

# Intimate Telepresence: Perpetual Contact and the Channels of Presence in Mobile Communication

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## Abstract

*Mobile media can become integral aspects of one's emotional, interpersonal life. Employing qualitative data from fourteen interviews, this study explores mobile media practices, senses of presence, and senses of intimacy between individuals and their significant others. This paper argues for a perspective of telepresence that involves the deeper, underlying influence of human emotions on the experience of social presence. Though the experience of social presence was the focus, the way in which individuals talked about mediated presence and described their feelings of presence became primary emergent themes. Another interesting pattern dealt with the sense of presence nourished by a couple's constant state of mobile connectedness. Theories of mobile interaction are integrated with the concept of social presence in order to make sense of this interplay.*

The mobile phone is an affective technology. It is an intimate device, often deeply intertwined with our emotional lives. It can be an extension of our minds, as well as foundational to our social, interpersonal experiences. Interpersonal communication is in essence all about connection. The act of communicating means connecting one's mind with another's. It's about sharing senses, emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Telepresence, in its many forms, is the phenomenon of forgetting that technology is involved in the mediation process (Lombard and Ditton, 1997; ISPR, 2000). When an individual uses a mobile phone, their body and senses connect with the phone in a cybernetic coupled relationship in which, as McLuhan (1964) theorized, the phone becomes an integral part of the user's communicatory abilities. Telepresence in the context of couples' use of mobile media is also about the sense of closeness nurtured by the practices of mediated interaction. Looking at the phenomenon through the lens of the everyday, emotional aspects of mediated life highlights the value of an ethnographic approach toward

understanding telepresence. This approach also inspires new ways of understanding mediated presence.

Employing Czaja's (2012) research, this paper takes a focused look at a particular emotional and social aspect of the telepresence experience. The context of romantic relationships provides a place of study in which these concepts are most keenly experienced. Czaja's (2012) study explored the interplay between emotional connections and experiences of telepresence in the context of mobile technology use by couples. Studies of telepresence often have focused on the ways the qualities of the technology influence the degree of telepresence experienced by the individual, but explorations of a qualitative nature are valuable for understanding the nuances of the subjective experience of telepresence. What are the nuanced differences in how individuals think about being present with each other through mobile communication? What types of telepresence do individuals value in their romantic and interpersonal lives? In what ways do couples experience a shifting sense of telepresence with each other through their use of mobile media? Questions such as these can greatly inform the definition and understanding of the concept of telepresence as it is experienced in everyday life.

In addition to different concepts of telepresence, the concept of mediated intimacy serves to illuminate the deeper, more emotional experiences of telepresence in romantic relationships (Czaja, 2012). It is an appropriate focus because it is central to interpersonal relationships, going beyond the basic practice of communicating information and relating to the fundamental reasons why people communicate. Examining how individuals understand the mediation of deeper communications can shed light on the humanistic values of experiencing telepresence in daily life. A number of qualitative studies have explored the social and cultural changes associated with mobile technology (see Baron & Segerstad, 2010; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ito, Matsuda, & Okabe, 2005; Rheingold, 2002; Thompson & Cupples, 2008). Czaja's (2012) study integrates a particular theory of mobile

culture with the reported experience of telepresence by couples. This approach offers insight into the nuances of the culture of telepresence, while seeking to elucidate how individuals experience the phenomenon in the moments of their everyday lives.

The study under focus was a qualitative, exploratory research of how the feeling of intimacy might be nourished by the practices of mobile telepresence. It is also about how feelings of intimacy might influence a sense of telepresence. Mobile devices can become integral to the relationships individuals develop with each other, and in this way, the mobile phone can be thought of as an intimate and social technology. It becomes an extension of emotional life, as it mediates everyday emotional, social interaction. The concept of telepresence comes into play when this technology becomes so integral to daily communications, that one abandons the harsh distinctions between mediated and non-mediated interactions

## 1. Mobile Devices and Mobile Culture

Mobile media provides an excellent context for understanding the daily social and emotional aspects of telepresence experience. The mobile phone brings the mediation of intimacy into new spaces (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). With a mobile phone, personal conversations are portable (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). It allows individuals to be networked into a web of communication possibilities. The mobile phone offers immediacy, reach-ability, and nomadic interaction, making it unique among communication technologies (de Gournay, 2002). Beyond these qualities, the smartphone allows for multiple types of communication: voice, textual, and visual. This variance in the form of mediation associated with mobile phone communication results in a more complex array of presence and affective experiences (Czaja, 2012).

The use of mobile media can be looked at as an everyday practice of social presence. One theory that aptly describes the relationship between the technology and practice of mobile communication is *perpetual contact* (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Perpetual contact involves the continuity of presence achieved through mobile communication. Through certain forms of perpetual contact, such as mobile chat and social networking, individuals can remain present both online and offline throughout the day, nomadically. In this context, the self can be centered both in the body as well as in a virtual space, much like the posthuman definition of self put forth by Hayles (1999). The posthuman is defined by the blurring of boundaries between embodied self and disembodied self, and is made possible by a coupled

relationship with technology (Hayles, 1999). It is a state of self allowed by both the qualities of the communication medium and its practices uses. Katz and Aakhus (2002) might include this aspect of the self in their concept of the “*apparategeist*” (p. 305) of mobile communication. *Apparategeist* is a term they coined regarding the “nature” and “spirit” of communication technology (Katz & Aakhus, 2002, p. 305). It describes both the physical capabilities of the technology and its associated social practices and attitudes (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). For Katz and Aakhus (2002), the *apparategeist* of the mobile phone is perpetual contact. Both the characteristics of the phone and the associated practices of use prompt a behavior of perpetual contact (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Perpetual contact is in some ways similar to Turkle’s (2008) notion of the “*tethered-self*” (unpaginated, *A New State of the Self, Itself*). The *tethered-self* refers to the psychological and emotional connections that individuals form with their personal mobile phones (Turkle, 2008). Much like being in perpetual contact, the *tethered self* is in a continuous state of contact with a network of others (Turkle, 2008). This reality is present within people’s interpersonal relationships and so it necessarily plays a role in the nature of social and emotional telepresence experiences.

In terms of the more functional aspects of the relationship between mobile device and the self, mobile phones are developed with increasing socially immersive qualities. Smartphones allow users to be networked with others through online chats and social networks, while also allowing them to communicate with others in diverse textual, auditory, and visual ways. These qualities are integral aspects of what Biocca and Nowak (2002) call “*mediated embodiment*” (p. 410). This term refers to the “process of more tightly connecting the body and mind to the medium” (Biocca & Nowak, 2002, p. 410) that is strived for in the advancement of communication technology. A tighter connection between body, mind, and device means a more seamless path toward telepresence experience. Telepresence depends on a lack of awareness of the presence of technology during a mediated experience (Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Lombard & Jones, 2008). The tighter the connections, both physical and psychological, the easier it may be to forget the role of technology in the interaction.

## 2. Telepresence

The foundational definition of telepresence is “a psychological state or subjective perception in which even though part or all of an individual’s current experience is generated by and/or filtered through human-made

technology, part or all of the individual's perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of the technology in the experience" (ISPR, 2000, Presence Defined, unpaginated). It is a subjective quality of the human experience of technology, rather than a quality of a technology's characteristics (Lombard & Jones, 2008). Through mobile communication, a certain kind of telepresence can be experienced as an integral part of the quotidian patterns of emotional and interpersonal life. In this way, the concept can be employed for a social theory of mediated interaction.

## 2.1. Social Presence and Copresence

Social presence refers to the sense that at least one other individual is present within a mediated interaction (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003). The concept includes the "sense of accessibility of the other being's psychological, emotional, and intentional states" (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 10). Because this study was about interpersonal relationships and intimacy in a mediated environment, social presence was a central concern. In the context of this paper, the kind of social presence experienced through mobile media might be understood in a subtlety different way than it is traditionally defined. As it is experienced through mobile technology use within a romantic relationship, social presence can be driven by emotional connections rather than sensorial perceptions. For the purposes of this paper, the term *social presence* can also be understood as the mediated sense of closeness with another being (Biocca, 1997; Biocca et al., 2003; Hwang & Park, 2007). The term *copresence* is useful to define the sense of mutually shared social presence (Goffman, 1963; ISPR, 2000; Zhao, 2003). In the context of mobile media, there is a difference between an individual sensing the presence of another and both individuals sensing the presence of each other. A participant may feel a sense of closeness with another person through using mobile media, but they may not actually feel that that sense is mutual. Using both terms to define subtly different experiences is valuable.

## 2.2. Telepresence for the Mobile Self

Social interaction through mobile media allows for a unique kind of telepresence. Particularly within an intimate, interpersonal relationship, the mobile device can come to represent in an abstract way the connection to that person (Czaja, 2012). Vincent (2005) suggests that one explanation for the emotional attachment to mobile phones is how the phone can become an "icon for the

user" (p. 119). Vincent (2005) further emphasizes that it is the emotional relationship between people that influences one's personal relationship with their communication device. With this understanding, social presence can continue beyond the actual mediated interaction. It is a sense of social presence supported by the daily habits of use and beliefs about the mobile phone. In other words, it is a social presence supported by the apparatus. This particular type of telepresence closely corresponds to Lombard and Ditton's (1997) definition of "presence as medium as social actor" (unpaginated); however, it differs in that mobile technology is not understood as having a presence and agency of its own, but is channeling the presence and agency of another real human.

The discourse on the ways the mobile device becomes a channel of presence and how the device becomes an integral part of the user prompts the question: does the technology itself act as a figure within the relationship? Does the technology itself come to represent something more than just a technology? These are complex questions in that they would require participants to think abstractly about their relationships with their phone and their partner's phone. The research presented in this paper found, however, that thinking abstractly in this way about one's device was not a common practice. It may also be the case that individuals do not want to think about their personal technologies in this way because it removes a sense of humanness from an intimate relationship between two people.

## 3. Intimacy in Mobile Practices

Intimacy has been incorporated into studies of telepresence in how it corresponds to measurable degrees of social richness within a mediated interaction (Lombard and Ditton, 1997; Short et al., 1976). The concept of intimacy involves the sense of both physical and emotional closeness (Laurenceau et al., 2004; Moss & Schwebel, 1993). It is a very personal and powerful emotion, making the difference between sense of presence and absence most poignant (Czaja, 2012). Distinguishing it from other romantic emotions, intimacy involves "self-revealing behavior, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings" (Prager & Roberts, 2004, p. 45). Self-revealing behaviors are practices of disclosing private information or feelings, often prompting a sense of vulnerability (Prager & Roberts, 2004). Positive involvement refers to the practice of giving the other one's full attention during the communicative interaction (Prager & Roberts, 2004). Shared understandings refer to the ways in which individuals feel as if they have an

**Table 1. Participant Contexts.**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Phone Type</b>	<b>Years With Current Partner</b>	<b>Frequency of Contact</b>
Eliza (27)	Non-smartphone	1 year	5-7 days/week
George (30)	iPhone		
Diana (27)	iPhone	2 years	4-5 days/week
Bob (28)	iPhone		
Claire (32)	Non-smartphone	2.5 years	3 days/week
Jim (31)	Non-smartphone		
Emily (27)	iPhone	Married 4 years	daily
Paul (27)	iPhone		
Amy (20)	Blackberry Curve	1.5 years	3-4 days/week
John (23)	Blackberry Curve		
Rosie (24)	Non-smartphone	4 years	daily
Mark (21)	Android	1.5 years	2-3 days/week
Nicole (26)	Android	1.25 years	daily
Ed (26)	iPhone	3 months	Long distance

Note: The number in parentheses is the age of that participant. A dotted line between names indicates that those participants are in a relationship with each other.

awareness of each other's deeper emotions and inner thoughts (Prager & Roberts, 2004). Prager and Roberts (2004) state that "intimacy regulation sequences" (p. 53) are the patterns of intimate behavior that over time develop the possibilities and nature of a couple's intimate interaction. Beyond intimacy regulation sequences, intimacy is achieved also through an individual's understanding of the "self-system" (Prager & Roberts, 2004, p. 48). This self-system is comprised of one's sense of physical self, self-concept, and the interaction between these two concepts (Prager & Roberts, 2004). These concepts can relate to context of mobile mediated intimacy in how the technology becomes a part of one's understanding of self. Intimate interactions between coupled individuals are behaviors that are regulated and maintained through practices (Prager & Roberts, 2004). Mobile phones can be viewed as a technology that can support the intimacy regulation sequences that nourish the sense of intimacy between individuals (Czaja, 2012).

#### 4. Method

The research design for this study was qualitative and utilized semi-structured interviews that each lasted approximately one half-hour and took place between March 8, 2012 and March 24, 2012. Examples of questions asked during the interviews can be found in

Appendix A. Using one-on-one interviews allowed for a "close-up, detailed, or meticulous view of particular units" (Mason, 1996, p. 92), as well as a more in depth exploration of certain nuanced telepresence experiences. Interview participants were sampled using a combined convenience and snowball method. This sampling and methodology was appropriate for the purposes and small scope of this exploratory study; however, for future research, and as Turner and Turner (2007) describe, a more rigorous ethnographic methodology would greatly contribute to the value of such a qualitative study of telepresence.

Fourteen interviews took place either in person, over video chat, or over the phone. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Participants were asked to sign consent forms and were briefed on the nature of the study. Participants were not briefed on the definition of telepresence prior to the interviews. This was important for grasping the realities of how these phenomena are experienced by individuals in their everyday lives. As a result, the interviews illuminate the distinction between a scholar's perspective of telepresence and how presence is experienced through mobile technology by individuals. Transcriptions were first analyzed according to categorically indexed themes, such as discussions of social presence and perpetual contact. Repeated readings of the transcriptions revealed a variety of emergent

themes. Table 1 briefly describes the relationship context of each participant. All names have been changed. For the scope of this paper, only themes relevant to social presence, perpetual contact, and the emotional aspects of telepresence are included.

## 5. Discussing Presence: Mobile Routine, Coordination, Perpetual Contact

When participants discussed their sense of presence with their partner, they often focused on the frequency and habits of connecting with them. Often, these routine practices were behaviors of coordination between members of couples. Though it is not always clearly apparent, the practice of coordination evoked a certain sense of presence for some participants. Mobile coordinating efforts often seemed to be ways of maintaining a sense of social, romantic unity between couples.

Paul and Emily do not spent long periods of time conversing through mobile media. When I asked Paul to describe the sense of presence that he feels while communicating with Emily using the phone, he responded:

That's a tough question. I mean a lot of our (he paused). So, we've actually looked at our phone bills a couple of times and all of our phone calls to one another are always one minute on the bill, which means that they're less than a minute. And, always to one another they're just calls to say, 'Hey, where are you or what time should you be there?' And, my phone calls to other people are always much longer. So, I think also our texts are a lot shorter as well...not so much real conversation I guess and so when we're communicating that way, I guess I don't get a lot of a sense of presence...When I'm carrying on more substantive conversations with my friends from undergrad there's more of a back and forth, very quick back and forth, with texts, because it's an actual conversation that we could be speaking, so I don't know if that answers your question.

When I asked Paul if he gets a sense of presence with Emily when they are not actually using their phones, he talked about their sharing of their calendars on their iPhones, saying:

It does, because I think the calendar function does that a lot, right? Because, I can look at the calendar to see what she's done and what she has planned and, you know, I put stuff on the calendar that we're both

doing and send out the invite to her and so that gets on her calendar. And, so we know exactly what's going on so there is that sense of being able to communicate, or I guess be close even though we're not actually texting or talking. So, I think that there are certain aspects about it, about the phone that enable me to feel more connected to her even though we're not talking.

Both Emily and Paul reported that they routinely text throughout the day in order to harmonize their life schedules, for example asking the other if they were planning to visit the supermarket. While I was asking Emily to describe the sense of presence she felt while communicating with Paul through various modes of mobile communication, she said, "We mostly use texting for quick information and sometimes for jokes, like sometimes we'll send funny things through text messages, but usually we use it just mostly for reminders." These responses are interesting because they support the notion that a certain sense of social presence can be experienced through coordinating practices. In some ways, the phone could be viewed as a linking device, integral to nourishing the romantic unit.

When Claire was describing the sense of presence with Jim via the phone, she emphasized the importance of their daily phone call routines. Claire said:

You know I'd rather be in person, but because we've been together a long time but we're still not living together or seeing each other every day, so I think that we have to replace that with a phone call. You know, I call him especially when I'm working, I call him every night when I walk my dog. That's like a fifteen minute conversation about our days, like couples normally would do.

Claire was asked if she felt a difference between talking with him and talking with others over the phone. She responded, "[Jim and I] have this habitual way of talking on the phone. I feel like it's just so regular and comfortable and that's like our routine that it feels very comfortable in that sense and I feel very close. But, other people I talk to on the phone sometimes I'm just not into talking on the phone." This response is interesting, because it suggests that the sense of presence that Claire feels when she is on the phone with Jim is related to their emotional relationship. The fact that she mentions the "habitual way" that they talk suggests that this emotionally supported social presence is nourished by their routine communication practices.

The reality of whether routine coordination and "check-in" communications evoke senses of presence is

not clearly apparent, because participants often contradicted themselves. Furthermore, in some contexts, the practice of routinely communicating, through small texts or longer conversations, evoked a sense of closeness for participants with their significant others; while, in other contexts, these communications were nothing more than the conveying of information to one another. Both Eliza and George reported that text messaging in particular is only for conveying information to one another and reported no sense of social presence; yet, later on in the interview Eliza mentioned getting little texts that said “I love you” and that those were nice because it meant that George was thinking of her. Rosie does not keep in touch with her live-in boyfriend throughout the day, but calls him on her way home from work to coordinate dinner plans. She did not report a sense of presence evoked from this practice.

Participants that reported experiencing a sense of closeness participated in communication practices that nourished this certain sense of presence with their significant other. These complex responses are interesting in that this particular sense of presence is different from traditionally defined telepresence. It is a sense of social presence that is constructed by the emotional relationships between individuals and is supported by mobile communication practices.

Emily talked about how sharing images through the Instagram application allowed her to “see where [Paul] is and what he’s doing and thinking about and what he’s seeing.” She further said, “...it’s nice to feel like you can feel connected throughout the day.” When Emily was asked if she felt a sense of presence with Paul when they are not actively using their phones, she responded saying, “I like knowing that I can always get in contact with him because I know his phone is always in his pocket.” Paul, during his interview, corroborated this, saying that he always carries his phone in his front pocket, will never leave home without it, and keeps it very accessible most of the time. Diana talked about a similar sense of social presence when she said, “I feel very connected because I know I can access communication with him at any point and know that he will immediately receive a notification...” In another example, the way that Ed described his messaging interface as one long, continuous conversation and the way that he always responded to his girlfriend’s texts throughout the day suggests that his sense of social presence with her through this mode of communication is also tied with a sense of perpetual contact.

Even though being connected through mobile media can nourish the sense of romantic unity, it can also disrupt

it. Nicole hinted at this notion when she said, “When you are in contact all day it kind of numbs the sense of when you are physically together and in contact with each other. You feel like you’ve been in that person’s presence all day and you maybe don’t get as excited so see that person later in the day because you’re talking with them all day.” This remark suggests that for her, the practice of perpetual contact supported a sense of telepresence with that person. George talked about the importance of both keeping a connection alive through mobile communication when the other is far away, and also the importance of missing someone and nourishing a sense of longing for that person. Both Emily and Eliza reported that their partner’s devices were always connected to them in both positive and negative ways. Emily talked about how her husband’s phone is always in his pocket and so she knows she can always get ahold of him; however, she also felt that his phone use was at times excessive. Eliza too mentioned George’s intimate relationship with his phone, saying that he brings it everywhere and even sleeps with it right next to him on the bed table. She said that she appreciates its utility, but he “treats it like it’s a human heart, that’s beating, that’s connected to him.” Both Emily and Eliza view their significant other’s devices as integral parts of them, extensions of their selves.

A common behavior reported by participants was contacting their significant other via other means to inform them when they are without their phone. George said:

Well, it’s happened a few times in the past and it’s kind of odd to be without it. You definitely feel like something is missing and usually the first thing I do is get on the computer and send a message to close friends and family saying that I forgot my phone so that nobody worries.

Claire and Jim, who both reject the idea of hyper-connectivity through mobile phones, contacted each other when they were without their phone. Claire said:

I’m fine with it. I mean I’ve forgotten my phone a couple times. I’ll go through a phase of forgetting my phone a few times, like, in a course of two weeks I’ll forget it three times. Like, I just need a break from it and I have everybody’s phone number in my wallet, written down because I do it so often. Then I’ll call [Jim] from work or from my roommate’s phone and say I don’t have my phone on me, you know, I’ll see you later or something.

This behavior suggests that these individuals typically assume a status of perpetual contact. They have a sense

that their partners have expectations for them to be able to be contacted. A number of comments made by participants suggest that perpetual contact is in the cultural consciousness. It is a behavior that most individuals are aware of. Eliza, for example, stated that she commonly will see people using their mobile phones during dinners, and she feels that it is the “rudest thing on the face of this Earth.” Other participants mentioned that they do not use push notifications because they do not want to be one of “those people who beep all the time.”

The mobile phone allows not only for perpetual contact, but also varying ways of being present with each other. When discussing the differences in how they communicate intimate emotions over various modes of mobile interaction, participants often talked about the different sensory limitations of each type of communication. Different modes of mobile communication can be viewed as channels of presence. Each channel allows for different degrees of social presence and copresence.

## **6. Channels of Presence: Social Presence and Device Characteristics**

When talking about presence and their mobile communications, a number of participants focused on the degree to which they could interpret or sense the emotions and reactions of the other person. Each mode of mobile communication allowed for a different degree of social presence for each participant. George summed up his concerns with this topic, saying:

I like the physical presence and I guess seeing the full reaction of somebody, right, because when you're on the phone, you can hear the voice, but you can't see the full reaction of somebody. You don't see what their body language is saying and you don't see, I guess, how they're feeling. You could always misinterpret something if someone is angry about something and you can't hear it in the voice, so that's why I'd rather do it in person if it's a deeper conversation.

Amy also mentioned the problem of misinterpretation through texting. She said:

I prefer talking on the phone to texting, but talking on the phone isn't always an option. So, in order, I'd rather see him in person, then Skype him, then call, then text. It's more of a sense of contingency. And, you can hear tones and inflections and it's helpful especially for things like if we're trying to talk about a sensitive topic that we don't necessarily agree on.

You can't really have those conversations through text message because someone's going to misinterpret something and it's going to be bad.

Ed, in contrast, reported that he experiences the least amount of social presence with phone calls and actually felt a greater degree with texting. Ed said:

So, phone calls are probably the least presence, if you want to say, when I'm talking with her, or really just anyone. I typically don't like talking on the phone with no visual cues. ...It's hard to hear what someone is saying, you know I have some low hearing loss and it's hard to hear if you don't expect what someone is about to say, you can't really hear it and respond quickly. Texting would be next because it's very real time. It gives you time to sort of digest what they are saying, and at least in Apple's iMessage system, you can see when someone is typing. So, it's almost equivalent to instant messaging someone on the desktop and that's what I'm really used to, not talking on the phone. So, I feel second as much presence there as I do on the phone. And then, video chat, obviously you have the audio/visual really strong sense of presence.

Ed's comment about how Apple's iMessage system is similar to what he's used to on desktop communication suggests, again, that habitual practices can play a role in the sense of presence. In this case, a combination of the characteristics of the texting application and Ed's preference for it influenced his sense of social presence.

Another example that suggests that the characteristics of the technology influence the sense of presence was one case in which a clear form of both spatial and social presence was reported. John described how when he uses his Bluetooth earpiece to talk with Amy, he often forgets that he is using a phone and is not in the same space as Amy. He said, “I'll be doing whatever just talking on the phone as if she's right next to me...like she's walking right next to me while I'm doing my thing...every once in awhile I'll realize I'm on the phone and can't do certain things, and she's not actually seeing the things I'm seeing.” For John, using a Bluetooth allowed him to forget the role of the mobile device in his interaction with Amy. This case could be viewed as an example of how the ergonomics of a technology, how closely it connects with organic body movements, influences the degree of telepresence experience. John was not holding a phone up to his ear or looking into a screen in order to communicate, but communicating in a way that more closely resembles how he would if Amy were indeed with him.

Though the characteristics of the communication technology does not completely determine the experience of telepresence, they shape the unique channel of presence. This notion is suggested by both John's experience described above, and also in how the flexibility of social presence allowed by various modes of mobile communication was a negative issue for some participants. Emily reported that she does not like to communicate intimate emotions over the phone, because she cannot be sure that she has Paul's full attention. She said:

I don't usually, unless we're away from each other for an extended period of time, because I like to see someone's face and their reaction to it. I don't want to see just like (Emily paused). I don't know if he's paying attention when he's on the phone, so I don't want to be, like, spilling my heart out and he's just, like, watching TV, or checking something else.

For Claire, as well, having the undivided attention of her partner for intimate communication was important. Her ideas are summed up in how she felt about video chatting applications such as FaceTime. She said:

Well, I mean there are a couple of things that I can think of that contradict myself. A good friend's husband was in Iraq and he wasn't around for his baby being born, and you know, so he gets to see this child at the first six months. And so, I think that's really pretty amazing that he really didn't miss out on that as much. So, that's really cool that that was available to them. But, I then I'm at work and my coworker is FaceTime-ing her boyfriend and they're arguing about where to put the furniture and I'm like why is this happening? I really don't think that this is important, you know? I think maybe the FaceTime thing is okay and maybe connects you back to that person because you know you have to sit down and have the conversation. When you're taking on your phone or texting, you can be doing a bunch of things and kind of have these halfway conversations, but with FaceTime you have to sit back down with them. You like really have to sit down and look at them. Like when people had landlines, they had to sit down and have the opportunities to talk to someone on the phone and I feel like no one sets up that time anymore. But, FaceTime would do that. So, maybe it's about figuring out how to bring that communication back.

These responses highlight the distinction between social presence and copresence, because they involve the

individual's awareness of the attention of the other person. Though phone conversations involve more awareness of the other's current state than texting, they still allow individuals to mentally be present in more places than one. A number of participants were concerned about the uncontrollable nature of attention made possible by different channels of mobile presence.

## 7. Discussion

Viewing mobile media as technological channels of human presence is valuable for conceptualizing the unique type of telepresence experienced through mobile communication. These channels of presence can be controlled. They can be chosen, silenced, or turned off completely. Telepresence in the context of this research is a type of social presence grounded in an emotional context. Mobile media offer ways for members of couples to remain communicatively linked through periods of separation. The mobile phone can be both an intimate personal device and a figure within a romantic, interpersonal relationship. In most cases, participants felt more connected with their significant other because of the existence of perpetual contact. This connectedness was often described by participants as a sense of closeness. The mobile technology routines within participants' relationships allowed them a sense of social presence in how it allowed them to feel closer to their partner's mental and emotional states throughout the day. This study integrates concepts of mobile technology use into an understanding of telepresence as it can be experienced in daily life. It explores the interplay between emotional life and the sense of presence.

This study investigates how participants describe a sense of social and emotional presence with their significant other experienced via mobile media. It illuminates some of the ways individuals think about their sense of presence with one another in the mobile media environment. Throughout the interviews it was also clear that individuals experience and interpret a sense of telepresence with their significant other in very different ways. The qualitative method used in this study was greatly valuable for highlighting this reality.

The focus on the concept of intimacy in the context of mobile communication between couples is valuable for studying social presence, because it captures both the emotional and physical sense of closeness. The physical sense is evident in that participants often preferred to have more intimate communications in person, in the physical presence of one another, giving them full awareness of their full communicative powers. The emotional sense



came into view when participants talked about wanting, or rejecting, being connected with their significant other throughout the day. This study highlighted one of the ways an individual's emotions can intertwine with their sense of social presence in the mobile environment.

## 8. Future Research

This study opens up a number of questions for future research. Because this research was small in scope, it offers only a snapshot of how 14 individuals perceive their mediated presence with their significant other. More extensive, ethnographic research could continue in order to grasp a more comprehensive understanding of how our culture understands mediated presence. This study also only explored one context. Another study could go beyond mobile, and look at how couples may use a multitude of media in order to maintain a sense of romantic unity. The emotionally driven senses of telepresence may exist in other media as well.

This study focused on the context in which strong emotions are expected. Another study might look at telepresence via mobile technology and compare the experiences between romantic couples and non-romantic friendships. Conducting this type of study would tease out the influence of emotion and telepresence more clearly. It would be fascinating to discover what nuances of context influence the experience of telepresence. In this study, the details of the context of telepresence experience were complicated. There were many variables that were not controlled. For example, individuals had different kinds of phones, had been seeing their partners for different lengths of time, and each had different living arrangements and relationship statuses. Another study might look more closely at the experience of telepresence as it may increase or decrease over time as an intimate relationship develops.

This exploratory research fundamentally dealt with how we think about being present with each other. This thinking is both a personal choice and a culturally influenced understanding. This paper contributes one part of a larger study on the nature of telepresence experience in our culture. Further studies could continue examining telepresence as it is an integral aspect of daily life, and an experience that is quickly becoming thoroughly embedded in the cultural consciousness.

## 9. Conclusion

Presence is no longer just about physical place. With new communication media, being present with others can

mean being networked with them and in contact throughout the moments of one's life. When we look at telepresence through an emotional lens, we see that it is as much about social behaviors as it is about the qualities of the technological environment. Experiencing social presence via their mobile communication with their partners was a choice made by the participants. Looking at telepresence in the context of romantic partnerships can offer clues to what kinds of presence individuals find truly valuable. When it comes to the communications that matter, the participants interviewed in this research valued being face-to-face above all other forms of mediated interactions. This research contributes to the study of telepresence in how it examined an emotional quality of the social presence experience. This study also integrated a theory of mobile interaction into the understanding of telepresence. It contributes an approach to telepresence that involves a socio-cultural perspective. Mobile media is quickly becoming a primary source of mediated experience. It is important to understand the larger picture of how these evolutions of social interaction influence our cultural practices. The intimate details of how individuals use mobile media on a daily basis collectively over time shape our cultural understandings and values. With innovation in mediated communication, we are faced with the question of at what point will we shift what it means to us to be present with each other?

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

This interview protocol is meant to be an example of the questions asked during the interview. The interview was semi-structured, allowing the participants to expand on topics that they feel more strongly about. The investigator described the nature and format of the interview. The purpose of the research was described at this time, informing the subject of the themes they will be asked to discuss. Subjects were asked to be as descriptive as possible.

### **Initial questions about the participant's mobile phone history and behavior:**

- How long have you had your mobile phone?
- How often do you use it for phone calls?
- How often do you use it for texting?
- How often do you use it for gaming?
- Can you tell me about any other uses for which you commonly or frequently use your mobile phone?
- Can you describe to me with whom you communicate most using your mobile phone?
- When and how did you meet your significant other?

### **Questions about presence and intimacy:**

- Describe the degree to which you feel a sense of being there, like you and your significant other are together in the same place while you are speaking with them on the phone.
  - How about texting?
  - How about gaming?
  - How about image sharing?
- Think about a time you felt very distant from your significant other. Describe how you used your mobile phone to communicate with him/her.
- Think about the last time you engaged in communication with your significant other using your phones. Describe what you were doing. What was meaningful about the interaction?
- How often do you think you responded in a physical or audible way even though the intended person couldn't hear or see you? For example, how often did you smile?
- Describe to what extent you felt mentally immersed in the experience.
- When you are on the phone with your partner, how easily do things going on around you distract you?
- Do you find that your moods are more influenced by your partner's when you are physically together or when you are communicating via mobile phones?
- How would you describe the difference in your sense of immersion in relation to the different forms of mobile interaction that you use?

- How much of a difference do you feel in the sense of immersion between when you're talking with your significant other and someone else?
- Has there ever been a time when you were distant from your partner and you did not have your phone with you? Can you describe what happened and how you felt?
- How often do you play games with your significant other using your mobile phone?
- Can you describe any in particular games or times when you feel closer with your significant other while you are gaming?
- Please describe in your own words and experience what intimacy means to you.
- Tell me about a time when you felt intimate emotions with your significant other while using mobile media.
- Tell me about times you feel connected with your significant other as a result of mobile media.
- Can you tell me about your relationship with your smartphone?
  - For example: how you carry it, how often you check it, what it means to you.
- What roles do your mobile devices play in your relationship?
- How do you think about them before, during and after you use them?
- How do you think about your partner's device?
- Describe what you think your current relationship with your significant other might be like without you both having mobile phones.
- Describe how you feel communicating sensitive emotions while speaking on the phone with your significant other.
  - How about through texting?
  - How about through another form of mobile communication?
- Tell me about a time when you needed to communicate something immediately to your significant other. How did you do it?
- How often do you communicate with your partner using your mobile during times when you are at work or school?

- Can you describe a time when you have used your mobile devices to communicate with each other even though you were both physically in the same place at the same time?
- When you first met your partner, how much did you differ in how you both used your mobile phones? Can you describe how you differed?
- In terms of how you use your phone, are there practices that you either learned from or developed with your partner?
- How purposefully do you use the various practices we've talked about in order to stay close to your partner?
- How effective do you feel your mobile devices are in maintaining a mediated presence with your significant other?
- If you could design a new application for your phone to use with your partner, what would it do and how would you use it?