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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jm1089k>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 32(32)

ISSN

1069-7977

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Publication Date

2010

Peer reviewed

The importance of being present: The effect of a real or videotaped person on visual attention

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Abstract: How does visual attention operate in social contexts? Most research exploring this question has used picture or video paradigms that contain social stimuli but do not provide any opportunity for social interaction with the participant. In our study, we monitored participants' eye movements as they sat in a waiting room. Participants waited while either a confederate quietly completed a questionnaire, or while a video of the same confederate filling out the questionnaire was displayed on a nearby computer. Participants' fixation patterns of real vs. videotaped confederates indicated that participants actively avoided looking at the real person, while they looked more and for longer at the videotaped confederate. These results demonstrate the importance of social presence on visual attention and suggest that video- or picture-based studies of social attention are measuring performance and drawing conclusions that do not accurately reflect the real effect of social presence on visual attention.