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Social Presence Theory

What is Social Presence Theory?

Social Presence Theory (SPT) was originally defined by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) as, "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships." A more modern definition of social presence theory was refined by Gunawardena (1995) to state, "**the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication.**"

Lowenthal (2010) feels that **definitions of social presence tend to lie on a continuum** where a **focus on interpersonal emotional connection between communicators** is on one end and a **focus on if someone is perceived as being 'present', 'there' or 'real'** at the other end. Lowenthal (2010) also goes on to state that most researchers tend to lie in the middle of the road, with both ends of that continuum retaining some focus.

In an influential article (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), social presence was found to be a significant predictor of audience satisfaction within a computer-mediated form of communication, contributing about 60% of the variance. Richardson and Swan (2003) also found that overall perceived learning was predicted by perceived social presence in online courses.

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Key Concepts and Dimensions

According to Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), social presence as a construct was primarily composed of two main concepts: **intimacy** (Argyle & Dean, 1965) and **immediacy** (Wiener &

Mehrabian, 1968).

Intimacy

Argyle and Dean (1965) posited that intimacy in a communication medium is influenced by a number of factors, such as: physical distance, eye contact, smiling, and personal topics of conversation.

Immediacy

Immediacy was conceptualized by Wiener and Mehrabian (1968), as paraphrased by Cobb (2009), as a measure of psychological distance that a communicator puts between himself and the object of his communication.

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Measurements

There is still little agreement on how to measure social presence (Lin, 2004; Stein & Wanstreet, 2003). Below we provide three examples of instruments:

The Social Presence Scale (SPRES) was developed by Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) to measure the **"immediacy"** concept. On this scale, the respondents were asked to complete fourteen Likert items to indicate their perceived social presence at an inter-university "GlobalEd" computer conference. The scale can be found in **Table 2** of the article. The instrument has been found to be both valid and reliable and is continually used in research today (Cobb, 2009).

The Social Presence and Privacy Questionnaire (SPPQ) was developed by Tu (2002), distinguishing three dimensions: **social context, online communication, interactivity**. SPPQ was created based on two instruments: CMC attitude instrument (Steinfield, 1986) and perceived privacy (Witmer, 1997). The content validity and the construct validity of SPPQ was tested with factor analysis. The final version of SPPQ contains 17 social presence items and 13 privacy items, rated on a five point rating scale. However, specific items were not listed in the paper.

A self-reporting Social Presence Scale was developed by Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, and Buuren (2011). The scale consisted of five items with an internal consistency of .81. The scale

can be found in **Table 1** of the article.

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