



Another look at 'being there' experiences in digital media: Exploring connections of telepresence with mental imagery



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ABSTRACT

Substantial multidisciplinary research has established foundational support for the consumer behaviour phenomenon that underlies the experience of telepresence within online social networks and other digital media products that provide hedonistic value. A review of major perspectives in this field provides justification of the important role mental imagery processes play in the phenomenon of telepresence. In line with this, we propose to extend existing approaches to mental imagery to reach the context of user experiences in digital media, and to theoretically connect telepresence with mental imagery. On this basis, and in conjunction with investigations bringing to light processes that intervene in the terrain of mental imagery, we present an integrative conceptual framework concerned with telepresence, and discuss the role of telepresence within a user's hedonistic usage of digital media products.

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1. Introduction

Imagine someone, mid-forties, who accepts an invitation through an online social network to reunite with their class from secondary school. After years without any news from most of their former classmates, they join the online group, surf the content and chat. When they access the network, they feel that they are present in a shared and virtual space, where they meet their classmates again and have the opportunity to enjoy a conversation. The content triggers reminiscences about their school days and other associated memories from that time. While they surf and interact, they think about what their classmates have become, and they fantasise online about a face-to-face school reunion. The online experience turns out to be so enjoyable that they lose interest in their immediate physical environment. Nothing but events related to the online social network seem to matter.

As the vignette above suggests, an attractive element of the use of online social networks banks on the user 'being there', in the heart of the virtual space afforded by the technology. This sensation, equally termed telepresence and spatial presence (Schubert, 2009), manifests as seeing things and 'living' events presented through the digital technology as if they were actually happening right there and then on terra firma (Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Steuer, 1992). Feelings of 'being there' accompany the elaboration of thought, via recreated memories, anticipatory construction or by using the imagination (Kim & Biocca, 1997), which intensifies the

enjoyment of using the technology (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003; Skalski, Tamborini, Shelton, Buncher, & Lindmark, 2011; Tamborini & Skalski, 2009). This capacity of telepresence to provide enjoyment makes it a central facet of hedonistic and entertaining consumption experiences, through which users take pleasure in imaginative constructions of reality (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). In recent years consumers have adopted online social networks, and many other interactive media products based on computer technologies (including websites, e-books, videogames, and virtual worlds) attracted, precisely, by the on-demand access to digital representations, where they can situate themselves, and the creative co-creation being provided (Manovich, 2001). Often known as digital media, these interactive products have increasingly gained legitimacy. They have done so among businesses willing to offer the type of hedonistic services and ubiquitous entertainment that many consumers now demand (Deloitte, 2010).

Due to the possible impact of feelings of 'being there' on the formation of optimal online-experiences for consumers and their willingness to re-use the digital media (Jung, 2011), a thorough understanding of telepresence is crucial to the design and marketing of digital media products. Not surprisingly, the consumer's sense of telepresence in digital media has garnered attention from a range of disciplines including computer sciences, behavioural sciences, and communication sciences. Until now, many useful and valuable insights have been offered about the antecedents of telepresence in virtual environments (for a review, see for example Lee, 2004b), its variety of forms (e.g. Keng & Lin, 2006; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Shen & Khalifa, 2008), as well as its consequences in the formation of enjoyment feelings and the state of flow (e.g. Nah, Eschenbrenner, & DeWester, 2011; Novak, Hoffman, & Yung,

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2000). Yet attempts to establish the domain and nature of telepresence have been scarce (see Lee, 2004a), and the connections between telepresence and important constructs in consumer behaviour and media psychology – such as cognitive elaboration, narrative transportation or mental imagery – remain unclear (Wirth et al., 2007). For instance, Schubert, Friedmann, and Regenbrecht (2001) delimited telepresence and distinguished it from other explanatory constructs on the basis of a factor-analytic study. However, they failed to elaborate this distinction starting from a theoretical framework, which explains what telepresence is and how it is formed. For their part, attempts to theoretically conceptualise telepresence (e.g. Minsky, 1980; Steuer, 1992) have been majorly oriented by technological approaches, so they did not consider other constructs related to cognitive and mental imagery processes nor the possible areas where they overlap with telepresence.

Importantly, there is scant knowledge about the possible demarcation lines and bonds between telepresence and mental imagery's subjective processes. We do know that media provides the pertinent external stimuli that lead users to vividly see things in their minds' eye (Finke, 1989). By using these internal processes, users reconstruct actual perceptions or generate brand new ideas, feelings, objects or events that resemble the experience of actually perceiving (see Roedelein, 2004). Like the online consumer in the opening vignette, individuals energised by digital media content might take part in mental imagery processes that place them in other worlds. These other worlds are worlds that fire up memories, and anticipate or create (fiction) events. These can all come in the shape of multisensory images, flights of fancy, or fantasies that involve other users who are on the virtual network.

Mental imagery is a central construct with strong potential to explain consumers' hedonistic experiences (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), like countless experiences on the social web (and other digital media) in which users are there purely to enjoy themselves and have fun. However, most previous research in telepresence has not given attention to mental imagery processes and has ignored possible intersections between these two concepts (e.g. Minsky, 1980; Paulos & Canny, 2001). Instead of recognizing the role of cognition and mental imagery on the formation of telepresence, they position telepresence in the terrain of perceptual and non-internal phenomena (for a discussion, see Section 2). Only a smattering of studies has looked into the links between telepresence and non-central elements of mental imagery processes. These include analyses about the influence of the individual's ability to engage in mental imagery in their sense of telepresence (e.g. Keng & Lin, 2006; Sas & O'Hare, 2003; Thornson, Goldiez, & Le, 2009; Weibel, Wissmath, & Mast, 2011). Others (e.g. Kim & Biocca, 1997) have connected telepresence with the mental imagery elicited in pure imaginative and inner terrains, different from virtual environments. Rather than the person feeling present in a virtual environment, here the user creates a fictional story in their mind, then imagines and feels that they are present within it.

Interestingly, investigation into the role of mental imagery in the specific context of consumption has been heavily focused on conventional environments and media (e.g. Bolls, 2007; Mikhailitchenko, Javalgi, Mikhailitchenko, & Laroche, 2009). Besides, imagery research in consumption has mostly concentrated its studies on pre-purchase stages and analysed the persuasive impact of imagery-evoking communications (e.g. Burns, Biswas, & Babin, 1993; Oliver, Robertson, & Mitchell, 1993; Unnava & Burnkrant, 1991). In addition, many of these studies, instead of directly examining mental imagery, have inferred the existence of imaginal processes from the effects of imagery-evoking marketing strategies on certain consumption-related outcomes, such as brand recall, attitude and purchase intention (see Babin, Burns, & Biswas, 1992).

Now though, mental imagery is drumming up interest in consumer behaviour research to examine its effect on the purchase intention of individuals who vicariously daydream about consuming a marketed product (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Molesworth, 2009). Few studies have delved into the impact of mental imagery on consumption experiences (e.g. Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; MacInnis & Price, 1987), and, as far as we can tell, only three have ever assessed mental imagery's role in the actual usage of digital media products (Jenkins, Molesworth, & Eccles, 2010; Molesworth, 2009; Simon, 2010). Moreover, in none of these cases has an explicit link been built between the imagery processes, elicited by the digital media, and the feelings of being present in the virtual (and sometimes purely fictional) domain afforded by the technology.

This article seeks to connect the dots and merge those distinct lines of investigation currently being developed in telepresence and mental imagery. By doing so, we propose to extend current knowledge regarding the user's experience of mental imagery within traditional media, and explore uncharted territory of their imaginal processes in digital media usage. This will offer a clearer understanding of the role that complex internal processes play in the phenomenon that is telepresence in digital media.

2. A sense of 'being there' and the mental imagery domain: a primer

Many users feel like they are actually present in the virtual environment created by the medium when they use online social networks and other digital media products. Their attention is deflected from paramount reality (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). The sensation can be vivid and pleasurable for users. They might feel thrilled at the opportunity to meet other real people (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003; Shen & Khalifa, 2008), or interact with objects, content and artificial characters that do not exist in physical environments (Biocca, 1997).

The concept of telepresence (Minsky, 1980; Steuer, 1992) – also termed virtual presence (Sheridan, 1992) and spatial presence (Schubert, 2009; Wirth et al., 2007) – stems from researchers working in engineering and computer sciences (e.g. Minsky, 1980; Sheridan, 1992; Slater & Usoh, 1993). These researchers started to explore the illusion of being present in remote spaces mediated by a computer while they were dealing with design aspects in robotics and computer-based environments. Shortly afterwards, a wider spectrum of disciplines – including marketing, communication sciences and behavioural sciences – focussed their attention on the feeling of telepresence and acknowledged it as a central concept in the study of digital media usage experiences (e.g. Fiore, Kim, & Lee, 2005b; Fortin & Dholakia, 2005; Jung, 2011; Nelson, Yaros, & Keum, 2006; Weisberg, Te'eni, & Arman, 2011). In line with this, the concept of telepresence spread to include different forms or typologies of feelings throughout a range of digital media products (e.g. Baños et al., 2004; Lessiter, Freeman, Keogh, & Davidoff, 2001). Since interest in telepresence has risen, substantial research has been developed to identify technological and user factors that trigger telepresence formation (see Lee, 2004b; Mennecke, Triplett, Hassall, Conde, & Heer, 2011; Sacau, Laarni, & Hartmann, 2008). Some attempts have also been made to address the role of telepresence activating states of flow (Nah et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2000; Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012; Zaman, Anandarajan, & Dai, 2010), which in turn produce the hedonistic outcome of an enjoyable experience (Nah et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2000). In addition, many other studies have explored various forms of telepresence (Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Shen & Khalifa, 2008). Some of the forms examined are of a consumer's feelings of one's own existence in the virtual environment

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