

Social Presence and the void in distant relationships: How do people use communication technologies to turn absence into fondness of the heart, rather than drifting out of mind?

Daniel Gooch · Leon Watts

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Abstract In general terms, Social Presence is a feeling of togetherness regardless of spatial or temporal separation. It is a socioemotional attitude that reflexively centres on other people, via perceptions of their affective attitudes towards oneself. Communication technologies contribute to the maintenance of close personal relationships by facilitating welcome and timely socioemotional presence in the mind of an absent other. Presence of this kind may be ‘in the moment’ of communication and also persist over time, as it is ‘topped up’ through repeated interactions. In this paper, we consider how type of personal relationship and degree of physical separation might condition the Social Presence value of a range of media. We report ratings of Closeness and Social Presence that were gathered over 21 days by 64 participants about the close personal relationships that were meaningful to them. We contrast the communication media they chose to use across four relationship types and whether separations were in the same or in a different city. Our findings are used to discuss new ways of thinking about the connection between people who care about one another, and the meaning of the void that separates them, through the time course of Social Presence and Closeness experiences.

Keywords Social Presence · Closeness · Relational communication

D. Gooch (✉) · L. Watts
Department of Computer Science, University of Bath, Bath, UK
e-mail: d.j.gooch@bath.ac.uk

L. Watts
e-mail: l.watts@bath.ac.uk

1 Introduction

From time to time, large numbers of people have to suffer periods of separation from the people they care about most. The routine intimacy of the domestic setting is ruptured, creating a need to consider how technologies might be used to construct a meaningful background connectedness (Kaye 2006) (Neustaedter et al. 2006). Whether it be couples in a long-term relationship, siblings, parents, children or best friends, the sense of social isolation and emotional disconnection can be debilitating. In these circumstances, interactive communication technologies cease to be tools of convenience but become a special kind of lifeline; they are mechanisms for sustaining personally important relationships. By interacting with one another through the likes of IM, email and VOIP, people who care about one another create new ways to understand one another, reconstituting the experience of living together to the extent that their circumstances allow. The mediated experiences of those in distant relationships become woven into their mutual understandings, as they negotiate the daily trials and tribulations of their separated lives.

The feeling of presence lies at the centre of all mediated experiences. In the context of mediated interaction, a generalized sense of presence can be thought of as ‘a psychological construct dealing with the perceptual process of technology-generated stimuli’ (Lee 2004, p. 30). That is, regardless of whether the feeling is of physical, social or self-presence, it is a subjective state that is based on the private interpretation of things that are perceived by a person in a sociotechnical setting. A key element of the construct is an attitude towards some object (self, environment, other), characterized by an abstract sense of mental transportation. The circumstances of a person’s real setting are altered so that the person’s experience is of