groups and out-groups work together. The researchers highlighted that organizational leadership should promote intergroup relationships; this idea could be applied to women veterans if they think they are in an outgroup. If leadership works with all organization members, Shnapper-Cohen et al.'s research recommendations for promoting organizational identity could positively impact individual social identity.

Individuals will compare themselves to others within the group for favorable comparisons and use that information to compare themselves to outside groups (Tajfel, 1982). One example found in the research was that veterans serving in the reserves might have an easier time transitioning into the workplace compared to active duty due to a military and civilian life balance (Flack & Kite, 2021). Researchers found that veterans

transitioning into the civilian workforce may compare themselves to their civilian counterparts, which may lead to culture shock and employee turnover (Peat & Perrmann-Graham, 2022). Perrmann-Graham (2022) identified that these veterans would perceive themselves as part of the out-group of the company culture, making inclusion harder. The researchers recommended that human resources should investigate veteran-specific diversity programs. Other researchers found that some veterans may not want to identify themselves as veterans to different groups in the workforce because there may be perceptions or concerns of stigmatized identity, mental health among veterans, and other groups in the workplace(Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021).

SIT can be applied to military service because of its unique social category, with specific identity components that make up its military culture. Within each branch of military service, there is a social comparison with the other branches, including reserve and National Guard components. The identity of a service member may be based upon many different factors, including whether the service member feels that they are part of the in-group or out-group, and this is also applied to the transition to a civilian workplace (T. H. Porter et al., 2023).

SIT grounds this research by acknowledging the overall impact of military transition service as a category for individuals to compare themselves to civilians and other veterans, following the social category tenet of SIT. The identity of the individual service member may be questioned when transitioning from military service, with specific challenges. One research study combining SIT with other identity theories showed that transitioning veterans undergo different identity phases, including

realization, relinquishing, and reconceptualization (Becker et al., 2023). Becker et al.'s (2023) research identified that the sample size of women veterans was small, and this was an area to be further studied to examine whether the different stages for women veterans are the same or different from those of male veterans. Porter et al. (2023) used the SIT theory for veterans who transitioned out of the military but acknowledged that SIT does not address how a shift in identity may occur. This theory could help explore the impact of the individual's identity as they transition and compare themselves with the interactions of other military veterans and civilians. Porter et al. stated that career coaching for transitioning veterans may help if their military identity is frozen.

SIT can also be further applied to online interactions that are gender specific by understanding how online gender-specific women veteran forums may or may not contribute to the transition out of military service and create positive social change. Through the lens of SIT, it is possible to gain insight into the impact of social identity on women veterans as they transition out of military service.

Literature Review Related to Concepts of the Study

Military Transition Issues After Exiting Service

Reentering society can be a challenge for veterans. A veterans employment toolkit was created by the staff of the Department of Veterans Affairs (2021) that identified several challenges veterans might face when readjusting to civilian life, including finding new ways to join or create a social community. The article also highlighted veterans' difficulties when entering the workforce, building structure, and even establishing services after transitioning. AmericaServes, a Veteran National Resource Directory

partner, identified that the top eight service requests were housing and shelter, employment, benefits navigation, income support, clothing and household goods, social enrichment, food assistance, and individual and family support (D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families , 2021). Research conducted in 2019 by the Pew Research Center found that 52% of the respondents felt that the military prepared them to transition out of service (Igielnik, 2019; Parker et al., 2019). This study identified that the previous challenges in 2019 were still recognized in the 2021 information from the Veterans Affairs common challenges and the AmericaServes information, which shows that there is still a need to address concerns of military veterans as they transition out of the service. A study focused on veterans' reintegration within the community, consisting of a panel of veterans, clinical providers, and community stakeholders over 5 years, identified that aligning individual and group needs contributed to the need for veteran reintegration during specific transition points (Rattray et al., 2024). Rattray et al.'s (2024) panelists reported that veterans struggle for 2 to 3 years after reintegration and that in Year 5, veterans may establish a new normal.

Social and community support before and after military transition may impact reintegration. One study, presented by Rattray et al. (2023), identified that a component of successful reintegration was a strong life purpose or social support. Still, negative scores for life purpose and social support harmed their reintegration, with women having the most responses about the lack of support from family and military peers (Rattray, Miech, et al., 2023). Other research identified that the Success in Transition (SIT) model should be used for the Department of Labor Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which

determines the social and community support before the transition out of service (Whitworth et al., 2020). Other research identified that many veterans did not know about the social programs early in their military transition. Further research could examine the impact of social programs for reintegration after military service (Perkins et al., 2020). All three studies are similar in their reference to the effect of social support on successful reintegration after military service. The study by Whitworth et al. (2020) focused on how the current TAP program should be reworked to focus on other transition categories. The Perkins et al. study, focusing on the three months after transition, would support the TAP changes that Whitworth et al.'s research identified as areas that could be improved.

Research suggests that the time after the transition from military service significantly impacts successful reintegration. Many researchers' articles identify that up to five years after military service can affect the transitions of military veterans after service (Ravindran et al., 2020; Sokol et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2019; Vogt et al., 2022). While many studies focus on preventing suicide in service members who have recently transitioned, the information is relevant in that support services and social support are identified as impacting positively and negatively, depending on the level of support. Sokol et al. (2021) recognize that the first year after transitioning out of military service is the "deadly gap", where Veterans Affairs services may not be available or utilized. Ravindran et al. (2020) suggested that younger veterans who have recently transitioned and have fewer years of service before transitioning may be at a higher risk for three to six months after military service. Thompson et al. (2019) identified challenges with a weak group identity and community belonging that were more

prevalent three years after the military transition than in the general Canadian population versus Canadian veterans. The study recommends that support services for veterans and their families be developed for transitioning veterans. Another recommendation was creating social identity measures to identify veterans with challenging transitions and suicide.

Women veterans face different challenges than male veterans when transitioning out of the military and may require different or additional support. When compared to male veterans, it was identified that women veterans might need more transitioning support and reported both physical and mental conditions over time compared to male veterans (Vogt et al., 2022). Maury et al. identified that women veterans had more difficulty transitioning out of the military at 66% vs. 51% for males (2020). Other research on women veterans identified the group needing specific structural social support programs to assist in reintegration challenges (Campbell et al., 2021). The researchers found that women veterans had smaller social network sizes than male veterans and that the Veterans Affairs office could assist in social mapping to encourage more connections. Online forums may offer more social links for women veterans to grow their social networks.

How veterans perceive their military identity when transitioning out of military service may impact successful reintegration. Identity disruption might happen for transitioning veterans as they exit military service (Kleykamp et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2020). Mitchell et al. (2020) identified a loss in the meaning of purpose and disconnectedness from their future selves, but that increase in social support helped

minimize identity disruption. Kleycamp et al. (2021) found that a strong or weak military identity impacted their transition and encouraged early planning for postmilitary life. Other research on the Australian Defense Force identified that strong military identities might lead to difficulties when engaging in civilian social groups and that the veterans' social group membership may be positive and negative; however, the study does not highlight a difference between genders (Barnett et al., 2022). Different research focusing on Australian women veterans identified that the masculinized military environment may hinder women when transitioning from military service (Lawn et al., 2024).

Gender-specific reintegration programs may impact how successful women transition after military service. The traditional societal gender norms of a veteran's identity form the basis of social practices around veteran identity (Best et al., 2021a, 2021b). Best et al.'s (2021a) research highlighted the need for gender-appropriate reintegration programs and services for female veterans. Best et al. (2021b) highlighted that future research could identify if gender appropriateness reintegration programs can translate to better socio-economic outcomes. Another study that focused on women veterans and community reintegration highlighted that women veterans had a lower percentage of dependable social support (Griffiths et al., 2020). This study supports further research on women veterans and their overall need for in-person or online support as they transition from the military.

The Department of Veterans Affairs recognized the needs of women veterans as a specific topic to focus on transition issues. The Veterans Affairs Center for Women Veterans (CWV) created training for the Transition Assistance Program, titled Women's

Health Transition Training (VA Women's Health Transition Training, 2021). An online participant handbook identifies five phases: shift from active duty, understanding the VA, available Women's Health Services, enrolling in the VA, and transition assistance. Under phase 5, transition assistance has a specific veteran-focused nonprofit page and specific resources for professional support for women veterans. Since this study focuses on women veterans who have transitioned within the last five years, there is a particular link to the Veterans Affairs Post-9/11 Transition and Case Management program. The specific program recognizes that when service members transition, there may be different barriers, including loss of identity, financial strain, employment/education barriers, relationship changes, mental/emotional wellness, and physical limitations (Post-9/11 Transition and Case Management, 2022).

Some Specific Challenges Faced by Veterans

Homelessness. Homeless rates among veterans may have decreased over the years, but there needs to be specific outreach and programming services. In 2021, the Veterans Affairs Homeless Program released a fact sheet stating that the overall homeless numbers have gone down but that there is a need to reach underserved populations, including tribal veterans, women, rural veterans, and ethnic minority groups (Health, 2021). 2022 report from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development highlighted the 2021 Point In Time (PIT) count of homeless veteran data, which identified that women veterans who experienced homelessness were more likely to have children, be in unsheltered locations, and increased by 10 percent (de Sousa et al., 2022). In 2023, the same organization released the PIT count information and highlighted that

women veterans were more likely to be unsheltered than sheltered than other male veterans (de Sousa et al., 2023). Another study compared the prevalence of food and/or housing instability (FHI) and identified that post-9/11women veterans should have targeted interventions to address these concerns of housing and food instability (Cypel et al., 2024)

Women veterans' psychosocial risk factors were specifically researched, comparing stable-housed women veterans to unstable, and found that military sexual trauma, financial insecurity, and marital status were some of the most significant factors in whether women veterans were homeless (Mulcahy et al., 2021). A longitudinal study focusing on 12 months after military service predicted that soldiers with a self-reported history of trauma, depression, and posttraumatic stress could face higher risks of homelessness (Koh et al., 2022). Research was conducted that focused on how stressful life events of transitioning soldiers impacted their housing situation, and that a high level of stressful life events 12 months after military service could contribute to higher rates of homelessness (Montgomery et al., 2023). Research focused on veteran families found that community reintegration support and case management are needed once stable housing is obtained, and that if there are other veteran families, the transition to stable housing would be easier based on the commonality (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2022).

Employment. In 2023, research by the Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) evaluated the Employment Navigator and Partnership Pilot (ENPP) to understand the program's effectiveness on transitioning veterans and spouses at 13 different sites (Osborn et al., 2023). Osborn et al. (2023) cited

some key takeaways: clients valued the one-on-ones with the navigators about resume and career exploration, and that successful warm handover and connections were most successful when clients were proactive. A study that focused on the Australian Defense Force that references the US DOL Transition Assistance Program (TAP) found that transitioning veterans go through three different stages before entering the workforce: realizing, relinquishing, and reconceptualizing (Becker et al., 2023). Becker et al. (2023) found that in many cases, their identity was reshaped three years into their transition into a civilian career.

A recent study found that veterans transitioning out of the military were more successful when finding employment within the first 15 months if the program had a coach/mentor component (Perkins et al., 2023). Another study on the National Career Coach program (NCCP) focused on veterans transitioning out of the military and looking for employment within the first 2 years, found that the intensive coaching model and follow-up helped veterans sustain and maintain employment (Bond et al., 2022). Bond et al. (2022) mentioned that employment is a factor in other social determinants of health. Another study on women veterans' identity in the workforce found that some women were not considered "woman or veteran enough" (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019). Hirudayaraj and Clay identified that the macro and meso levels of a woman veteran's identity could challenge the individual, group, and organization (2019).

Health and Mental Health. Multiple studies focus on the mental health of veterans who have recently transitioned out of the military and focus on different topics such as Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) and, for women veterans, Military Sexual Trauma

(MST) that cover different domains from psychology, social work, human services, and more. There have also been numerous studies that focus on health-related issues that transitioning veterans may face. A 2024 integrative review focused on peer support specialists and outcomes identified that multiple studies provided information on peer support specialists' impact on the Veterans Administration, focusing on accountability, emotional support, and other resources (Ranney et al., 2024). Ranney et al. identified that most articles demonstrated significant improvements in the specific outcomes that could be measured, showing peer support's positive impact on the veteran (2024). Reconnecting to Civilian Life using Activities that Improve Mindfulness (RECLAIM) found that the virtual interactions among group members contributed to being valued as Veterans interacted with other peers. The program did contribute to the participants' psychosocial functioning (Shue et al., 2023). One specific study identified that social support received from civilians in their community may contribute more than social support received from military sources when dealing with long-term PTSD (Blais et al., 2021).

Another study focused on chronic pain interventions identified that nurses play a critical role in the advocacy of different modalities to assist veterans with chronic pain, including nonpharmacological interventions, such as therapy, exercise, and peer support, which may aid in managing chronic pain (Lakshman et al., 2024). One specific study focusing on mental health and PTS identified that the characterization of discharge of Other Than Honorable/ General one year after transitioning from military service might need more specific mental health services and support services (B. Porter et al., 2022). Rural veterans were also a focus of research surrounding group peer support, which

found that veterans identified that the groups were effective in assisting veterans' overall health, specifically that they were a significant distance to other resources and support from an urban area (Azevedo et al., 2020) Azevedo et al. recommendations for specific outreach was too tribal and women veterans and that peer support workers should consider training more women veterans and sexual minority groups as peer group leaders (2020).

When looking at gender and veteran suicide attempts, the researchers found that women veterans needed to be safe and comfortable, and that male veterans did not feel the same way; suggestions were made that psychological safety should be addressed for women seeking help (McDonald et al., 2023). Women veterans were also more inclined to use the VA Video Connect (VVC) system when it came to receiving mental health services compared to male veterans (Lindsay et al., 2022). Lindsay et al.'s (2022) research was conducted during COVID-19, but identified that further research should be conducted with the perspectives of veterans gaining increased access to mental health services. A 2024 systematic review of the literature found that women veterans face unique healthcare-specific needs and that there needs to be specific screening practices and better trauma-informed care (McDermott et al., 2024). McDermott et al. (2024) identified that further research and reviews would be necessary to expand upon the LGBTQ+ communities and other specific services such as fertility, eating disorders, and menopause.

There is a correlation between employment after military transition, job loss, and its impact on mental health. Recent research about job loss for transitioning veterans

contributed to their future self-continuity (FSC) and adverse mental health in perspective to their identity (Levin et al., 2023). Levin et al. (2023) found that the veteran's identity disruptions from job loss may contribute to higher suicidality, and mental health professionals should be aware of the impact.

Gender-Specific Support

Gender-specific support has been identified across different disciplines; due to the specific needs of women veterans, they may prefer to speak to their same gender. Monteith et al. recognized gender bias in the Veteran Health Administration and that more programs need to be targeted for gender-specific services that could prevent suicide (Monteith et al., 2022). Under the VA, the Center for Women Veterans (CMV) created specific training and information for transitioning women veterans health care services (Veterans, 2024). The researchers identified that a current observational study in women, rural veterans, and transitioning service members was specifically sampled, Assessing Social and Community Environments with National Data (ASCEND) (Hoffmire et al., 2022). Acknowledging biases toward women veterans may allow more diverse events within Veterans Service Organizations and the VA to assist in health care and community reintegration (Dallocchio, 2021). These studies may support the information gap on the impact of gender-specific support needed during and after military service. Another research study focused on women veterans and perspectives on peer support identified a need, not just from a clinical perspective, but from a relationship, shared experiences, and social connection, and should be used as a resource for mental health challenges and building community (Matteson & Hardiman, 2024). Providers and support services

should be aware that some women veterans may request or feel more comfortable accessing services from women veterans. Information on Canadian women veterans that focused on their military-to-civilian transition (MCT) and support systems targeted at male veterans needed to be redesigned to remove sex and gender biases (Eichler, 2022). There should also be a recognition that there could be perceived biases in health care towards women veterans, and they should feel comfortable addressing any concerns that a woman veteran may have.

Social Support

Social support is critical to military transition, with the impact of positive social support or the lack thereof. One study that was not specific to veterans and used the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SMIC) reported that positive and negative social experiences based on group membership impact an individual's social psychology (Haslam et al., 2021). From 2019 to 2020, the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study (NHRVS) evaluated the different types of support (Na et al., 2022). Surveys were completed by 4,069 veterans (Na et al., 2022). The majority of the respondents were male, 90.2%, and older veterans, which is identified as a limitation of this study. The study highlighted that receiving and giving social support may depend on factors such as the impact of their military service and the support that close relationships play in a supportive or nonsupportive role. Another study supported the challenges women transitioning out of the military have with social support, citing results that the women in the study reported lower dependable social support in both the United States and the UK (Godier-McBard et al., 2022; Griffiths et al., 2020). Griffth et al. (2020) research focused

on women veterans who were three years postinjury, highlighting that community reintegration might have been impacted, and the injuries may have contributed to the feeling of isolation. Godier-McBard et al. (2022) focused specifically on UK women veterans and identified a need for specific programming, and most programs focused on male veterans. Both studies support my research question by identifying a gap in specific research on support received for women veterans.

Two nationally recognized Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) have conducted research specifically referencing women veterans' issues; the reports found that specific services are needed for women veterans. In 2021, the Wounded Warrior Program created the Women Warriors Initiative report that collected data through a survey of the women warriors registered with the program, and from there, thirteen roundtable discussions were held with ninety-eight women (Wounded Warrior Project, 2021). The researchers reported that women in the study felt that there was a crisis of identity where they did not see themselves in the representation of veterans and had difficulty relating to civilian women. The same women reported that being with like-minded individuals with the same experiences gave them the social support needed to reduce isolation and increase resiliency (Wounded Warrior Project, 2021). The research identified that women veterans had a better connection with other women veterans (52%) than male veterans (45%). One of the report's recommendations was establishing virtual, women-only support groups; several in-person and virtual groups were created after this study was presented. In 2023, the Wounded Warrior Project released its Women Warriors Report, which identified that additional research should be focused on women veterans,

military identity, and its impact on post-military service lives (Evans et al., 2023). The Women Warriors Report contributes to the overall research problem of women veterans' transition issues. The Disabled American Veterans (DAV) in 2024 released their report specific to women veterans and mental health that focused on suicide DAV, n.d.). The DAV (2024) highlighted several key findings, specifically regarding social support from a women-led peer group and stated that there needs to be more women veterans retreats done by the VA Vet Centers. It supports this study on how online forums and in-person events may or may not contribute to or assist with these challenges.

Online Social Support

Social support online is an area that is starting to be researched across different populations and for various reasons, and veterans may use these forums to reconnect or even seek services. In 2021, Chen and Yang reviewed how social media was used for health purposes, with social support being a specific category (Chen & Wang, 2021). The researchers found that individual and network support allowed the users to build a community to foster a group identity. The online groups permitted the users to share information and offer support, and the perceived social support could contribute to the individual's overall well-being. One of the recommendations of this research was how social media could be used for identity-building for health outcomes (Chen & Wang, 2021). This recommendation could support the gap in the impact of online forums, and since there was no direct population for the study, having a women's veteran focus could assist in expanding the overall knowledge on the subject. In 2023, Tweets were reviewed on how veterans interact on social media, and it was found that, unlike other groups, the

veterans displayed more negative emotions when discussing postcombat trauma (S. V. et al., 2023).

Different groups have used online forms of social media to gather and exchange information; many of these groups are used by veterans to exchange information. An additional study focused on Army Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Facebook use found that the online support group allowed for an increase in happiness levels and a decrease in depression (Yeshua-Katz & Zilberstein, 2021). One limitation of this study was that there was a limited number of women participants, and further investigations could build on the current findings. While this study has a mental health focus, it contributes to my research by focusing on social media use for support.

Summary

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on women veterans' transition out of the military as it relates to being complex and having several challenges involving social identity and social support (Adams et al., 2021; Dallocchio, 2021). The literature reveals that women veterans' services, including mental health and other support services, have recently been researched, which has identified the need for specific gender services. More immediate and longitudinal research is needed to understand how women experience disruptions to social identity and the need for social support during reintegration (Boros & Erolin, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2020).

The background literature reveals the need to understand better the experiences and needs of women transitioning out of military service, particularly regarding the social support they have used or felt they needed. Experiences for women veterans transitioning

out of the military based on social identity can provide valuable insight to fill this gap in the literature on women veterans' challenges and whether they believe gender-specific online forums are helpful. The qualitative study design I used is well-suited to identifying these experiences.

The following chapter explains more details about the research design and rationale. Additionally, Chapter 3 provides an in-depth description of the methodology for this study. The chapter's other critical components are the research design, sampling procedure, data collection and analysis processes, and addressing ethical and human subject considerations. Finally, issues of trustworthiness and ethical guidelines were highlighted.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this generic qualitative study is to explore women veterans' perspectives and experiences with online, gender-specific social support services and understand how that contributes to their social identity after military service. More research is needed regarding the social perspectives of the reintegration experiences of women veterans and online social support services (Boros & Erolin, 2021). This study is intended to add to the scholarly understanding of women veterans' social reintegration experiences, including their support needs from gender-specific online forums.

This chapter discusses the methodology for this generic qualitative research study. The first section is focused on the research design and rationale. The second section includes my role as the researcher. The third section discusses the research methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and data analysis processes. A discussion of the methods of establishing trustworthiness in this research is presented before the chapter summary.

Research Design and Rationale

I designed this research study to address the question: What are the women veterans' perspectives and experiences with gender-specific, online social support services, and how does that contribute to their social identity after military service? The chosen research tradition is a generic qualitative inquiry. This design allowed me to explore the experiences of women veterans. It allowed for a preliminary inquiry into women veterans’ transition challenges and how online gender-specific social support may

assist with their social identity after military service. Using social identity theory (SIT) as a theoretical framework, inquiries were made into women veterans' social identity, social categorization, and social comparison of the in-group and out-groups within the online gender-specific forums (see Tajfel, 1974). The generic qualitative inquiry allowed women veterans to tell their stories freely but was not guided by philosophical assumptions (see Kahlke, 2014). This design is suited to explore and capture attitudes and beliefs over a particular issue or experience. Generic qualitative inquiry is also suited since the researcher is a woman veteran. There is some preknowledge/preunderstanding of the topic. However, the researcher wants to expand the previous knowledge on women veterans' military transition challenges and the support needed (see Percy et al., 2015).

A generic qualitative design is best for understanding the participants' life experiences and reflections. A case study was also considered. The case study approach implies a more specified case of participants that requires a more informed discussion of the phenomenon before narrowing, since (Priya, 2021), this study is about women veterans who meet the criteria for the research and not just about specific women who served in the military. Ethnography is focused on culture, and my research question is not about direct observation and seeks to understand military transitions (Sharma & Sarkar, 2019). While there might be multiple answers, my research is not an attempt to apply holism to veterans and their transition from the military (see Stewart, 1998). Narrative studies are usually in chronological order and are focused on stories and histories of experiences with a phenomenon. While my research focuses on a specific transition period for women veterans, the research was not be presented chronologically (see Kim,

2016). Phenomenology is focused on a phenomenon's daily experiences and how individuals cope and adapt to everyday aspects of their lives, and that is not what my research question is about.

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the data collection instrument (Goodell et al., 2016). As the researcher, I developed the interview guide, recruited participants, observed the participants during the interview, and analyzed the data. It is essential that I professionally conduct myself and ensure that I have no personal relationships with any participants.

I am a retired Army enlisted soldier and a woman who transitioned out of military service over ten years ago, so there may be potential for bias in certain areas of my study. I also know and participate in some gender-specific women veterans' forums. However, I do not anticipate having any preexisting personal or professional relationships with the participants. I acknowledge that I currently work in a human service organization and regularly volunteer with veteran service organizations. Being a part of different veteran service organizations, I may have encountered women veterans who have transitioned out of military service within the last 5 years; thus, I might have heard their perspectives on how their military transition occurred.

Biases were managed, and an audit trail was maintained and derived from field notes and reflection journals about decisions made during the research process. A detailed reflective account of how the research study was conducted, along with the experiences and attitudes of the participants, was maintained through journaling (see

Ravitch & Carl, 2020). The data was also member-checked to ensure the information was accurate, helping validate the data (see Motulsky, 2021).

As a woman veteran, I used this opportunity to learn more about women veterans and their direct experiences with gender-specific online social support after transitioning out of military service. Moreover, I do not expect any dynamics involving the exertion of power or influence over the participants. Should any conflicts of interest arise, I will take immediate action and provide prompt notice to my dissertation chairperson and the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Methodology

In this section, I discuss the participant selection logic, instrumentation for the research study, recruitment, participation, data collection procedures, and the data analysis plan. A generic qualitative methodology was the most appropriate one for this study because it allowed me to explore and seek further understanding of women veterans' use of online forums as they transition out of the military.

Participant Selection Logic

The sampling strategy used for this study is purposeful sampling, which is used to select participants based on the criteria of this study, the first being a woman veteran. Purposeful sampling is appropriate for finding participants with the knowledge and information required to answer the research question (Flick, 2018). Because this study revolves around online forums, snowball sampling (see Kirchherr & Charles, 2018) may occur as other women veterans refer other women veterans to this study. Snowball sampling is used when populations may be hard to reach or hidden, and the respondents

are specific to the population, but responses may still be varied (see Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). Both sampling techniques helped the study reach women veterans across the United States and globally who fit the inclusion criteria.

Participants recruited for this study fit the criteria of women veterans of all races and ethnicities who have transitioned from U.S. military service in the last 5 years. Participants were not serving in the National Guard or Reserves. Participants have used online military/veterans' forums for social support after military service. After IRB approval, participants were recruited by emailing veteran service organizations to post the recruitment flyers on their bulletin boards, social media, and Facebook (FB) women veterans' groups with an online presence. Permission was requested from any FB group administrator to post the flyers to the group to recruit members to participate in the online forum. The study was posted on my personal Facebook account and LinkedIn.

Potential participants responded to the flyer and contacted me through Facebook, private messenger, or Walden email. Once contacted, I emailed the informed consent with instructions to respond with "I consent" as their agreement to understand the study and willingness to participate in an interview. Participants confirmed an appointment date and time for their interview through email. Interviews were held via Zoom and audio recorded.

The number of interviews needed to reach saturation depends on the research question and whether no new information arises. When conducting interviews, the sample size can range from 9 to 17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Saturation was reached when no new information was needed, and the data are substantial, meaningful,

and rich enough to answer the research question (Jahja et al., 2021; Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Instrumentation

In qualitative inquiries, the researcher is the primary data collection tool for establishing the relationship between themselves and the participants (Billups, 2022). I used a semistructured interview protocol designed especially for his study to guide participant interviews (Billups, 2022). I developed a set of questions and recorded the semistructured interviews for accurate and complete documentation.

I collected data through videoconference interviews via Zoom. The virtual platforms have the advantages of recording and playback options to have the information available after the interview. This platform allowed me to have the entire dialogue and download the complete material for transcribing. Recording and maintaining the interviews for future reference and confirmability allowed for the data analysis's credibility, validity, and accuracy.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

Participants were recruited using social media, specifically through the FB platform. I contacted the administrators of three FB pages using the FB private messenger and gained permission to post a recruiting flyer on their pages. The administrator’s response was the authorization through FB private messenger. I documented the permission request and approval by copying the conversation to a Word document. I contacted the FB page administrator with the IRB-approved flyer information for final

consent to post on their site. This step helped document the authorization. The study was also posted on my personal Facebook and LinkedIn accounts.

Participation

Potential participants who acknowledged via self-reporting that they met the criteria and returned their "I consent" reply were scheduled for a 30-minute to 60-minute interview through Zoom. The selected participants were reminded to ensure they were in a private location for their interview and that the researcher did the same.

During the interview, participants were reminded that the discussion was audio recorded, that their participation was entirely voluntary, and that they may skip any questions they did not want to answer and stop at any time. The interview recording started once all the participants' questions were answered. All interviews took place via Zoom in the researchers' private office. The participants were asked to respond to the questions from the interview guide (Appendix). The study's inclusion criteria were verified before continuing with the rest of the questions. Participants were allowed to ask any questions following the interview. In this study, a transcript review of the participants' responses was submitted to participants for review. This approach ensured that the participants' voices were accurately represented and their experiences were correctly interpreted.

The interview concluded with a debriefing, including a reminder of the resource information they received along with the informed consent. I closed with thank you remarks for the participants' time and participation in the study, and a reminder of their $20 e-gift card.

Data Collection

Data was collected from participants through snowball and purposeful FB sampling. I set up appointments based on the researcher's and the interviewee's schedules. While interviewing women veterans, I asked them to share this study with other participants who may be interested, if there are not enough participants during the initial period to reach saturation. I found other Facebook or social media groups to share the study with until data saturation.

The data collected from interviewing the participants was combined with the researcher's notes, journaling, and memos for analysis. Zoom meetings were used to host the interviews, and audio recordings and verbatim transcripts were created. Finally, all data was collected using password-protected instruments and stored in secure environments accessible to me.

Data Analysis Plan

The data collected from the interviews were transcribed from the audio recordings using the Read app as part of Zoom. The transcribed data was put into an Excel spreadsheet to start the analysis. This study's analysis categorized the keywords and phrases to find emerging themes. Therefore, thematic analysis (TA) was appropriate for this study.

I followed the six phases of the TA guide outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Phase one is familiarizing yourself with the data. I immersed myself in the data to become familiar with it. As the primary research instrument, I developed analytic thoughts while I collected the data through interactive means during the interviews. I

reviewed the transcribed data for accuracy, which helped me understand the data more deeply. The data was read several times for meaning and patterns before coding.

Phase two is generating initial codes (Braun & Clark, 2006). I hand-coded by entering the data into an Excel spreadsheet. This process allowed for revising and changing the coding. Some initial codes that exceeded the scope of social identity theory were generated. All data were systematically coded, and a list of codes was generated.

Phase three is searching for themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Before this phase, all the data was collected and initially coded. The data was sorted into themes, noting themes that reflect social identity theory and any other emerging themes. Some codes formed main themes or sub-themes, and others were discarded when found to be a duplication of another theme. Additionally, thematic maps, charts, and figures were created as visual pictures to help sort the codes into themes.

Phase four is reviewing the themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). I checked all the themes by rereading all the material and rearranging any data as necessary. The data was first reviewed at the level of coded data to ensure that all data formed a coherent pattern. Next, the data was reviewed at the level of themes, using thematic mapping to help visualize the relationship between the themes. If the relationship between the themes reflects the meaning of the data, then I move forward to step five.

Phase five is defining and naming the themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). I used the verbatim data from the interviews without paraphrasing. The themes were determined and refined by identifying their essence. I described the scope and content of each theme

in a few sentences as a test for clarity. The themes are concisely named to give the reader a sense of the theme.

Phase six is producing the report (Braun & Clark, 2006). The final step of the analysis was to create the report. Considering my audience, a report was written with a concise, coherent, logical, and non-repetitive account of the data narrative. I provided sufficient evidence of each theme using vivid examples from the data. I wrote the data in such a way that it demonstrates to the reader the validity and merit of the analysis. Verbatim extracts from the participants were embedded within the analytic description that will effectively illustrate the story of the data. The report goes beyond description and reveals results that help answer the research question.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility is when the information is presented accurately and can be verified (Amankwaa, 2016). Member checks are also widely accepted for enhancing credibility (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019; Motulsky, 2021). In this study, a transcript review of the participants' responses was submitted to participants for review. This approach ensured that the participants' voices were accurately represented and their experiences were correctly interpreted.

Transferability

Transferability within research is using the same methods and outcomes in other populations or settings (Jahja et al., 2021). I ensured that the study findings would be appropriately documented to meet the standard of transferability to similar studies of

women veterans. For example, I used saturation of the data collection to reach transferability and kept detailed records of all the events and activities regarding the data collection process for future reference.

Additionally, I utilized purposeful sampling with variation. The use of purposeful sampling allowed for the selection of participants who had experienced the phenomenon under investigation, in this case, women veterans who have transitioned out of the military within the last five years (Ames et al., 2019). Also, incorporating variation in participant selection, such as different ages and geographic locations, may enhance the range of experiences captured in the study. The scope of participants was not limited to these areas.

Dependability

The strategies involved the detailed recording of all research activities, decisions, and reflections throughout the research process, from data collection to analysis and interpretation (Carcary, 2020). I used an Excel spreadsheet to log the date, time, and details for each data collection and analysis step. The data should be able to be replicated using the same procedures in the audit trail that are not familiar with women veterans (Amankwaa, 2016).

Confirmability

The confirmability in a qualitative study is the ability of other researchers to confirm my study's results, not based on the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest (Amankwaa, 2016). The audit trail in qualitative research validates the researcher's study

by giving a detailed account of the data collection process, data analysis, and data interpretation from the participant's perspective rather than the researcher's biases.

Ethical Procedures

Before collecting data, permission was received from Walden University's IRB. During the recruitment and data collection processes, I informed the participants that they could cease participating in the study at any time. Walden University's approval number for this study is 11-25-24-1010281. The identities of all participants in the study were kept confidential, and the data collected was kept confidential as well. Each participant was assigned a participant number, and their real names were not used.

All required documents were submitted to the IRB, including the informed consent form, the CITI training report, Facebook permissions, a demographic questionnaire, a social media flyer, participant resources, and IRB forms A and C. All participants were emailed an IRB-approved informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, study procedures, sample interview questions, risks and benefits, available resources, payment, privacy protection, and researcher contact information. Participants were given instructions on returning the form and the timeframe. All participants replied with 'I consent' to set an interview appointment.

The research was only conducted with those who freely volunteered. I respected all potential participants' decisions to join, continue, or halt the interview process. Anyone who entered the study had the right to change their mind later. Participants could stop anytime and receive a thank you for their interest and initial participation.

Participants who completed the interview received a $20 e-gift card as a thank-you for their time and participation.

All research studies involve some risk of minor discomfort when an interview includes sharing sensitive information. This study poses minimal risk and discomfort to the participants' well-being, which is no greater than what they might experience daily. Resource information was provided in the informed consent form and offered again during the interview if any topic triggered distress for the participant. The data will be securely kept for five years and then destroyed.

Summary

In summarizing the conclusion of Chapter 3, I began by stating the purpose, followed by the research design and rationale to explain the researcher's role. I discussed the methodology I chose as a generic descriptive qualitative approach to explore women veterans' perspectives and experiences with online, gender-specific social support services, and understand how that contributes to their social identity after military service. I further examined the sampling strategy through which my recruitment of participants from women veteran organizations and online forums is vetted to meet the interview criteria. Trustworthiness issues were described in detail, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lastly, I described the ethical procedures involving treating human participants and data collected from them in compliance with the Walden IRB. Chapter 4 gives a detailed account of the researchers' findings. Topics outlined include data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the study results.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This generic qualitative study aims to explore women veterans' perspectives and experiences with online gender-specific social support and understand how that contributes to their social identity after military service. This research may promote social change by increasing awareness of the social identity of women veterans after they transition from military service. This research might encourage service providers to address their concerns, enabling them to advocate for change in the women veterans' population. The research question is as follows: what are the women veteran's perspectives and experiences with gender-specific online social support services, and how does that contribute to their social identity after military service? This chapter will discuss the following areas: study setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the results.

Setting

The study participants consisted of 10 women veterans who met the inclusion criteria for the study. Using purposeful and snowball sampling techniques, I recruited potential participants through Facebook and LinkedIn. Respondents expressed interest by contacting the researcher via Facebook, Messenger, or LinkedIn. The informed consent was emailed for participants to review and confirm meeting the inclusion criteria and agreeing to the interview terms by responding “I consent”. Interviews were then scheduled and conducted via Zoom, with audio recordings to capture participants’ narratives.

The selected participants were reminded to ensure they were in a private location for their interview, and for the researcher to do the same. All participants were advised that a pseudonym would be used, and their responses would be masked to avoid identifying them. I was the sole data collector. The interview recording started once all the participants' questions were answered and the participants agreed to be recorded. All interviews took place in my private office via Zoom.

Demographics

Demographic information was collected from each participant. All participants were over the age of 40, with the exception of one participant, who was 38. Five participants identified as Caucasian, two as Caucasian Hispanic, one as Asian, Black, and one chose not to identify. All were married except one, who was divorced. Seventy percent of the participants had children, and there was more than one child in the family for those with children. The participating military branches of service were seven, having served in the Air Force, one in the Army, one in the Army and Army Reserve, and one in the Navy. All participants had 20 or more years of service, except one. Specific to whether they were officer or enlisted, five identified as enlisted, three as officers, and two identified as both serving as enlisted members before converting to an officer.

One of the demographic categories that emerged was how they found the online groups. While this is important, not every participant discussed this; therefore, no direct theme could be developed. Three veterans identified that the organization had an in-person and virtual presence and utilized both. In comparison, three other veterans

identified that they met at an in-person event and then used the online forums to share information.

Data Collection

The recruiting of participants came through a variety of sources. Once I had Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I requested permission to submit my recruitment flyer to the Walden participant pool, which was granted. I also uploaded the flyer to my personal Facebook and LinkedIn. The flyer was submitted to the administrators of gender-specific veteran Facebook groups, where permission to post my flyer was granted. I also sent my recruitment flyer to my professional network with veteran service organizations, including local Veterans of Foreign Wars, The American Legion, and Disabled American Veteran posts. I asked them to post it on their organizations' social media platforms, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. I recruited over 20 participants with the exposure, and 10 met the study's inclusion criteria.

Participants who expressed interest and met the inclusion criteria were first sent the informed consent form via my Walden email. Participants were instructed to reply "I consent" before any interviews were scheduled. Upon receipt of a positive consent reply, participants were scheduled for 45- to 60-minute interviews conducted via Zoom based on their availability. In the email with their Zoom link, I reminded them to please be in a place where their interview could be private. I also informed participants that it would be an audio recording of the interview only and emphasized the voluntary nature of participation with the option to withdraw at any time. All participants were asked for consent to be recorded before the interviews started. All interviews were conducted in my

private office via Zoom. I was the sole data collection agent conducting interviews to ensure data integrity. During interviews, I listened carefully for key concepts and asked probing questions. I recorded my thoughts during and after each interview, which allowed me to capture additional insight.

Each interview concluded with a debriefing session, which included a reminder of the resource information. Participants were informed that they would receive the transcribed interview via email for review and verification of accuracy, along with instructions regarding the timeframe for returning the accuracy report. Participants were also asked to share the flyer with their networks to generate more leads. All participants who completed the interviews were sent a separate email to verify what names and emails they wanted to use to receive their e-gift cards. This process was used due to the online request for an e-gift card, where the names and emails were used to complete the transaction. For the study, the names are only for the incentive, and they are reminded that their names will not be part of the study.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was applied to this generic qualitative study. The data collected from the participant interview was recorded and transcribed using the transcription option as part of a paid Zoom account. When recording to the Zoom cloud, the transcription option allowed for both an audio recording and a text version of the recording, which I converted to a Word document for review. Participants received the raw data in Word for review and accuracy. I used a Word document for initial manual

coding and definitions before copying the information into Excel to review categories and themes.

I used the six thematic steps Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined to analyze the data. The first step was to become familiar with the data by immersing myself in the data and reviewing each transcript several times before coding. The audio file of the transcript was used to verify the accuracy of the data and correct the transcripts as needed.

Step 2 was generating initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After familiarizing myself with the interview transcripts, I manually coded the data. This allowed me to identify comments or phrases using the participant's words (Saldana, 2015). Another benefit of hand-coding is the ability to immerse oneself in the data. The initial codes for all interviews were 74, but realizing that some were too focused and should be combined, I narrowed them down to five different categories based on the research question. After reviewing the initial categories, some could be combined within the final categories of the study to develop three different categories for the research question. Each category had its definition, allowing a priori and emerging codes to be generated.

Step 3 was to search for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began by reviewing the initial codes to identify similar ones that could be combined. I put all my codes into an Excel workbook, grouping similar codes by tabs based on commonalities, ideas, and thoughts, and consolidating them to develop categories (Saldana, 2015). Upon further review, I consolidated the related codes, forming three overall categories (see Table 1). This process of coding and consolidation allowed me to identify key themes that emerged from the data.

Table 1

Coding Categories

Category	*F* (frequency) used throughout interviews
Sharing and receiving links and resources. a. About pointing others to information	24
Providing and receiving information b. More about how women used the groups c. How women connect with other veterans d. What's happening in the group	54
Identity as a veteran e. Identity as a woman veteran	8

Step 4 was to review the themes to ensure clarity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To organize and analyze the data, the categories were formed based on the data and the research question. Step 5 used Braun and Clark (2006) to define and name the themes. The themes were analyzed to make sure that there was data and a narrative for each. After reviewing the transcripts, generating codes, and creating categories from the data, the final Braun and Clark (2006) step was to produce the report with the key themes listed below.

1. Big picture: Connecting with other women veterans was helpful
2. Veteran forums were used for federal or state benefits, but women used gender-specific forums for questions about women's issues.
3. How women veterans use the groups matters.

4. Women veterans do not necessarily want to share their own stories but want to help others.
5. Identity as a woman veteran is important because Women Veterans felt more included in women-only groups.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility is when the information is presented accurately and can be verified (Amankwaa, 2016). Member checks are also widely accepted for enhancing credibility (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019; Motulsky, 2021). In this study, a transcript review of the participants' responses was submitted to participants for review. This approach ensured the participants' voices were accurately represented and their experiences correctly documented. A research journal with notes, reflective entries, and recorded interviews was used for triangulation.

Transferability

Transferability within research is using the same methods and outcomes in other populations or settings (Jahja et al., 2021). I ensured that the study findings would be appropriately documented to meet the standard of transferability to similar studies on women veterans. I utilized purposeful sampling with variation. The use of purposeful sampling allowed for the selection of participants who had experienced the phenomenon under investigation, in this case, women veterans who have transitioned out of the military within the last five years (Ames et al., 2019). Snowball sampling was also used

because the participants may have known others who could meet the study's inclusion criteria.

Dependability

Dependability was established by maintaining an audit trail throughout the research process, from data collection to analysis and interpretation (Carcary, 2020). I used an Excel spreadsheet to log the details for each data collection and analysis step. The data should be able to be replicated using the same procedures in the audit trail that are not familiar with women veterans (Amankwaa, 2016).

Confirmability

The confirmability in a qualitative study is the ability of other researchers to confirm my study's results, not based on the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest (Amankwaa, 2016). The audit trail in qualitative research validates the researcher's study by giving a detailed account of the data collection process, data analysis, and data interpretation from the participant's perspective rather than the researcher's biases. To remain neutral throughout the process, I utilized reflexive and reflective practices. I also used direct quotes from the participants in the results.

Results

In this section, I present findings from the interviews with women veterans who have transitioned out of the military within the last five years and their experiences with social support within online forums. The results provide evidence to the research question: What are the women veteran's perspectives and experiences with gender-specific online social support services, and how does that contribute to their social

identity after military service? Direct quotations from participants are used to showcase the perspectives and experiences of participants and to provide rich, descriptive details.

Theme 1: Big picture: Connecting With Other Women Veterans Was Helpful

How and why women veterans connect online matters and is equally important. One veteran spoke about an online group with over 1200 women veterans, active and some who have transitioned out of the military, and how they still maintain that connection, mentoring, and overall support. Veteran 3 spoke about transitioning out of the military and how the online forums helped her transition after retiring.

> Veteran 3 mentioned, “a few groups are specific to women. So I've connected with them online. I haven't had an opportunity to actually go to any of their in-person events, but I think because of my connection with the different organizations, a lot of them being female-specific. The transition has been a lot easier for me.

Veteran 10 stated, “I get to connect with them, and they're hear their stories. But they found me on Instagram. So it's just kind of cool. How we can like connect and find some common ground, even if we have different experiences”. Many veterans belong to regular veteran forums but use gender-specific forums for women's issues, or feel it is easier to connect with other women veterans.

Overall, Veteran 5 might have summed up this theme by stating, “So I have a huge respect for social media forums that allow women veterans to connect.” Veterans serve worldwide and transition to different communities when they get out of the military, and social media allows them to feel connected and share information.

Theme 2: Veteran Forums Were Used for Federal or State Benefits, but Women Used Gender-Specific Forums for Questions About Women's Issues

Over half of the participants commented that the online forums allowed them to share and receive information specific to Veterans Affairs for applying and/or understanding disability claims submissions or GI Bill benefits. Most participants received help from online veteran groups regarding their VA claims, and these forums were not gender-specific. Some observed other questions that were asked within the online groups to assist them in filing claims, such as Veteran 6, " So there was a lot of I know I was looking at it for all the disability stuff." And she used that information to help with her claim. Veteran 7 spoke about how the forums helped her to prepare for CNP {Compensation and Pension}exams. Veteran 3 commented that there is so much information, and "those online communities help me get answers to the questions that weren't easy to just find on my own."

Veteran 9 also added,

> The Veterans Affairs process is daunting. And so being able to, when you're looking at those forms and trying to figure out what they're asking. I was able to go to those forums and ask questions, and then later give. You know my experiences with those who are in the same position, especially because of a lot of issues that women have over the course of their career.

Women veterans may seek information about VA disability benefits in gender-specific groups if it is a women-specific issue. It was also identified that they may feel

more comfortable addressing their concerns to other women veterans. Veteran 9 clarified, “But if, when I was talking about, you know, women, specific medical issues, I usually ask that one on the women's officers forum.” So, while some participants said that they received and gave information in the regular veterans' forums, it still shows that some felt that the gender-specific forums were better if it was a women's issue. Some participants reviewed and offered suggestions in the gender-specific forums based on their experiences.

Two veterans specifically highlighted information about how they used the forums for GI Bill assistance. Veteran 2 mentioned, “ So you know, it's a little different on what benefits you have rather than just any woman veteran.”

Veteran 6 added,

> Facebook pages out there that had a lot of information. It was just that; that was kind of where I started, and I still go there as well, and that has a lot of GI Bill information… So there's a wide range of information in that group. You just got to sort through what's the most recent information, because there is just so much information. You just got to make sure that you got the most up-to-date information.

While only two veterans specifically mentioned the GI Bill, this shows that they are looking for information on the forums. The information received is not only for them; they use the information that may also benefit family members.

This theme highlights that sharing and receiving information on VA benefits and

entitlements is one area many veterans, not just women veterans, use. Information sharing from either a regular or gender-specific forum is used to help themselves and others. The information also highlights different areas the participants were unaware of until they reviewed the group information.

Theme 3: How Women Veterans Use the Groups Matters

How women veterans use the group may come in many forms; for some, it may be that they feel safe sharing with other women veterans. Others use the forums to share and mentor other women veterans, utilizing information they have learned. Veteran 6 described how she felt and used the forums, “I'm also like kind of a helper, and so like, if I have bits of information that I can use to help others, I'll kind of. I'll provide that information, especially if I know it's something that's current.” Veteran 8 highlighted that the groups allowed for mentoring by asking and receiving questions.

Veteran 3 highlighted,

> Because of the female specific groups that are online are, the questions are generally to tailored towards women. So it'd be, you know, as a mom, as a woman, as a wife. Those questions that's how the questions are usually formed. And then? Men, not so much.

The feeling of being safe to share was highlighted by several participants, especially in the gender-specific groups. Veteran 2 stated, “With no men in the group, she felt more secure in asking about female stuff.” Veteran 3 noted that the “women that are able to speak. Positivity to one another is really inspiring. So it's like a daily affirmation, type thing.” Veteran 5 felt, “I feel like the support is more sincere in a in the social media

forums that are exclusively for women veterans." Veteran 7 highlighted the social support received, "There are similar situations that they ask questions, and it's just reading all the responses and the support that was provided from other women."

However, Veteran 3 highlighted that there were more complaints than celebrating of women in these forums. Veteran 7 had a similar comment about one of the forums she was part of, "Forum was was the cattiness like some some of the responses would get pretty toxic sometimes."

Veteran 8 commented that not all women veterans got along in the forum.

> I sometimes see a little bit more contentiousness in responses, right? Because you have a group of 12,000 women of varying political stances, and of course, some of the questions, I mean, it can really be all over the map, as far as, like, I mean, sometimes whoever's posting, you know will get hit with some pretty strong opinions.

Women veterans used the regular veteran and gender-specific forums for transition assistance. Veteran 3 commented, "The online presence of veterans has really been helpful in my transition, just answering questions. I didn't even know I had." Veteran 8 used the forums to offer support rather than receive support while transitioning. Veteran 10 highlighted how they used the online forums, "So yeah, my main communication is through sharing resources and speaking about our military experience and transition."

Veteran 6 highlighted her interactions when it came to her transition:

> Why, I made my choice, and then that way, like they have, like a firsthand, like my firsthand experience. They can see why I did it, and then, you know they can kind of make their own choices. So we do talk about like our experiences and put our veteran input into there, so that way they can kind of make their own decisions.

This theme combines how women use and feel about online forums. For some this was a place to share and receive information, even from a mentoring aspect. Some thought that the gender-specific forums allowed them to feel safe to share and be open about what they were going through. Some women commented that not everyone got along and that there were differences of opinion and some cattiness. Finally, some used the forums to assist with military transition. Several veterans did not belong to just one group but were members of multiple groups based on whether that group was a good fit for them.

Theme 4: Women Veterans Do Not Necessarily Want to Share Their Own Stories, but Want to Help Others

This theme was mentioned several times, but in different ways. Some participants reviewed the information in the forum and may or may not comment. Others felt that they should share facts and not opinions. Veteran 6 stated how she used some forums: “Most of the time. I'm just kind of a watcher. I take in information. I use what I can. I take notes of what I can, so I'm kind of just I hover and I watch.” One Veteran 2 commented that others only comment “when they need something. That's the only time you ever see them is, but not provide anything.”

Veteran 3 was the most adamant when she stated, “I have to refrain from giving my opinion. If I don't know the no factual information, then I will help and provide a response if it's factual.” She stated, “I don't interject myself in other people's opinions, or even adding my opinion to people's questions.” She said that she was also frustrated about the negative stuff, not so much the positive things happening.

Within the groups, many participants discussed that they would share resources and opinions to help someone. One example was that Veteran 1 received a source about her situation: "And that so was helpful. It was a general recommendation, but it was helpful in my situation.” Veteran 3 mentioned that she chose to message someone privately to share information with them privately, not putting it in the main forum. Veteran 8 noted that the forum allowed her to keep current on what was happening, and Veteran 2 agreed that it allowed her to know what was happening locally.

This theme was the most interesting, and while not all women veterans had a problem sharing personal information, others did not want to share. So, it is essential to remember that sharing resources may allow other women veterans to find information, even though they may not directly engage in the forum. Most participants only wanted to share factual information and not opinions. Some women veterans may not want their views to be commented on, which may be expected when using online forums. Also, some women veterans did not want to share personal information online.

Theme 5: Identity as a Woman Veteran Is Important Because Women Veterans Felt More Included in Women-Only Groups

All veterans were women for this study, with a veteran identity, but how they saw themselves mattered. While this theme only appeared nine times, it crosses over into other themes when dealing with gender-specific groups. Sometimes, "identity" was not explicitly mentioned, but the concept was there. One example would be Veteran 4's comment about general forums, "general, online forums are not. They don't create that community, or they don't create that feeling of I belong here. They don't. They don't create the belonging."

Veterans 7 and 8 commented that the online groups contributed to their identity as veterans. Veteran 8 mentioned, " I mean, obviously, if I identified as a female veteran I identify as a veteran. But it is it is easier to feel included by women by gender-specific groups." Veteran 7 referenced having similar issues, which helped them connect in gender-specific forums.

Some participant responses referenced identity but were also about being visible. Veteran 3 felt, "So it's people assume my spouse is the veteran, and I'm the veteran, or I have to tell people I'm a veteran, and things like that. That's personally frustrating to me." Veteran 9 highlighted that "we need to be more visible, and social media has played a large part in that." While visibility is essential online, how, when, or if the veteran woman assumes or uses her veteran identity is important.

Veteran 10 offered additional insight about being visible:

> I didn't have it in my title {veteran}; I almost felt like I should more embrace the role of military spouse, because that's what I am now, and or mother or HR professional because that is my profession outside of the military. And then it was more about. With later clarification in the interview, I actually changed my title on social platforms to state that I am a veteran, and embrace that the same would be, for in in connecting with females, you know, oftentimes I have experienced that it is not the 1st thing we say about ourselves speaking for myself, and then also connecting with others that are female where males tend to say, Oh, I served.

Some women identify as veterans immediately and do not always understand why other women do not. Veteran 1 explained,

> It was interesting to me, and I didn't really understand why somebody wouldn't identify as a veteran, and there was many different answers. There's whether it was, you know, time and service, or as they wanted to refer to it as imposter syndrome. They didn't feel like they were veteran enough, and so when they posed it that way. It made a little bit more sense.

This theme is vital to understand from a SIT perspective and from understanding women veterans. The online gender-specific forums allow them to identify with other women veterans who may have had similar experiences. The gender-specific forums may allow for the creation of connections and the ability to feel safe and share information.

Summary

Chapter 4 outlined the data collection process to gain results for answering the research question on exploring women veterans' perspectives and experiences with online, gender-specific social support services and understanding how that contributes to their social identity after military service. The chapter includes the research setting, the demographics relevant to the study, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the final results.

Chapter 5 will be my interpretation of the key study findings while revealing the study's limitations. The conclusion reviews recommendations for future studies, including positive social change applications.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This generic, qualitative study aims to explore women veterans' perspectives and experiences with online, gender-specific social support services and understand how that contributes to their social identity after military service. More research is needed regarding the social perspectives of the reintegration experiences of women veterans and online social support services (Boros & Erolin, 2021). The primary aim was to increase the scholarly understanding of women veterans' social reintegration experiences, including their support needs from gender-specific online forums.

Interpretation of Findings

Theme 1: Big Picture: Connecting With Other Women Veterans Was Helpful

When women veterans connect online, it creates value for them. How the individual complements the organization and their motivation to be part of a group is a concept of social categorization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ding et al., 2017). Tajfel identified that the value function of the group will be based on the similarities and differences based on the group membership (Tajfel, 1982). Not all women veterans will have the same opinions on different discussion topics; however, when connecting online, many may understand the needs of others based on being part of a group as a woman who has served in the military. SIT can be applied to military service because of its unique social category, including the different military branches, Reserve and Guard, and choosing the group based on similarities and differences. Women veterans may choose gender-specific forums based on specific categories, and they want to belong to similar

groups. These specific identity components make up its military culture and, specifically, the subculture of women who have served.

While this theme is considered the big picture, it also underscores that many women veterans use online forums before and after military transitions. Some women may seek direct social support, and some may seek answers to different questions about how they use the forums, how many, and what type of forums are specific to the individual and sometimes the group. Ultimately, based on the data collected, women increasingly use online forums to receive and exchange information, which has been helpful in their transition from the military.

Theme 2: Veteran Forums Were Used for Federal or State Benefits, But Women Used Gender-Specific Forums for Questions Specific to Women's Issues

This theme highlights that online forums may not be unique to women veterans seeking information and assistance, but are important to veterans overall. This finding aligned with Zhou et al.'s study focusing on veterans' needs and social media as the most discussed topics identified by veterans were VA Support and Assistance and Educational Benefits and Opportunities (Zhou et al., 2022), not the need for social media forums to be gender specific. In this study, many participants highlighted that it did not matter overall if the forum was gender specific.

Some participants of this study did seek out gender-specific forums when dealing with women's disability-related VA claims or assistance. Several mentioned that there is much information online, and some participants did try to offer suggestions or resources for other veterans while participating in the online forum. Several women noted that the

information received directly impacted them and their families when dealing with the GI Bill, specifically helping their families receive benefits.

This theme highlights that information about federal benefits is being exchanged; for some, it is gender-specific information, but mostly it is veteran-specific information. This theme also aligns with the findings of The Wounded Warrior Project, Women Warriors Report, which stated that women may not know all their benefits or how to access them (Evans et al., 2023). Women veterans in this study admitted to using the online forums for information and applied the information they received to help themselves and others.

Theme 3: How Women Veterans Use the Groups Matters

The ability of women veterans to feel safe to talk about different aspects of their lives was an important theme. The value function of the group is based on the similarities and differences based on the group membership (Tajfel, 1982). The gender-specific forums allowed them to discuss various topics, from military transition to VA disability and being a mom serving in the military. It is important to remember that women veterans may choose the groups based on the individual's perspectives and beliefs, and lines can be blurred between self and group (Jaubert et al., 2020; Tajfel, 1974). The results indicated that women may be a part of many different military online groups, and not all may be gender-specific; instead, they use the groups to meet specific needs.

SIT suggests that the individual will adopt the characteristics of the group with whom they identify, thus building on the "I think," "We think," and "It is" to create a collective identity and how they see themselves as part of the group (Ashforth et al.,

2011; Conroy et al., 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Sometimes, the identity is in the sharing and receiving of information. The group answers specific questions, building and sharing resources that the group can use. When it came to military transition, there were comments about using the social support of the group but also using the group to mentor or receive mentorship from other women who may have gone through similar circumstances.

Rattray et al. (2023) identified that a component of successful reintegration was a strong life purpose or social support. The information the participants received online was helpful throughout their transition from the military. Many participants received and gave online social support by either sharing or receiving information. For some, it did not matter whether it was gender-specific; they could ask questions and receive information. Since this study focused on particular areas of military transition, other themes highlighted how it may or may not have impacted them. Even after several years out of the military, many women still used the forums to assist and receive support. This research supports the Women Warriors Initiative Report, educating transitioning service members on available resources (Wounded Warrior Project, 2021).

However, some people watched the online forums and did not always directly engage with other members. Some participants were sometimes frustrated that some groups focused on negative issues rather than positive situations. This shows that women veterans may be part of different online forums to receive information that can help them. All the participants shared that they share information about changes happening with veterans, and for some, they learned about local events that they could be part of. It was

clear that the resources and support received online allowed them to get information that helped in their military transition.

Overall, women veterans use online forums to exchange information. For some, the feeling of being safe to share, especially about military sexual trauma, allowed them to receive and share their story. Every group online may not fit the needs of all, even some women veterans. When identifying which group works for them, they will at least review the information and offer additional information for the group.

Theme 4: Women Veterans Do Not Necessarily Want to Share Their Own Stories, but Want to Help Others

In an online environment, individuals within the group, open or closed, are subjected to other opinions when posting information. Some women did not mind assisting women veterans, but did not always want to post about their situation. Whether that was from a perspective of not wanting to share for privacy reasons, or it could have been based on what the forum was about. This aligns with a recent research study on social media usage and value avoidance, emphasizing personal responsibility and identifying that tradeoffs may have negative consequences (Scharlach & Halliman, 2023).

The results of this study support why some women veterans may not want to share their stories based on receiving “Likes” or potential comments that may be negative. The word “judged” was used by some participants, and they chose not to post about their specific circumstances, not wanting or needing others to comment on their

situation. This goes hand in hand with Theme 3, which discusses how women veterans use forums.

Some of the women wanted to make sure that the information was factual. While some veteran information was easy to verify, some may change based on the situation. Some women reported sending individuals private messages and communicating with them that way. This indicates there could be more women veterans viewing the information than posting or commenting within the group. This could be essential for the group admins to realize that more information could be exchanged privately than in the online forum.

Theme 5: Identity as a Woman Veteran Is Important Because Women Veterans Felt More Included in Women-Only Groups

This theme is vital to understand from a SIT perspective and for understanding women veterans and how their identity may be impacted by the online forums they choose to be a part of. Porter et al. (2023) used the SIT theory for veterans who transitioned out of the military but acknowledged that SIT does not address how a shift in identity may occur. The online gender-specific forums allow them to identify with other women veterans who may have had similar experiences. You can see this in how they viewed their military veteran identity; some in the general forums felt they might not be "veteran enough" and had to prove their veteran status.

Some women veterans chose gender-specific community and social support forums based on their identity. Social identity creates an individual's emotional significance to the group and the symbolic relationship from an imposed informational

framework (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1974). Some participants felt it was easier to be included in the gender-specific forums, allowing them to feel seen or visible. One participant commented that she felt normal among women veterans, which is a key takeaway about the social support and social identity of women veterans.

Not all the participants had trouble with their own military veteran's identity, and others would not initially acknowledge their identity based on their current situation. These online forums created or reinforced their military veteran identity, allowing them to feel seen. This is similar to Kleykamp et al. (2021), who found that a strong or weak military identity impacted their transition and encouraged early planning for postmilitary life. The gender-specific groups allowed for discussions that some felt were women-specific without having to explain all of the details. While there were different opinions, women veterans reported that the group dynamics allowed them to feel connected to others, often allowing for in-person events.

Connection to the Theoretical Framework

When SIT was introduced, the major components were cognitive, evaluative, and emotional (Tajfel, 1974). In Tajfel's work with Turner, in-groups and out-groups are seen, and values and goals of the individual and group setting are defined (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). SIT was used in 2022, focusing on online communications to highlight that group members can form an identification, and the need for face-to-face communication is not always required (O'Reilly et al., 2022). In this study, the participants have their military service in common. However, most have only met online, with their military service contributing to the group's social categorization, and for some,

their identity. SIT may revolve around in-groups and out-groups, so for women veterans, that may be a general forum, or that may be a gender-specific forum. Women veterans sought online forums for specific women's issues, thus building on the social categorization that women used the forums for support. The theory also supports that the identity of women veterans was or could have been shaped by the information shared and received online.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations emerged while conducting this study. First, the study had a small sample size and only focused on women veterans. This may not represent the perspectives of all women veterans who have transitioned out of the military. Second, this study does not account for National Guard or Reservists who may have been in active duty before. This study uses a five-year window with a greater time frame, which may result in different responses. The majority of the 10 participants were military retirees. This could limit the transferability of the research if participants did not serve for 20 years. Also, with a small sample size, it is challenging to draw adequate conclusions. The generic qualitative approach allows participants to express their experiences on the specific topic. Participants may not always answer truthfully or remember their actions. Participants may also have difficulty communicating their feelings, making it hard for the researcher to understand or interpret their experiences.

Recommendations

Future research might have a wide-reaching sample size. The sample size could consist of more women veterans who are not retired because their perspectives may differ

from those of other women veterans who did not serve in the military for as long. The inclusion criteria could be changed to a longer transition timeframe, for instance, 10 or 15 years, so that responses could be recorded and compared with the experiences and perspectives of those who recently transitioned. While this study focused on women veterans, the foundational aspects could be viewed from male veterans and their potential use of gender-specific forums.

This research did not specify what type of online forums women veterans used, and future research could target specific platforms to focus on, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, or others. While individuals may have accounts on multiple platforms, they may be able to compare and contrast specific usage for social support. Part of the research could identify if they were participants/members before the military transition and how that impacted or assisted them when transitioning out of the military.

Additionally, further research could be adapted to military spouses' use of online forums for social support. Studies have highlighted spouses' challenges during their veterans' military service and afterward. Future research might explore how SIT might inform an understanding of how military spouses see their identity.

Implications

The implications drawn by the researcher from this study extend across multiple levels of society, from the individual to the societal and policy levels. Valuable insights into the experiences of women veterans and their use of online forums within the context of military transition can be gained. This section examines the potential impact of this study on the individual, organizational, and community levels, as well as methodological

implications. Additionally, practice recommendations are provided, outlining some steps that can be taken to assist admins of online forums in assisting women veterans with military transition.

Individual Level

Women veterans will not all have the same experiences when they transition out of the military. The benefit of women veterans connecting online for social support and resources may allow them to find answers and share their experiences with others. Within gender-specific forums, women veterans may feel safe asking specific questions and not having to prove their veteran status.

Organizational and Community Level

Organizations and communities have a vital role in promoting positive social change. The study's findings emphasize the significance of community connections and organizational support within online forums. Organizations that employ social or peer support workers should understand what their clients may or may not be sharing or receiving specific information to help them. Suppose an organization at any level has an online presence, especially for veterans, then being aware of what is being shared or questions being asked will help the organization address concerns or provide information about the topic. In that case, they should realize that veterans are reviewing their content for accuracy and may assist others via private messages.

Communities with a large veteran population might want to consider that many veteran organizations might have city or area-specific Facebook pages. The information could be combined with other information for resource fairs. The ability to share

information about what is happening locally in online forums might increase interactions online and in person.

Methodological Implications

Methodologically, the researcher, through her findings, contributes to the growing body of research on SIT, providing insights into the experiences of women veterans who transitioned from the military. This content-specific knowledge adds depth to the overall understanding of women veterans, their transition challenges, and how online forums contribute to their social support. Researchers can build upon this methodological approach to conduct similar studies about veterans and online forum usage. SIT may now be used to study online groups, and this study contributes to the differences between in-groups and out-groups. SIT theory demonstrates its applicability in the context of veterans and online forums. The theory's core concepts are social categorization and identity. SIT could be explored in various veteran scenarios and situations.

Recommendation for Practice

Regarding practice recommendations, first, admins should be aware of what is being shared and the impact of the content. Organizations could provide training to workers who monitor social media/online forums. They may be able to develop specific information about resources in the community if the topic comes up. If it is a gender-specific group, moderators should be familiar with the issues and try to engage women veterans who might need it.

In summary, positive social change's implications span individual, organizational, and community levels. The use of SIT within online forums may offer a better

understanding of the in-groups and out-groups and how it applies to how women veterans use the forums. These implications extend to research, theory, and practice, offering a better understanding of what challenges and resources might help when veterans transition out of the military.

Conclusion

This generic qualitative study aimed to explore women veterans' perspectives and experiences with online gender-specific social support and understand how that contributes to their social identity after military service. Results of the study show that women veterans receive support, whether social support or resources, to assist with military transition. For some women veterans, the gender-specific forums allowed them to feel safe and seen and to ask about women veterans' specific issues.

The military has identified that more women are now serving, and that number is growing. Transition challenges are documented across many disciplines, but online forums may be used to address these issues. The online environment allows women veterans to connect regardless of location, thus allowing them to feel more connected than isolated. This research shows that women veterans use social support and resources to assist with their military transition.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Thank you very much for meeting with me today. I appreciate your willingness to share your personal story. If at any time you need to pass or pause on a question, it is perfectly all right to do so. The interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes. If at any time you would like to stop the interview, just let me know, and we will do so. Do you consent to being audio recorded?

Do you meet the following inclusion criteria for the study?

- 18 years old or older
- Women Veteran
- Transitioned from the military within the last 5 years
- Not currently serving in the National Guard or Reserves
- Used online military/veteran forums after military service for social support

The following demographic questions will provide a description of the study sample.

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your race/ethnicity? _____
3. What is your relationship status? _____
4. Do you have children? If so, what are their ages? _____
5. What was your branch of Service? _____
6. How many years did you serve? _____
7. Were you an officer or enlisted? _____
8. When did you transition out of the military? _____

As we begin, please remember when you left the military and the years following your military transition. Think about your experiences with social support, relationships, and

sense of belonging after military service and how online forums may or may not have impacted you, whether veteran or just women veteran online forums.

1. Please describe your experiences with social support from gender-specific online military/veteran forums.

Probing: Can you share some examples if not provided in responses?

2. About gender-specific online forums, which ones did you find most beneficial for social support needs, and how?

Probing: What was it about that specific forum that made you choose that forum?

3. Describe your sense of social comparison to other veterans using the online forums.

Probing: Can you share some examples if not provided in responses?

4. Describe your sense of social comparison to other women veterans using gender-specific online forums.

Probing: Can you share some examples if not provided in responses?

5. Describe your thoughts and feelings towards your identity as a Veteran after service and the impact of military/veteran online forums.
6. Describe your thoughts and feelings towards your identity as a Veteran after service and the impact of gender-specific online forums.

Probing: Can you share some examples if not provided in responses?

7. Describe how you benefitted from the military/veteran forums for military transition.

8. Describe how you benefitted from the gender-specific forums for military transition.

Closing

Is there anything else you want to share that we have not discussed? I want to thank you for sharing your story and for your time today. Sometimes, memories can trigger some powerful emotions. Our next step is that I will send you a copy of the summary results, which will be emailed via email to review for accuracy and a timeframe for which to reply. You will also receive instructions on how to view the entire research project once it is published.