

# “www.iamtrailingspouse.ph”: The Constructed Identity of a Trailing Spouse in Blogs

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## Abstract

This study looks into the constructed identity of a trailing spouse that is narratively presented through blogging. Three trailing spouse blogs were analyzed to see how each uses socially constructed concepts in their sense-making. In particular, the concept of gender is located within their blog posts, and how it contributes to the construction of their identity as trailing spouses, and how this is presented in their blogs' communication narrative. Through a Social Constructionist lens, a document analysis of the communication narratives was used. It showed three levels of identity presentation among the blogs that were studied. From a Fictional Mediation level of narrative, one that presents an identity that acts as its narrator and directly addresses her audience, in this instance, within an identity of what a trailing spouse is to her. At the other end of the spectrum is the Non-Fictional level, a narrative voice that addresses a generalized perspective, presenting a more introspective identity. In between the levels is a balanced narrative where both Fictional and Non-Fictional voices are used, where the blogger comfortably switches from one to another depending on the context using social constructs that presents an identity that shows many sides of a trailing spouse. Only one of the three bloggers, explored the issues involving gender roles and its effects on her identity as a trailing spouse.

**Keywords:** *trailing spouse, identity presentation, narrative communication, Social Construction, narrative analysis, blogging as a narrative*

## **Introduction**

### **The Concept of the Trailing Spouse**

A "trailing spouse" is what we today describe as a person who indeed follows or accompanies the respective partner, wife, or husband, moving to a different city or country mostly because of professional reasons (Knezevic, 2013). Also known as Expatriate or Accompanying Spouse/Partner, this is common among military, government, or diplomatic communities where members are assigned to a different location several times over in a career. Globalization and the rise of BPO's and companies reaching out to other countries gave this an entry. Even in the private sector, the phenomenon of the trailing spouse is not fading (Richardson & McKenna, 2002).

On known record, the first use of the idea of a trailing spouse was in a Wall Street Journal article, which discussed the beginning of companies providing job opportunities for the spouses of executives they relocate (Bralove, 1981). "The bank is designed to provide job leads for the trailing spouse of a newly hired or transferred executive" (p.29). This study took note of the decrease of migrating couples in the late 60's and 70's, due to the socio- economic freedom that was then being discovered by the wives. A slight shift was made in the gender role stereotypes and dual careers were now being considered before a move is made by the husband (Nivalainen, 2004).

In the early 21st century, this problem for companies persisted, with "family considerations" as the main cause of declines to transfers or relocations for employees (Adler, 1987). The said wives are now highly educated with either promising or established careers of their own. It became more difficult for the women to leave behind what they have built for themselves, a very different scenario in the past studies.

While this began, academics and corporate studies have noticed the plight and concept of the trailing spouse in the West. Meanwhile, in the South East Asian areas, there is a slightly different perspective. In The Philippines, a country where more than 1.8 M of its citizens have flown abroad as Overseas Filipino Workers (Gavilan, 2015), a



number of such migrant workers have indeed travelled with their wives and families. There have been several studies, from the effects of relocation (Bayes, 1989), organizational support (McNulty, 2010), to commuter partnership (Mulder and van der Klis, 2007) countless of articles (Wilcox, 2014) and features that try to encapsulate the idea of the trailing spouse. Both from short to extensive, the studies have discussed what it involves and most especially the problems and issues such individuals face in carrying the title.

## **Social Constructs and Identity**

The life of a trailing spouse, particularly in the sectors of military and diplomacy status, is an example of a socially constructed concept. Aside from rank, gender is another nominal characteristic that gains a status value (Ridgeway, 1991); and a common point in studying trailing spouses. For instance, gender ideologies (Gupta et al, 2012), and the differences and similarities between the concerns of male and female trailing spouses (Braserby, 2010) have become popular topics.

As social constructs are being studied, to Cerulo (1997), studies on identity have evolved from the development of the “me” to a more collectivist view. Brought on by the movements of society and nationalists, identity studies have shifted to being part or the shared sense of being part of an ideal or a group. As with the earlier example, the concept of “gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, class/status” became common angles that form political implication. Aside from this, the differences in how such collective concepts are made, kept, and revised in studying identity became points of interest, including how advancements in technology have changed the interaction from physical to cybernetic (p.386).

Like status and gender, identity is also a social construct; in fact, “Social constructionism informs much of the work on gender identity” (p. 387), and in the life of a trailing spouse with all three are factors that go hand-in-hand.

## **The Trailing Spouse and Blogging as a Narrative**

Many of the literature about trailing spouses look into the many factors that affect their lives (Stimming, 2012; Purgat-Popiela, 2010). And almost all of them mentions the concept of identity, albeit peripherally, have discussed their sense of loss and concerns over their individuality and sense of purpose as a trailing spouse.

One way of dealing with this loss and identity dilemma is by finding solace in each other. In the earlier days, trailing spouses exchange letters that evolved into emails for families and today the advent of social media and more importantly trailing spouses who blog about their life.

Via these means they are able to construct through words, actions (such as writing blogs), and media products (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Aside from exploring how social constructs are created as identities (Guess, 2006), many researchers have studied the narratives of individuals and the language used to be able to understand how they create, manage, negotiate, and present their identities (Tidy, 2007). The ability to present themselves to others and how they create and manage their realities as trailing spouses giving others a glimpse of the lives of these individuals were also explored.

Through the "trailing spouse blogs," they are able to share their stories, their narratives, and their daily realities. Also seen as a therapeutic means to assess their identity, blogs that are more personal in nature, serve as modern evolutions of journals and diaries of their experiences and travels (Scott, 2013).

Through the blogs the aspect of subjectivity in constructionism can also be seen, as they are able to express different roles as an individual. By sharing the experience of trailing spouses, they are also able showcase the variety of characters and how they see things differently due to their beliefs and cultural background. And through subjectivity they are able to interactively find out what society expects from the trailing spouse and learn it via the views of others.



## Rationale

In reviewing the related literature, one of the noticeable observations is that the trailing spouse as a research variable or concept is mostly dependent in nature. Not many try to first understand how the subjects create, or at the very least, present these characteristics that to them build their identity.

This study explores not the factors that affect trailing spouse and their identity presentation, but their perspectives on these effects.

Another path this study hopes to explore is studying the constructed reality of a trailing wife, and how her identity is presented through her blogs. In analyzing these contemporary versions of journals, the unique voice of the trailing spouse may be heard and given notice, as well as the communicative aspect that comes with it.

The trailing spouse narratives are some of the best means to study such voices as these are not based on outside observations or interpretations, but are perspectives and *poietia* that directly come from the subjects themselves. This creates for a data source that is rich, credible, and novel to study.

Finding social constructs that specifically relate to the concept of gender helps the study see how a trailing spouse presents her identity in her narratives.

I, as the researcher of this study, am also a trailing spouse. While there might be an obvious bias to the perspectives given, I hope to get a better understanding of my and others like me, represent and make sense of our identity through our blogs. As a communication student, I believe that an academic look at how a trailing spouse portrays her identity will contribute to how women like me can be able to express herself; and how society can better listen to the plight of this unique perspective I and others like me have.

## **Research Problem and Objectives**

This study aims to be able to contribute to the said discourse of the trailing spouse by trying to explore its makeshift and how a trailing spouse presents her identities via online blog. A narrative analysis using the Social Constructionist lens, seeks to explain the sense or meaning-making that creates the reality of the said subjects.

With this in mind the study hopes to answer this research problem:

How is the constructed identity of a trailing spouse narratively presented through blogging?

In answering this research question, the study aims to:

1. Explain the identities that a trailing spouse presents as her constructed reality in her blog posts;
2. Describe how a trailing spouse makes sense, how her reality is constructed as told in her blog posts of narratives and
3. Locate and interpret how a trailing spouse uses the concept and related concepts of gender in her narratives and identity presentation in her blog posts.

## **Study Framework**

### **The Social Construction of Reality (SCR)**

Drawn from the school of Constructionism, the social construction of reality is a theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) that posits that our social environment is not something we find or discover, but something we make. As we communicate, "persons-in-conversations co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create." (Griffin, 2006, p. 69).

Going back to the assumptions of Constructionism, a society develops and creates the meanings of its behaviors and characteristics as well as how these are to be understood. Through habitualization, overtime traditions are made, sustained, and sometimes taken for granted and break and/or disappear via the interactions made together by people.



Examples are gender, the feminist perspective and how gender roles are expected to be performed.

Today, many women are more independent. The female partners today have almost, if not equal opportunities as their male counterparts (Braseby, 2010).

This ideal sadly creates one of the main problems and concerns a contemporary trailing spouse faces, which is the idea of sacrificing her own professional advancements in order to give way to her husband's career (Knezevic, 2013). In contrast, this is also a great time to point out that this concern seems more adverse when it is the husband who is playing the role of the trailing spouse. According to an article (Hendershott, 1995), this discussion seems to be given more weight brought by the unconventional role reversal, and the traditional ideals of the male ego as the known breadwinner.

The reversal of roles, on the matter of the male trailing spouse, is on the other hand, not a big issue in certain societies. This is due to another conceptualized creation of people-culture. In the Western perspective and even arguably in the Philippines where women are also considered economically independent, there are other countries whose "perceived gender role and ideology and marital obligations" (Gupta, Banerjee, & Gaur, 2012) are still at the core of their reality and greatly affect their way of thinking.

To construct is an important verb in the theory of Social Construction (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Following James Carey (1989), there are four stages in social construction.

First is finding a way to concretize a concept, for example the sense of worth as an individual. To be able to assert ourselves in our chosen niche, like in migration, assimilation and acculturation in the host country, may also be an example as it is often difficult to adjust to the cross-cultural factors (Stimming C., 2012).

Second is Maintenance, or the upkeep of a certain concept in order for it to remain relevant. In the cross-cultural adjustments, there is the

need to try and not get too engrossed in the host country, wherein one suddenly loses a sense of heritage. The range of the change we make can greatly affect our construct (Purgat-Popiela, 2011). While assimilating may be a means to conform and adjust to the culture of the host country, acculturation may create certain problems for example for how we are able to break away from this new way of life once our assignment ends and we return home or move to another location.

Third is that the process of construction ideally helps us to be able to decipher the difference between the physical and the social reality. It contributes to how we make meanings of things not just as something that is already there but also attach significant distinctions, again social meanings, to such physical or tangible concepts (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Fourth is how we communicate our reality. In identity, there is of course the concern that trailing spouses become footnotes in the lives lead by their husbands. This relates to all the other issues wherein a trailing spouse will feel either the change or the loss of the identity that she has established before she married a traveler. Loss of independence, loss of profession, loss of connection—all these that construct who we are as a person are factors we have to contend to. Through the trailing spouse blogs trailing spouses are able to share their stories, their narratives, and their daily realities. These also serve a means to assess identity, perhaps via blogs that are more personal in nature, modern evolutions of journals and diaries of our experiences and travels (Scott, 2013). The aspect of subjectivity in constructionism can also be seen via the blogs, as we are able to express different identities. Sharing the experience of trailing spouses through the blogs, we present or communicate the variety of our characters and how we see things differently due to our beliefs and cultural background. And through subjectivity, we are able to interactively find out what society expects from the trailing spouse and learn it via the views of others.



These elements of SCR may be framed as a process in the construction of one's identity as seen in Figure 1.

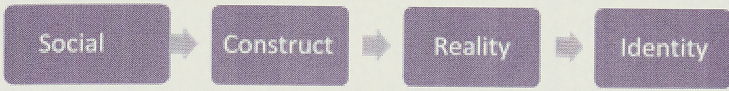


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the Social Construction of Identity

## Narrative Communication

The study of Narratology is looking at the narrative, or events, whether fiction or non-fiction, reported orally or in written form in a sequence or in an orderly manner (Felluga, 2002), as well as the narrative structure, which is what the story is about or its plot and the way it was told, the dramatic action, descriptions, and literary tools used to tell the story (Poyntz, 2002).

It was in the 60's that Narratology was first considered as an academic approach (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2005) and used in different fields of study (Lambert, 2015).

Despite blogs being the most used online platforms in telling stories (Page & Thomas, 2011), there is limited research that looks into narrative perspective, particularly on how blogs or bloggers present a unique kind of perspective, for example the Feminist Narratology (Nowson, Scott, & Oberlander, 2006); or as in this study's case, the perspective of a trailing spouse.

In connection to SCR, a narrative can be a way for sense-making, or a story that is told in a retrospective manner—thus constructed. The rationality of how a narrator deals with a situation is a way to show the audience how the characters experience the situation and helps persuade them into buying into it, seeing good reason in them, seeing its consistency and truthfulness, as well as creating a sense of credibility for the narrator. It is in this credible stance where power and identity is incorporated in the framework of narrative structure. The narrative voice (Jahn, 2017) of the trailing spouse is a means to communicate her identity, and this may be performed as an author

presents a novel. There are levels of communicating these identities through the story. According to Kellas (2008, p. 241), "People build and communicate their relationships, cultures, and identities, in part through the stories they tell".

A Narrative Communication is composed of several elements such as events, time, and listeners. A storyteller would then account or report an event, in a certain passage of time, to a certain group of listener/s. For a more scholarly definition of narrative communication, Labov (1972) writes that it is "a method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of clauses which is (it is inferred) actually occurred' (pp. 359-360).

We learn about the world by communicating with one another, and we often do this through stories, which are more comfortable way of giving and receiving information (Kreuter, 2007). And in our stories we also present ourselves to our listeners and/or readers.

In the literary sense, narrative communication has three levels: nonfictional communication, fictional mediation and action.

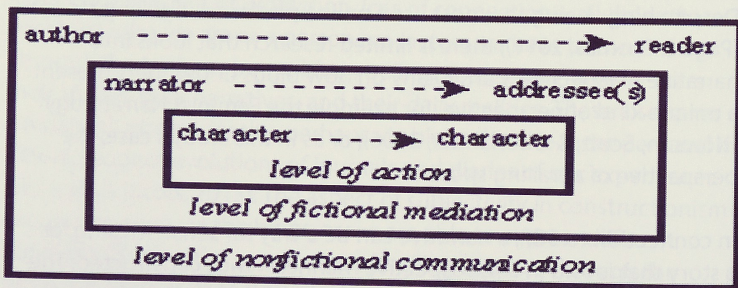


Figure 2. The Narrative Communication Levels (Jahn, 2005)

Each level comes with its own set of addresser and addressee (sender and receiver). The Non-fictional level of communication is considered "real" between the author and the readers, where the actual identity of the source is presented to the actual readers who receive the message. In a story, the actual author as who he is, does not directly



communicate with the readers; thus, the interaction is called “extratextual”.

In the Fictional Mediation level, the narrator is the actual story teller or the narrative voice that is read in the text. It may be a first-person narrator or a third-person kind, but it is obvious it often holds an omniscient persona that addresses a known audience or the intended reader of the story.

The Level of Action is a communication process between characters, between the story, or the actual events or narrative that is taking place. In a fiction, this may be the protagonist interacting with another character or reacting to the events that are unfolding in the story. This framework is utilized in differentiating the levels of identity the narrator is using in conveying a story or a narrative as intended for its readers and/or audience.

## **Integrated Theoretical Framework**

Using the Levels of Narrative Communication as shown in Fig. 3, the study begins from within the framework, or the Action Level, wherein the story or the narrative is anchored. The innermost level provides the tone of what theme or situation the author sets in, basically what is the context of the story. After this is determined, the Fictional Mediation Level will then be observed to see if the story will indeed have a more narratorial voice, and if the author will use a more direct tone towards an intended reader or a target audience. Social concepts will be tagged, and then see how the said narrator would try to account and rationalize the situation as results and interpret if the author will be able to come to terms with the kind of reality presented in the post. This level will hypothetically represent the identity of the author. The same process will be used in the third level of the Narrative Communication, but this time to see if the narrative voice used will be inclined to a more realistic or personal form of identity, one that is anchored to a wider perspective away from the identity presented (Refer to Figure 3).

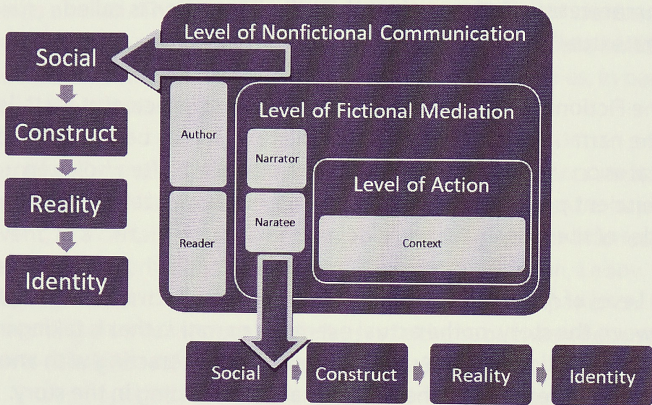


Figure 3. Integrated Theoretical Framework

### Integrated Conceptual Framework

By analyzing the two levels based on the inner most level of action, finding the social concepts that are consistent in the blog post, and interpreting how the blogger would rationalize it via the Social Construction concepts, the study explored how the second level indeed constructs the identity of a trailing spouse and how the third level constructs a more concrete and broader identity that the blogger wishes to present (See Figure 4).

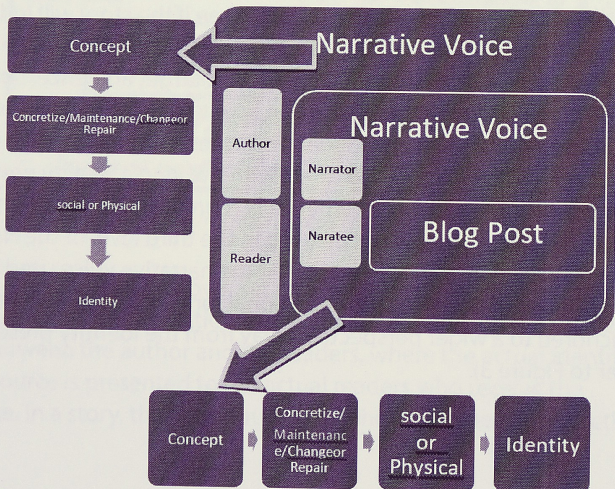


Figure 4. Integrated Conceptual Framework



## Integrated Operational Framework

The example we will use to operationalize the theories is from one of the Diplomatic Baggage's posts on her visit to Rome with her husband JG (the pseudonym she uses on the blog). In the Action level (innermost box), which is identified as a travel blog, wherein the main characters are about The Diplowife (the blogger) and JG (her husband), who are touring Rome.

In the Fictional mediation level, the blogger presents her story as a wife, who is travelling with her husband, and both have different interests about the trip (JG, wanting to go for its historical spots, which is not enticing to his wife, the Diplowife). In this level, the main concept is their opposite personalities, but the construction process occurs when the blogger relates how their different interests is solved by her husband to a compromise of finding tour spots that she can relate to, and creating themed itineraries. In these stages of construction, the concept of "compromise in marriage" is emphasized and shows the identity of the blogger of a "happy wife".

In the Narrative Communication level, the blogger uses her writer voice to tell the story of how her trip with her husband became more interesting. By relating the story of how JG created an itinerary based on a what Diplowife enjoyed, the concept of a "themed travel" is discussed. The construction was discussed by showing how travelling is not just about going places. Concretizing how to make travel interesting; maintaining its relevance by associating tour sites to a movie to make it more meaningful; and therefore changing how travel can be done via a "themed travel." In this narrative voice, the blogger is able to present her skills in writing about a travel, using a personal angle in the narrative.

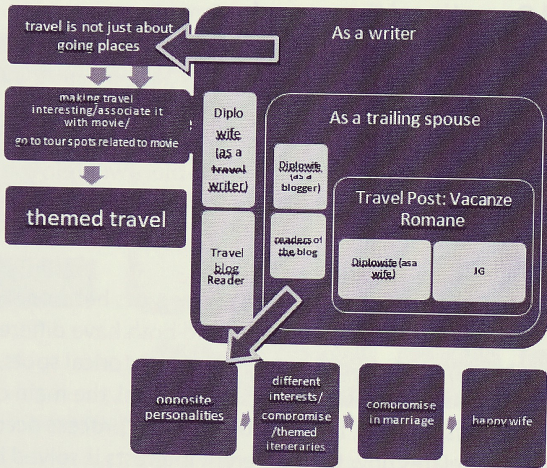


Figure 5. Integrated Operational Framework

## Methods and Procedures

The main research design used was Document analysis, which in nature as it is, will mainly gather and analyze data from 24 Blog Posts of three participant trailing spouses, the third includes myself. For purposes of better understanding, the subjects will be referred to as Trailing Spouse Bloggers or TSB. The said Blogs that will be studied include:

Almost Diplomatic – [www.carolific.com](http://www.carolific.com) – “Musings of a 20-something journalist turned diplomat’s (undiplomatic) wife”. The blogger is currently posted and has been living in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia for three years with her husband (10 blog posts reviewed).

The Diplomatic Wife – [www.diplomaticwife.com](http://www.diplomaticwife.com) – “Living Life Diplo-style”. The blogger is also the wife of a Diplomat who was previously posted in Jakarta, Indonesia and in Berlin, Germany. The couple is currently back in the Philippines (4 blog posts reviewed).

Diplomatic Baggage – [www.diplowife.wordpress.com](http://www.diplowife.wordpress.com) – “Misadventures of a Diplomat’s young wife”. This is my personal



blog. My husband and I were posted and lived in Tripoli, Libya and in Muscat, Oman, and are currently in the Budapest, Hungary (13 blog posts reviewed).

In each TSB presented, one or two blog posts were used as an example. These were chosen based on the post that best describes the overall findings that were consistent in their narratives. Although the study focused on the text found in the given blogs, the analysis was based on the Narrative (Narrative Analysis) using the Narrative communicative levels (Jahn 2006). The said model distinguishes the different “narrative voices” that an author or the TSB uses in presenting communication in a story or the text that is written. This was done by collecting texts that present different kinds of concepts, and the data constructed were placed within the levels mentioned in the study framework.

After the concepts from the blog posts were generated and placed within the Narrative Communicative levels, the said concepts were then analyzed as to how the TSBs work around this idea as well as how they rationalize, construct, and present the concepts found in their posts through their writing.

This process of analysis hoped to address the third objective, particularly, how these trailing spouses would make-sense of their gender.

For an in-depth understanding of the background of the TSBs, as well as some clarifications on the data analyzed, follow-up interviews were also conducted, both personally and via video chats (as Almost Diplomatic was posted abroad). Units of analysis are the texts taken from the three blogs, and data construction was based on the theory following the concepts from both the Theory of Social Construction of Reality and Narratology. As mentioned earlier this was done both via theme construction and code clustering, to see whether there are similarities and or differences in how the identities were presented.

The blogs were chosen based solely on the fact that they were the only three consistent trailing spouse bloggers with the Department of

Foreign Affairs. Each of the bloggers use "categories" in the blogs (e.g., "Travel", "Personal Thoughts", "Beauty and Wellness") and each blog post examined were taken from each of the said categories.

The scope of this study covered mostly identity construction and narrative analysis. Although all three TSBs are wives of diplomats, the aspect of being involved in Diplomatic relations like policy and national issues were not be covered in this study. This is to avoid involving the sensitive and often confidential nature of the TSBs' husband's work. It is also important to note that I was one of the bloggers included in the study.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

Following the integrated theory discussed in the study framework, the study analyzed the blogs by trailing spouses.

### **The Diplomatic Wife (TDW): The Lifestyle Blogger**

The Diplomatic Wife (TDW) was launched in 2009 a few months after TDW was posted in Jakarta, Indonesia with her husband. Coming from a family of entrepreneurs, TDW was in marketing/advertising before marrying TD (The Diplomat, the pseudo name she uses to refer to her husband in the blog). Her blog shows the aesthetics that are put in every photo and the lay-out is noticeably something the blogger really puts effort in presenting, and is similar to a lifestyle magazine in theme.

Although there were some blog posts that discussed some of her personal musings and opinions, most of the blog posts featured involved fashion, home décor, and lifestyle tips. Almost all the blog posts that were used for the study were about a certain brand or an event. An example is her post in attending a symposium of products made by Filipino brands: Blog Post Title: The Best of Filipino Design and Décor at Manila Fame, October 25, 2016. URL: <http://thediplomaticwife.com/blog/>. In this post, the level of action was obviously one wherein TDW presented herself as a guide to the symposium showing us through the designs that she found



interesting. She states in the post, "Last week, I had the pleasure of attending Manila FAME. I was excited because as a blogger, they let me in as media and I was able to take pictures of the beautiful things that caught my eye so that I can share them with you!"

TDW was clearly presenting a level of fictional mediation, not just as a trailing spouse, but as a representative of the "media" as "a blogger", which she took to herself as responsibility to become her reader's guide to the symposium. The narrative voice that she used was one where she took it upon herself to share her thoughts and inputs on designs.

Although there was a portion in the post, wherein she shared a level of personal identity, however it was used as a segue (seg-way) to introduce the theme she wanted to present which was highlighting the furniture category. In the post she shares,

I remember going with my aunt when I was younger where I would always stock up on super fabulous jewelry from Cebu. The jewelry was always so unique and eye-catching that I would be asked about it whenever I wore it. This time though – married, with my own home – I came back with another interest: Furniture and Decor. I was not disappointed!

This is just one of the many examples, but most of the blog posts are of this tone. Thus, in a narrative perspective this particular blog is one that presents an identity that is more in the fictional level. Most of the posts show the narrator's awareness of her audience. TDW would often address her readers directly, through her tips and advices, as with the post acting as a guide or an expert. In this sense she uses her perspective as a brand and marketing/advertising expert.

This persona as a marketing consultant and brand expert is often used, and can be identified in the concepts that she uses to construct this identity. Some of the concepts she would often use are, "biggest names in the industry", "envirosocial company", "Filipiniana take", "brings oomph to the table", "the perfect chic".

Such social concepts were constructed and first concretized by TDW as ideals that present a certain product or brand. She placed more

meanings into such items because as a Marketing expert, these are the concepts that establish the ideals of selling a product. The maintenance or the upkeep of these concepts is the idea that these are not only works of art and are designed by fellow Filipinos, but are also relevant because they are trendy and are known "in the industry". The level of change is seen in how, she used to prioritize accessories for dressing up when she was single, her interest shifted to furniture design and finding products that are now more suited to being a home maker and a mother. This was the only time that TDW seemed to explore gender as a concept. But as with the rest of her posts, she does not delve or critically assess this concept, once again only discussing being both a wife and mother through the products and lifestyle choices she presents in her posts.

It can then be interpreted that that the socially constructed concepts used in the blog post are of the physical reality. She was able to attach meanings to the furniture and products that she wrote about in her blog, showing how such things are relevant to her and therefore the identity she presents as a blogger and marketing/branding expert. There were times when TDW would present a more personal level of narrative voice. However, the example that was used as part of the analysis was dominant in many of the blogs. In the life of a trailing spouse, TDW still connects her experiences in conflict to branding (e.g., recommending certain furniture for people constantly moving locations). Even in more personal aspects of her life (posting on preferred "baby gear" for her son).

This presented an identity of TDW as related to the previous work she was doing prior to marrying someone into the Foreign Service. She relates that before she launched her blog she would often find it difficult to interact with people at social gatherings as a companion to her husband; stressing how the blog helped her build her individuality. She writes:

When you are out in a reception that you are forced to attend, and do well, it's a performance diba? And then someone asks me, so what do you do? Oh I'm the wife of so and so, and you see their eyes glaze over and their looking around for someone else to talk to because you're stuck with a housewife or whatever, it was the worst feeling in the world. That's why the blog really helped because after that I was no longer the wife of..., I'm a blogger...



This is why the social construct that were identified were very much connected to the lingo and concepts that are used in marketing/ branding and advertising. The blog also presents TDW as a persona who prefers a certain level of taste and way of life, although she did not make clear her specific socio-economic level. This may be taken back to what Cerulo (1997) explains about an identity that wants to have a shared sense of being part of a certain group. She explains this preference to “high-end” products and a certain “posh” presentation of lifestyle, “...because I have a vision of what life I want to have. I want to sustain the life that I see...”

To TDW, not to be perceived as well-off, instead she presents this kind of identity because she explains that she has an idea of what kind of life she wants to live and is simply showing it through her blog. That she wants her and has husband to fully experience a certain “way of life”, not dictated by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) or any social classes, but one that she wants for herself. She explains:

That’s basically how I am trying to live. I am milking the experiences, the blog enabled me to see it in this way. Na so many people they saved all their lives namatay sila (they die), they never use the money. But you are actually earning that money to experience how you want to live.

She also explains that this sprung from her desire as a child to have control of the life and home that she lives in when she becomes older. She connects this to what she believes the standard a Diplomat and his family should live. TDW explains in an interview,

Because that is my perception, parang as a Diplomat he should have this life... I did everything that I could possibly do so that we could get that life that he wanted. It wasn’t about being ‘hoity-toity’ it was about what he is. I did not just want him to have a job, parang he if was going to be a diplomat... Like I would in whatever I do, he’s gonna do it properly. So when my husband said he did not want to entertain with paper cups, then I researched all the glasses! And I sold stuff so that I could afford to buy (the glasses)... I found the best deals, you don’t know how the effort that I do to be able to afford these things.

Connecting her stories of her family background and her identity presentation in the blog, we can see how TDW made sense of this lifestyle. Her upbringing as well as her beliefs and attitude in life,

coincides with the voice and persona that she portrays and shows in her blog.

## **The Diplomatic Baggage: The Personal Blogger**

The study was able to categorize the three bloggers and their identity presentation in a spectrum. Each of the participating trailing spouse showed aspects of the narrative communicative voices that were used as indicators (Jahn, 2017).

In the first trailing spouse blogger, TDW was more inclined in the Fictional Mediation level, wherein the socially constructed concepts and the process of sense-making that she uses shows an identity that this is beyond her true self. On the other side of this spectrum is me, the second trailing spouse blogger, The Diplowife (who is also the researcher and author of this study).

The Diplowife is the pseudo name I use in my profile account towards the blog and the webpages. My blog, Diplomatic Baggage: Misadventures of a Diplomat's Young Wife was launched in 2008, immediately after I married my husband JG (the name I use to refer to my husband in my blog) who is also a Filipino Diplomat. As mentioned earlier, I leaned more towards the non-fictional level of narrative communication voice. Unlike TDW, I rarely wrote about any specific event, or discussed a product, although I also talked about travels and events of my life in Muscat, I was more internal in my narrative approach. The themes in my blog posts were more introspective, concentrating on my personal thoughts and opinions on my experiences and topics that I discussed were more observational towards people, places, and events that I encountered.

Diplowife writes and presents a more subjective expression of perspective, wherein my beliefs, convictions, interests, and values, ideological orientation, and attitude were expressed heavily in the blog.

As an example, one of the posts that was analyzed was an entry of my thoughts on what it means to be a Diplomatic trailing spouse.



Blog Post Title: The Unexceptional Amazing Life of a Diplomatic Spouse, August 4, 2016

URL: <https://diplowife.wordpress.com/2016/08/04/the-unexceptional-amazing-life-of-being-a-diplomatic-spouse/>

In this post, Diplowife discussed several aspects that I felt were often intertwined or perceived by diplomat's wife, such as myself. These included my thoughts on, being an extension of my husband's position in the embassy, balancing my roles as wife, and the "sacrifices" made in choosing to be a trailing spouse. In the post, Diplowife writes,

...it got me thinking about what I would tell her about this life that we lead.

...We talked about how some people might peg our lives as somewhat exceptional, balancing our many roles as wives, mothers, and maybe even share in the public service aspect of our husband's work.

There are also 'the sacrifices' we made when we married into the Foreign Service, things we left behind in order to fully support our Diplomat spouses abroad... So I decided that I wanted to share my thoughts on it."

I then proceeded to share my insights woven in between with personal anecdotes and my convictions regarding the matters at hand. This, as many of my blog posts, is text heavy, unlike TDW and even Carolific's posts who are more inclined to use multi-media tools like pictures and videos, emphasizing a deeper sense of sharing in her narratology. This reflects my blog as more of the traditional type of a personal journal rather than an interactive website.

In sharing my internal thoughts, my readers see more of the "real" persona of the author as supposed to a fictional representation I want to project. In this particular blog post, although I was tackling the topic of what for me, being a trailing spouse, means. I present this in a level wherein i seem to be thinking out loud rather than actually conveying a story.

Following the pattern used in the study framework, the Action level, or the setting of the scenario of the narrative does not take place in any physical setting and does not involve any character interaction. Except that the post feels more like a non-fiction essay, my internal

monologue wishes to express my perspective in my position as a Diplomat's wife.

Because of this pragmatic tone, I position my narrative voice, as earlier stated in the non-fictional level of narrative communication. This is further seen as what Jahn (2017) refers to as an extratextual interaction. The Diplowife, although addressing a certain audience or reader in the first-person, does not seem to show any direct or specific target of who I am talking to, again, showing a more introspective approach. For instance I state,

And if you think about it, all of it boils down to choices, and having them means that you choose one and not another. I wouldn't consider it a sacrifice or giving up something, when with eyes-wide-open you opted for this life, which isn't really a down grade, it's just... different.

With this narrative voice, I then present social constructs that although can be seen as broader topics of discourse, I discuss them via opinions and my stances revealing a more in-depth persona. Some of the social concepts that I tackle in this post, are "Status", wherein I write,

In being a de facto public servant, I personally don't think too much about the fact that my husband is someone who represents our government in another country, and by default that makes me one myself.

I also discuss "feminine roles" a woman takes on. The many roles we play, for me it's not very different from what many married women take on all over. It isn't unique for a woman to take on many hats at a time, wives at the same time mothers at the same time career women at the same time side-kicks or partners to whatever else our husbands needs help with.

I write as well "identity crisis", as in the sacrifices of losing oneself and the choices made to be a trailing spouse. I write,

I think it's a bit unfair on the part of our husbands to have to say that we made sacrifices on their behalf. I think saying that means you have regrets, and if you have them maybe you need to question your choices.

It's just a matter of making the most of what you've got, and if your husband doesn't support you... that's on him, not on his job title. And



if you find yourself feeling empty and stunted in the shadows of your better-half, that's just on you entirely.

In these social constructs, I show my sense-making by concretizing my convictions based on my opinions and attitudes that I developed in my life. I explain (refer to focus group discussion between participants) that I often struggle with the concepts I wrote about, which was why the blog became some sort of haven to process such thoughts, at the beginning just a venue to practice my writing skills, and eventually turned to a "tangible" companion that documents my growth from a young newly-wed shipped to another country, to a retrospective blogger of eight years, therefore undergoing a process of maintenance and change. Diplomwife further explains that while reviewing the blog for the study, "I realized that, oh here is six years of my life. Suddenly the thing that I was running away from became the testament of my existence."

And because the textual data show very introspective concepts, we can see that the social construct of the Diplomwife is more on the social reality. My blog posts present a sense-making that is beyond an actual tangible representation like choice of a furniture. Consistent with the non-fictional level of narrative communication, the readers and followers of my blog are shown with my actual identity and the makeshifts of who I really am as a person. Beyond being the Diplomwife, I present through my blog, my truest self.

This, among all the posts that were studied, was the only one that touches, not gender in particular, but a concept within gender studies that is very important – agency (Malmstrom, 2012). In this post I talked about how "choice" and adapting to this decision, making sense of certain topics that a diplomatic trailing spouse like me faces.

### **Carolific: The balanced blogger**

Unlike the two other trailing spouse bloggers, Carol uses her real name, and shows her face in her blog, "Almost Diplomatic". Carol started blogging in 2014, a few months after she got married to her Diplomat husband Alvin, who is also his real name. According to her

first post, the blog and its theme used to be very different from its current appearance, but she decided to change it and write about being a trailing spouse.

She called the blog "Almost Diplomatic" as she explains that it was because she knew she could never be the kind of Diplomat's wife that has the same exceptional skills in diplomacy as her husband. Before getting married, Carol used to work as a journalist, whose beat covered the Foreign Affairs where she met her husband.

Because of her experience covering the Department of Foreign Affairs, Carol is not new to the life of Diplomats and their wives, although her perspective of this was more of an outsider looking in. This is why unlike the other two bloggers, Carol had a bit of an idea of what being a trailing spouse entails. According to Carol,

Di ako nagulat (I was not surprised), kasi I was dealing with all these people. Kasi they were in a bubble eh, and I was from the outside, I was looking at them and like, ha funny people, these people are so weird. And then I'm suddenly part of the weird crowd. And in a way I think it helps me understand others more kasi nga (since) I came from there.

Because of her background in the media, and perhaps her being a part of a younger generation that belongs more to digital natives, it was not hard for Carol to turn to blogging, and using her position and perspective to both practice her skill and write about her experience as a trailing spouse.

Compared to the two previous bloggers, TDW and Diplowife, Carol's blog and identity presentation falls between the two spectrums. Carol's blog is a mixture of both her non-fictional communication medium, as well as her fictional mediation means. Among the three, she is the most active in terms of putting up blog posts, and is more consistent with how she chooses to use the blog depending on what purpose she is using it for.

The posts in her blog is a collection of her many facets in personality, not only as a trailing spouse to her husband, but also, she uses the blog to write about press relation (PR) events and promotions of



events and places that she encounters in Kuala Lumpur where she was posted when she started the blog. In addition, Carol also posts a more creative and different side, as she also reviews cosmetic products, and gives tips as a make-up and beauty expert. As proof of her being a digital native, and very comfortable with the technology of blogging, Carol is the only one of the bloggers who uses videos, multi-media tools, and advertisements, that make her blog seem more interactive and “hip”. This also means that Carol, uses the blog as a means to earn money, and receives compensation often from sponsors or is commissioned to cover a certain event using her blog as a media tool. In this light, Carol is what present digital and multi-media technology industry refer to as “content creator”, wherein she uses herself and the blog as resource known as user-generated content, that is today marketed as a product brought on by the social media revolution (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014).

Concentrating on her identity presentation and social construct, again Carol is a good balance between the fictional persona of her being a trailing spouse/event/beauty content writer; as well as a non-fictional “real” identity wherein like *Diplowife* she also shares more intrapersonal communication approaches, giving her thoughts and insights on some matters.

Many of her blog posts show these two sides interwoven in one entry. Unlike TDW and *Diplowife* where one blog post was used as an example, two posts will show how Carol is able to balance two levels of narrative identities in her blog.

Blog Post Title: Beauty + Review: Let’s Talk Hair Removal – Sumuzu Treatment, April 21, 2016.

URL: <https://carolific.com/2016/04/21/beauty-review-lets-talk-hair-removal-sumuzu-treatment/#more-5848>

In this entry, Carol reviews and discusses what to most Filipino women a faux-pas or taboo—having body hair removed. As a narrative perspective, we can see how she approaches it as both a reporter—reporting on an experience of women’s hygienic and vanity rituals—as well as any other woman concerned about her body hair.

In the fictional level, she addresses her readers straight-forwardly, stating facts and information regarding the treatment, what to expect, the mood of the area where the procedure takes place, even a systematic table of the variety of services provided and how long it will take. This can be compared to what seems like a feature article in a beauty or lifestyle magazine.

However as earlier stated, it is combined with a non-fictional narrative voice, where Carol shares some insights about herself such as the anecdotes below:

And while I'm happy with the close to bionic hair growth rate I have for my head, I would have to admit that body hair wise, it's the same. And it's not as fun.

My grandmother often said that if I didn't start shaving and plucking when I was younger, all my body hair would have fallen off by now or they would be so thin, they wouldn't be noticeable. I guess for some, it may work. But alas, it's pretty obvious how that side story ended.

And to drive a point, Carol uses a close-up picture of her armpits after she underwent the treatment herself. As with most of her beauty and wellness blog posts, Carol tackles social constructs and concepts that deal with aesthetics and at times, the social demands and requirements that encapsulates physical appearance, that this specific entry includes. She states,

Of course, I don't judge people who choose not to remove hair down there or in any part of their body. Your body, your decisions. I'm just talking about my choices and saying how tired I am of people who give unwanted hair removal so much sexual connotation.

Another example of how Carol presents two sides of her identity in her blog posts is how she uses her professional experience to help her husband with his job in the embassy.

**Blog Post Title:** Travel: Cebu and Bohol for the 2nd Ambassador's Tour. June 19, 2015 URL: <https://carolific.com/category/travel/asia/philippines/cebu/>



In this blog post, Carol writes about going back to the Philippines as part of an event organized by the Philippine Embassy in Malaysia, bringing in other diplomats to the country for a cultural tour.

Although in most cases, Carol would not be invited, but because of her connections to the press and her means to produce a PR article on the event, she was asked to come along, and she shares this in her blog. The non-fictional part is her basically relating what transpired in the said event, but as with the previous example, her real identity is also narratively present in the post as she relates her thoughts in the event.

As far as social construction is concerned, she makes sense of this as part of her makeshift being both a journalist and unofficially part of the embassy through her husband. In the post she explains,

I was lucky enough to be invited to join as a.) part of the embassy and b.) part of the media delegation... It's a running joke nowadays that I'm the embassy's publicist. But that's cool since I do enjoy helping out by using my media experience. Better to get so busy than end up being rusty.

During the discussion among the participants, she further explains that, this is a part that she likes about the blog because it allows her to be of help to her husband's work, as she is able to use her skills and know-how in the media industry to assist in Alvin's career.

The process of her identity construct is found with each of these blog posts wherein her narrative as former reporter turned trailing spouse, while moonlighting as a beauty expert builds her presentation. Like TDW, she is also able to construct and concretize concepts that are tangible, for instance in the cosmetic products she reviews and relates them to being presentable as well as sharing something that she enjoys doing which is using make-up. At the same time, she is also able to present an identity tied to a contemporary millennial that is able to find a means to earn a living within a creative project built around her blog and her personality. The maintenance in this social construct is seen as she allows her situation to be used as something that makes more of herself, both beside and outside the reach of her husband's identity as a diplomat and main breadwinner of their family. She does admit that, connected with the success of the blog, she also

encounters conflict, wherein her presented identity is often only seen at face value, again both as a trailing spouse and a makeup expert. This is because some readers only see her as both, when in reality, she is of course more than what she presents in the blog, to which she says, as a form of social construct,

And the thing is medyo it opens you too much to people. I've learned to reel it back in. I mean, I was careful before, but there were times like people think like they know you, like they can judge you and stuff. This is just a part of who I am, not all of me. But yun nga it opens you up to criticism. And it's fine if its constructive but then if it opens you up to judgment... It made me more careful.

Again she balances this by presenting more in-depth and intrapersonal blog posts similar to what Diplowife does on her blog.

**Blog Post Title:** Random Thoughts and Happenings 2. April 15, 2015

URL: <https://carolific.com/2015/04/15/random-thoughts-and-happenings-2/#more-1226>

This is one of Carol's longer posts where she summarizes a lot of the things that she thinks about that is connected to what she juggles as a trailing spouse and all the other things happening in her personal life. The blog post is a collection of sub-heads that gives us a glimpse of the aspects of Carol's life, and in effect, her presented identity, which again is a balance of all the hats she wears.

In the post she talks about "being home alone", "side-trips", "diplomatic functions", "allergic reactions", "life-simple pleasures", and "making new friends".

In analyzing the particular posts, you can see how Carol constructs and makes sense of all these concepts. She concretizes these social concepts by first narrating them in the blog, relating them as events that happen in her life. She recognizes the importance of these; therefore, cementing their relevance in her life. She attaches meanings to these concepts as a form of maintenance. For example, considering skyping with her Danish father, who she only recently reconnected with after years of being estranged, is a source of positivity. Of another



example is learning to change to experience, dealing with an allergic reaction in using cosmetic products for her eyebrows. Her repair and change mechanisms in dealing with these concepts are evident in her stories and the posts she shares, such as this. It gives us a glimpse into her balancing of these identities, however many they may be.

Through the blog, you may sense that Carol, like the TDW, only tackles gender and concepts that are connected to it in a more surface level. Through her posts in beauty and wellness, she advocates the importance of feeling good and looking good as well. The only time she laments being in a power struggle was when she discussed making the decision to leave her career when she married Alvin in her earlier blog posts. What is interesting to note is that, Carol's empowered stance as a woman, may not be presented in her blog but is clear when in person. Carol continues to work as a freelance writer, and as discussed earlier, uses her blog, and her persona as trailing spouse/blogger to find stories she can use to continue her writing skills.

### **All Three Trailing Spouses**

There are also social constructs that each of the TSBs correspondingly discusses. Some of these concepts are common among trailing spouse blogs like "migration adjustment", "Filipino culture" and "hosting parties". What is interesting is that, despite the similar topics, the aspect of Social Construction that deals with subjectivity is present in these overlaps. The interesting part is how each participant present such similar concepts differently depending on the identity and dominant narrative voice they use in their blogs.

More than looking at specific blog posts, the bloggers sense-making and social construct can also be seen by looking at their blogs in a broader perspective. This is evident in the obvious changes in the way they think and write about topics from when they started as compared to their more recent entries. The participants all agreed that this was mostly due to ageing, maturing, and learning along the way, making the blog proof of this change as it documents their evolution and the constant construction of their identities.

The dominant narrative voice that they present in their identities shows how they are also conscious in wanting to be accepted and remain in line with what they feel is expected of them as trailing spouse. Each of the bloggers relate how they have many other aspects and discourse to write about in their blogs, however are met with certain restrictions. These are not just imposed by the Foreign Service in order to protect the nature of their husband's work, but are also imposed by the participants themselves, all set within the identity they wish to present. However, it is important to note that there is not much introspection in terms of gender within the three bloggers. While their perspectives as women is clearly seen, there was not much critical or in-depth discussions that relates to their being a woman trailing spouse, or how the concept of gender as a social construct is being used in their chosen topics.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Each of the Trailing Spouse Bloggers have their own dominant identity that they present in their blogs. Using the different narrative communication levels, we are able to see these identities. If lined as spectrum, the participants show different versions of these said levels, with the *The Diplomatic Wife*, in one end, as more fictional in her identity, *The Diplowife* in another end, showing a very "real" non-fictional presentation, and *Almost Diplomatic*, in the middle, balancing both levels of presentation.

These identities are presented via the social construct and sense-making process that the participants assess in their blog posts. Social concepts and practices are described and identified within their blog entries. There are concepts that are similarly discussed by the bloggers, but are still inclined to look at them differently.

All three bloggers showed some changes in the progression of their blogs in terms of what a trailing spouse means to them and how they present in their blogs. Although their husbands were mentioned several time in the posts, they were all very careful to mention anything about their work, but rarely do they discuss social concepts that deal with marriage and married life.



Some common social concept like gender are also rarely discussed in the blog posts. Subjectivity is indeed present in the blog posts as the bloggers express their thoughts and opinions on concepts, consistent with the personality they wish to project.

Changes are again apparent, as they often mention learning from their experiences and adjusting according to what they learned. The TSBS posts shows how their presentation of their identities by writing and telling their audience about their acts and stances (Ochs, 1993). The dominant narrative voice, or the identity that comes through in their posts also suggests how they all want to be part of a certain ideal group.

This study only concentrated on the dominant identities and the social constructs that the participants discussed within their blogs. As such, while it also aims to contribute to the discourse of the trailing spouse and their communicative approaches, this study focused only on their identity construction and sense-making within their presentation. However, there are still many aspects that can be tackled that involves the topic of the trailing spouse, including looking at their perspective through a feminist lens.

The social constructs that were mentioned and constructed within this study also deserve a closer look. As migration, gender, and status are commonly studied in line with the lives of a trailing spouse, other concepts may also be given light, especially in the field of communication. This includes cross-cultural communication encounters and techniques trailing spouses use to navigate their way through the travels. In the constructionist lens, these spouses have found ways to communicate not just amongst each other, but have developed a world-view, that is both unique and global at the same time, connecting with each other as they cross paths during their postings.

This study looked into Filipina bloggers, but suggests that, as a continuation of the study, perhaps a look at other trailing spouses from other countries using the framework, would yield the same kinds of social constructs and narrative perspectives.

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