

PANEL

Considerations for Social Presence Theory, Research, and Application in the 21st Century

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The concept of social presence or feeling “with” mediated others has a long history dating back to seminal work by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), well before the general concept of (tele)presence was popularized in the 1990s (Steuer, 1994; Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Yet advances in social presence theory and research lag behind those in the area of spatial presence or “being there,” which currently has a stronger theoretical basis (chiefly the MEC model by Wirth et al., 2007) and more developed and validated measures (e.g., Vorderer et al., 2004; c.f. Nunez, 2007). Although there have been some laudable attempts to further understandings of social presence (e.g., Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003), scholarly work in this area seems to have stalled, relatively speaking, despite an explosion of social media technologies.

This panel attempts to help rectify this problem through a series of presentations focusing on issues related to social presence. Panelists will present work dealing with social presence theory, measurement, and application. Following these presentations, a guided discussion will be opened up with the audience in an effort to identify key issues for social presence scholarship and technologies in the 21st century. What conceptual and measurement issues remain to be resolved? What contexts for social presence are in need of further study? And how can we best engineer social presence using current and future communication technologies?

1. Challenges in Studying Social Presence: The Case of One-Way Communication

Paul Skalski

Most scholars studying social presence are interested in two-way communication situations such as human-computer interaction or computer mediated communication. As a result, conceptualizations of social presence and their corresponding measures include items dealing with interactivity (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003). But what happens in one-way communication situations, such as watching a person deliver a speech on TV? Do people have meaningful social presence reactions during one-way communication situations, and if so, how can they be measured? This presentation argues that social presence regularly occurs in response to one-way

messages and presents suggestions for investigating these reactions. It begins with a brief review of concepts related to social presence in the mass communication literature, such as parasocial interaction (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), and distinguishes one-way social presence from them. It also reviews existing measures that could be adapted to measure this type of presence (e.g., the passive interpersonal scale from the Temple Presence Inventory by Lombard & Ditton, 2007). It next presents research findings demonstrating varying levels of social presence in response to different one-way communication messages (e.g., Skalski & Tamborini, 2005). Finally, a series of recommendations are presented, including (1) a set of sub-concepts and measurement items for studying one-way social presence, (2) suggestions for refining social presence theory to account for one-way communication, and (3) a call to researchers to correctly measure one-way social presence instead of spatial presence or other types of presence in particular situations.

2. Social Presence and Computer-Mediated Communication: The Key Concept?

David Westerman

Computer-mediated communication has exploded over the last two decades. Online interaction has especially increased, seemingly exponentially, in the era of so-called social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Early theories of online interaction, such as Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), suggested that it would be impersonal and not useful for relationships due to the lack of cues provided. However, other perspectives such as Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 1992) suggest how people can form relationships even through very lean media, and has a good deal of evidence supporting it. Given the sheer amount of media interaction that takes place, anecdotally, this also makes sense. This presentation will discuss this, and will argue that establishing social presence in online interactions is the key to using technology for interpersonal relationships, and will suggest that the development/refinement of an updated social presence theory is important for the field.

3. Selling through Social Presence: Implications for Online Shopping

Brian Blake, Kim Neuendorf, & Paul Skalski

An increasing number of people are bypassing traditional brick and mortar stores in favor of online shopping. Although some may view online shopping as less personal than real-world shopping, features of online shopping sites such as recommendation agents and user communities have the potential to create a sense of social presence. The MAIN model (Sundar, 2008) argues that technological affordances related to modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability activate heuristics determining responses such as social presence. Using MAIN as a framework, this presentation discusses features of online shopping websites likely to support social presence. It builds on existing research on website appeal (e.g., Blake & Neuendorf, 2004) and considers how features of shopping sites and other online selling platforms affect users. Preliminary results of a cross-national survey on online shopping and social presence (with U.S. and Chinese samples) will be reported. Results will be discussed in terms of their implications for e-commerce practitioners.

4. What is Social Presence? Definitional Issues and Instructional Communication

Stephanie Kelly

Social presence has been argued to be a necessary condition to improving education; both in traditional face-to-face classrooms and in technologically mediated ones (Gunawardena, 1995). The experience of social presence has been found to lead to positive educational outcomes, such as student satisfaction and instrumentality in a course (Johnson, Hornik, & Salas, 2008) as well as decreases in frustration and increases in affective learning (Hample & Dallinger, 1995). But what is social presence? This presentation will highlight issues arising from unclarity in the explication of social presence, especially in regard to similar concepts such as electronic propinquity (Korzenny, 1978) and mediated immediacy (O'Sullivan, Hunt, & Lippert, 2004).

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