Always On and Always With Mobile Tablet Devices: A Qualitative Study on How Young Adults Negotiate With Continuous Connected Presence

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Abstract
Internet-enabled mobile devices expand the virtual spaces of Internet users. Mobile Internet users encounter continuous connectivity where they are not only always on but also always with the device. Users are presented with situations of continuous connected presence requiring them to deal with the overwhelming volume of virtual interaction. This study reports from a longitudinal study of 35 university students in Australia conducted in 2011/2012. Mobile tablet devices were given to participants who had never owned one before, to be observed over a period of 1 year. By qualitatively exploring how users experience and negotiate with the added virtual space, this study found that while users benefit from continuous connectivity, they also adopt strategies to disconnect from the ubiquitous access especially when engaging in tasks that require undivided attention. New users go through adjustment by developing their own involvement shield strategies while experimenting with online colocation and copresence.

Keywords
mobile tablet devices, iPads, copresence, connected presence, young adults, mobile Internet

Introduction
New virtual spaces have been created and have evolved with the introduction of digital networks and digital devices. Mobile tablet devices are designed as small portable computers that can be used seamlessly in both private and public spaces. Tablet users are challenged to make continuous choices about when and where they are going to use the device and whether to apply existing norms of computers and mobile phones or develop new ones. By observing 35 young adults who have been given a new mobile tablet device for one year, this study attempts to understand how new technologies fit into the user’s existing digital environment.

As the phrase “going online” implies, we often envision the Internet as a place. The Internet was created as a dial-up service where users could go online, fulfill their needs, and then disconnect from the service. Such uses of the Internet established the tradition of users entering the cyberspace whenever it was necessary and exiting after the task was completed. When broadband was introduced, dialing up was no longer required, and the concept of “always on” emerged. However, even with broadband, users had to sit in front of a computer and turn the device on to connect to the network. Users could leave the network by simply moving away from the desk or turning off the device. It was not until portable mobile devices had been introduced that true ubiquity was realized.

Mobile phones have been commonly used prior to smart phones or mobile tablet devices. However, continuous mobile Internet access that these new mobile devices provide has opened up new opportunities of being constantly present in the cyberspace, blurring the boundaries between online and off-line spaces. Ubiquity is realized not only in the sense that switching on and off is unnecessary but also by the constant proximity to the user.

Mobile tablet devices are not only always on—that is, the user can get continuous access to the network—but they are also always with the user—that is, the users are in close proximity to the device. Green (2002) uses the term “always availability” to describe the ways that individuals become always on call due to mobile phones. Similarly, Turkle’s (2008) “always on you” captures the constant accessibility. This reciprocal nature of mobile media enables ambient virtual copresence (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, & Robinson, 2010) but at the same time requires the user to adopt involvement shields to control the overwhelming volume of social interaction (Goffman, 1966).

Appendix

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In this study, the situation where mobile devices are always in close proximity to the user is defined as always with. Mobile tablet devices introduce a new situation where users expand their virtual space enabled by ubiquitous connectivity. By being always with the device, users are confronted with continuous connectivity from which they sometimes need to withdraw in order to maintain their solitude.

Tablet devices are similar to mobile phones, especially smart phones, in many ways but carry some uniqueness. This study extends existing theories of mobile communication to explain how young adults, when given access to tablet devices, adapt to and use the new digital environment.

**Colocation, Connected Presence, and Copresence**

Three concepts—colocation, connected presence, and copresence—are essential to understanding how mobile Internet access may change the way users perceive of and behave in the online space. This is because mobile Internet has expanded the virtual spaces available to users that were previously not available with fixed devices such as computers and laptops.

Communication technologies enable humans to telecommunicate and therefore create a sense of being somewhere other than the actual physical space they are located in. Presence is the experience or feeling of being there (Heeter, 1992), while copresence is being together with others (Schroeder, 2006). Copresence can be distinguished from colocation, which is a mere state of being in the same space. Being copresent implies an interaction or a relationship among the parties (Zhao & Elesh, 2008), whereas being colocated merely means that people are within proximity. They are mutually present within the sensory range of the other (Goffman, 1966; Zhao & Elesh, 2008).

Colocation mainly refers to the state of being in the same physical location. Digital technologies have created a new situation where people are colocated in virtual spaces. For example, when people are playing online games, they do not always interact with all visible players. Another example would be when someone logs on to a messenger service, the list of contacts that are available for messaging are those who are colocated in that virtual space. This does not necessarily mean that they are copresent. Schroeder (2006) and Licoppe (2004) used the concept of connected presence to describe this type of mutual availability that was enabled by mobile technologies. Rendering the availability to be contacted is important in the connected environment that mobile media offers. In order for that to happen, people must be in constant contact with digital devices that enable ubiquitous connectivity. Mobile phones were designed so that people can carry them around, making users available and reachable.

Mobile media with Internet access, such as smart phones and tablet devices, enhances the state of connected presence because they provide various methods of communication other than phone calls and short message service (SMS). It is increasingly the case that people are exposed to other people who are not necessarily copresent but are simply in close range in cyberspace. In order for interaction to occur, there must be a regionality of space, the power relations that underlie personal affinity and social engagement, and thus a copresence. Electronic connectivity does not equate social connectivity. That is why removing physical barriers does not automatically lead to the reduction of social barriers (Zhao & Elesh, 2008).

Connected presence, however, does open up new opportunities to be contacted. This can make the communication interruptive, where the user has no control over from whom or when he or she may be messaged (Garrett & Danziger, 2007). Online messaging is less disruptive compared to face-to-face situations where it is harder to adopt avoidance strategies. In an online situation users can use various methods of shielding themselves. For example, when an instant message (IM) arrives, it can be screened and ignored until the recipient is ready to engage in a conversation (Quan-Haase, 2010). Chang and Law (2008) found varying degrees of IM interruption depending on the social presence of the messages. Studies on involvement shields applied to messaging environments show various techniques that manage unwanted online interaction. Online involvement shields range from “ignoring,” “hiding,” “blocking,” and “relegating” (Zhao & Elesh, 2008). Without flatly rejecting others’ right of communication, people can shield themselves from interaction by using walls, gates, or situational closures so that it “leads persons inside and outside the region to act as if the barrier had cut off more communication than it does” (Goffman, 1966, p. 152).

Telephones are in a sense a colocation medium. It enables people to be within close proximity—one phone call away. However, the type of interaction via phones is not always personal. Anyone who obtained the phone number can call. The social media applications that can be used on mobile phones, however, are more personal and are designed to realize copresence. By the mechanism of befriending, users grant permission to their group of friends to be colocated and copresent within the cyberspace. As Goffman (1966) observes, “Persons must sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived” (p. 17). Virtual colocation or connected presence is a new situation that is worthy of attention as much as the concept of virtual copresence. Users need to negotiate new strategies of permitting other users into their virtual space and adopting involvement shields to protect their personal space.

With mobile technologies, the sense of place matters very little because people can be online communicating with people who are in remote places. We no longer live in a world where we can separate the physical and digital world. Both worlds are increasingly meshed with each other, expanding the binary notion of online and off-line into multiple realities.
Ubiquitous Connectivity of Mobile Tablet Devices

Physical proximity is not directly correlated to perceived proximity. The frequency, depth, and interactivity of communication can increase perceptions of proximity. The process of identification, where people find common identities to others, also increases the level of perceived proximity (Wilson, O’Leary, Metiu, & Jett, 2008). Telecommunication technologies allow people who are not within physical proximity to feel that they are in close contact through mediated communication. Opportunities of being in virtual proximity have been increased due to mobile devices.

Earlier studies on mobile phones emphasize the individualization and fragmentation of space when people choose to engage in private conversations on their phones in public spaces (Gergen, 2002; Green, 2002). Similarly, providing ubiquitous access to the Internet via mobile technologies changes the way people engage with others in public and semipublic spaces. Hampton and Gupta’s (2008) study shows how Wi-Fi–enabled public spaces were used for private activities connecting to people in any place. They identified “true mobiles” who use laptops in public spaces to avoid interacting with people who are physically colocated. Public privatism occurs when mobile phones create a private cocoon within the public domain. To understand this phenomenon, it is useful to distinguish space from place, where place is a physical attribute and space is the experience of the persons making sense of it (Gumpert & Drucker, 2012; Wilken, 2008).

According to Scolari, Aguado, and Feijóo (2012) mobile media is a new species to study within media theory that has dramatically changed the media landscape. This refers to the continuous connectivity enabled by mobile technologies. People have become tethered to communication devices and are continually copresent (Turkle, 2008). Users connected to the network via mobile devices can choose the space in which they mainly function and interact. They can switch from one to another. They can belong to multiple realities, realizing ambient virtual copresence. Mobile media allows users to be colocated in several places online. Where they choose to be copresent is their active choice. Gergen’s (2002) absent presence concept describes this situation where people are colocated but are engaged in other activities, thus rendering them to be absent. Due to mobile technologies, people have gained more control over whom they interact and communicate with regardless of physical space. In other words, mobile devices with Internet connectivity provide a unique situation where a person can be situated in multiple spaces and colocated with others in several virtual spaces, where they can continuously choose to enter or exit the spaces.

Ubiquitous computing does not enable anything fundamentally new, but it does make everything faster and easier to access (Weiser, 1991). It is an intimate technology that users keep with them whenever and wherever they go, in close contact with their bodies and places, “even in sleep or repose” (Goggin, 2011). Mobile technologies converge communication, mobility and space. Such technologies can lead to altered ways of understanding places and spaces. For example a mobile phone call can transform “a non-place, like a train station, bus, airport, or road into a third place for chatting and playfulness” (Lasen, 2005, p. 25).

While the literature on mobile phones can be applied to mobile tablet devices, there are some unique features that are worthy of investigation. Mobile tablet devices share similar characteristics with smart phones in many ways. However, there are differences that make the two devices complementary to each other. Related to this study, two significant differences can be found; the size of the screen and the perceived social function. The difference in screen size is becoming less significant due to the introduction of smaller tablets and larger smart phones. The model used in this study was iPad II - 9.5 inches (24.1 cm) by 7.31 inches (18.6 cm) - which is significantly larger than a standard smart phone. Another difference is that mobile phones have a long tradition of being perceived of as a communication medium. Normally the uses are private and personal, which makes it inappropriate to use it in formal social settings such as in meetings and classes. In contrast, the social perception of tablet devices is closer to that of computers, allowing users to use them more freely in public spaces. Seamlessly fitting into a variety of social settings, mobile tablet devices are able to realize true mobility, not only in the physical sense but also within the social context.

Ubiquity of the Internet is not a new phenomenon. The introduction of broadband enabled users to be always on the Internet. The shift from dial-up to broadband resulted in significant changes to the way people use the technology at home, due to the always on feature. Compared to modem users, broadband subscribers use broadband more frequently and place more value on the service (Cole et al., 2004; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008). Internet-enabled mobile devices added another dimension to this always on feature by being always with the user, enhancing this ubiquity.

Multifunctionality of computers and the portability of mobile phones merged into mobile tablet devices. However, how users adapt, use, and negotiate the uses have yet to be explored. This study observed users, after giving them tablet devices, for the period of 1 year to see how they perceive and negotiate their off-line and online presence.

This study did not attempt to test specific hypotheses but instead tried to provide an in-depth view of how users adapt to new mobile tablet devices based on what was observed. In particular, this study examined how users coped with mobile tablet devices with regard to how users differentiate tablet devices from other digital devices such as mobile phones or laptops. Drawing from previous studies, we can anticipate that tablet users will find a way to integrate this new device into their existing digital environment, while negotiating its uses in the context of their everyday lives.
Method

Mobile tablet devices were given to university students to be observed over the course of 1 year. None of the participants owned a mobile tablet device before the study. Throughout the year of observation the participants were free to use the device with no intervention. Full-time undergraduate students at a university in Australia were the initial target population. There were in total 3,902 participants who were enrolled full-time as first- and second–year students as of August 2011. Three different recruitment methods were used. First, a banner advertisement was placed on the university online learning site where students could click through a link to where the information about the study was posted. The second method was to place flyers across the campus bulletin boards in every building. The third method was sending an e-mail to all first- and second-year full-time students.

Voluntary participants were directed to a link where they could complete a short screening survey. They were asked their age and gender and about ownership of digital devices including tablets. Based on the population’s gender and age composition, 35 students who did not already own a tablet were selected. Twenty-one (60%) participants were in the age-group 18 to 20 years and 14 (40%) participants were between 21 and 25 years, which is representative of the study body at the university.

All participants were given an iPad II, with Wi-Fi and 3G access. Wi-Fi was available on campus at no extra cost. 3G access required students to purchase a SIM card and subscription to a mobile 3G service, if they chose to use the technology. During the 1 year of observation, nine participants purchased their own SIM cards and used 3G services.

A mixed-method approach, combining netnography (Kozinets, 2009) and online surveys, was used. This article reports particularly from the findings of the netnography. An online community was created where participants were invited to actively participate by answering questions, engaging in discussions with other participants, and posting self-reflective postings.

Throughout the year, the research team administered three online surveys—before giving out the iPads, 6 months into the study, and at the end of one year. These surveys included open-ended questions that were exploratory in nature. A monthly tracking survey asked participants to log their iPad usage for 1 day. An open discussion forum where participants could freely post messages was open all year. Here, they could engage in discussions with each other or the research team. Eleven prompted discussion posts were initiated by the research team where participants were asked to respond as well as engage in discussions with other participants. This study analyzed the online community postings and individual responses to open-ended questions.

Participants were eligible to seek technical support at the University Library Information Technology Support Centre. However, the research team did not provide any training or educational support. This was to observe how users adapt to the device in a natural setting and to see the changes over time.

All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Prior to the study, appropriate ethics clearance was sought and approved by the National Health and Research Council through their National Ethics Application Form.

Results

A Seamless Addition of a New Digital Device to the Users’ Digital Environment

All participants had mobile phones before they were given their iPads, and 26 (74%) of them had smart phones. They differentiated the tablet devices from their mobile phones and positioned their iPads “in between the laptop and mobile phone.” The iPad shared functional similarities to both devices but had its uniqueness: integration in work, play, and social functions. Rather than replacing the existing uses of various devices, iPads were placed seamlessly in their own place. Some uses were complementary. Neil found that he was using more apps on his iPhone because he had discovered new ones through his iPad. Others substituted the uses, particularly when browsing the Internet.

I found that most of the time I [only] used my iPhone when my iPad was already busy. For example, I would be watching a film on my iPad and would search for recipes/go to Facebook on my iPhone. (Diana)

But in most cases participants positioned tablet devices in a new space. In fact, 77% of the participants did not think that iPads changed their mobile phone use. However, most users experienced what we could label as a novelty effect. According to the tracking survey data, the time spent on tablets decreased from 11.8 hours per day in the first month to 6.6 hours in the seventh month and to 3.9 hours in the last month. At first participants were exploring and experimenting with their iPads, but usage decreased after the novelty phase.

Through the qualitative analyses of the answers and discussions on the online forum, four themes related to mobile presence emerged: (a) always on and always with mobile devices, (b) the situation of continuous connected presence, (c) the mobile device as an extension of self, and (d) switching off the mobile self. The results are reported in the following sections.

Always On and Always With

Participants found that the most striking difference between laptops and mobile tablet devices was the ubiquity of access. Although laptops are designed to be mobile, in reality, the
booting time makes it less accessible on the go. The uses are usually confined to designated spaces such as in the office or at a desk. In contrast, mobile tablet devices can be turned on instantaneously at any location. Participants described their iPads as “fast connection” to the Internet and “accessible” anywhere. Since it is “more mobile and more readily available” (Rene), users were able to take it with them and use it anywhere. Users described their iPads as devices with easy access, portable, lightweight, and quick to start-up. All of these characteristics make the iPad a truly mobile device.

To me the iPad makes information more accessible. Whether it be the Internet while lying in bed, or quick access to e-mail, calendars, lecture notes, or just about anything else, the iPad is my first point of call. I love its portability and the fact it fits in my handbag. (Kathryn)

I cannot live without my iPad, having access to information at any time has become a necessity. I now take my iPad everywhere, the main benefit I think is its size and portability. Just last week I bought a new Mac Book Pro. Despite being super excited by this, I still found myself using my iPad over it just because it was so much easier to open and use in front of the TV or wherever ever I was. I was shocked by this. (Kathleen)

The device fills in the gap between computers and mobile phones. “[The] device fills a void that is between the laptop and the mobile phone technologies” (Patrick). This is particularly beneficial when users use the device to communicate with others.

[I use it mainly] for communication, having the ability to have my e-mails open all the time, is the biggest benefit, as the iPad can just sit in the corner, takes up less room and doesn’t need to be logged on all the time like the laptop. It’s also a lot easier to carry around, so I can send e-mails while I’m doing other things. (Jean)

Going online meant more than just getting access to information to the users. It was a gateway to their social networks via instant messaging, social networking sites and other communicative functions.

Being able to access the Internet in more places also makes me more likely to look things up or check e-mails and Facebook. (Sophia)

I can send and receive e-mails and messages on the go rather than having to log onto a computer when I get home . . . Communication flows freely, it’s great. (Jayden)

True mobility of using it anywhere was what made users use the device continuously. The uses have expanded to “cafés writing e-mails, the dinner table to show my family YouTube videos, the bus, lectures and while traveling overseas” (Henry). The perception of continuous access was linked to Internet connectivity.

Wherever there is Wi-fi . . . me and my iPad are there! (Heather)

It has allowed me to have a more remote access to the Internet, and at times, when the Internet stops working at home, access still [with 3G connection]. (Rene)

However, getting easy access was not a novel concept. They all had high-speed access to the Internet at home and on campus. So it was not the access itself but the seamless nature of access that they experienced as unique.

You’ll be surprised how seamlessly it fits in . . . The key thing about the iPad over the last 6 months is that it is organic. You just let your use of it come as it comes. (Henry)

Not only has the iPad increased my access to information but it has significantly increased my exposure to this world with different news apps, and unconditional Internet access anytime, anywhere. (Mary)

The always on feature of broadband has brought about changes to how people perceive and use the Internet at home. Skipping the dialing-up process, broadband users were able to access the Internet faster, which resulted in more frequent uses. Tablet devices tend to take the always on feature further because it has reduced the booting time.

I feel that since getting the iPad I can access online info faster simply because of how fast it is to turn on. (Alex)

The more important feature of the tablet devices is that it is not only always on but also always with the user. Being always with the user enables what Turkle (2008) described as “always-on-you” characteristics of mobile devices that make people tethered to the online space. The device is connected to the network at all times, but it is also in close proximity to the user due to its portability. This is in contrast to laptops where the space determines how they are and are not used. Due to the always with characteristic of tablet devices, users were able to expand their usual boundaries of uses and connect to others in spaces where they had not done so before.

Its compact nature means I can take it anywhere. I always have it on me. (Neil)

I have now been able to access the Internet and my e-mail in places where before I would just have to wait for my laptop. These places include on public transport, at airports and even out shopping. (Anna)

The iPad has definitely affected my access to information ‘anywhere, anyplace’ for the better. Whilst carrying my iPad I feel that I am constantly in touch with information on any subject through the Internet. (Jacob)

Instead of waiting till I get home to look something up, I will do it then and there on the iPad. (Rene)
Increasing the situations where users can access their tablets involves multitasking, which poses yet another challenge to users.

I constantly utilize the Skype and messenger apps running in the background at all times. Usually I find the iPad is used more when I am watching a movie or using my laptop for other entertainment purposes. It gives me the ability to quickly respond to a friend and not interrupt my other technology. (Terry)

Users are engaged in ‘continuous partial attention’ where people process multiple streams of information but not fully committing to a single activity (Jones, 2005). Mobile devices give users the sense that they can do more, be in more places, and control more aspects of life (Turkle, 2008). This was certainly the case of the study participants.

**Continuous Connected Presence**

In a mobile environment, place matters very little. The locative function of smart phones overcomes the physical space by geo-tagging the user so that they can be in constant contact with their acquaintances and attach meaning to the physical space.

Notwithstanding all the talk of mobility, we find ourselves tethered in novel ways—not to a hometown, or to a particular social background, but to our devices themselves and the feeling of connection they provide, which we seemingly cannot sit still without. (Rosen, 2011, p. 43)

The concept of “connected presence,” which emphasizes these phenomenological implications of mobile phone usage, is contextualized within the setting of the digital life. Mobile phones realize connected presence of people who are at a distance (Christensen, 2009).

Being online changes the sense of proximity to others. Rather than feeling closer to those who are in their physical proximity, they have the alternative to constantly connect with far-but-close people online. Perceived proximity is not a direct function of physical proximity but can be increased by way of communication and identification (Wilson et al., 2008). Participants in the study maintained their online presence by connecting to friends and confirming their presence online.

I am constantly connected with people in class as I am always on Facebook in class or checking e-mails. (Noah)

Similar to what Licoppe (2004) found among mobile phone users, connected presence could be found among the tablet users. However, in contrast to phone users, tablet users did not specifically target the receiver at the other end. The receiving end is more of a social space consisting of a predetermined group of loose social networks. Users do not always connect specifically to one person but target all or part of the links that they have established through social network sites or those who are on their contact list. Anyone who has access via e-mail, SMS, or social media belongs to this virtual network. Tablet users are “constantly connected with people” (Noah).

Having the iPad has definitely changed how I interact with people. It’s become more casual, I’ve become more flexible with gatherings and things because I don’t have an allocated time when I’m chatting to people. I can do it anytime I feel like it. (Diana)

The concept of ambient virtual copresence in the online world reflects this new type of constant virtual presence (Horst et al., 2010). The passive modes of checking people’s status updates on social media or exchanging light text messages are examples of ambient virtual copresence that is similar to the sharing physical spaces. Participants described such virtual presence to have become prevalent in their everyday lives after using their iPads.

When I am with people either at home or at university, I have to remember to be sociable and not get completely lost in using the iPad. If the conversation gets a bit tedious, I just want to check Facebook and see how the rest of the world is doing. (Madison)

Having Internet access allows users to use their device as a portal to the world. They search information and communicate through that portal. Having mobility, on the other hand, adds one more component to the connectivity, a continuous access to the portal. This has very important implications to the user. The link between the user and the cyber world is no longer asymmetrical. Not only is the user able to enter the cyber world with ease, but also vulnerable to anyone interrupting the private space.

I would not say that the iPad has changed the way I communicate with people either electronically or in real life, but rather has increased the ability for me to be accessible online. (Rita)

Ubiquitous connectivity provides users with the opportunity to be constantly in touch with multiple virtual spaces that enables virtual copresence. The reverse is also true. Being always on and always with the device opens up the entry to the user that permits other people to visit.

**Extending the Self**

While the mobile tablet device enables a user’s continuous connectivity to other people and increased opportunities to communicate, it also allows for an expanded personal space. Being in close physical proximity with the mobile tablet devices motivates personalized uses. Participants used the device for organizing contacts, making appointment calendars, and keeping reflective journals. The first thing participants did when they
received their iPads was to customize their device to reflect their own persona. This involved activities such as “set up e-mail” (Julie), “put everything in the calendar and ditch my old diary” (Heather), “download apps to transfer Word files from laptop” (Teresa), “have fun setting up apps and searching for personalization accessories . . . stylus, covers, keypads, etc” (Kathleen), “set up Facebook” (Neil), “sync with iTunes account to transfer music” (Jacob), and “sync pics” (Patrick). Its intimacy and interactivity made iPads their alter egos. Participants were conscious of how their iPads would reflect their real-life identities.

What makes the iPad me? Well, the apps that I have on it all reflect my interests and me as a person. (Mary)

I think an iPad is a great medium to personalize your image, if I were to look at my iPad right now, I would have to say the person using it is a fun-loving kinda guy, who has 80% games and 20% study apps. (Noah)

Participants were aware that their iPads would represent their owner because they would always leave traces on the device.

If someone who knew me looked at my iPad, they wouldn’t see something that is uniquely me . . . but the way I like to look at it, is that it is a work in progress and like any good relationship we are taking our time to get to know each other . . . but if you looked at my iBooks shelf, then you would see me and it definitely doesn’t have any Star Wars novels . . . that’s one part that is customized to the max! (Jean)

This perception as a personalized device makes users to be more intimate with their iPads.

As far as sharing the iPad as a computer I think that people feel intimidated when offered a look of my iPad. The reaction is similar to when people ask to look at your new phone, they clearly don’t feel comfortable and fear accidentally accessing any private data such as e-mails, text messages, or even photos. (Jacob)

Positioning the device as an intimate personal device led participants to use it for self-reflective activities. For example, Alex uses it to jot down his thoughts whenever he needs to rather than writing in long bursts. Henry thinks of writing on his tablet “a much more casual and accessible affair” because the iPad is a “more relaxed device making writing something more tuned to my own time.” This created a new type of tension where users wanted some solitary space to reflect but at the same time had continuous access to their social networks.

**Switching Off the Virtual Self**

Telephones, including mobile phones, are point-to-point communication devices. Tablets, on the other hand, are designed for wider social communication, making them more reciprocal and symmetric. The way that mobile devices are positioned within the everyday life can be explained by the telephone metaphor. Accessibility enables the user to make calls, but it is ubiquity that allows users to be reached at any time. Landline telephones lack the latter, but the mobile telephony realized this ubiquity. In both cases, the problem that users encounter is that incoming calls are not always predictable. Users are faced with a new situation of having to decide whether or not they will respond to the incoming calls immediately. Through digital telephony, caller IDs and call waiting services were invented. These can be used as involvement shields. The situation is similar with tablet device users where they have to deal with incoming messages and various push notifications.

The connected presence makes the communication interruptive, where the user has no control over when he or she will be messaged. Rettie (2008) suggests that mobile phones increase the value of social networks because they enable social support and ease the maintenance of large social networks. The non-intrusive phatic contact was one of the benefits of SMS over voice calls. Social network site applications such as Facebook or messenger services fulfilled such non-intrusive contact needs with the loose cyber community to which users belonged.

Nonetheless, mobile colocation leads to another type of interruption: the distraction initiated by the user. The cyber-world is no longer a distinct space from the everyday physical world but exists in continuum. Users of mobile media constantly check to see who is online, who is updating, dipping in to see what is going on in their cyber world, confirming their own online presence. Users may “tone out to apps” (Noah) or just “constantly refresh Facebook and Twitter, hoping something interesting might appear” (Adrian). Participants were constantly going back and forth between the physical and online space.

Being connected to the Internet constantly . . . makes it very tempting and very easy to tune out. (Jacob)

This is a different type of distraction that participants in this study encountered. They could decide how and whether to respond to direct incoming messages since they were familiar with mobile phones and IM uses. However, they had no previous experience of coping with their constant monitoring of the cyber world. Evelyn struggled with “habitual checking of Facebook and e-mails.” Many participants thought of the social network applications on the tablets as temptations during other activities. They were experiencing what Turkle (2008) highlights as the importance of undivided attention to ourselves and how the tethering with mobile devices takes time away from such self-reflection.

Mobile tablet devices certainly have increased the connected presence and the opportunity to be copresent with others. “No matter what I do, I always find myself on Facebook (Noah)” was the type of response participants
expressed with regard to how pervasive the new device had become in their everyday lives. Participants had to formulate new strategies to practice involvement shields due to this constant existence online. Mobile media has enabled ubiquitous access to and the continuous presence in the online world. Instead of blocking others from contacting, users had to devise a strategy to stop themselves from constant monitoring. The act of disconnecting from the ambient virtual copresence was found to be a prevalent strategy among the participants, especially when they felt the need to focus on a task.

Most of the discourse about mobile media is built around the feeling of connection with which mobile media provide people. Less attention has been paid to how people choose to disconnect and recover their own personal space. Due to mobile media and the connectivity, the distinction between private and public space is not always clear. It is sometimes the personal space that is compromised due to the connectedness. Mobile connectivity enables users to be online all the time without having to “go online.” Since they are already online, the act of disconnection is necessary if one wanted to “go off-line.”

Having to pull back from the temptation of virtual copresence, users devised new types of involvement shields. One of the method was to physically move away from the device. For example, participants frequently “left the iPad behind” (Dot) or simply did “not use it in lectures” (Kathryn) or “banished the iPad to the lounge room” (Jean). Not putting it on the desk when they needed to study was another method of disconnection. Another method was to customize the iPads during certain periods so that they would be less tempted to play around with it. Anna deletes distracting apps during exam period and re INSTALLS them afterwards. Alex initiates self-control by closing or deleting apps that are not relevant to the main task. In contrast, Elizabeth opens many other useful applications so that she will not get tempted to go on Facebook. Turning the volume down, so that they will not be distracted by the notification sounds (Donald) was another effective way of coping with the continuous connected presence.

Conclusion

Mobile tablet devices provide users with continuous and ubiquitous access to the Internet, enabling them to find information efficiently and providing the opportunity to be constantly connected to other people. The portable size and mobile nature of the device were perceived of as an enormous advantage to novel users.

During the novelty phase when users were exploring and experimenting with the device, participants not only spent most of their screen time on their iPads but also had a very optimistic outlook. In the sixth month of use, participants were asked to look back on their uses. Most of them mentioned how “it has taken productivity to a new level” (Brian), how “quickly you can do things on it” (Sophia), and how they were “getting too attached to technology” (Henry). Realizing that they have to take control over the new challenges, such as managing distraction, occurs at a much later stage.

This study focused on the always with feature, which the new users found to be challenging particularly when they were trying to focus on one task or one social setting. Being always with the device meant that the users were situated in continuous contact with other users who were not physically in the same space.

The situation of being always with the device resulted in a new state of continuous connected presence with people in cyberspace. While this was not perceived to be particularly a negative experience, users had to adopt new strategies to avoid unwanted interaction and control when and with whom they communicate. Thus users had to develop new types of involvement shields when they were “with” their tablets. Due to the connected presence, users acquired a habit of constantly monitoring their online networks and deciding when to develop the situation into copresence and communicate with others. Not only were they managing the incoming messages, they were also dealing with their own urge to monitor or contact those who were colocated. Constantly having to make decisions about whether or not to switch from colocation to copresence was the new challenge the users encountered. The main methods of shielding were to move away from the virtual space physically or to delete the applications. Rather than having to shield themselves from unwanted or interruptive communication initiated by others, they had to stop themselves from their own monitoring.

Participants quickly found the position of the tablet within the spectrum of various digital devices, situating it between the laptop and mobile phone. This led them to perceive of the device to be an extension of self, identifying themselves with the device and using it as a portal to the outer world. But they also felt the need to develop a front gate that they could open or close as they deemed as necessary.

This study observed participants over the course of 1 year after giving mobile tablet devices to users who had never owned one before. During the first few months, there was an obvious novelty phase where users play around and experiment with the device. Eventually they were able to stabilize the usage and reflect on their uses. The results in this study accounts for any changes over time among the study participants. However, the study was exploratory and based on a small quota sample within a university in Australia. Thus further investigation of a broader population is needed to confirm and elaborate the findings.

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