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Options for the Construction of Attentional Social Presence in a Digitally Enhanced Multicommunicative Environment

Jeanine Warisse Turner¹ & Sonja K. Foss²

1 Communication, Culture, and Technology Program, Georgetown University, USA

2 Department of Communication, University of Colorado Denver, Denver, CO, USA

Because digital technologies have expanded the potential for individuals to engage in multicommunicating, communicators now face a challenge: They must make themselves present to others in a way that secures the attention of the audience. To address this exigency, we offer a model of attentional social presence that centers on four options for the communicator's construction of social presence. In budgeted social presence, communicators focus on their own availability; in entitled social presence, they limit the audience's access to competing messages; in competitive social presence, their focus is on the nature of the message; and in invitational social presence, communicators focus on another individual.

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The introduction of ubiquitous digital technology in the form of the smartphone has created multicommunicative environments in which multiple simultaneous interactions are both possible and likely (Reinsch, Turner, & Tinsley, 2008). Although people have always engaged in multicommunicating (as when talking to an adult while interspersing conversation with a child), opportunities for this kind of communication have increased significantly with the advent of digital technologies. Some projections suggest that, by 2020, 70% of the world's population will use a smartphone, and 90% will be covered by mobile broadband networks. As a result, many individuals have or will have easy access through their digital devices to email, blogs, games, social media, and personalized marketing appeals (Mlot, 2015; Smith, 2012), and smartwatches bring the connection to multiple messages and audiences even closer (Bieber, Kirste, & Urban, 2012). The communicative environment, then, is no longer a largely stationary context defined by one medium and one

Corresponding author: Jeanine W. Turner; e-mail: turnerjw@georgetown.edu

conversational context but instead is characterized by multiple media and multiple contexts. The unique, highly dynamic, rich communicative context (Soukup, 2000; Stephens, Sørnes, Rice, Browning, & Sætre, 2008) of the contemporary multicomunicative environment has been labeled an environment of *radical multimodality* (Walther, 2009) and *polymedia* (Madianou & Miller, 2013), and it generates new kinds of opportunities for the construction and management of social presence.

Communicators who seek to interact with others in the multicomunicative environment face a challenge: They must construct a social presence or make themselves present to others in a way that initiates interaction and secures audience involvement in that interaction. Social presence, initially defined as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction” (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 65), is transformed in a multicomunicative environment into the requirement that communicators create salience for themselves in the communicative space of another.

The first task for communicators who seek to construct the kind of social presence demanded by the multicomunicative environment is to secure the attention of the audience, a prerequisite long recognized in the practice of rhetoric. Lanham notes that, although rhetoric is “usually defined as ‘the art of persuasion,’ it might as well have been called ‘the economics of attention.’ Rhetoric tells us how to allocate our central scarce resource, to invite people to attend to what we would like them to attend to” (Lanham, 2006, pp. xii-xiii). Communication activates the resource of attention, directing “attention to one way of perception, thinking, and feeling, and not another” (Pfister, 2014, p. 31). Campbell’s observation that “‘nearly all strategies’ for speaking and writing ‘catch and hold attention’” (Campbell, 2007, p. 165); the admonition to begin presentations with introductions that arouse “audience members’ attention at the outset” (McCroskey, 1982, p. 222); and motivated sequence for organizing persuasive speeches, which begins with engaging the audience’s attention (Monroe (1943), are representative of the truism that the successful engagement of another begins with securing that person’s attention.

The notion of the attention economy provides insights into the challenge that communicators face as they attempt to make themselves present to others in the digitally enhanced multicomunicative environment. Simon first identified the attention economy when he observed that “in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients” (Simon, 1971, pp. 40–41).

The attention economy is “a system that revolves primarily around paying, receiving, and seeking what is most intrinsically limited and not replaceable by anything else, namely the attention of other human beings” (Goldhaber, 2006, para. 8). Because the allocation of one’s cognitive resources to various activities is limited, the virtually infinite number of information offerings “has an upper bound” (Webster, 2014, p. 4). The resource that is scarce in the attention economy,

of course, is precisely what communicators require to construct the social presence that initiates an interaction.

Our aim in this paper is to offer a model for the communicator's construction of social presence in response to the scarcity of attention that characterizes the multicommunicative environment. To address this exigency, we propose a new way of theorizing social presence that we are labeling *attentional social presence*. The theoretical underpinnings for the model derive from theory and research concerning social presence and relational control, and we place these two constructs into conversation with each other in an effort to understand the new kind of communicative activity that the multicommunicative environment requires. We begin by summarizing the theoretical foundations of social presence and relational control that undergird our model of attentional social presence. We then present the model itself, in which we posit that communicators deal with the probable lack of attention from potential audience members using four options for attentional social presence: budgeted, entitled, competitive, and invitational social presence.

Theoretical foundations

Social presence

The construct of social presence is linked to communication technologies in various ways in the literature; as communication technologies have evolved, so has the conception of social presence. Because we are suggesting a new way of theorizing social presence, we begin with a review of a family of concepts related to social presence that speak to the extent to which a medium can convey another's presence.

One way in which social presence is conceptualized is as a property of a communicative medium. Social presence, from this perspective, is the "degree to which the medium permits users to experience others as being psychologically present" (Fulk, Steinfeld, Schmitz, & Power, 1987, p. 531). The degree of presence manifest in a medium is determined by the number of channels or codes available within that medium (Walther, 1992) so that face-to-face communication, for example, is seen to have the greatest social presence and print media the lowest (Fulk et al., 1987). Media richness theorists similarly conceptualize social presence as a property of a medium when they suggest that the more a particular channel emulates the face-to-face environment, the more media richness or social presence the channel carries (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

As communication technologies have developed, the extent to which individuals experience the illusion that a mediated experience is not mediated became a focus, creating a substantially different conception of social presence (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Lee's definition of social presence as "a psychological state in which virtual (para-authentic or artificial) objects are experienced as actual objects in either sensory or nonsensory ways" (Lee, 2004, p. 37) is representative of this perspective on social presence. In this type of research, social presence is explored in

the use of avatars (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003); the design of video games (McGloin, Farrar, & Fishlock, 2015); videoconferencing (Park, Rhoads, Hou, & Lee, 2014); and computer-mediated environments in general (Sung & Mayer, 2012).

The availability of the Internet as a venue for identity construction triggered another evolution of the construct of social presence, this time with social presence conceived as the development and management of self-representation online to produce a particular “degree of feeling, perception, and reaction” in response (Tu & McIsaac, 2002, p. 146). The construction of this form of social presence is seen as “an ongoing project” that is “both an art and a craft, something one works at persistently” (Xinaris, 2016, p. 66). It is the product of a number of elements, including the information that individuals include in profiles, the photographs they upload, the preferences they indicate, the products they endorse, and the timeliness and frequency of their postings and replies (Ke, Chávez, Causarano, & Causarano, 2011; Xinaris, 2016). Studies of this version of social presence explore the construction of online presence in online education, for example, and link levels of perception of social presence to variables such as perceived learning, perceived satisfaction with an instructor, and student engagement (Freeman & Bamford, 2004; Ke et al., 2011; Richardson & Swan, 2003).

The emergence of the digitally enhanced multicomunicative environment requires a shift yet again in the conception of social presence. Individuals not only must make strategic choices about how to construct and manage their own online social presence in an effort to be perceived in particular ways but must interact with others in the multicomunicative environment; they must attempt to project themselves into the communicative worlds of others. To have even a minimal capacity to influence another requires communicators to make decisions, whether conscious or not, about the construction of their own social presence in such a way as to capture the attention of the potential audience. In this paper, we integrate into the literature on social presence a new way of theorizing the construct that addresses the demands placed on communicators by the multicomunicative environment.

Relational control

In a multicomunicative environment in which communicators must secure the attention of their potential audiences before they can try to influence them, they must establish some degree of relational control or dominance in the interaction. The act of securing the attention of another suggests that the communicator has “the right to direct, structure, or dominate” the interaction (Watson & Brodowsky, 2004, p. 4). Relational communication (Rogers & Escudero, 2004a) and dyadic power theories (Dunbar, 2004; Rollins & Bahr, 1976) inform the model we develop below in that they provide explanations of this influence process, focusing on communicators’ control attempts or efforts “to change the behavior of another” (Dunbar, 2004, p. 238). The construct of relational control derives from the key

premise of relational communication (Rogers & Escudero, 2004a): All communicative exchanges have both content and relational dimensions (Bateson, 1958; Millar & Rogers, 1976; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Content messages refer to the “object or referent specified in the message” (Millar & Rogers, 1976, p. 87), and relational dimensions refer to the message being communicated about the nature of the relationship of the interactants.

Although some theories of relational control see dominance as a function of structural or material characteristics (such as race, gender, age, and institutionalized roles) that bestow privilege on a communicator (Liska, 1992); as a personality trait (Henley, 1995; Norton, 1983); or as a social skill (Mitchell & Maple, 1985), relational communication and dyadic power theories attribute relational dominance to interactional patterns (Dunbar, Bippus, & Young, 2008). That communication behaviors are critical to the enactment of relational control can be seen in the definition of interpersonal dominance as “a relational, behavioral, and interactional state that reflects the actual achievement of influence or control over another via communicative actions” (Burgoon, Johnson, & Koch, 1998, p. 315). Among the strategies that have been identified as ones that are more likely to express dominance and result in control over another are talking more, interrupting, using less polite forms of speech, initiating touch, imposing on others’ time, and elevating oneself physically (Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996; Burgoon et al., 1998; Henley, 1995; Rogers & Farace, 1975; Rogers & Jones, 1975).

Three types of control maneuvers are identified for defining a message in terms of its capacity for dominance. Messages used by communicators to attempt to direct or assert definitional rights are one-up control movements, messages of acceptance of another’s relational definition are one-down control movements, and neutral or control-leveling messages are one-across movements (Ericson & Rogers, 1973; Escudero & Rogers, 2004; Rogers, 2001; Rogers & Farace, 1975). One-down control maneuvers should not be seen as inherently submissive, although they may constrain a receiver’s actions, as Rogers-Millar and Millar explain: “A one-down movement may be just as directing as a one-up statement. If one individual consistently transmits one-down messages, the other may be ‘forced’ to respond in a one-up manner if the interaction is to continue” (Rogers-Millar and Millar, 1979, p. 240). The implementation of the types of control maneuvers in interaction results in two basic patterns for describing the control dimension of relational communication: symmetry and complementarity. In a symmetrical pattern, messages mirror each other (Peña, Walther, & Hancock, 2007), while complementarity is a pattern in which interactants’ forms of maneuvers are different, but the messages mutually fit with each other, as when a dominating message is met with a submissive reply (Dryer & Horowitz, 1997; Peña et al., 2007; Rogers & Escudero, 2004b).

The model of social presence we propose below integrates key constructs related to relational control: the existence of relational dimensions of messages and the communicator’s need to establish some degree of relational control in order to

secure the attention of an audience to initiate interaction. The various types of control maneuvers available for defining messages and the patterns of control that result also are incorporated into our model.

Attentional social presence

In this section, we offer a model for the construction of social presence in a multi-communicative environment in which communicators must secure the attention of a potential audience by asserting some degree of relational control. We label this form of presence *attentional social presence* to capture the primary communicative action involved: the insertion of a communicator into another's life/world in an effort to secure that individual's attention as the precursor to interaction and possible influence. We define attentional social presence as a state achieved when a communicator's actions shift attention, through increased relational control, from the audience's current objects of attention to the communicator.

The model we propose for attentional social presence focuses on the actions of communicators. We recognize that, in a multicomunicative environment in which individuals are initiating and receiving messages simultaneously, choices about social presence apply equally to audience members as to communicators. We have chosen to develop a model conceptualized from the perspective of communicators, however, largely because of the frustration many communicators feel at trying to communicate effectively with audience members in a context of competition for attention (Aoki & Downes, 2003; Cooper, 2011).

With the exception of the fourth type of social presence we will explicate (invitational), the construct of attentional social presence is not limited to particular kinds of relationships or particular sizes of audiences. Attentional social presence applies to communicators' efforts to insert themselves into the communicative space of others in fleeting interactions or in sustained relationships, with both strangers and intimate others. Likewise, our model applies to face-to-face as well as virtual audiences and to interpersonal or mass audiences.

We now turn to our model of the four options available for constructing attentional social presence. We have chosen to label these options *budgeted social presence*, in which communicators control others' interactions with them by focusing on their own availability; *entitled social presence*, in which communicators focus on the environment and, in particular, on the audience's access or exposure to competing messages; *competitive social presence*, in which communicators' efforts are directed at the nature of the message; and *invitational social presence*, in which the focus is on the audience.

We explicate three key dimensions of each type of presence available to communicators: the focus of the communicative effort, the key strategy used to construct the social presence, and the nature of the relationship envisioned by the communicator. These three dimensions reflect the key decisions that communicators make as they seek to secure the attention of the potential audience. When

communicators want to shift the attention of the audience to themselves and their message, they initiate some kind of communication in an effort to insert themselves into the communicative environment of the potential audience. To do so, they must choose some aspect of communication on which to focus as their entry point into the interaction; the nature of that focus is thus a key dimension of attentional social presence. They then employ strategies that align with the focus as a means for establishing relational control, supporting strategy as a second dimension of attentional social presence. Communicators are actively creating and shaping their conception and definition of the relationship when they make overtures to a potential audience (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Rogers & Escudero, 2004b), just as different types of relationships shape preferences for and feasibility of various options for constructing social presence (Walther, 1996). Thus, the envisioned nature of the relationship is the third dimension of the model. We turn now to the first option for constructing attentional social presence: budgeted social presence.

Budgeted social presence

Budgeted social presence describes a communicative state in which communicators are participating in or have access to multiple conversations. Budgeted social presence exists across a wide continuum, ranging from a state of alertness, in which communicators keep a digital device turned on in case specific communicators try to reach them, to a state of active initiation, in which communicators begin conversations with others while they are involved in other conversations. Communicators also may be immersed in text or email responses while engaging or tolerating the face-to-face interaction around them (Cardon & Dai, 2014). The norm or expectation within many organizations that individuals carry a digital device with them at all times (Turkle, 2015), providing employees with ubiquitous access to one another, suggests that budgeted social presence is the default state for many individuals. As employees, they are expected to effectively and efficiently manage a steady flow of message input and output related to their workplaces through their “electronic leashes” (Mazmanian, Yates, & Orlikowski, 2006).

Communicators enact budgeted social presence when the focus of their relational control efforts is on their own availability through the efficient management of multiple messages at once. The key strategy is to juggle and manage multiple messages by multicommuting, allocating social presence across a number of interactions. The relationship envisioned, at least temporarily, is marked by a conversion of the audience member into an availability expenditure. In the default state of budgeted social presence, communicators always face the choice of when to step out of budgeted presence and into another type of social presence.

Focus

When they are immersed in budgeted social presence, communicators focus on their own availability, thus managing their own attention and time; their efforts thus are directed at controlling others' interactions with them according to the

communicators' own needs. Aware that they are not likely to have the attention of the potential audience, communicators in budgeted social presence focus on how they can manage messages and the individuals connected to them in ways that achieve maximum productivity for themselves. Budgeted presence allows individuals "to restrict or regulate the number of interactions that they share with some of their contacts, allowing limited contact with weak ties" and sometimes limiting contact among strong ties, as when budgeted communicators text close friends or selectively ignore their messages because they "do not desire an extended conversation" at that moment (Stafford & Hillyer, 2012, pp. 300–301). In an era characterized by "the overwhelm" (Schulte, 2015), individuals in budgeted social presence are able to annex additional minutes and hours by engaging in multiple conversations at once and triaging the most important messages in real time.

Key strategy

When they enact budgeted social presence, communicators allocate their availability across multiple conversations. Their key strategy is managing or juggling: making decisions about when to be open to incoming messages, when to participate in outgoing messages, in how many conversations to be involved, and how fast the pace of each conversation will be. If one of the available messages requires a quick response, communicators proceed in a somewhat automated way (Turner & Reinsch, 2007, 2009). If another message requires a more nuanced or cognitively complex response, they may respond with a short text indicating that the message was received and send a more complex message later. Some communicators even program into their digital devices automated responses that can be accessed quickly for this purpose (Turner & Reinsch, 2007, 2009).

As communicators budget their availability across multiple conversations, they seek to limit the variety of costs they may incur, including relationship and message costs (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Engaging in multicommuting increases losses for all tasks involved in the communication process (Cameron & Webster, 2013). Communicators, for example, may miss information in one message as they are trying to attend to other messages, thus incurring a message cost (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013). Similarly, communicators may offend their conversational partners if they are observed multicommuting or appear unempathic (Cameron & Webster, 2011; Turkle, 2015), possibly incurring a relationship cost. In budgeted social presence, communicators' efforts are focused on efficiently handling and dispensing as many messages as possible while limiting the costs incurred.

Nature of relationship

Although the enactment of budgeted social presence allows communicators to exchange information and maintain connections with many individuals, its use evokes particular types of relationships and concomitant conceptions of audience members. In the moment in which messages to various audience members are subjected to budgeted social presence, those audience members become demands on

the finite availability of the communicator. Each potential audience member is assessed as to how much of an availability expenditure that individual deserves at that time, and the individual is managed accordingly. Some suggest that this approach views the individual as a message “to be handled” or “gotten rid of” (Turkle, 2011, p. 168) as communicators employ one-up control maneuvers to assert their rights to define the nature of the relationships they will have with others (Rogers, 2001).

Audience members are treated impersonally to some degree in budgeted social presence, with the communicator at that moment choosing not to engage their unique human qualities and incurring a relationship cost. In terms, the nature of the relationship created is marked by pseudoregard; there is a grant of attention, but it is not personalized, as it would be in genuine regard (Skågeby, 2009). Certainly, short messages sent frequently throughout the day (in which communicators attend to or check in with significant others) may be interpreted as abbreviated signals of investment in a relationship or as the assignment of unique value to the recipient (Bayer, Campbell, & Ling, 2016; Lin, 2001; Ling & Haddon, 2003). Similarly, quick messages in forms such as Facebook posts may be seen as relationship maintenance with a goal of accruing social capital (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). But even when the messages sent within budgeted social presence are of value and investment, in the moment at which they are sent—because they involve the split attention of the communicator—they often create an implicit relational statement that privileges the communicator’s own availability over the uniqueness of the recipient.

Entitled social presence

Communicators may choose to deal with the issue of probable audience inattention by focusing their communicative efforts on the environment; when they do, the result is entitled social presence. The key strategy in this kind of social presence is limiting the number of messages in the environment so that few or no messages compete with the one offered by the communicator. The relationship envisioned with the audience is one of inequality, with the communicator assuming a superior position to the audience.

Focus

To respond to the potential lack of attention by audiences in the multicomunicative environment, some communicators choose to focus on the environment and, in particular, on the other messages available to the audience in that environment. As a result, communicators address the possible lack of attention by audience members by trying to secure attention through coercion: limiting audience access to many other messages so they will be more likely to attend to the communicator’s message (Gikas & Grant, 2013). Because entitled communicators believe their message is important for and will benefit the audience, they assume that it should be privileged over other messages that audience members might be sending or

receiving. Not unlike the construct of allocation theorized by [Bordewijk and van Kaam \(1986\)](#), the adoption of entitled social presence means that communicators do not have to compete with other audiences or messages for the attention of the audience because the potential for competing messages to intervene is largely removed. Cutting off access to other potential messages does not ensure that audience members will attend to communicators' messages, but communicators increase the likelihood that they will do so by limiting the opportunities for audience members to communicate with others ([Kraushaar & Novak, 2010](#)).

Key strategy

Communicators seek to control exposure to potentially competing messages and channels by blocking them, especially those available on digital devices. They ensure that their message is given priority by requiring audience members to surrender connection to communicative media that would give them access to other messages. Entitled communicators insist that the audience pay attention to the message they want to present through various means. They may require, for example, that audience members look at them, stop talking and listen, stop texting, or put their cell phones or laptops away. They may use their status or ethos ([Hyde, 2004](#)), for example, to require audience members to turn off or surrender their digital devices, as when a professor requires students to turn off their cell phones during class. Although entitled presence can involve involuntary removal of digital devices by audience members, communicators also may provide incentives to those audience members, such as the provision of access to information they desire ([Perrussel, Doutre, Thévenin, & McBurney, 2008](#)) or the promise of awards ([Schein, Schneier, & Barker, 1961](#)); likewise, communicators also may choose to apply various forms of disciplinary power ([Foucault, 1989](#)). The critical element of entitled presence is that digital devices are removed from the environment to encourage a focus by the audience on the communicator's message.

Expectations from norms created within a relationship or a physical environment also can serve as a means of creating entitled social presence. Some high school students report, for example, that an expectation that a girlfriend or boyfriend respond to a text within a certain amount of time limits the audience's interactions within the physical vicinity and prompts exclusive attention to text messages from one person ([Lenhart, Anderson, & Smith, 2015](#)). Rooms within buildings in which access to a wireless signal is prohibited and the capacity to connect to other sources of information is removed also construct a type of entitled social presence that is sanctioned by an organization or entity.

Nature of relationship

The use of entitled social presence creates an asymmetrical relationship of superior-inferior; it thus represents enactment of a one-up control maneuver ([Rogers, 2001](#)). Communicators claim greater power in the relationship by asking that audience members acquiesce to them by ostensibly attending only to their message. Communicators who construct entitled presence are attempting to transfer

information to the audience because they believe the audience would benefit from the information. The communicator conceives of the audience as a container to be filled with information, a conception not unlike the view of the receiver in the transmission or linear model of communication (Berlo, 1960; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Even when audience members seek out communicators for guidance and interpretation in situations that are more audience centered, the communicator's perspective is privileged over that of the audience because the communicator is perceived to hold some kind of value for the audience.

Competitive social presence

To respond to the probable lack of attention of the audience in the multicommutative environment, some communicators focus on the nature of the message they are constructing, striving to make it as appealing as possible. The result is competitive social presence, which produces another relationship of asymmetry but this time with the communicator in the low-power position.

Focus

When they construct competitive social presence, communicators focus on their message and, in particular, on controlling the message they are creating, striving to make it so compelling that audience members will attend to that message. When communicators enact competitive social presence, they recognize that the message they want to impart or the conversation they want to have with the audience potentially has competition from many different messages or conversations that are likely to be highly relevant to the individual's interests. Communicators enacting competitive social presence seek to win the competition between their message and the others available.

Key strategy

Competitive communicators choose to compete with other messages by using strategies of persuasion to develop an engaging message. Many such strategies from a variety of theoretical traditions are available for increasing the likelihood that an audience will choose to attend and acquiesce to the communicator's message over others (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1979; Marwell & Schmitt, 1967; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Among these persuasive strategies are those offered by consistency (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958); attribution (Bem, 1972); expectancy violation (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Miller, 1985); inoculation (Compton, 2013); reasoned action (Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988); and rhetorical theories (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 2014). In their use of persuasive strategies in competitive social presence, communicators are operating from the interactional model of communication, in which the role of the receiver in shaping the message is paramount (Schramm, 1954). As communicators receive feedback about their messages from audience members, they may adjust those messages in an effort to attract and retain the attention of the audience, speaking louder (Gelinas-Chebat & Chebat, 1992) or selecting a different type of evidence (Reinard, 1988), for example.

Nature of relationship

Like entitled social presence, communicators who employ competitive social presence envision an asymmetrical relationship with the audience, but the communicator is in the inferior position, while the audience is in the superior position because of the audience's control of its own technology and conversations. Communicators must win the attention of the audience with a one-down maneuver (Rogers, 2001) designed to address the likelihood that audience members are being confronted with multiple messages they are likely to find more interesting than the one being advanced by the communicator. Communicators are adopting lower-power or weaker positions than their audience members, who have a high degree of control of the interaction and at least momentarily greater dominance because they have a choice about whether to invest their attention in the communicator's message.

Invitational social presence

In a fourth type of social presence, communicators respond to the probable lack of attention by the audience by choosing to focus specifically on that audience. They invite someone to interact with them in an effort to learn more about that person and, if the invitation is accepted, an equal relationship is generated between them. The result is invitational social presence, rooted in the theory of invitational rhetoric, in which the communicator's goal is not to persuade and change others but to try to understand their perspectives (Foss & Foss, 2012; Foss & Griffin, 1995).

Focus

When communicators choose to enact invitational social presence, they focus their communicative efforts on one or a few potential audience members in one interaction or conversation. Certainly, all communicative efforts have an audience focus, but when invitational social presence is constructed, communicators choose to attend to one audience member or a small group thereof, not for the purpose of adapting to them as a means for influencing them (Hootman & Ochs, 1969; Seiter & Gass, 2007) but in order to learn about their perspectives. Communicators invite the potential audience members to interact with them in a focused, dedicated interaction, motivated by an interest in getting to know them. A mother's text to her daughter, inviting her to meet for coffee, is an example of an invitation to interact that characterizes invitational social presence, as is a teacher who invites students in a seminar to construct the syllabus for the class together. The audience for invitational social presence cannot be large because, as the number of potential audience members grows, "so do the chances that some participants will see the rest of the group as a potential audience, whose attention is to be competed for" (Goldhaber, 2006, para. 43).

Although communicators are issuing an invitation because they would like to engage with another and to learn and grow from the interaction, they must accept that the invitee is free to refuse the invitation. Communicators do not presume that their message or the proposed interaction is more important to the potential audience member than other messages in the environment. Ideally, in invitational

social presence, all participants implicitly acknowledge that they will focus on one interaction, with attention ideally shared equally among interactants, but the invitee may choose not to participate in this way in an interaction. Although invitational social presence sometimes may look like budgeted, competitive, or entitled social presence in that one person is sharing information or feelings with another, what differentiates invitational rhetoric from the others is the mindset of the communicator concerning relational control; the communicator genuinely abdicates control over another person while focusing exclusively on that person.

If a potential audience member accepts the communicator's invitation to engage, that communicator must let go of typical expectations for how interactions are likely to proceed. Because the nature of the interaction is open and will be constructed by the communicator and audience together, the communicator does not have preconceived ideas about what the interaction will be like or what the outcome will be. Communicators and audience members enter an invitational interaction simply seeking exposure to the perspectives of others. This openness means that both communicators and audience members are willing to move outside of their normal boundaries for interaction, deliberately seeking variety, newness, spontaneity, surprise, and even what might be uncomfortable for them in an interaction. As a result, the nature of the interaction and any possible relationship they create is not predictable; neither the communicator nor the audience member enters the interaction with preconceptions about what will be discussed or the outcome of the conversation.

Individuals who enact invitational social presence are not confined to any particular type of communication mode or to synchronous technology; they may use face-to-face interaction or interact using some form of communication technology. Typically, the communicator and the audience each uses the same mode (face-to-face, cell phone, or email, for example) for their interaction, but invitational social presence may be conducted with the communicator and audience member using different media (one using email and the other responding via letter or phone, for example). Because their focus is on one person or a small group of people, however, if all participants choose to engage in invitational social presence, they restrict their communication to one interaction or conversation.

Key strategies

The key strategy employed by communicators who enact invitational social presence is to issue an invitation to another to participate in an interaction with them. If audience members choose to participate, communicators employ two primary communicative strategies. One is offering perspectives, by which communicators articulate their perspectives "as carefully, completely, and passionately as possible to give them full expression and to invite their careful consideration by the participants in the interaction." They present "their vision of the world" and show "how it looks and works for them" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 7).

A second strategy for the construction of invitational social presence is the creation of three external conditions in the interaction between communicators and audience members—safety, value, and freedom—that encourage audience members to offer their perspectives to communicators. Communicators contribute to a feeling of safety when they convey to audience members that the perspectives they share will be received with respect and care. The condition of value involves acknowledgment by communicators that audience members’ perspectives are valuable because the individuals who hold them are seen as “unrepeatable individuals” (Walker, 1989, p. 22) who have intrinsic or immanent worth. Freedom “involves the recognition that audience members are the authorities on their own lives,” and they thus have the “right to constitute their worlds as they choose” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 4).

Nature of relationship

In invitational social presence, audience members are viewed as potential partners with communicators in the conversation because they are seen as having experiences and holding perspectives that are valuable and of interest to communicators. In fact, to maintain a distinction between communicator and audience is especially difficult in invitational social presence because no one person’s ideas are privileged, and no one person has primary influence over or responsibility for the nature of the interaction. The stance toward the audience by the communicator in invitational social presence constitutes an enactment of the dialogic or transactional model of communication (Barnlund, 2008; Wilmot, 1987), in which senders and receivers are interchangeable and interdependent, both collectively and collaboratively involved in the generation of meaning and the definition of the relationship. Because the invitational interaction is characterized by “the principle of egalitarian reciprocity”

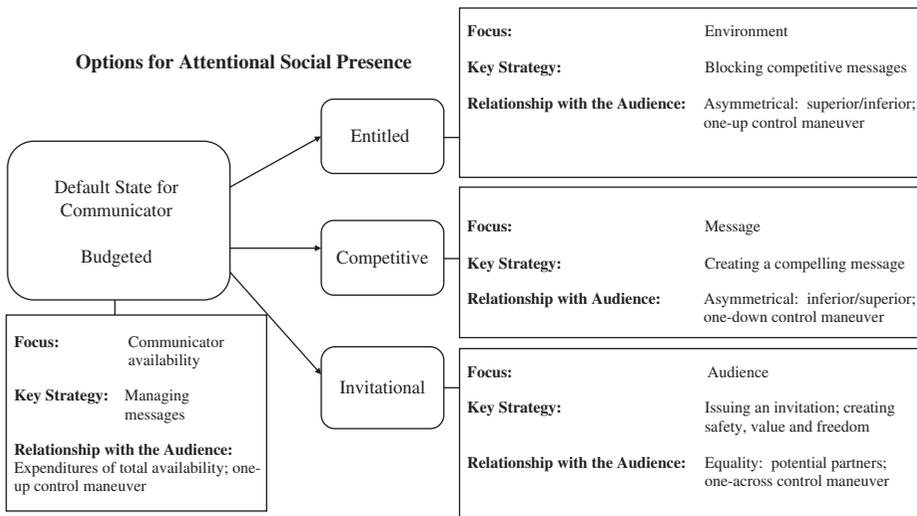


Figure 1 Options for the construction of attentional social presence.

(Benhabib, 1992, p. 29) and the control maneuver being used by the communicator is one of control leveling or one-across (Rogers, 2001), each participant “has the same symmetrical rights to various speech acts, to initiate new topics, to ask for reflection about the presuppositions of the conversation” (Benhabib, 1992, p. 29).

The four options for the construction of social presence we have theorized, including their different foci, strategies, and types of relationships conceptualized, are summarized in Figure 1.

Conclusion

The model of attentional social presence we have proposed, which integrates aspects of theories concerning social presence and relational control, is designed to address the requirement, in a multicomunicative environment, that communicators insert themselves into the communicative worlds of others by securing their attention. The four options we explicate for the construction of attentional social presence—budgeted, entitled, competitive, and invitational social presence—establish a basis for interaction through a focus on some aspect of communication, the enactment of strategies in line with that focus, and the definition of a particular kind of relationship. Our work extends previous research on social presence by proposing attentional social presence as another evolution in the construction of social presence in response to the development of new communication technologies. We are not proposing that attentional social presence replace previous conceptions, but see it as a useful addition to previous conceptions of social presence: one that addresses the unique demands of the multicomunicative environment.

In what follows, we outline a series of research questions suggested by our model of attentional social presence and consider how future research concerning the construct might develop. One such line of research might focus on budgeted social presence. This type of social presence is different from the others in that it often functions as a default state, its focus is less on securing the attention of the audience and more on meeting the communicator’s needs to manage time and availability, and it involves wide variation in the many forms it may assume, some very active and some quite passive. All of these aspects of budgeted social presence need to be parsed out in more detail than we have been able to do here.

A second direction for future research is exploration of the reasons communicators provide for choosing one option of attentional social presence over another. Argues that adoption of a uses-and-gratifications approach to computer-mediated communication can contribute important insights into the interpersonal nature of media use Ruggiero (2000), and such an approach concerning attentional social presence could prove beneficial. Studies designed to understand the rationale for specific choices by communicators and the rewards they associate with those choices will provide important information about the selection process involved in attentional social presence (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Not only must communicators select a type of attentional social process to employ in a particular communicative situation, but they often must justify and defend their choices to their audiences. Although legitimation strategies have been studied for justifying the actions of multinational corporations (Vaara & Tienari, 2008); institutional maintenance and change (Harmon, Green, & Goodnight, 2015); educational reforms (Nordin, 2014); and image revitalization (Jensen & Hammerback, 1986), among others, the legitimizing strategies used to support the selection of one type of social presence over another have not. Communicators might also serve to legitimize a specific choice of attentional presence based on the richness of the medium (Daft & Lengel, 1986) or the media affordances offered by a polymedia environment (Madianou & Miller, 2013). Research concerning legitimation strategies would draw on rhetorical and interpersonal communication theories as they intersect with the issues raised by digital technologies to discover how communicators and audiences inform one another about and defend their choices concerning social presence.

Our focus in the model is on communicators and their construction of attentional social presence. Future research should extend our model to include the perspective of the audience. Our approach to attentional social presence effectively orders options on a continuum on which social presence is arranged according to the degree of relational control exerted by the communicator and the concomitant amount of input from the audience. Among the questions to investigate from the audience's perspective are how the construction of a particular option of attentional social presence by a communicator influences the participation and engagement of the audience. Some types of social presence may generate lesser or greater involvement or engagement by the audience (Zaichkowsky, 1986), although some research has suggested that greater input or control by the communicator does not necessarily mean greater attention or engagement by the audience (Liu & Gal, 2011). Possible relationships between the type of social presence constructed by the communicator and factors that affect the degree of audience involvement would add an important component to the model.

Future research also should focus on the factors that affect receptivity of the audience to the communicator's influence. Degree of acquaintance, situational factors, or the social skills of the communicator, for example, may affect how audience members respond to the different types of attentional social presence. Just as interacting with a friend produces "different perceived patterns of dominance relative to interactions with strangers" (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000, p. 118), any previous relationship the audience has with the communicator may affect receptivity. Similarly, the demands of the situation and the norms that characterize a setting are likely to affect receptivity to a type of social presence, as are the social skills of the communicator. A poised, self-assured, composed communicator, for example, may facilitate audience receptivity to a type of social presence in ways that less socially skilled communicators do not (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000).

The phenomenon of matching or fit between the communicator's and the audience's expectations for a certain kind of attentional social presence also deserves

attention in future research. Just as communicators are constructing social presence in certain ways because of the multicomunicative potential available to the audience, audiences have expectations about the options for social presence constructed by the communicator, and these do not always align. When individuals find social presence to be satisfactory (Hecht, 1978), it may be because the interactants involved in the interaction have made similar decisions as to the nature of the social presence they believe is appropriate or effective in a situation. Dissatisfaction (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) may be the result of a mismatch between the decision of the communicator and the expectation of the audience concerning social presence. Options for negotiating or intervening into mismatches between the expectations of communicators and audiences also deserve attention. Clearly, a number of factors affect such negotiations: the power held by, degree of interest in, and commitment to the interaction by the participants, for example (Lewicki, Saunders, & Barry, 2006). We also recognize that communicators and audiences may not be able to reach agreement about the appropriate kind of social presence in a given situation. The types of communicative acts involved in reaching a mutual decision to interact despite mismatched social presence and the impacts of such an outcome on the nature of the interaction are as yet unexplored.

The construction of attention is central to the communication process, but securing the attention of potential audiences is increasingly difficult in the digitally enhanced multicomunicative environment. We have offered a model of attentional social presence that describes the options available to communicators who seek to insert themselves into the communicative world of others to initiate interactions. They do so, we suggest, by creating environments for interaction through the use of particular constellations of the dimensions of focus, strategy, and relationship. We hope that our model provides a starting point on which other scholars can build to further explore the attentional social presence that has emerged to address the challenges of the multicomunicative environment.

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