**Crossing Boundaries and Creating Organizational Knowledge in a Women's Virtual Community**

# Abstract

The impact of virtual communities on the world of work and organizations has been gaining attention throughout the world. This qualitative research was a case study of an informal, gender-based community in the Israel Defense Forces. The research was based on the field of organizational knowledge and boundaries and on the field of virtual communities. The findings indicate that the community was established in order to provide its members with support and knowledge and subsequently promoted ideas to improve the service in the organization. The article contributes to understanding the ability of an informal community of professional women to improve their lifestyles at work by means of virtual network communication. In addition, the findings shed light on how communities contribute to the work and environment.

**Keywords:** organizational knowledge, cultural boundaries, virtual community of practice, gender community, Israel Defense Forces

# Introduction

The present research examined a unique case of a community of professional women who were serving in the army (the Israel Defense Forces, or IDF). Military organizations are characterized by a special employment arrangement, including selection, recruitment, and training of soldiers for different professions and roles (OMahony et al., 2017).

The IDF is among the only armies in the world that has conscripted women into its ranks under a mandatory draft law since its establishment in 1948 (Moshe, 2013). The Security Service Law stipulates that any person who is an Israeli citizen or a permanent resident, has reached the age of 18, and has not been exempted from service can be called up for service (Moshe, 2013). As of 2021, women account for about 40% of the IDF's conscript soldiers and about 25% of the officer corps. Despite the mandatory nature of the draft law, the average rate of enlistment of women in recent years has been 58%, which is quite low compared with the average enlistment rate of men of about 75% of the total potential (Shafran-Gittleman, 2018). The law also stipulates that women can apply for discharge from the army for reasons of religion and conscience, or three additional reasons: parenting, marriage, and pregnancy (Eran-Jona & Padan, 2018).

In general, armies are characterized by an organizational culture of total commitment to work in terms of time and location (OMahony et al., 2017). The Israeli army is characterized by a hierarchy in which most of the senior officers are men. The dominance of men in the IDF derives from their responsibility for most of the combat action; only a minority of women serve command and combat roles, with most assigned to combat-support posts (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018). Accordingly, the identity of female soldiers is developed relative to that of the male soldiers (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018).

Three main factors have guided the integration of women into the IDF throughout the years: (a) the perception of the IDF as a people’s army; (b) security needs; and (c) social processes that contribute to or undermine gender equality. In addition to mandatory service which represents a contribution to the state, the question arises of the long-term involvement and commitment of women who remain in the career service after serving their mandatory term. The decision to continue in the career service is made jointly by the employee and the organization. Eran Jona and Padan (2018) found that for all the soldiers, the decision to remain in IDF career service at a mid-level rank can be attributed mainly to intrinsic factors, such as recognition of the contribution to the organization, satisfaction with work, social ties with coworkers, and the like. It is less associated with extrinsic factors such as wages, perks such as a vehicle, promotion, and the like. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the organization, there have been significant changes in recent years. Following increases in the wages of the career soldiers, and most notably in the pensions paid to servicepeople, who customarily retire at age 45-50, the IDF had to redesign the career service. This resulted in a reduction of the number of people serving (Almog et al., 2021). In the process of this change, the organizational culture of the IDF became more like that of the labor market in Israel, and of career armies that are not based on universal conscription (Levy, 2020).

The present study applied theories of cultural and organizational knowledge and boundaries to examine the development of the community over time from an informal and temporary body to a community has operated for several years and received public recognition, This research was innovative in its examination of the field of informal communities of professional women in the military and of how the community gained formal recognition, including adoption of some of its recommendations by the organization. The purpose of the research was to examine how the information built in the virtual community crossed and expanded the boundaries of the organization.

## Research Field

Wonder Women is one of several virtual communities that have been founded in recent years by soldiers in mandatory and career service in the IDF. In 2016, Hadas and Mira (all names cited here are fictional) established the Wonder Women community. At the time of the research, Hadas continued to serve as its administrator and leader.

The group was established to provide a forum for sharing experiences of parenting and service, with the specific purpose of offering information and support to women in the IDF who were on maternity leave or in the process of returning from leave to the military organization. In time, the community grew and subcommunities were form by different members to address the specific issues. These included, for instance, groups for female career soldiers who were undergoing fertility treatment, pregnant women, breastfeeding women, and others. At the time of the research, the membership of the community numbered over 3800 women (H. & Bar-Schindler, 2022).

The Wonder Women community is unique in several respects.

1. Unlike communities that military organizations create, which are top–down, Wonder Women and a few other communities were founded by participating members themselves, to serve their needs. In the case of Wonder Women, the founders were women in the career service.

2. Wonder Women offered a safe environment within a predominantly male military organization in which women in career service could exchange advice and opinions.

3. Wonder Women has been continued daily activity for many years and its membership is steadily increasing.

4. For two years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the virtual format of discussion (Facebook and WhatsApp), more than 30 in-person meetings were held in different locations (members’ homes and playgrounds).

5. Over the years, the discussions in the community forums produced ideas for several programs that the IDF adopted. These included projects for the welfare of the women and their families, such as a center for second-hand uniforms, and program for couples in fertility treatment, and others.

6. Values of mutual help among members and preservation of the codes of loyalty to the military organization, as well as inclusion of variety of opinions and ranks, positions, and units in the army contributed to the role of the community as a place for sharing and obtaining swift, informal access to diverse information, outside the organizational hierarchy of the army.

These unique features contributed to the influence of the Wonder Women members on changes in the IDF, such as specific attention to the women in career service.

## Theoretical Background

Among the numerous definitions of community, the most suitable for our purposes is that of Delanty (2012), who wrote that a community should be understood as a symbolic system. He described four main approaches to the concept of community in modern research. The first is the traditional approach, which imposes the criterion of shared space. In this framework, the discourse of neighborhoods, civic volunteering, community development, and the like are created. The second approach is the sociological, cultural, and anthropological one, which stresses cultural aspects of identity. Accordingly, community is a group identity that is defined in dialogue between the individual and the collective. The third approach, which is associated with postmodernism and radical democracy, studies community in terms of political awareness and collective action. The fourth and current approach emphasizes global and international networks and refers to cosmopolitan and virtual communities.

The community studied in this research responds to all four approaches; it is virtual, but based on a shared organizational and geographical space and includes aspects of initiatives, political organizational activity, and community development. In the present research, we examined the interrelationships of the members of this virtual community, who all worked in the same organization. Based on Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2020), we defined it as a community of practice (CoP), a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.

Research has shown that the virtual connections do not prevent social consolidation of the community. Blanchard and Horan (2000) found that social capital and civic engagement increase when virtual communities develop around physical communities, and when these virtual communities foster additional communities of interest. Communities that engage in the exchange of general community information and providing opportunities for government and political participation are communities of virtual knowledge that benefit from social capital (Benamar et al., 2017).

Bismuth (2021), a community builder and researcher, noted that communities that develop in organizations offer many secondary benefits, such as a bond and sense of belonging to the organization among employees, creation of organizational innovation, recruitment and maintenance of employees, branding of the employer, and connections between organizational subcultures. This refers both to communities in which the meetings are virtual and those that are physical. In addition, Dei and van der Walt (2020) argued that virtual communities should be treated as highly valuable instruments for managing knowledge in organizations. Other researchers (McLoughlin et al., 2018; Chi et al, 2017; Burnett & Buerkle, 2006), added that CoPs have multidimensional applied value in reducing the cost, for example, of transferring information and utilizing resources in an organization. Social involvement and cooperation are created in CoPs by concentrating on issues that are relevant to people. On the organizational level, they create practices of knowledge; they can serve as a powerful component of holistic knowledge management and share balanced informal information in response to formal and business needs and demonstrate organizational value (Benamar et al., 2017; Dei & van der Walt, 2020).

To understand how the Wonder Women community operated, the present research focused on the knowledge shared in the community and on its boundaries and dialogue with the organization. In a cross-sectional study that reviewed dozens of studies, Jesiek et al. (2018) found two categories of boundaries: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal categories include interpersonal relations, expertise, colleagues, and competitors, and vertical ones include rank, status, seniority, authority, and power. Jesiek et al.’s (2018) findings show that horizontal boundaries sometimes block the sharing of knowledge. However, crossing horizontal boundaries is relatively easy and can enable the transfer of semantic and pragmatic knowledge, as well as the transformation of knowledge. They showed that the advantage of opening organizational boundaries and making them flexible is that sharing knowledge, as a force that mediates communication, which can lead to organizational change (Jesiek et al., 2018). Examination of the challenges people face when sharing information in virtual groups in organizations (virtual communities of practice, or VCoPs) have found that long-term sharing and transfer of knowledge depends upon the time resources of the community members, the support they receive from each other, and management of the community knowledge (Tseng & Kuo, 2014; Wolf et al., 2009).

Moreover, community leadership has great value in the knowledge transferred, its design, and the definition of the boundaries. Research conducted at the IDF leadership school and among users of Twitter found that the community leaders invested and tweeted a great deal more than others in the community did (Almog et al., 2021). It also emerged that leadership in the virtual space requires traits adapted to that space, which is characterized by collaborative leadership. Its process of influence is dynamic and involves interaction among the group members, because the goal is to lead one another towards the group target, common targets, or both (Gazit, 2021; Minke, 2015). Hence collaborative leadership is based on relationships, division of labor, and guiding values, and not on organizational structure.

The virtual community studied in the present research is a women’s community. Researchers of virtual communities found that the gender composition of virtual communities (VCs) shaped the style and content of the communication of and among its members (Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2020; Shen & Khalifa, 2014). Gender composition has been shown to influence the relationship between two important identity-based factors, (a) the stage of identification and approval of the group members, and (b) encouragement to participate actively in the VC. In comparison, other research has indicated that identification with community and its objectives is a significant and stable factor of participation in the VC, regardless of gender composition (Wolf et al., 2009). A common aspect of all the approaches and studies on community is an emphasis on the shared idea and sense of belonging in developing the individual and collective identity of community members. In addition to the social response that communities provide, the findings also suggest their objective of sharing and generating change.

# Method

## Research Question

The present research examined how knowledge was created in a women’s virtual community that acted within and expanded the boundaries of an organization. Different studies and theoretical approaches have addressed change processes in organizations (e.g., Jesiek et al., 2018), but the body of knowledge on communities in organizations, and specifically the effect of these communities on organizational processes has not been extensively researched. Moreover, the present research focused on a community in an organization in which one of the values is the protection of information.

## Participants

The research concentrated on a closed group conducted by means of digital media. Therefore, the interviewees were recruited by means of a written request to talk with them. The Ethics Committee of the researchers’ academic institution approved the research.

Personal interviews were held with the administrator of the virtual community at four different times during the research period. A preliminary letter was then sent to prospective research participants, explaining its purpose. This resulted in interviews with eight members of the community. One of them was responsible for development of communities in the IDF, and another for establishing communities in the IDF. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 25 to 35; 95% were mothers. They all held middle-level positions; 15% in technological jobs; 57% in administration; and 28% in professions such as law, logistics, computerization, and the like.

In addition, we held focus groups with 7 of the 13 people who were responsible for different areas of interest in the community, such as fertility, stillbirth, and others. This form of data collection was suitable considering the availability of the participants and our need to expand knowledge on the nature of the community and its contribution to its members and the organization. The use of the focus group in addition to interviews was based on the notion that its participants represented a distinct group within the community of members who felt comfortable discussing a predetermined topic together. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), these conditions as suitable for the use of focus groups of optimal size (up to 13 people). The conversations indeed flowed easily, and the members shared anecdotes and different feelings about the community and the relationships among its members.

## Research Approach

The decision to conduct a case study was based on Denzin and Lincoln’s (2018) use of this approach in their examination of the characteristics of the discourse and experience of social groups. We employed framework analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2000), for both the individual and the focus-group interviews. We used a thematic framework, including indexing, charting, mapping, and interpretation. This design allows themes to develop from both the research questions and the narratives of research participants.

## Data Collection

Two researchers conducted the interviews, guided by a semi-structured questionnaire; each interview lasted between half an hour to two and a half hours. Due to the pandemic, they were held in the evening on Zoom from home. The conversations were comfortable; they included telling stories about the families and recent events related to the community. The interviewees also spoke about why and how the community had grown. They described אולי how their careers had developed for them to date and their expectations for the future. Use of the questionnaire might raise concerns about a “common story” bias, but the open framework of the conversation and the opportunity for participants to make comments, criticize, and voice reservations were part of the discourse. The conversations in the interviews focused on differences between the communities that emerge within the organization and those emerge outside of it, between virtual and tangible communities, and between formal and informal communities. These comparisons were discussed in terms of different issues. Finally, we held another conversation with the community administrator and then studied and interpreted the nuances that arose in the interviews.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using content analysis. First, we identified words of potential interest by means of word-frequency counts, and next we conducted a key-word-in-context (KWIC) search to test for the consistency of word usage. This procedure helps strengthen the validity of the inferences derived from data. We then coded categories based on the content and themes that emerged from the texts. To increase the reliability of the results, the analyses of the researchers were compared. The categories identified were then analyzed according to the case study approach (Stake, 2005). All the names of the interviewees presented are fictitious.

# Findings

The findings focus on two main themes regarding the meeting point of knowledge with organizational boundaries that were extracted from the interviews with the women in the Wonder Women community. The first theme is establishment and self-definition: birth pangs of a community of women. The second theme is the positioning of Wonder Women, initially as an informal, intraorganizational VCoP that served specific members,and later as one with a public presence.

## Theme 1: Establishment and Self-Definition: Birth Pangs – *“We set up Wonder Women [to] bridge the gap in bonding and networking that was created by women giving birth, moving aside for a few months … [and feeling] alone.”*

The community members described the development of the Wonder Women community as a group associated with life events (childbirth, maternity leave, and the subsequent return to work). It was founded by women who were experiencing loneliness and detachment during maternity leave and who, as new mothers, felt a need to learn about a completely new world. Thus, the community was initially established for the short-term purpose of enabling social encounters and mutual consultation for the specific period of maternity leave. However, the connections between the women continued when they returned to work after the maternity leave.

In the first two years of the community, its discourse focused on difficulties and insecurity of the members, who had previously been guided by the aspiration for professional success in their fields. The community provided a space to express one’s weakness, despite the lack of acquaintance with the other members, based on their common experience as mothers. As one member put it, “*We encourage each other, love ourselves, uplift ourselves … and all this takes place in a sort of parallel side-channel to the large, patriarchal organization.”*

The community framework was designed during this period. Decisions were made about its purpose, the director and members were identified, and procedures for joining and leaving were determined. In time, in addition to the element of social and emotional support, the information and knowledge that emerged in the discourse became a significant aspect of the community. The members perceived the knowledge available in the forum as reliable and more relevant to them than the information provided formally by the organization. For instance, one said, *“The group is active 24/7 … an interaction developed that helped overcome the feeling of being alone."*

Another explained that “*when someone asks a question in the community, she immediately receives a few different answers.”* This highlights the advantage of direct communication and an immediate response to the individual’s need. The interviewees described how the community produced a database that also contributed to professional and personal empowerment: *“by talking about things ... value is created in the interactive encounter.”*

There was also some criticism and lessons to be learned about the content conveyed. The community administrator noted that *“vast knowledge is thrown out into the air … I don’t filter the posts [except in cases of] shaming.”* This reflects the boundaries of the discourse in the community and the role of the community leadership, as discussed by Almog et al. (2021).

In this respect, Wonder Women met the current definition of a community (Delanty, 2012). It operated in a shared virtual space, as well as the physical space of the IDF, its members created a collective, and the community served its members as a source of identity. The members formed their ties in a framework they created as professionals in the IDF, based on encouragement to play an active role and take responsibility for the community. This supports research findings on the importance of such connections to virtual communities of women (Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2020; Shen & Khalifa, 2014).

## Theme 2: Positioning as an Informal, Intraorganizational VCoP – *“[Wonder Women is] a platform of women’s initiatives … without control of anyone in the organization. Nobody can say that it belongs to them[or that we] did or didn’t meet our targets.”*

In addition to fulfilling its initial purpose as described in the first theme, Wonder Women also promoted political social consciousness and collective action, as represented by the second theme, which focused on two central processes the members underwent as employees in the IDF. The first involved the knowledge that the community members brought with them and contributed as women and mothers, in addition to the professional experience and knowledge associated with their work in the organization. The second was the IDF’s recognition of the community and the added value it contributed to the organization.

The first step in developing the community knowledge arose from the members’ understanding that they had to attain information about what was happening in the organization that they would return to after maternity leave. One of them described the situation:

When you are a woman on maternity leave at home, you don’t have IDF email at home … [the] platform we built [is] our answer to so many problems ... we have this community that solves our problems in a minute.

The members of the community felt a connection and became involved in different levels of the community. Knowledge in diverse areas, such as health, labor laws regarding maternity leave, and more was conveyed. Thus, the community positioned itself as a source of information and a social network for professionals in the IDF career service. The activity defined a connection among the women, who sought a supportive social framework and aimed to preserve the boundaries of the community and its activity. The blurring of the community boundaries at this stage was only internal; all the members worked in the same organization, but they would not have met each other without the virtual community.

The discourse in the community was based on the experience of the community members, reflecting the advantages and shortcomings of being women and mothers in an organization that has no boundaries of work hours:

Obviously, this includes an aspect of being women, because when I knew that at 7 pm the men would drink coffee and I was nursing my baby, I felt I was missing out and should be compensated for it.

These passages from the interviews reveal the need for a response suited to mothers in a masculine professional environment. The IDF culture was designed mainly for men’s careers, which are generally led by patriarchal perceptions according to which women should take care of the house and family, while men can invest hours in work and social and professional ties (Shen and Khalifa, 2014). Consequently, the community provided its members with professional ties similar to those of the men, but also created professional and social relationships for women that were conducted mainly from their homes, after work. Moreover, the women established a wider open community that was larger than that of most men in the organization.

The IDF formally recognized the community two years after it was founded. The IDF head of personnel invited the community administrator to familiarize him with the community. This heightened the recognition of the community members that “*Wonder Women [is] a sort of brand.”* The next leap forward of the community came naturally, according to its members, when the information conveyed within it was expanded to include activities for community members and their families and later, for additional people in the organization, as well. An example of a community initiative that benefited all professional soldiers was the establishment by the IDF of the Retro Store, which offers second-hand uniforms to the entire army. Thus, the connection between the community and the organization, based on needs and active initiatives, increased.

The recognition of the community and acceptance of its initiatives demonstrates the desire of the organization to learn from what was happening in the field. However, the encounter between the community and the organization also highlights two significant gaps between the two entities. The first, largely technical in nature, was the disparity between the varied, accessible knowledge provided swiftly by the digital community, and the formal, hierarchical communication in the IDF. The second, which was more conceptual, involved the hierarchical institutional structure. This reveals the inherent contradiction between the reciprocity of building community knowledge in its virtual format and building an organizational body of knowledge on behalf of and for the organization. The communities that were founded by the army relied on the desire of officers in the organization to reach the entire IDF population. As the community member who was responsible for establishing communities in the IDF noted: “*[What the commanders wanted] was not exactly to build communities, but rather … to use communities as a source of information … mainly as a bottom–up communication channel. And also, top–down.”*

This sheds light on another aspect of change that Wonder Women generated in the organization. The community was built by women in the field and engaged in bottom–up communication internally. However, the new communities established by the IDF, some of them inspired by Wonder Women, served the commanders as a channel for top–down communication. Therefore, the needs raised in the two kinds of channels differed, whether they were in the field or related to organizational management.

Examination of this theme indicates that broadening the community led to exposure of the ideas that guided it to other groups in the organization and in the world of communities. Like other VCoPs, such as those of professionals in public service (Holmes, 2018; Chi et al, 2017; Burnett & Buerkle, 2006), the community studied here also began with the purpose of support and networking and later expanded to include management and sharing of knowledge. This contributed to the shift of the community into the public space of the organization, its recognition by the IDF, and development of its role in voicing the mood and the needs of women in the career service.

**Figure 1 is about here**

The figure presents the community objective – improvement of the situation of women in career service in the IDF. Researchers have found that communities in intraorganizational VCoPs contribute to open organizational, team, and personal discourse and contribute to the organizational, political and career-related consciousness of the community members. This is achieved by bringing together people of diverse professions, corps, geographical locations, experiences, and attitudes and contributing vast accessible information to the community discourse. The community members achieved their objectives by sharing information and knowledge that is relevant to women in the career service of the IDF, while preserving the ethics, values, and boundaries of their community within the organization. It can be said, then, that in Putnam’s (2000) terms, that community members, as individuals and as a group, created a space of shared knowledge that consolidates social capital.

# Discussion

The findings of the present research indicated three types of added value that the community contributed to the organization: (a) the value of trust based on information and knowledge shared in virtual communication; (b) the value of organizational initiatives; and (c) the value of maintaining and crossing organizational boundaries as a practice for community empowerment.

## Trust Based on Information and Knowledge Shared in Virtual Communication

The first type of added value was related to the trust built among the community members, which enabled them to share knowledge and information through virtual communication. According to the members interviewed, the community provided them with accurate information on issues of family and parenthood, especially in the medical realm, but also with respect to human resources. Other research has produced similar results, such as the KSB scale developed by Tseng and Kuo (2014) regarding the convenience of receiving information online in professional communities. These findings also support those of Jesiek et al. (2018), who discussed the importance of sharing semantic and pragmatic knowledge in organizations. In the present study, the lack of clear and accessible information for women at the stage of building a family and afterwards led the community to launch a campaign for the establishment of a center that provides access to knowledge about parenthood that is relevant to them.

Like the findings of Jesiek et al. (2018), the present research findings also demonstrate how the transformation of knowledge that the community contributed to its members and, indirectly, to other members of the organization emerged from exposure of the need for available, diverse information. The research indicates that the IDF adopted the way in which the community members obtained and distributed information and knowledge. Thus, the modern communication platform that the members used to convey knowledge within the community and its content contributed to the IDF as a whole and to all the career solders serving in the army.

The desire of the community to spread its message and knowledge is consistent with the findings of Blanchard and Horan (2000) that the investment of leisure time and contribution to other communities fostered civic involvement of the members and the social capital of the community.

The shared knowledge that contributed to realizing values was based on trust of the members in each other and in the organization. Thus, as shown by McLoughlin et al. (2018), who discussed the components of trust in communities, the present findings suggest that cognitive and emotional trust affected the feelings of the members of a virtual community. Trust increases the sense of community togetherness and empowers the experience of partnership and the desire to share knowledge. In this case, the knowledge concerned daily practices and was intended to improve their life at work and at home. The knowledge, resources, and values of the community were based on communication and friendship, access, and quick response to issues raised in the forums. Hence, in the terms of Foulidi & Papakitsos, )2020) and Shen & Khalifa, (2014), the community created a mechanism primarily for learning about quality of service, but also a learning system for itself and the organization. It began with the involvement of individuals with work issues, but also affected the hours after work, the “second shift.” Moreover, as the community members testified, improvement of the quality of work of women in military career service enabled their professionalization and better understanding of the codes of the organizational culture that were relevant to their jobs.

This emphasis on maintenance of community and organizational values by the community members is supported by findings that the survival of virtual communities depends on careful attention to issues of privacy, trust, and encouragement of community members (Batenburg & Bartels, 2017). Trust, a critical component of the community studied here, emerged as a precondition for the development of ongoing effective discourse. Thus, the community members created a model of values that supported Dei and van der Walt’s (2020) conclusion that sharing information in virtual communities within organizations is based on trust, and in communities of women, especially, on sharing and friendship.

## The Value of Organizational Initiatives

The second type of added value referred to the organizational realm. The analysis showed that after Wonder Women had been positioned as a differentiated community of practices, members, and internal community discourse, it reached a stage of opening up to the organization. At this stage, the community members considered the knowledge and information in the community as a more relevant and reliable alternative to what they received from their organization of employment, which was therefore important to share with others. Thus, after the members’ success in establishing the community and their recognition of the added value it provided them, they strived for organization-wide improvement, as well. As Katz (2017) reported, social media can reveal and open the door to public discourse regarding different subjects and, in doing so, generate social and cultural change, as in the example of the MeToo movement.

They did this in two ways. First, as a community and individually, they presented their needs to the IDF. Second, through their communication network and voluntary initiatives, they demonstrated how the needs could be met on a permanent basis and encouraged the IDF to adopt this method. Dei and van der Walt (2020) claimed that social interaction contributes to indirect sharing of informal information that is also significant to the formal needs and thus contributes to the organization. In a similar vein, the present study also found that the ways in which the community ideas and practices trickled into the organization were founded on a collegial social view. The community contributed to the organization being more sensitive to aspects in which knowledge was not accessible. In contrast to the findings of Karazi-Presler et al. (2018), who found a process of adoption of the marginal identity of women in the patriarchal military organization, the present research found that the members of Wonder Women promoted the IDF’s recognition of the importance of its activities and its members’ contribution as career servicewomen. These findings resemble those of studies of other communities of professional women (Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2020; Shen & Khalifa, 2014).

## The Value of Maintaining and Crossing Organizational Boundaries as a Practice for Community Empowerment

The third added value contributed by Wonder Women was its role as bridging social capital, in Putnam’s (2000) terms, between the community members and the army. The primary outcome of this was the empowerment of the female career soldiers in the military organization, as well as recognition of the community as significant to the organization. The analysis of the findings indicated that this process developed in two levels: (a) the number of members of the community and timing of its establishment and (b) intelligent maintenance and crossing of boundaries by the community leaders.

### Number of Members and Timing

The desired size of the Wonder Women community was a subject of inherent contradictions. As found by Trach and Peleshchvshyn (2017), a minimum number of members is required for a community to function and have influence. Thus, the aspiration of the women in Wonder Women to generate organizational change encouraged its numeric expansion. Over the years, hundreds of women from the career service joined the community. Their diversity also increased, both in the range of professions and in the ranks represented. Analysis of the comments by the administrators indicated the tension between numeric size and the goal of intimacy and friendship in the community. This underscores the importance of strict adherence to the values and codes of conduct in the community. Wonder Women created a “walled garden” environment (Holmes, 2018), a sort of visual boundary to protect those who belonged to the community and at the same time conduct a framework for personal and professional growth by means of sharing practices.

The relatively long life of the community and presence of its members in the organizational space also helped establish its status. The interpersonal acquaintances crossed the boundaries of the virtual network to include in-person meetings and invitations to discussions in military forums on different subjects associated with women, communities, and increasing network knowledge. The members of the community, and especially its administrators, were recognized as experts in knowledge regarding these areas. This strengthened the ties with officeholders in the army and formal recognition, including awards for excellence in initiatives and contribution to the organization. Thus, the timing of the community growth was important to its success. The further reinforcement by the international MeToo movement also enabled the members of Wonder Women to voice their needs as women, mothers, and female employees, and to expect an appropriate response from the organization. This was also enhanced by the willingness of the organization and its officers to listen to the discourse in the community, among other things because of the promotion of some of its members to senior positions, and by the COVID-19 crisis, which led to rethinking of employer­–employee relations throughout the world, including in military organizations.

### Intelligent Maintenance and Crossing of Boundaries by the Community Leaders

The network link that the community provides is based on a combination of interpersonal, social, and organizational ties in daily life and the broader system, and on a critical view of its administrators. The findings show that within the army, the community administrators developed professional ties with officials and administrators of other communities. This encounter was characterized by mutual learning; according to the administrators, it helped them identify relevant trends in the army that the community should address, including, for example, the challenge of findings solutions for the whole family, and not the career servicewoman alone.

These findings are consistent with those of research on the leadership factor of virtual communities (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2020) that setting and leading a community agenda (activist agenda), motivating the group forward, maintaining the content-related boundaries of the community, sharing and ethics (protecting the community), and critical community activity and members are part of the role of the community administrators and leaders. In other words, it is their job to carry out these tasks for the sake of the existence of the community.

The analysis of the findings also indicated that strict adherence to the boundary of sharing in the community, which protects the organizational honor and ethics, was a critical code that the administrators set and the members abided by, both within the community and in the military organization. The importance of this has been found in studies on communities in other countries (Batenburg & Bartels, 2017; McLoughlin et al., 2018). Indeed it is twofold, both because the community is an informal entity whose members all belong to the organization and moreover, because it is a military organization in which the hierarchy and limitations on information are very strict.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the community interfaces with the organization based on the ethical code customary in the IDF regarding social activity, protection of information, respect for regular participants and invited speakers, and the like. This helped maintain the boundaries in all aspects of the community. For example, when ideas for improvement were suggested, the members and the community administrator took measures to achieve the change in coordination with the organization. Accordingly, this activity included crossing boundaries and the initiative of the community together with the consent of the organization. Another interface, overlapping of boundaries, can be seen in the support and joint efforts in areas such as developing additional communities, for example. In these instances, the community was invited to contribute to the organization as an entity recognized for its knowledge and success.

This represents social capital that grew from individuals to the community space, and from there to the organization. The community members were careful not to cross horizontal boundaries, such as those between different arms of the military or between positions. However, for instance regarding medical issues and conditions of service, as well as the crossing of organizational boundaries inherent in maternity leave, there was some blurring of belonging and loyalty to known boundaries. This enabled communication across sectors and led to breakthroughs, such as the later establishment of the Mizpim Center. This was possible because of transverse network structure of the virtual community. Although the community members were careful not to cross horizontal boundaries, such as those between rank-and-file soldiers and officers, the greatest successes of the community occurred when network communication was used and the organizational boundaries were crossed; this supports the findings of Jesiek et al. (2018),

The importance of this qualitative research lies in the application of the theoretical field of knowledge and boundaries in the research of VCoPs of women in a military organization. The analysis showed that Wonder Women was based on loyalty to the IDF and on the members’ desire to improve their work and living conditions. The community created space for the individualism of the community members, recognition of mutual respect, and development of a normative culture based on community and organizational values. Two innovative results emerged from the research. First, the community members felt they were contributing informally to the professional development of the other members regarding issues of management in the army. Second, the community empowered its members and the organization, As found by Benamar et al. (2017). These findings underscore the importance of intra-organizational communities for employees, in general, and women, in particular.

The main limitation of the research was that the participants were all women who agreed to be interviewed. Future studies should explore a broader variety of perspectives, by including more women from the IDF or comparing the findings regarding this community with similar communities in the army or in other countries.

# Summary

Wonder Women is a virtual community based on the Facebook and WhatsApp platforms. The interest that the community created within and outside of the organization was based on its being an informal, virtual community of women in the career service of the IDF and on the content it created. The analysis showed that the values ​​of collegiality and trust among community members contributed to their sharing of knowledge. Based on these values, the community that was created to fulfill its members’ needs for the limited period of their early parenthood and return to military service after maternity leave grew into a platform for sharing and inclusion. Over time, when community members returned to work from maternity leave, two processes took place. First, the community grew in membership and was eventually opened tomany of the employees in their workplace. Second, the method of sharing and consulting that the women practiced in the community trickled into the organization. This mutual benefit was noted in the interviews and demonstrated in the examples that the community members presented. It focused on values of friendship, membership, and sharing information and knowledge. The sharing was not limited to the community but was expanded by its members, who held key positions in similar communities within and outside of the organization. The openness to sharing and recognizing the needs of others were expressed in the activity of the community members in the organization. Thus, it can be said that the process the community underwent began with individualism and a focus on personal needs, but eventually involved extensive activity The community activity led to a broad value- and ideology-related view in the organization.

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Figure 1 is a visual representation of the findings.

**Figure 1.** *The Findings*