

Social Presence Cultivation & Loneliness During COVID-19

Background

The social distancing that has occurred as a result of COVID-19 has isolated many people, limiting many social interactions to entirely mediated platforms. This disconnect from others has potentially created a sense of loneliness, but social presence experienced through repeated interactions may decrease that sensation.

We propose a new concept, **Cultivated Social Presence**, defined as the general feeling of social presence developed through repeated mediated interactions. Based on reasoning about loneliness and tie strengths, we pose the following:

H1. Cultivated Social Presence is negatively associated with loneliness.

H2. Cultivated Social Presence mediates the relationship between mediated communication and loneliness reduction.

RQ1: Does the extent of the mediated relationship in H1 depend on tie strength of communicators?

RQ2: Does communication with AI or virtual assistants influence cultivated social presence or loneliness?

Methods

Survey Population: Nationally representative samples in Singapore (N = 204) and US Urban Areas (N = 288) and US university students (N = 248)

Measures (all on 5-point Likert scales of either agreement or frequency)

Cultivated Social Presence

When I communicate with others through any interactive media (e.g., online chatrooms, social media, texting, video chatting, online gaming, etc.)...

- It feels like we are together; I feel like the others are interacting with me; I feel like others are aware of my presence; the presence of others is obvious to me; my presence is obvious to the others; they act warmly toward me; they act sociably toward me; I have a personal relationship with them; I feel comfortable communicating with them; I feel close to them; I feel like we are part of a team (Cronbach's alpha = .93)

Tie Strength

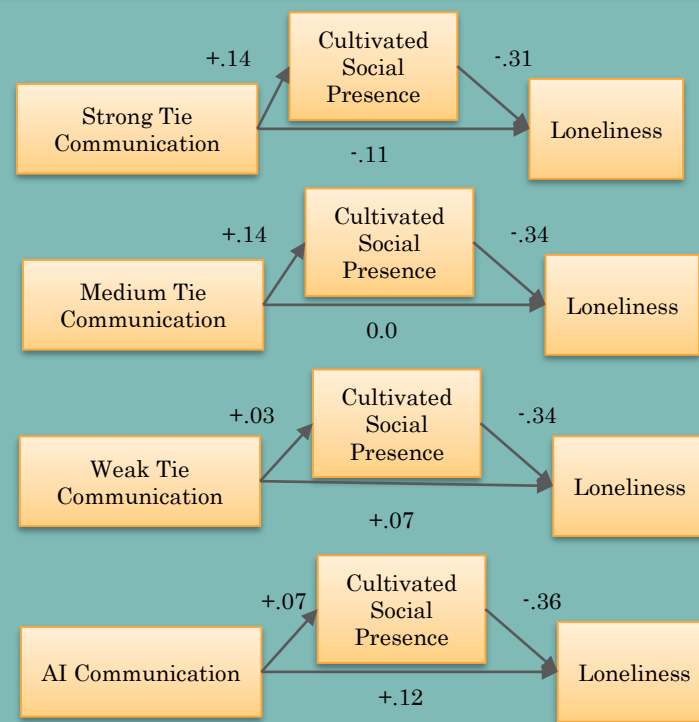
Since Social Isolation began as a result of COVID-19, how often do you talk with or interact with (including in online communication people who you consider to be...

- STRONG TIES (e.g., partner/spouse, close family, best friends)
- MEDUM TIES (e.g., extended family, like cousins, or good friends)
- WEAK TIES (e.g., friends, community members, classmates/coworkers)
- AI or virtual assistants (e.g., Alexa, Siri, Google Assistant, Cortana)

Results

- H1 supported.
- H2 supported for strong-tie communication, but not other communication strengths.
- Unexpectedly, although medium-tie, weak-tie and AI communication are associated with more cultivated social presence, they are also associated with *more* loneliness (the opposite of mediation, CSP unlocks loneliness assoc.)

Summary: Although mediated communication across tie-strengths is associated with more cultivated social presence, cultivated social presence only mediates a reduction in loneliness for strong tie communication.



Note: covariate data source (US or SG) not sig in all models

Conclusions

- Cultivated Social Presence is a possible causal factor in reducing loneliness through mediated communication (more research needed to establish causality)
- Because controlling for cultivated social presence was found to *increase* the association between medium-tie, weak-tie, and AI communication with loneliness, perhaps the causal direction is flipped: lonelier people may seek out communication with med/weak/AI ties as a coping mechanism, which is ineffective.