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Mobile Devices, Interaction, and Distraction: A Qualitative Exploration of Absent Presence

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Abstract:

Mobile devices have become an ever-present and indispensable part of our lives. Despite this pronounced ubiquity, few studies have addressed the influence of mobile devices on everyday social interaction. The purpose of this article is to examine such social ramifications. Specifically, this study offers an in-depth qualitative exploration of so-called absent presence, the state where a partner is physically present, yet absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere. Building on interviews about technology use with Danish students, findings suggest that the microsocial dynamics at stake in such impaired social interaction include delayed responses, mechanical intonation, a motionless body, and a lack of eye contact. Appropriating developmental psychologist Daniel Stern's terminology, it is suggested that this mismatch between the vitality of a person and his or her absently present conversational partner amounts to a kind of *unintentional misattunement* which disrupts the smooth flow of ordinary interaction and signals indifference to what is being said. On this basis, absent presence is distinguished from related concepts of daydreaming and mind wandering. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords:

absent presence, attunement; interaction; mobile devices; vitality

1. Introduction

In 2014, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) reported that the number of mobile cellular subscriptions in the world would soon hit 7 billion and that the global market was steadily approaching saturation levels (ITU 2014). In many Western countries, the penetration level has now surpassed 100%. The widespread availability and use of mobile phones means that these devices are commonly present in public and private settings and during casual and intimate interaction, often as subtle background objects. In fact, we have become so closely intertwined with mobile devices that 89% of a recent study reported having experienced so-called phantom vibrations, that is, perceived vibrations from a device that is not really vibrating (Drouin, Kaiser and Miller 2012). An increasing number of people even report experiencing intense unease when temporarily unable to use their mobile devices (Yildirim and Correia 2015). Mobile devices have become an ever-present and indispensable part of our lives. Despite this pronounced ubiquity, few studies have addressed the influence of mobile devices on everyday social interaction. The purpose of this article is to examine

such social ramifications. Specifically, the present study offers an in-depth qualitative exploration of *absent presence*, the state where a partner is physically present, yet absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere (Gergen 2002). The study explores how absent presence is experienced from an immanent perspective, i.e., from a vantage point located within the interaction itself.

2. Background

2.1. Mobile devices and social interaction

Existing studies on the social ramifications of mobile devices have mostly honed in on issues of connected, social, and mediated presence (Christensen 2009; Gooch and Watts, 2013; Villi 2015). These concepts all refer to situations in which physically absent partners become experientially co-present to some extent as a direct result of technological mediation. The higher degree of mediated presence, the more technology recedes into the background, and vice versa. An absolute degree of mediated presence is defined as “a psychological state in which the virtuality of experience is unnoticed” (Lee 2004:32) or as “the perceptual illusion of nonmediation” (Lombard and Ditton 1997:np). Obtaining this ideal is fraught with difficulty and technical limitations. Dreyfus (2009), for instance, describes the infamous curse of the webcam in which direct eye contact is prohibited by the offset placement of camera and screen: “You can look into the camera or look at the screen, but you can’t do both” (p. 16). Nevertheless, even lesser variants of mediated presence can be used to sustain important personal relationships when people are geographically separated (Wang, Tucker and Rihll 2011). As such, existing research tends to focus on the social benefits wrought by media technologies. Without disputing the importance of studying such positive aspects of mobile devices, a unilaterally optimistic focus might be inadequate since downsides and drawbacks are equally part of the technological package. As Paul Virilio (1999) once put it, “When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck” (p. 89). In the context of mobile devices, it is crucial to turn the issue of mediated presence upside down and also examine what has been called *absent presence*, the state where ones partner is physically present, yet absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere (Gergen 2002).

2.2. Mobile devices and absent presence

In a landmark study of absent presence, Turkle (2011) describes how the student Lon preferred it when his father had a desktop computer, because it meant that his father’s work was limited to a specific place. Now Lon’s father uses his smartphone for work purposes while sitting next to Lon on the couch watching football, and this physical proximity makes his father’s absent presence seem particularly excluding. This brief portrait highlights two characteristics about smartphone use: Individuality and availability. First, due to its relatively small screen size, a mobile device like a smartphone constitutes a private perspective that is not necessarily shared with co-present others and thus transforms me into a ‘windowless monad’ closed around my own personal projects (e.g., my work). Such one-to-one coupling of smartphone and visual perspective differs from the classic one-to-many relationship of watching television together. Hence, absent presence is not due to media technologies *per se*. Second, this individuality may also apply to a desktop computer, but with a crucial spatiomaterial reservation: You have to physically seat yourself in front of a desktop

computer to use it. As such, the portal into the digital world is deliberately chosen and restricted by the amount of time spent in a chair in front of the computer. A smartphone, however, is always at hand and can be utilized almost anywhere. Combined, this ‘handheld individuality’ means that mobile devices are often present, but that one cannot see what is happening on a conversational partner’s mobile phone. This uncertainty leaves room for interpretation. Nakamura (2015) argues that when a person looks away from a face-to-face interaction to their mobile phone display, this action signals one of three things: 1) The phone is more interesting than the current interaction, 2) the partner should ‘hold’ or wait for a while, or 3) the phone is about to become part of the interaction (e.g., when looking up information in the service of the social activity). In the first two instances, the partner is curbed in favor of the device. Looking at your device when spending time with someone can send a powerful nonverbal message. But what are the effects of such gestures?

2.3. Effects of absent presence

In a recent Pew report, romantic couples, particularly younger ones, reported being annoyed and upset when partners use mobile devices during time spent together (Lenhart and Duggan 2014). Specifically, 25% of married and partnered respondents and 42% of unmarried respondents in serious romantic relationships reported feeling that their partner had been distracted by their mobile phone while they were together. In another study, 62% of married/cohabiting women reported that technology interfered with their couple leisure time at least once a day, and such ‘technoference’ was found to be associated with lower relationship satisfaction (McDaniel and Coyne 2014). Experimental studies have further shown that the mere presence of a mobile device can diminish trust in one’s face-to-face conversational partner (Przybylski and Weinstein 2013) and that people report having better conversations and higher levels of empathy when devices are absent compared to when they are present (Misra et al. 2014). None of the existing research, however, examines the dynamics at stake in these impaired social interactions. As Przybylski and Weinstein (2013) argue, “The first and most important question this research leaves open concerns the mechanism through which a mobile phone impedes relationship formation” (p. 8). This statement clearly demonstrates the need for in-depth explorations of absent presence. While quantitative analyses have established *that* absent presence has significant adverse effects on social interaction, qualitative studies may help explore *how* these effects originate. To develop an analytical framework capable of opening up this black box, however, we first turn to the work of Daniel Stern, a developmental psychologist who pioneered the study of microsocial interactions.

3. Theory

3.1. Forms of vitality

Daniel Stern (2010) calls attention to an aspect of human existence that often remains hidden in plain view: Vitality, how life itself is manifested in movement. We human beings are essentially and fundamentally animate beings that are evolutionarily hard-wired to pick up on movement. For instance, when a mother facing her infant goes ‘still face’, that is, when she does not move her face, not even with slight expressions, the baby quickly becomes upset. Even later in life, vitality remains a crucial component of social understanding: If a person neither moves their body nor alters their

facial expression it is difficult to make sense of their thoughts and emotions. This is why a blank facial expression is also known as a ‘poker face’. Stern (2010) analyses concrete *forms of vitality*, that is, specific manners in which such vitality unfolds over time. When describing the vitality of an event, one is not describing its content (‘what’) or its purpose (‘why’), but its style (‘how’). This is best captured through adverbs or adjectives such as exploding, surging, rushing, gliding, tense, pulsing, gentle, fleeting, etc. As an example, imagine the difference between exploding, tense, and gentle laughter. In ordinary language use, dynamic changes in vitality such as timing, pitch, and stress procure the experience of talking to a living human being (as a contrast, think of the steely intonation of robots in sci-fi movies). By infusing our language with vitality, utterances as simple and seemingly nonsensical as ‘hmmm’, ‘uh huh’, and ‘ahaa’ may carry forms of vitality that can actively guide our conversations: The fall in pitch at the end of ‘hmmm’, for instance, usually signals a closing out, i.e., a prompt to move on. ‘Uh huh’, on the other hand, is a neutral placeholder signaling continued interest on behalf of the listener. Finally, the rising pitch at the end of ‘ahaa’ signals interest in what was just said and carries an implicit encouragement to continue. Of course, such backchannel responses are always culturally embedded and vary from language to language. Nevertheless, the basic principle remains the same.

3.2. *Affect attunement*

In social interaction, we often match and share forms of vitality across different sense modalities, what is also known as *affect attunement*: We express the vitality of another person’s actions without imitating their exact behavioral expression. An illustrative example is given in Stern’s (1985) early developmental research: When a nine-month old boy slowly sets up a steady rhythm of banging his hand on a soft toy, his mother gradually falls into the boy’s rhythm and begins to repeat the word ‘kaaaaa-bam’, ‘kaaaaa-bam’ with ‘kaaaaa’ accompanying the preparatory upswing and suspenseful holding of his arm before it falls and the ‘bam’ falling on each stroke (p. 140). The mother switches to a different sense modality, but her speech prosody matches the vitality of the boy’s movements. Through language, she becomes part of his game. In other words, affect attunement is what brings us ‘in sync’ with each other. Such rhythmic synchrony plays a pivotal role in embodied interaction (Gill 2012). Stern (1985) also describes *purposeful misattunement* in which a person deliberately mismatches another person’s vitality to guide that person’s level of affect: In trying to soothe the crying infant, a parent could say, ‘there, there, there’, giving more stress and amplitude on the first word and trailing off towards the end (i.e., ‘^{there}, there, there’). Alternatively, the parent could caress the baby’s back or head with a stroke analogous to that sequence, applying more pressure at the onset of the stroke and trailing it off toward the end (p. 69). This underattunement helps instill a sense of calm into an otherwise distressing situation. Far from merely applying to the field of developmental research, however, attunement is pervasive in our everyday lives. Armed with the concepts of vitality and attunement, we now proceed to the study.

4. Methodology

4.1. *Situating the current study*

The data presented here is part of a broader study on technological mediation of attention in an educational context. The study is conducted as a long-term, multi-method qualitative inquiry at a large business college in urban Denmark. A business college is an institution that provides general upper secondary education in commerce covering lines of study that range from global marketing and communication to innovation and event management. Students are young men and women aged approximately 16 to 20 years. Data collection began in August 2013 and spanned a year and a half. After conducting initial exploratory interviews with six teachers about their personal experiences with technologies in the classroom, I followed their work through participant observation (Spradley 1980). The purpose of this observation was to explore how the use of digital technology affects our contemporary educational system, focusing specifically on altered classroom dynamics. After six months of observation in various classrooms, I started conducting formal, in-depth interviews with individual students. During my observations, I had noticed that students often used educationally unrelated websites during class (Aagaard 2015). In an attempt to gauge whether (and if so, how) this distractive media strategy intertwined with their broader life trajectories, I wanted to address the use of technologies outside the context of school in settings that young people choose freely. Hence, a number of interview questions regarded students' spare time ("how do you use technology outside of school", "do you use social media when you are with your friends", etc.). The interviews were semi-structured, which means they took departure in an interview guide, yet remained flexible enough to explore spontaneously occurring 'red lights' such as unusual terms or intonations in participants' answers (Kvale and Brinkmann 2008). All participants volunteered and were not paid for any part of their involvement in the study. 25 students were interviewed in total. The interviews lasted about 15 minutes each and the sound recordings were subsequently transcribed to text.

4.2. *Abductive analysis*

While reading the transcripts, I stumbled upon the following descriptions of absent presence and found them significant. Not only did students speak lucidly and insightfully about absent presence, they also gave remarkably rich descriptions of what the phenomenon entails. The level of detail inherent in these descriptions surpassed the coarse distinction between attention and distraction with which I had previously worked (Aagaard 2014). As such, my theoretical grasp of the phenomenon temporarily broke down. But a breakdown-driven or *abductive* analysis that occurs precisely in situations of surprise, bewilderment, or wonder is a perfectly acceptable approach to qualitative research: (a) We observe *X*, (b) *X* is unexpected and breaks with our normal understanding, (c) but if *Y* is the case, then *X* makes sense, (d) thus, we are allowed to claim *Y*, at least provisionally (Brinkmann 2014). In my attempt to make sense of the students' descriptions (i.e., *X*), I eventually turned to Stern's conceptual tools (i.e., *Y*), but as befits an abductive approach, I remain open to critiques and alternative interpretations. In fact, I have certain reservations myself: Stern (2010) treats vitality as a *mental creation*, "a product of the mind's integration of many internal and external events" (p. 4). This statement is problematic to me, because my research project is heavily informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2002) phenomenology of perception, which explicitly breaks with such mentalist understandings of our existence. In line with other scholars, I wish to dislodge Stern's insightful descriptions from his mentalist ontology (Mühlhoff, 2014). As Stern (2010) himself sporadically implies, vitality can also be understood as a *force within movement*.

When understood accordingly, vitality exists at the level of mutually interacting bodies, what is also known as *intercorporeality* (Merleau-Ponty 1964; see also Tanaka 2015). This is how I read these following descriptions. The quotations used are those which best illustrate the points of interest. They have been translated from Danish to English and all names are pseudonyms.

5. Findings

In this section, I go through three different dynamics of absent presence, which surfaced in my interviews: (1) Delayed responses, (2) mechanical intonation, and (3) a motionless body. These themes are the abductive products of reading through and making sense of students' descriptions through the lens of Daniel Stern's analytical framework.

5.1. Delayed responses

The first dynamic appeared in my interview with the student John. During class, John was an avid user of technological devices for distractive purposes such as texting, playing games, and using social media. Outside of school, however, John's views on distraction were strikingly different.

John: I'm a strong proponent of not using your phone when you're together two-and-two, because then... Well, it's just not the same. It's not cool being other person who just sits there waiting.

Jesper: It's not 'the same'. Can you elaborate on that?

John: If you were sitting with your phone here while I'm talking to you and just looked at it, I wouldn't feel like you were listening to me, although you might actually be doing so. I wouldn't feel like we were having a real conversation.

Jesper: Why not?

John: Uhhh... Yeah... I wouldn't feel like you were listening or like what I was saying was interesting to you.

Jesper: I'm aware that it's difficult to describe, but I'm trying to understand what it is about sitting with my phone that makes you feel like I'm not paying attention.

John: You're *absent*. You're just more focused on your phone. I know that from myself. If somebody's talking to me and I'm looking at my phone I don't hear what they're saying.

Jesper: So it's something about paying attention and being there. You talk about 'absence', but what does it mean that people are 'present'?

John: It's just like what you're doing now: Sitting there, making eye contact, and having a conversation instead of, like, on/off, looking at your phone and going, '... Sorry, what?'

In John's narrative, using your phone does not allow for meaningful social interaction. When a person is 'looking' at their phone, he argues, it does not feel like they are 'listening'. At first glance, the utterance makes no logical sense: We listen with our ears, not our eyes, so why should it make a difference where we look? Is the statement expressing some kind of cognitive bias? In fact, John's utterance is an indication of the cross-modality of perception: When a person is using their phone, they are often completely immersed in it. There is no question of multitasking (e.g., looking at texts

while listening to friends). We sense this lack of responsiveness directly in the comportment of our partners: When a person is focused on their phone, John argues, they quite simply *look* ‘absent’ and preoccupied. This makes us feel like what we are saying is not interesting enough to capture the attention of the listener. I then set John the tricky task of describing what being ‘present’ entails. John replies that I am being present at that very moment simply by sitting there, across from him, and making eye contact while maintaining a conversation. As a contrast to this presence, John mentions the choppy and unfocused vitality of a person periodically looking at their phone during a conversation (or, what could also be described as absent presence). To describe the style of such comportment, John uses the term ‘on/off’, which means starting, stopping, and then starting again, several times. If we try to make sense of this statement according to Stern’s terminology, the problem becomes one of rhythmicity: Ordinary conversation is a moment-to-moment collaborative process of steady interchanges in which the listener’s vitality dynamics actively contribute to the conversation. The off-set style of *delayed responses* in absent presence like, ‘... Sorry, what?’ however, breaks this ephemeral circle of presence and disrupts the flow. The two speakers get out of synch. What the short bursts of attention and delayed responses of absent presence hinder, in other words, is the smooth rhythmicity of everyday interaction.

5.2. *Mechanical intonation*

The second dynamic surfaced in my interview with the student Isabella, who professed to using technological devices for distraction during class, but told me that she tries not to use her phone to check social media when spends time with her friends, because she finds it inappropriate.

Jesper: Try to explain what happens when people grab their phones.

Isabella: You just don’t feel like they’re paying as much attention to you.

Jesper: How can you tell?

Isabella: For instance, eye contact. If I tell my friend that I’ve been upset this week I feel it’s very important that she looks me in the eyes and tells me that she can relate and understands instead of just going, ‘Yeah. Okay. Hmmm’ [uttered with a flat intonation]. Otherwise, you just feel a little... It might as well have happened during class that you’d just say, ‘Yeah. Hmmm’ and not really take it in. You don’t really relate to the situation or fully understand. Really try to understand. I know that as a girl you can multitask, but you can’t multitask that damn much as to sit there and ‘like’ pictures.

When we tell our friends about upsetting or otherwise meaningful events, it is important that we feel understood. In fact, being empathically told by a person that they can ‘relate’ to an upsetting episode we describe to them may be akin to an adult version of the ‘^{there}there, ^{there}there’ sequence. Of course, adult empathy is not a matter of unconditional acceptance, but attunement is just as crucial in cases of disagreement. Using your phone while conversing precludes such attunement, Isabella explains, because in such cases people do not really relate to the situation, but merely go, ‘Yeah. Okay. Hmmm’. At first glance, Isabella is describing an episode in which she gets ongoing albeit limited responses from her friend, which may seem preferable to the example from above in which an unresponsive partner answers, ‘Sorry, what?’ But it may not be so simple. Isabella is describing

a specific type of verbal responses: ‘Yeah. Okay. Hmmm’. Recall that the vitality of such responses signals a closing out, a suggestion for the narrator to move on. What the overtly *mechanical intonation* of such responses indicates, then, is not the deep and empathic understanding that Isabella seeks, but an indifferent registration of facts. What Isabella is describing is not just a failure to elicit attention, but the dynamics of a lost struggle for recognition. Isabella’s statements reveal other important aspects of absent presence: First, Isabella follows John in describing how the need for eye contact in social interaction is thwarted by absent presence. This means you immediately sense the lack of attentiveness in your conversational partner. Secondly, Isabella, strongly opposes being reduced to the same level of interest as school material by her friend (‘It might as well have happened during class...’). This statement expresses an interesting point about students’ view of absent presence in school, albeit one that we shall not pursue any further. Finally, while describing the lack of empathic attunement in absent presence, Isabella subtly repudiates the cultural cliché that women are superb multitaskers: She argues that her girlfriends cannot relate to her situation while they simultaneously browse, view, and ‘like’ pictures on social media.

5.3. *A motionless body*

The third dynamic appeared in my interview with student Simon, who explained to me that his girlfriend has the ‘bad habit’ of checking Facebook on her phone at the dinner table. Since he chose to use such an unabashedly normative term, I asked him how this habit affects their conversation.

Simon: First of all, there’s a very long response time. It takes you a while to answer. And I do that myself. If I need to text someone while my girlfriend is talking to me, she gets really, really annoyed that I can’t just answer her immediately [snaps his fingers]. But I can’t. I don’t work like that. Although she may not be uninterested in what I have to tell her, it easily seems like she is.

Jesper: Because there’s a long ‘response time’?

Simon: Because there’s a long response time, and because the tone of voice may be different. Like, ‘Yes. That’s fine’ [uttered mechanically]. It may also have something to do with the fact that she’s not looking up. Her movements don’t signal any interest. She’s not looking at me and listening to me, but looking somewhere else.

Like the previous interviewees, Simon emphasizes delayed responses (‘long response time’), mechanical intonation (‘tone of voice’), and a lack of eye contact. However, Simon adds a further concern for motility. When describing his girlfriend’s phone use during at the dinner table, Simon accentuates movements that do not contain vitality or signal ‘interest’. When his girlfriend is using her phone at the dinner table, he tells me, she is not looking at him, but has instead turned her gaze forty-five degrees down and is looking at her screen beneath the table (‘she’s not looking up’). A mobile device can be remarkably fixed and inflexible in its demands on the comportment of its user, which entails being both hands-on with the keyboard and face-to-face with the screen. This constrains one’s body language and allows only a limited range of facial expressions, precluding any head nodding or smiling (even frowning and eye-rolling). Absent presence, in other words, renders one’s conversational partner unresponsive. It leaves them in a state of suspended animation with all

the vitality of a mannequin doll. Only the thumbs are moving. This idea of an almost *motionless body* puts a new perspective on both lack of eye contact and the noticeable delay between utterance and response: Silence is sometimes perceived as a sign of reflection and deliberation, but this mostly happens when it is accompanied by a thoughtful expression of some sort (as epitomized in Rodin's *Le Penseur*). In the case of absent presence, however, a high latency and a fixed stare do not signal thoughtful hesitation, but simply makes you seem 'uninterested' in what your partner is trying to tell you. This conspicuous lack of vitality is detrimental to social interaction. Interestingly, Simon admits to occasionally being absently present when interacting with his girlfriend, although he explicitly tells me that he gets upset when she does it to him, and vice versa.

6. Discussion and conclusion

6.1. Absent presence as unintentional misattunement

Across all three interviews, students mention downcast eyes as a key part of absent presence. Such lack of eye contact can thus be considered a fourth dynamic of absent presence. In this regard, however, it is important to note that although mutual gaze indubitably plays a crucial part in social interaction, we should not understand the eyes as gateway to a deeper state of mind ("the eyes are the windows to the soul"), but consider them part of a broader level of mutually interacting bodies producing vitality dynamics. To paraphrase Merleau-Ponty (2002), I do not see absent presence as a psychological fact hidden *behind* vitality dynamics, I read absent presence *in* them. In the case of absent presence, such dynamics also include delayed responses, mechanical intonation, and a motionless body. Taken together, these dynamics directly reveal the inattentiveness of absently present conversational partners. I immediately perceive my conversational partner as preoccupied, absent, and closed off. This dynamic influences a social interaction negatively, because an absently present person's responses consistently mismatch the vitality of their conversational partners in regards to both rhythmic timing (i.e., delayed responses) and emotional intensity (i.e., mechanical intonation). Indeed, sometimes vitality all but disappears (i.e., a motionless body). These dynamics get the conversational partners 'out of sync' with each other. As such, absent presence has a tendency to disrupt the smooth flow of ordinary interaction. Appropriating Stern's terminology, we may call such a mismatch between the vitality of an absently present person and his or her partner an *unintentional misattunement*: No matter how important the subject matter of a conversation may be, absently present people's answers usually seem slightly apathetic and indifferent. Hence, they continuously regulate their partners in a downward direction.

Communication theorists have famously argued that, 'we cannot *not* communicate' (Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson 2011). What this means is that every non-verbal behavior, gesture, and action can be considered as a form of communication. Everything we do conveys a message. This includes breaking unwritten codes of conduct. As Garfinkel (1967) showed through his famous breaching experiments in which he asked students to perform socially aberrant actions such as haggling about fixed prices or standing too close to other people, the 'victims' of these experiments did not find such deviations from social norms to be totally senseless, but viewed them as illegitimate and offensive motivated departures from normal conduct. Something similar can be gleaned from the interviews. As Simon puts it, although an absently present person may not *actually* be uninterested

in what they are being told, it very much ‘seems like it’. What we communicate through absent presence, in other words, is that we are uninterested in what our conversational partner is trying to tell us. Absent presence signals *indifference* to what is being said. This makes it all the more worrying when students report frequently experiencing a distinct lack of receptivity from friends and relatives who use mobile devices. Perhaps this is why so many people report having better conversations and higher levels of empathy when mobile devices are absent (Misra et al. 2014)?

6.2. *Absent presence versus daydreaming and mind wandering*

To be clear, being distracted during everyday interaction is not a completely new phenomenon. Daydreaming and mind wandering are well-known phenomena with venerable ancestries: Already in the early sixties, Goffman (1963) described how an individual may drift from his immediate social circumstances to a “playlike world” in which he alone participates (p. 69). Absent presence, however, differs from its earlier predecessors in at least three aspects: First, daydreaming is a relatively rare phenomenon, whereas the handheld individuality of mobile devices means that the possibility of absent presence is constantly lurking. Absent presence, one might say, is just a click away. Second, John’s unintentional slipup (‘If somebody’s talking to me and I’m looking at my phone...’), Isabella’s talk of ‘trying not to’ use her phone when she is with her friends, and Simon’s self-conscious shift of perspective mid-sentence (‘I do that myself’) implies that even opponents of absent presence engage in the behavior because of a habitual element that is not under voluntary control of the user (see also Aagaard 2015). Lastly, if you were to drift away during a conversation with your friends, they would most likely tell you to ‘snap out of it’, but somehow the social norms around the use of mobile devices are too vague and novel to possess such commanding authority. Our society is still in the inaugural stages of working out and solidifying social norms regarding the proper use of mobile devices. One small example of this burgeoning development is the game of ‘phone stack’ that groups of friends play at restaurants: At the beginning of a meal, everyone puts their phone face down at the center of the table and no one is allowed to pick up their phone during the meal. The first person to give in to temptation picks up the check. If no one gives in, then everyone pays for themselves (Tell 2013). Only time will tell if such minor initiatives eventually coalesce into broader societal norms regarding absent presence.

6.3. *Limitations and future studies*

This study is not without limitations. First, the microsocial dynamics of absent presence were not an explicit focus of my research project, so this study is based upon only sparse and somewhat spontaneously occurring data material. It is a highly explorative investigation based on data from only one location, involving just a few tech-savvy business students. The reason I felt compelled to write the article, however, is that when I stumbled upon these vivid descriptions of absent presence, they resonated deeply with my own experiences of absent presence. Something just *clicked*, and it is important not to underestimate the importance of such serendipitous findings in qualitative research (Åkerstrøm 2013). Based on statistics from the background section, one could argue that a major part of the Western population is already familiar with absent presence (Lenhart and Duggan 2014; McDaniel and Coyne 2014). Future research could help determine whether the identified dynamics

apply equally in these cases. Second, regardless of the generalizability of the findings, a historical element remains: The dynamics found in this study may only apply to people situated in a historical watershed in which absent presence is on the rise. In pace with the ubiquity of mobile devices and, by extension, absent presence, the experience may become so normalized that its upsetting element gradually wanes. This would in turn leave the findings of this study outdated. Finally, although the identified dynamics in the present study constitute a refinement, elaboration, and clarification of the concept of absent presence, the list is still preliminary and may be expanded by future studies. Such research might benefit from microanalysis of facial, vocal, gestural, and/or postural expressions in face-to-face interaction in which one conversational partner is attentionally occupied by a digital device such as a phone. In conclusion, in spite of its inevitable limitations this study has delineated a number of microsocial dynamics currently at stake in absent presence.

6.4. Conclusion

Both researchers and the general public often understand media technologies as means to bridge distances and to connect people dislocated in space, or what is commonly referred to as mediated presence. The point of this study, however, was to explore the microsocial dynamics of the reverse situation, absent presence, in which a self-enclosed conversational partner is completely engrossed in their technological device. It thereby responded to a dearth of in-depth studies of such technology use. Taking departure in Daniel Stern's idea that dynamic momentary shifts in vitality allow us, automatically and without awareness, to affect one another, the present study proposed the term *unintentional misattunement* to highlight social ramifications of delayed responses, flat intonation, a motionless body, and lack of eye contact inherent in absent presence: Combined, these dynamics lead to an awkward interpersonal rhythm that emits an aura of carelessness to the non-phone user.

These findings give rise to a number of implications, theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the findings of this study add to the burgeoning field of techno-critical studies (e.g., Carr 2010; Sacasas 2013; Turkle 2011). Our everyday use of digital devices entails important downsides that are worth studying and analyzing. Additionally, it is suggested that research on the use of media technologies in general and on absent presence in particular can be productively combined with embodiment theories (e.g., Merleau-Ponty 2002). Viewed from a practical standpoint, this study has important implications for citizens of the 21st century. Swiping around on the smartphone may start out as harmless distraction, a mere diversion from pauses in the flow of conversation, but it may end up subverting the intimacy and emotional connectivity one finds between people that are engaged in conversation. Since absent presence seems to be on the rise, it is imperative that we address this peculiar new phenomenon and maintain a critical awareness of what is currently happening. I hope that the empirical and conceptual contributions of this study will help promote such discussion and reflection regarding the use of mobile devices in social interaction.

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