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Sharing my Life with You: Investigating Location Sharing and Its Relational Consequences in Close Relationships

Continuous location sharing (CLS) has become part of the everyday infrastructure through which individuals stay connected with those close to them, yet how it shapes relationships from the inside remains poorly understood. Communication research has theorized mediated togetherness mainly through Licoppe's (2004) concept of connected presence, developed for discrete mobile phone contact, while family research has focused primarily on hierarchical settings such as parental monitoring of children, and studies of location sharing between adults have relied on short-term, hypothetical designs that cannot capture how the practice settles into relational routine over time. How permanent mutual visibility reshapes communication, trust, and relational norms in symmetric close relationships among adults has received little empirical attention. Therefore, this study asks how individuals experience relational dynamics that emerge from continuous location sharing, and how these dynamics reshape their relationships over time. Data were collected over 14 days using experience sampling method (ESM) with nine purposively sampled dyads ($N = 18$) sharing their location via Apple Find My, recruited for established, symmetric close relationships. The 14-day period follows established standards in ESM research, where a two-week record-keeping window is considered sufficient to yield a stable and generalizable estimate of everyday social life without overburdening participants. This window captures the onset and early habituation of these dynamics, though longer-term stability remains an open question we address alongside the possibility that participation itself heightened participants' awareness of their own sharing behavior. These were complemented by semi-structured individual interviews, theoretically sampled from the ESM sample and structured around the critical incident technique, which anchored interviews in concrete episodes where participants noticed discomfort, reassurance, or conflict tied to location sharing. Data were analyzed drawing on elements from grounded theory, namely theoretical sampling, iterative coding, and constant comparison, using Licoppe's (2004) connected presence, which describes how mediated contact sustains an ongoing sense of togetherness between exchanges, as a sensitizing theoretical lens. The analysis reveals a three-phase process model of Ambient Connected Presence, with transitions identified through recurring shifts in how participants described and justified their sharing across diary entries and incidents. Individuals initially adopt CLS for concrete, goal-directed purposes, either to coordinate logistics or to gain reassurance, without intending permanent visibility. Over time, the practice habituates not through active renewal but through inaction, producing a silent agreement in which discontinuing sharing becomes socially costlier than maintaining it. In the third phase, CLS generates intended outcomes such as connectedness and trust alongside unintended ones. Hence, we theorize communication substitution and structural control ambivalence. The first captures how passive location awareness replaced verbal check-ins about whereabouts. The latter explains the tension between reassurance and its surveillance-like character, present even in healthy, symmetric relationships. Findings extend Licoppe's concept of connected presence by showing how it is reconstituted under automated, passive visibility. The moving location coordinate becomes the new silent phatic act of the relationship, sustaining presence without any deliberate communicative contribution from either party. For designers, low-friction exit options and prompts that distinguish situational from permanent sharing are needed. For regulators, voluntary interpersonal tracking represents a structural gap that existing data protection legislation does not address.