Exploring the Entrepreneurship Ecosystem of Marginalized Direct Sellers: Needs

of Military Spouses

Tracey Mays, PhD
Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship & Management
College of Business
Minot State University
Minot, North Dakota

Art Sherwood, PhD
David Cole Professor of Entrepreneurship
College of Business and Economics
Western Washington University
Bellingham, Washington

Lyzona Marshall
Assistant Professor of Business
Seton Hill University
Greensburg, Pennsylvania

ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the ecosystems needs of marginalized persons, specifically women military spouses, involved in a direct selling business. An exploratory design was used to engage a nonprobabilistic purposive sampling strategy. Specific selection criteria were used to recruit 10 participants. The participants were located throughout the U.S. A thematic analysis revealed six emergent themes with direct implications for entrepreneurial ecosystems and direct selling ecosystems. The study implied a need for research and entrepreneurship education to offer entrepreneurial skills and support systems for marginalized populations.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Ecosystems, Direct Selling, Military Spouses

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Synopsis

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to understand the ecosystems of marginalized persons, specifically military spouses, engaged in a direct selling business. The following research questions helped guide the study: what is the general experience of these entrepreneurs with direct selling, what are the entrepreneurship ecosystem needs of military spouse entrepreneurs actively engaging in a direct selling business, what do they currently have, and what are they missing.

Methodology

A nonprobabilistic purposive sampling strategy was used. Data was collected using semi-structured, open-ended questions. Recorded data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed using a thematic approach. An inductive process was used to analyze data for themes based upon response frequencies among three or more participants.

Results / Findings

Six themes emerged: motivation, previous experience and skills, perception of business success, support systems, changing environments, and communication.

Conclusion and Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice

The findings may have direct implications for direct selling ecosystems, especially for military spouses. The participants' experiences suggest that for military spouses, the on-going support through entrepreneurial ecosystems is limited due to changing environments. Another finding implied that local support from direct selling organizations was insufficient to achieve sustained success. Additional research is necessary; however, there may be opportunities to develop enhanced entrepreneurial skills and support systems.

Implications for Entrepreneurship Education

The respondents had degrees in various disciplines, yet, decided to start a venture. This implies that it may be of benefit to students to incorporate entrepreneurship education across disciplines. It could be useful for entrepreneurship educators to build both enterprising (intrapreneurship) and entrepreneurial components into the curriculum. Additionally, there is a need for students to develop a portfolio to show demonstrated entrepreneurial knowledge, skills, and abilities. Lastly, an opportunity may exist to integrate theories and practices that leverage business opportunities using social media.

Introduction

Direct selling is a worldwide micro-entrepreneurship phenomenon with significant participation and financial impact. The Direct Selling Association (DSA) reports that in 2016, over 20.5 million people in the US were involved in direct selling, with 5.3 million of those running independent businesses resulting in 35.5 billion in retail sale (Direct Selling Association, 2016). The global scope is also significant.

> Direct selling has become a major transnational industry in lower and middle income countries (LMICs), promoting the sale and purchase of products ranging from cosmetics and nutritional supplements, to kitchenware, oils and detergents…These organisations extend their reach well beyond formal marketplaces, drawing on the energy, entrepreneurship, and aspirations of a global workforce" (Busher, Bremner & Muljono, 2009, pp. 4).

According to the World Federation of Direct Sellers, the direct selling industry accounts for more than US $183 billion in retail sales globally with approximately 103 million direct sales entrepreneurs spanning across several industries (WFDSA Annual report, 2016). Direct selling is, "the person-to-person sale of a product or service by independent sales representatives who are sometimes also referred to as direct sellers, consultants, distributors or other titles" (WFDSA Annual report, 2016, pp. 11). While this global phenomenon is growing, it is unclear in the literature if all participants, particularly those in traditionally marginalized populations, are finding success and what leads to that success. We explore this issue through the lens of the entrepreneurship ecosystem. The particular focus of this paper is the needs of people who fall into traditionally marginalized populations in terms of an entrepreneurship ecosystem to support their success, with a particular focus on military spouses.

Entrepreneurship ecosystems are defined as "set of interconnected entrepreneurial actors, entrepreneurial organizations, institutions and entrepreneurial processes which formally and informally coalesce to connect, mediate and govern the performance within the local entrepreneurial environment" (Mason and Brown, 2014, pp. 5).

While literature on entrepreneurship ecosystems is rapidly growing, little is known about the entrepreneurship ecosystem surrounding those participating in direct selling. To begin this exploration, we focus on military spouses in the US as their needs for employment are high. The reported unemployment rates for military spouses are three times the national rate (Davis, 2016). This study will also allow for exploration of the ecosystem questions for a predominantly female population. Our exploratory research questions include: What is the general experience of these entrepreneurs with direct selling? What are the entrepreneurship ecosystem needs of military spouse entrepreneurs actively engaging in a direct selling business? What do they currently have? What are they missing?

We start by briefly reviewing the entrepreneurship ecosystem literature, linking it to the limited amount known about the ecosystem for direct selling, especially for marginalized entrepreneurs. Next, we describe our exploratory interview study method including a description of the interviewees, followed by a description of the data and our analysis. We then go on to discuss the findings, offering limitations and implications for future research.

Literature Review

Although direct sales careers have become common among military spouses (Strazalkowski, 2017), the academic study of the ecosystem of military spouses within the direct sales industry has not advanced into publications. Although women have engaged in home-based work for quite some time, the study of women doing home-based work is also limited in

academic research (Kalyanaraman, 2016). This exploratory study will seek to add to the academic conversation of these topics. The purpose of this study is to understand the ecosystems of military spouses in direct selling therefore a review of the literature of entrepreneurship ecosystems follows.

Entrepreneurship Ecosystems and Direct Selling

The perspective of entrepreneurship ecosystems developed from several previously established streams, including strategy and regional development literatures (Acs, Stam, Audretsch, & O'Connor, 2017). The perspective essentially argues that the location specific ecosystem surrounding entrepreneurs has the potential to impact entry and performance.

Entrepreneurship ecosystems are defined as:

a set of interconnected entrepreneurial actors (both potential and existing), entrepreneurial organisations (e.g. firms, venture capitalists, business angels, banks), institutions (universities, public sector agencies, financial bodies) and entrepreneurial processes (e.g. the business birth rate, numbers of high growth firms, levels of 'blockbuster entrepreneurship', number of serial entrepreneurs, degree of sell- out mentality within firms and levels of entrepreneurial ambition) which formally and informally coalesce to connect, mediate and govern the performance within the local entrepreneurial environment (Mason and Brown, 2014, pp. 5).

More simply put, the entrepreneurship ecosystem is the set of actors and conditions that affect the success of entrepreneurs within a particular locality. At the center is the entrepreneur, surrounded by a variety of people, institutions and formal and informal interactions.

The ecosystem consists of a variety of domains made up of actors, organizations and entrepreneurial processes. Mason and Brown's (2017) work identifies multiple domains within

an entrepreneurship ecosystem, including the public sector, financial institutions, academic institutions, private sector, culture, and infrastructure. Within each of these domains we find the actors, organizations and entrepreneurial processes that have the potential to lend to the success
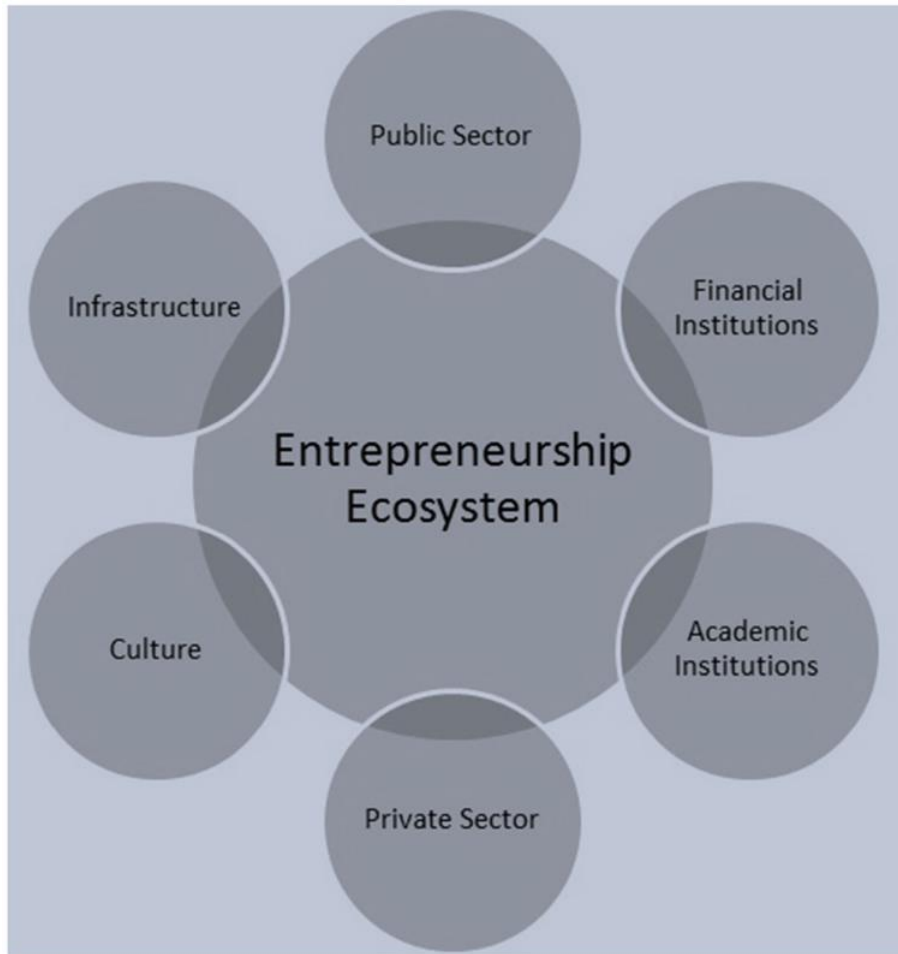

Figure 1: Domains of the Entrepreneurship Ecosystem (Mason and Brown, 2017)

of the entrepreneurs within the ecosystem. Figure 1 illustrates these domains.

While the literature related to entrepreneurship ecosystems in general is growing, much remains to be explored and researched for specific contexts, such as direct selling and the entrepreneurs associated with these micro-enterprises. Direct sales often occur in a one-to-one or small group or party plan environment. Direct sales also may take place in a branded shop or retail location, or online via e-commerce or social media." (WFDSA Annual report, 2016). While a channel of distribution, direct selling is different from direct marketing. "Direct selling is about individual sales agents reaching and dealing directly with clients; direct marketing is about business organizations seeking a relationship with their customers without going through an agent, consultant, or retail outlet." (Bellin, 2016, pp. 160)

Direct selling has the potential to begin addressing challenges facing entrepreneurship in the US and elsewhere: the composition of women and minorities engaging in entrepreneurship continues to be out of line with the population and thus, marginalized. The Kauffman foundation reports a portrait of US entrepreneurs as 80.2% white and 64.5% male (Kauffman Foundation, 2017). Data regarding direct selling indicates 84% white and 74% female. So while the minority participation rates continue to be out of line with the US population (77% white), the female participation rate is significantly higher. (Direct Selling Association, 2016; US Census, 2016)

More specifically, the DSA (2016) reports significant percent involvement by US women (74% of all involved vs approximately 50% of the US population) and mixed levels of participation by major minority groups (examples: 22% Hispanic involvement vs 17.8% of US population and 9% African American vs 13.3% of US population). Across the globe, the sales percentage of total direct sales coming from emerging economies has increased from 36.4% in

2011 to 43% in 2015 with 46% of sales occurring in the Asia-Pacific region (led by China with $35bn in sales).

While there is limited academic research completed on direct selling generally (Busher et al., 2009), academics from a variety of fields have studied direct selling around the world for those that could be considered part of marginalized populations. For example, de Casanova (2011), using an ethnographic approach, explored the experiences of women cosmetic sellers of the company Yanbol in Ecuador. Another example includes Busher et.al. (2009) who examined direct selling in lower and middle income countries, focusing on three case studies in Namibia, Uganda, and Indonesia.

Further, while there has been some effort to understand direct selling and the entrepreneurs involved, it remains unclear about what types of entrepreneurship ecosystem needs exist for those marginalized populations potentially, or actually, participating in direct selling. The situation becomes even more complex when considering entrepreneurs who may live in a rural environment with a limited number of domains and their associated actors, organizations and entrepreneurial process and who also may be only temporarily in a particular place. In order to explore these contexts, we have chosen to focus on military spouses.

There are approximately 564,000 military spouses of active duty military members nationwide and have an unemployment rate more than triple the national average (Davis, 2016). Military spouses are predominantly women (95%) and face particularly challenging career situations. Their spouses are often deployed or gone for extended periods of time, leaving them in the household as the only adult. It appears that direct selling, part or full time, could provide a unique opportunity for the spouses to address multiple personal and professional needs.

Military families relocate 10 times more often than civilian families (dosomething.org), making it a challenge to deeply embed in a place-bound entrepreneurship ecosystem. Thus, our focus is on a specific marginalized population who are engaging in direct selling as their work, who also have the specific challenge of moving locations regularly. This is an important issue for direct selling companies and associations as they work to support their networks, the entrepreneurs themselves and academics who seek a deeper understanding of how entrepreneurial ecosystems influence both the start-up and implementation of entrepreneurial ventures.

Our study addresses several research questions including: What is the general experience of these entrepreneurs with direct selling? What are the entrepreneurship ecosystem needs of military spouse entrepreneurs actively engaging in a direct selling business? What do they currently have? What are they missing?

Methods

This study involved an exploratory qualitative design to understand the ecosystems affecting the success of marginalized persons engaged in a direct selling business. A quantitative research design supports a standardized approach to examine variables for generalized results (Sargeant, 2012). Comparatively, a qualitative research design provides an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Babbie, 2011). Research studies relative to understanding entrepreneurship ecosystems affecting marginalized persons are limited. An exploratory qualitative research design is the most appropriate approach to gain an understanding of this field. Exploratory qualitative studies support works where limited research exists or there is significant uncertainty on the topic (Babbie, 2011).

The research objective is primarily building an understanding rather than measurement of the ecosystems associated with women military spouses involved with direct selling organizations. After an Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and approval, participants located in various parts of the US were recruited through social media (e.g., Facebook). The participants represented personal contacts of one of the researchers with specific knowledge of the participants' backgrounds, experiences, and direct selling business status, which supported the purpose of the study. The selection process was done based on the following criterion: (1) female military spouse, (2) current owner of a direct selling business, and (3) member of a bound entrepreneurial ecosystem. A total of 11 participants were recruited, with one participant that voluntarily withdrew for personal reasons. This selection process was appropriate to gain access to the target population.

Validation strategies ensure trustworthy results for the study (Creswell, 2013). To reduce interview bias and subjectivity, the interviewer activated a bracketing process to pre-interview participants. Qualitative research literature includes bracketing as an ethical method for researchers to set aside any assumptions during the research process (Fischer, 2009). The interviewer also conducted pre-interviews to provide an overview of the research purpose and establish a "conversational" tone for the actual interview. Researchers suggested strategies that offer a more relaxed interview assisted research participants with being more open and forthcoming (Babbie, 2011).

Sampling

We conducted a nonprobabilistic purposively sample selection process to recruit participants for this study. A total of 10 military spouses that own a direct selling business were selected for this research. The selection of a small sample size is consistent with qualitative

research methods that allow for opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of the participants'

experiences with the research phenomenon (Babbie, 2011). The participants were all women,

age ranges of 25- 50 years old, and located in various areas of the country: the upper mid-west of

the United States, Kansas, and Hawaii. Table 1 shows the companies in which the participants

had an affiliation.

Table 1: Companies named in the interviews

Advocare (1)	Lipsense (1)	Younique (2)
Shacklee Incorporated (1)	Norwex (1)	Young Living Essential Oils (1)
Juice Plus (1)	Origami Owl (1)	Scentsy (1)

The interview setting was in a private office that facilitated private telephone interviews

over a period of four days. Participants were also e-mailed an Informed Consent form that was

signed and returned either by facsimile, email or in person. The Informed Consent outlined the

opportunity for participants to withdraw from the study at any time and assured participants of

confidentiality and anonymity with respect to shared information and data. During the telephone

interviews, the participants were asked nine specific open-ended questions (See Appendix A).

This allowed participants the opportunity to provide more detailed responses to interview

questions. The interviews were recorded using digital recording software. The recordings were

then transcribed through the use of a professional transcriber. The transcribed data was then

categorized according to the individual interviewee. The interviewees' personal or identifiable

information was not included within the data. Instead, a numbering sequence of one through ten

was used to identify participants. The transcribed data was developed into an electronic format

that could be read using a word processing application or software program.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data. Data was collected using a semi-structured open-ended interview format. The raw transcript content was then analyzed and hand coded using an open coding approach to identify themes or trends. Two researchers reviewed the coded data and agreed on the prevalent themes that emerged. Qualitative studies with a small sample size are benefited from hand coding and analysis for theme identification (Babbie, 2011). The "thick description" (Denzin, 2001) of experiences by participants supports the authenticity and realistic view of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

An inductive process was used for data analysis to identify meaningful key words, phrases or themes. Berg (2009) discussed the inductive approach as an immersive document review to highlight themes within data. Key words and phrases identified during the interviews were used to develop categories and themes. Themes were selected based upon repeated responses among three or more participants. Any underlying themes that were outside of the scope of this study were abstracted to ensure the responses reflected the research questions and study focus.

As with any study, validity is a concern. The researchers were concerned with validity as well and therefore took precautions during the design, data collection and analysis of the study. One of the ways that validity was addressed was by using standardized open-ended interviews. Standardized open-ended questions help to understand the holistic viewpoint of a group of people, which can be helpful to minimize issues of credibility by carefully collecting the same information from every research participant (Patton, 1990).

Results/Findings

A total of 10 military spouses that own a direct selling business participated in this research. The interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes each and were conducted from

September 30 to October 3, 2017.The participants were all women between the ages 25 and 50 years old. The participants were located in various areas of the country: two upper mid-States in the United States, Kansas, and Hawaii. The self-identified previous work experiences of the participants varied to include: Marketing (1 participant); Education (3 participants); Military (2 participants); Healthcare (1 participant); Self-employed/Education (1 participant); and Health and Fitness (1 participant). Their experience with their current direct sales company ranged from 6 months to more than 4 years as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Amount of experience with the company

Didn't Answer	Less than 6 months	6-12 months	1-2 years	3-4 years	4+ years
1	0	3	2	2	2

Based on the interviews, six themes emerged: (1) Motivation – rationale for getting into a DSO based on either financial need or product interest; (2) Previous Experience and Skills – work experience and skill sets for operating a business; (3) Perception of Business Success – gauging the success of their business; (4) Support Systems – identifying support from the DSO and from military spouses to achieve success (5) Changing Environments – dealing with frequent moves and (6) Communication – understanding the implications of social media as a communication tool.

Theme One - Motivation

The participants provided two distinct reasons for joining a DSO, which included a desire for income or interest in the product. Four participants identified additional income as a motivator to join a DSO to support a household. In contrast, two participants also indicated a strong interest in or desire for products offered by the DSO as a motivator.

"And so, it's been really cool to replace a "real job" income with this income, and even go bigger than that. I don't think I saw that from the very beginning, but I've been involved in the culture and the community, I can see how big financially it can be. But also the wide reach of people that we can help, because the bigger team, the stronger team, the more families you are reaching." (interviewee 3)

"Which is the goal. For all of it to replace his income." (interviewee 6)

"I mainly started, um, because I wanted to go back to work when both of my kids were in school last year. I wanted to do something, but, um, with our life, like, moving every two years, I wanted something, um, that I could do at home. Or that I could take with me."(interviewee 5)

"They make you, I don't know. Um, believe in the products." (interviewee 10)

"And, I'm always like, I can't keep up. And that's why I think I've lost my motivation. It's like I'm not going to sit here and lug around all these things and then you are just going to retire them in a few months." (interviewee 1)

Theme Two - Previous Experience and Skills

The majority of the participants expressed the importance of previous work experience as beneficial for the business. Although the backgrounds of the participants varied, it was evident that having work experience provided a bridge to success in the DSO environment. All 10 participants shared a common perception that the overall skills to running their business related to soft skills to relate to people, such as interpersonal skills, confidence, organizational and business skills.

"You need business skills. Like, you sign up, then they expect you to kind of know, like, how to run your own business. There are training tools and things like that. But there are skills I wish I would have known about having business." (interviewee 1)

"...I was doing payroll, I was doing scheduling. I was having team meetings, all of those things transferred well." (interviewee 8)

"...., dedication. And being able to be sociable and personable to people. Uh, having knowledge with everything internet wise and being able to navigate through Facebook and all that other stuff so you can grow your business." (interviewee 4)

"…Gotta have the people skills…" (interviewee 5)

Theme Three - Perception of Business Success

Participants were less forthcoming with distinctions on identifying business success. The impression of what equated to business success varied among participants, including feelings of not being successful due to personal reasons or circumstances to a lack of support from the DSO. Two interviewees indicated feelings of success but a lack of a specific goal when starting the business. One interviewee felt successful due to the achievement of a higher level of responsibility in their organization.

"I don't. Definitely not. And I think half of it is my fault. And half of it is just like. I'm not, like a seller." (interviewee 1)

"No. Um, I wanted to be more active … so I just, life happens and I just pulled back a little bit. Knowing that I need to focus on my family and my kids first..." (interviewee 9)

"...the level I desire is definitely a lot higher…" (interviewee 6)

"I think, I think if I could have met one-on-one with someone, like at someone's house or a coffee shop. That would have been more helpful. Because it kind of forces you to do it versus online you can ignore your computer a little bit easier." (interviewee 9)

"Yes. Actually, the first year that I did it, I earned about $5,000. Not trying to sell to people, but people coming to me and noticing that I lost so much weight." (interviewee 7)

"I mean I have already surpassed my original goals." (interviewee 8)

Theme Four - Support Systems

Respondents indicated the need for support systems as key to success in direct sales business. The type of support was distinguished between two support systems: (1) support from the DSO and (2) support from the military spouses. Those respondents that perceived support was received from the DSO indicated a more positive business outlook. The specific support that

was identified involved three methods of support: (1) conferences, (2) the person who recruited them into the business; often referred to by the participants as their up channel, and (3) advice.

Conversely, support from military spouses was indicated as an anomaly among the participants. The prevailing attitude among the participants indicated feelings of competition and rivalry due to recruitment from within a concentrated group. Three participants indicated a level of support from military spouses that ranged from help to run the business or provide customers.

DSO Support

"...the person that helps you to get into the business is, basically your uplink to all of this training" (interviewee 4)

"Specifically [organization name] does a really good job of internal training. There is literally no shortage of training that you can do. Every training that's ever been done is recorded, and archived, and organized. Um, we also have a very robust group of consultants who are absolutely willing to give their time, uh, to train other consultants." (interviewee 10)

"...I mean they're training online is incredible, there's uh, it's broken down I guess into teams so my team will focus on like tasks to do every day or tasks to do weekly or tasks to do monthly..." (interviewee 3)

It would be nice to just have like, if not like the mini meetings with the small things. Like one or two regional things. Like one for each state, or if it's like little states like a few states, like a centralized area where people can go to. That's more motivating to be than being stuck in a big conference and not really...like you feel like this little fish. especially if you are not like the big seller." (interviewee 1)

Military Spouse Support

"So we are almost all military spouses...We do a lot of our things together, even though we are geographically separated...we'll have a lot of sideline buddies, so even if we move around a lot, I can almost always find somebody else..." (interviewee 11)

""So we tried to help each other some, but none of us were really in the position that we could make it grow the way we would have probably hoped for." (interviewee 9)

"Um, with people who are military, I haven't really gotten any support from, you know…" (interviewee 7)

Theme Five - Changing Environments

The participants indicated moving as a challenge for running and maintaining a business. The majority of the participants acknowledged that frequent moves due to the military commitments of their spouses had a negative impact on their business. There was an indication of unexpected social impacts that expanded beyond monetary rewards, as bonds developed among team members. In contrast to the other participants, one indicated a positive impact of moving as a way to find new customers and expand their team.

"So one disadvantage of being in [location] was I didn't have my network because we moved." (interviewee 7)

And, right now, it's kind of just been put on hold, um, between the move and everything like that. (interviewee 9)

"home businesses are great for military spouses because…you can grow your customer base." (interviewee 2)

"...when we moved state-side, basically my business had to completely restart. Um, I think that if you view that as a positive then you're going to have amazing growth." (interviewee 10)

Theme Six – Communication

All of the participants indicated that social media served a critical role in the ability to communicate with customers. Overwhelmingly, the participants indicated Facebook or Instagram as the platforms of choice for communicating with and reaching out to customers. The participants also indicated that the ability to understand Facebook's functionality had a direct correlation with profit maximization.

"…I think that is a big thing now. How to throw a Facebook party and get people to be more active, and how to get more people to join your Facebook group." (interviewee 1)

So we, like I said we do a lot of events online through (unintelligible), it's like a webcast kind of thing. Or Facebook, there is so much stuff on social media now (interviewee 10).

"The principle of doing all the direct sales through Facebook or through Instagram. So to say, I mean, not to say that they are just supporting Facebook, but that's how all the messages are given. It's all through Facebook lives and groups on Facebook or events on Facebook…" (interviewee 3)

"…it's the big things like the education of understanding how to create Facebook ads, and a marketing campaign, and writing a business plan and understanding all of those big things, but also the little things of just understanding…" (interviewee 10)

Implications of Theory, Research and Practice

The findings from this qualitative study are nongeneralizable; however, these participants' experiences may have implications for entrepreneurial ecosystems generally, and direct selling ecosystems, specifically. The experiences of the participants suggest that military spouses do not have ongoing access to ecosystems to support their entrepreneurial endeavors due to their frequent relocations. A major theme was apparent related to participants dealing with changing environments. Study participants described multiple moves. Some reported moving internationally, which brought about unique challenges for their direct sales business. Overall, the participants deemed the moves as disruptive to their direct sales business. Direct sales would seem a good fit for someone that moves often due to the portable nature of the business, however, dealing with changing locations is a challenge for almost any business. Though the moves were reportedly disruptive to business there was also an unexpected social disruption that negatively affected business due to relocations.

A major theme surrounding support systems became apparent during the study. Reportedly, the participants did not feel the DSOs provided the level of support needed for their specific context. Additionally, some of them felt fellow military spouses within direct sales companies (the other players within the ecosystem) leaned toward competition rather than mutual support. This latter is an indicator for an opportunity for some mechanism to create networks (e.g. local support groups) and to help build healthy competition/coopetition and mutual support. This implication is suggestive from the participants expressing a desire for more local conferences and some expressing a desire for local support networks.

Another major theme of the study is the need for a social support system. The findings underscore the importance of the social network developed by team members and recruiters, also known as "up channels". This finding implies the importance of the entrepreneurial ecosystem among military spouses in direct sales. Most participants reported relocating was disruptive to business more so due to the displacement from the team rather than due to having to restart the business in a new location. Participants reported that their sales take place mostly online so their actual business can go on almost seamlessly through a move. However, moving from the team significantly inhibited their social interaction and connections with their team members. Interestingly, the participants that reported a great deal of support from the home office and their team had a more positive outlook toward their business. Similarly, those that reported higher levels of success also reported higher levels of support from their company and team. This implies a need for an ecosystem that promotes success through support.

The support of direct sales companies for the participants of this study was comparable. As reported from the study participants, many direct sales organizations generally rely on three methods of support. The first method of providing support is in the form of company

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conferences. Many participants reported they were unable to participate in these conferences due to the amount of money and time needed to attend. The participants that attended conferences expressed how valuable the information learned in the conference was for their business. Some reported a need to have local conferences or local support systems established by the company. The implication is that the infrastructure of the ecosystem must be set up in such a way for each member to have access to the organization, specifically the organizational trainings. The cost should not be prohibitive for the masses to be involved in conferences or sessions with the direct sales company.

The second method of support the direct sales company provided participants of this study was in the form of support from the person that recruited them into the business, also called their up channel. Reportedly, the up channel provides training in person, over the phone, and often via Facebook. The up channel often encouraged a culture built on positivity, inspiration and motivation. The domain of culture is one aspect of the entrepreneurship ecosystem that lends to the success of entrepreneurs within the ecosystem (Mason & Brown 2017). The implication is that there may be a need for military spouse engaging in direct sales to be a part of a team with a strong culture. The theme of motivation demonstrates that the participants initial motivation to become involved in direct sales was need-based related to the need for additional sources of income to support the family. However, the strong culture of the team kept some participants in the business even when the business was not a monetary success.

Participants of this study reported the need for business skills, interpersonal skills and organizational skills to run their business. Some said they received product training from their organizations, but not basic business skills training which they felt necessary to run their direct sales business. Most of the participants of this study reported specifically needing business skills

to run their business. They thought more business skills would improve their business success. An implication derived from this study for research, practice as well as for entrepreneurship education is the importance of teaching entrepreneurial skills. The findings seem to support the significance of the infrastructure within the ecosystem to provide training that is accessible and affordable. This finding is particularly important for practice to the DSA and the individual direct sales organizations. This finding could support the need for additional research on the specific skills necessary to pursue direct sales endeavors.

Implications of Entrepreneurship Education

This study describes experiences of military spouses who engage in direct sales as a means of entrepreneurship. All of the study participants had worked outside of the home in various capacities prior to beginning their direct sales business. This implies that it is not unusual for a direct sales entrepreneur to have been employed prior to pursuing an entrepreneurship opportunity. Researchers found that graduates they studied with majors or minors in entrepreneurship typically have multiple occupations in different sectors and roles prior to entrepreneurship pursuits (Jones, Pickernell, Fisher, & Netana, 2017). Thus, it may benefit students for entrepreneurship education to incorporate both enterprising (intrapreneurship) and entrepreneurial components into curriculum to meet the future requirements of graduates post-graduation (Jones, Pickernell, Fisher, & Netana, 2017).

All participants of this study attained at least an undergraduate degree; three participants hold advanced degrees (in speech pathology, marketing, and business). Even with higher-level education, the participants could not fully articulate the specific skills that transferred from their previous work experience and education to their direct sales business. The inability to articulate their skills may imply the need for entrepreneurship students to develop and maintain a portfolio

related to their entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and abilities gained throughout their degree program. The portfolio could be a required part of the curriculum to show demonstrated knowledge, skills and abilities in key entrepreneurship competencies.

Elmunti, Khoury and Omran (2012) found a causal relationship between entrepreneurship education; specifically the teaching of entrepreneurial skills and enhanced venture effectiveness. Specific entrepreneurial skills that the participants found of value for their business were interpersonal skills. The inclusion of experiential exercises that help entrepreneurship students demonstrate interpersonal skills may have implications of their future venture effectiveness. The participants of this study overwhelmingly reported the use of social media, specifically Facebook as a viable means of communication within their team as well as for reaching out to customers. The interviewees emphasized the need to understand how Facebook works to maximize their profits. Nambisan (2016) suggested the need to build digital technology perspectives to enrich existing entrepreneurship theories. New technologies have provided opportunities for new kinds of entrepreneurship and especially for women entrepreneurs (Steel, 2017). Entrepreneurship education should include teaching how to leverage opportunities using Facebook and social media platforms**.**

Limitations, Further Research and Conclusions

Our purpose was to begin an exploration of entrepreneurship ecosystems for direct selling, with a particular focus on military spouses as non-mainstream entrepreneurs. Our findings yielded multiple new insights into this specific context with implications for research, practice, and entrepreneurship education. That being said, our exploratory study has its limitations.

Findings for qualitative studies are often nongeneralizable as is the case with this study. We recognize the limitations of this data in terms of size of the sample, possible researcher bias, and internal validity concerns. However, the participants of this study described experiences that may have implications on the encounters of military spouses in direct sales so future studies should be undertaken to further discover the military spouses experience in direct sales and to help support an ecosystem that helps achieve success. The study was also limited due to the sampling method used. The use of the nonprobabilistic purposive sampling method may result in the possible exclusion of potential participants that may have had an effect on the research findings (Girden & Kabacoff, 2011). Additionally, the study used structured, open-ended interviews, which limited the flexibility in relating the interview to particular circumstances unrelated to the pre-determined questions (Patton, 1990). Lastly, the study was limited in the type of triangulation method used. We used the triangulation of qualitative data sources method in which the researchers compare perspectives of people from different points of views (Patton, 1990). However, we were limited to compare the points of views of the researchers involved, rather than other stakeholders. Though there are limitations, there were useful conclusions that can be drawn.

Our research allows us to draw some conclusions based on our research questions. The general ecosystems needs of the military spouse in direct sales is an infrastructure that can support an entrepreneur who experiences constant changing environments. The ecosystem that would be most appropriate for a military spouse in direct sales is one that provides support from the direct sales organization, a localized support system, and a strong culture. Additionally, the findings support that previous work experience can translate to the direct sales business, but

there are certain skills necessary for success. There is room for improvement for skills development.

For practitioners; including direct selling associations, direct selling organizations and the direct selling entrepreneurs themselves, we found that additional work is necessary in the areas of skills development, dealing with changing environments, and developing support systems. Specific opportunities exist for practitioners to collaboratively develop ecosystems to address the holistic needs of members engaged in such systems.

Additional research questions that arise include (1) what skills and abilities are necessary to be successful as a military spouse in direct sales, (2) do military spouses in direct sales have an entrepreneurial mindset (3) does a strong support system correlate to increased effectiveness (4) does a move/relocation negatively affect direct sellers- if so is that affect related to the loss of portion of the ecosystem? These research questions may be addressed by a larger scale survey of needs, additional interviews, ethnographic studies, or correlational studies.

Future research areas that might benefit from this type of study include opportunities for rural communities, minority groups, single women, and immigrants. These marginalized groups historically have experienced limited access to resources and opportunities associated with entrepreneurial interests, such as capital, mentors, and support systems.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. What company is your business under?

2. How long have you had it?

3. Can you tell me about your experience with working outside the home prior to your business start up?

4. Do you think the skills from your previous work experience transferred to owning your own business? What kind of skill do you think are necessary for your business?

5. Can you tell me about your experience with direct selling (why did you start, what were your hopes with it, What has happened)?

6. Do you feel as if you achieved the level of success you desired wit your business?

7. What sort of support have you received from the company to empower you to be successful?

8. From other military spouses?

9. Do you have anything you would like to add?