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## **The Value of Human Warmth: Social Presence Cues and Computer-Mediated Communications**

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In the 21st century, organizations use computer-mediated communication channels to manage customer relationships. However, there is a potential problem in that such channels may lack the authenticity of human contact. One possible solution is to incorporate social presence cues. We present the results of an experiment designed to test hypotheses derived from social presence theory. We find that adding social presence cues increases reciprocity and site quality perception, and fosters more positive attitudes and loyalty toward the store. In addition, our findings draw attention to the influence of social presence cues on reciprocity under varying levels of situation uncertainty.

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# The Value of Human Warmth: Social Presence Cues and Computer-Mediated Communications

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Organizations communicate with customers through various media. Historically, communications occurred through mass mediated messages (e.g., television, newspapers) or face-to-face communication. During the last decade, emerging technologies have enabled firms to communicate with customers using individualized methods (Hoffman and Novak 1996). An important difference between traditional face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication is that the former encompasses more psychological connections. In face-to-face interviewing, people communicate via multiple cues (e.g., eye contact, gesture, facial expression). At the same time, computer-mediated communications exhibit little emotional or social appeals.

One way to overcome the lack of human warmth in computer-mediated communication is by increasing the social presence of each party. Social presence is defined as the salience of another person in a mediated environment (Short et al. 1976). For instance, the presence of an avatar or the presence of socially rich descriptions or pictures of products in decision making (e.g., purchasing a product from an e-store) have a positive impact on purchase intention (Gefen and Straub 2004; Holzwarth et al. 2006). Relatively little research examines the impact of social presence cues in virtual communication settings (e.g., firms communicating with their customers via emails or instant messaging). According to social presence theory, when customers communicate with a firm through a computer-mediated communication channel, they receive different cues for interpretation (Short et al. 1976). To the extent that a computer-mediated channel sends signals that create a sense of face-to-face communication, customers will consider the virtual communication experience more communicative and friendly.

This leads to a question regarding consumers' perceptions of social presence cues. During computer-mediated communications, as the level of social presence cues increases, is communication effectiveness enhanced from the consumer's perspective? Social presence theory predicts that the optimal level of social presence depends on how much the situation requires social presence. In other words, the appropriateness and need for social presence differs across the types of situations/inquiries. For instance, imagine that a consumer is sending an instant message complaining about his billing error. The firm's response might not be personalized or prompt for many reasons including: 1) all available representatives are taking care of other customers, 2) the corresponding representative is not knowledgeable to resolve the issue and s/he needs to transfer the case to other reps, and 3) it takes a long time to retrieve the consumer's billing information and history. Under these situations, including more psychological connections and human warmth to the exchange will help the communication become more reciprocal and interactive regardless if the major concern is not yet resolved. On the other hand, if the firm sends a prompt response message that is personalized and associated with the former message (e.g., resolving billing error), adding social presence cues to this message will not make a significant difference in the communication outcome.

Therefore, the objectives of this paper are twofold: (1) to explore the influence of social presence cues and (2) to test the moderating role of situation in computer-mediated communications. Social presence theory is applied as a theoretical background to address the two objectives. In particular, this study focuses on a situation where consumers communicate with an e-store through an Internet chatting function.

The hypotheses are tested using a full factorial design. The experiment was a 2 (with vs. without social presence cues) X 2 (non-personalized vs. personalized message) between-subject factorial design. 120 participants were recruited from undergraduate and graduate business courses from an AACSB-accredited University. Participants were assigned to a scenario where they received a wrong product from an e-store. Participants engaged in live online chatting with a store representative to resolve the problem. After participants completed the chatting session, we collected dependent measures including: reciprocity perceptions, attitude, satisfaction, and repurchase intention.

We found three interesting results. First, the inclusion of social presence cues in computer-mediated communication enhances consumers' perceptions of reciprocity and site quality, and strengthens consumer loyalty and favorability toward the site. Second, reciprocity perception mediates the influence of social presence in terms of loyalty, attitude, and perceptions of site quality. Third, the influence of social presence cues on reciprocity perception depends on the degree of social presence required for a given situation.

One important feature that differentiates the Internet from traditional media is the potential for immediate interactions between customers and firms. Here, we find that increasing the level of social presence cues can be an effective measure for stimulating interactive and effective communications.

Here, we apply social presence theory in the context of computer-mediated communication. Previous studies have explored the influence of social presence cues on trust (Gefen and Straub 2003; Gefen and Straub 2004), system/media acceptance (Karahanna and Straub 1999), and patronage behaviors (Hassanein and Head 2005) in commercial web sites. However, the application of these findings to consumer behavior is somewhat limited. Our results provide support for social presence theory, indicating the usefulness of the theory for consumer behavior applications in the area of new media.

New media offer important opportunities for organizations to establish interactive communications with their customers. A first step toward stimulating such virtual relationships is to understand consumers' perceptions. This research provides preliminary understanding of how consumers perceive computer-mediated interactions and highlights the important role of social presence cues.

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