**User Experience and Artificial Intelligence Assignment5**

**Topic: Social Presence, Theory of Mind**

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**Not Just a Tool, But a Relationship: Rethinking Social Presence**

One of the most striking changes I’ve noticed when interacting with modern AI systems—like ChatGPT, Siri, or Alexa—is that they no longer feel like tools. Instead, they increasingly feel like partners. There’s a subtle but growing sense that I’m not just operating a system, but coexisting with something. That feeling is at the heart of Social Presence.

But social presence isn’t simply about recognizing that “something” is there. Recent studies show that this sense of presence is tied to emotional trust, comfort, and imagined relational roles. When people imagine Siri as a coworker, supervisor, or friend, they report greater comfort and trust. Interestingly, while functional tasks led to higher cognitive trust, social tasks didn’t necessarily increase emotional trust. This suggests that while AI can be more than just a tool, its ability to form emotional bonds depends on specific conditions.

To me, this highlights the importance of designing AI not just for functionality, but for relational framing. People respond not to features, but to meaningful roles. And those roles aren’t defined by voice or interface alone—they’re shaped by how we interpret the AI’s intentions, personality, and presence.

**Theory of Mind Is a Two-Way Imagination**

Theory of Mind—our ability to infer others’ intentions, beliefs, and feelings—is traditionally considered a uniquely human trait. But can we apply it to AI? Not in the literal sense. Still, there are clearly moments when users project Theory of Mind onto machines.

What matters most isn’t whether AI actually “understands” us, but whether it makes us feel understood. When Siri remembers what I said, gives consistent feedback, or calls me by name, I begin to sense intentionality. The moment I feel that, I unconsciously treat the AI as a thinking being. That’s the gateway to Theory of Mind.

This is a kind of two-way imaginative process. AI works hard to appear human-like, and in return, we start interpreting its actions as if they stem from intent. Studies show this as well—users' trust in AI ("faith") was affected by the gender match between the user and the Siri voice, and social presence correlated more with technical familiaritythan with surface-level demographics.

We are paradoxical: we want AI to understand us, but if it feels toohuman, it becomes uncanny; if it feels too robotic, it becomes untrustworthy. Somewhere in between, AI must be tuned to exist in a delicate space between human-likeness and machine identity.

**AI Doesn’t Need to Replace Humans—It Can Complement Us**

In fields like education, eldercare, or fitness, a persistent question is whether AI can replacehuman roles. But for me, the more important question is:  
Does it have to?

One study on older adults using robot and human coaches in exergame programs found that while robots could create a sense of automated social presence, humans were still perceived as warmer and more competent. And yet, that didn’t mean the robots were useless. On the contrary, participants still found them meaningful—just in complementary, supportive roles.

This suggests that AI doesn’t need to pass as human or outperform humans emotionally. Instead, it can thrive in assisting and augmenting roles—especially where consistency, responsiveness, and neutrality are valued. In those contexts, people don’t require full empathy or emotional depth. What they need is reliable collaboration, emotional clarity, and predictable rhythm.

I believe we should stop holding AI to the unrealistic standard of “perfect human mimicry.” The goal should not be to replace but to extend what humans can do—especially in areas where emotional labor is heavy or cognitive load is high.

**From Talking Machines to Workable Partners**

Social Presence and Theory of Mind are not just technical metrics. They reflect how humans try to make sense of technology relationally. The reason AI increasingly feels like it has presence or intent isn’t just due to better algorithms—but because we are inventing new ways to live alongside it.

The more human AI seems, the more trust it should earn—right? Not always. In some cases, too muchhuman-likeness triggers discomfort, while a bit of emotional distance provides a safer, more predictable experience. That’s why we should stop aiming for human replicas, and instead focus on building AI that is human-compatible—socially legible, emotionally clear, and functionally trustworthy.

AI is no longer just a calculator or search tool. It’s becoming a participant in our shared reality. And that means our task isn’t simply to make AI more human-like, but to make it harmonize with human ways of thinking, feeling, and relating.

What matters most isn’t whether the AI can mimic empathy—it’s whether we can move together in rhythm.