Does Embodiment Matter? Evaluating Social Presence, Comfort and Authenticity in Robot-Guided Meditation

Ellie Green
School of Computing Science
University of Glasgow
Glasgow, United Kingdom
2733434g@student.gla.ac.uk

Andrew Logan Blair
School of Computing Science
University of Glasgow
Glasgow, United Kingdom
a.blair.2@research.gla.ac.uk

Mary Ellen Foster
School of Computing Science
University of Glasgow
Glasgow, United Kingdom
maryellen.foster@glasgow.ac.uk

Abstract

Guided meditation is predominantly delivered through audio-only media or in-person sessions, yet social robots may offer a richer form of interaction through physical embodiment. To investigate this, we implemented a loving-kindness meditation on the Furhat robot and compared user responses to the robot-guided meditation to an equivalent audio-only condition. Social presence was measured on a quantitative survey, alongside qualitative post-experiment interviews. Results showed significantly higher social presence scores in the embodied condition, with participants reporting higher levels of engagement and companionship. While embodiment did not increase perceived authenticity, participants were comfortable with the robot in the structure of a human-designed meditation. These findings suggest that physical embodiment can meaningfully enhance meditation experiences through social presence, as long as the design avoids intrusiveness or false human equivalence.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; *User studies*; • **Applied computing** → **Consumer health**.

Keywords

human-robot interaction, conversational interfaces, meditation, health, embodiment

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1 Introduction

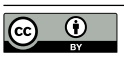
Along with other artificial systems designed to engage in natural and emotionally meaningful conversation with humans, social robots are increasingly found in settings that were once considered exclusively human domains. This includes not only healthcare and educational settings, where Socially Assistive Robots in particular are common and well-studied [5, 11, 14], but also more spiritual [4, 24] and personally intimate, wellbeing contexts [12, 22]. The risks of AI companions in mental-health spaces are well-documented [17], and this is not the space we consider here; rather, we address the lower-stakes task of guided meditation, which is a traditionally spiritual task and one that demands qualities that are often the hardest for a robot to deliver: emotional warmth, calm attentiveness and a sense of co-presence.

An important consideration is *social presence* [10]: the sense of "being with another". In the context of Human-Robot Interaction (HRI), this framing is particularly relevant: does a user perceive a robot as having a genuine sense of a person with meaningful intelligence, intention and emotional response [3]? A system that successfully conveys attentiveness, responsiveness and emotional expressiveness can foster a sense of presence. With the increase in social robots and AI conversational assistants, social presence is forecast to become a defining element of everyday media experience, and therefore a core consideration in HRI research [6]. Intuitively, a physically co-present robot should provide more sense of social presence than a disembodied, speech-only agent, although it has been recently highlighted that physical embodiment may introduce its own challenges such as perceived uncanniness and discomfort [18]. Particularly in our target use case of guided meditation, the choice between an audio-only interface and a physical robot is not entirely clear: the robot might be preferred precisely because the visible social presence enhances engagement, or the robot itself could disrupt the calm and introspective nature of the meditation.

Our overall goal is therefore to examine the extent to which an embodied robot affects perceived social presence, comfort, and authenticity in a meditation experience, when compared to a voice-only condition. We examine this question by implementing a guided meditation application and comparing participant responses to robot-delivered meditation with responses to an equivalent audio-only condition. Using a combination of quantitative responses on a validated social-presence questionnaire with the qualitative analysis of interview data, we found that embodiment can meaningfully enhance meditative experiences through strong sense of social presence, as long as design is carefully considered to prevent intrusiveness and replication of real human connection.

2 System

We implemented a conversational system based on loving-kindness meditation (LKM), a meditation style that is accessible and emotionally intuitive for beginners, relying on sending feelings of hope and compassion towards yourself and others. LKM has been shown to promote positive emotional states, compassion and social connectedness while reducing negative states such as anxiety and



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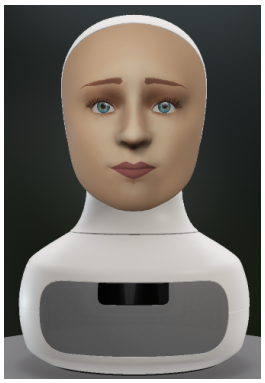

Figure 1: Appearance of the Furhat robot, projecting the 'Isabel' face.

depression [16] and to enhance activation of brain regions associated with emotional processing and empathy [9]. The system interactions were based on existing LKM scripts [13, 26], both of which follow a similar structure: participants are asked to relax, think of a loved one, and then repeat phrases wishing safety, health and happiness to that person. The meditation then moves on and the participant projects this love to several different people and places.

Since LKM is a guided style, the system interaction follows a largely linear progression through a series of conversational states, guiding the user sequentially through reflective prompts and pauses for contemplation. There are mechanisms to support users if they experience hesitation or uncertainty, and the user can also exit the meditation at any point. The interaction was intentionally designed without excessive branching to avoid disrupting the calm and reflective nature of the meditation. The persona was designed to be calm, humble, and compassionate: a supportive meditation guide, rather than a task-based assistant. The synthesised voice was chosen to support this persona: it used a local accent and was slow-paced, slightly lower in pitch than the default, and soft in tone.

For the embodied version of the system, we used the Furhat robot [1], combining the selected voice with a relatively neutral, adult human female face. Ideally, we would have liked to use a gender-neutral appearance, as gender presentation in robots has been shown to activate stereotypes and influence user expectations in ways that are very difficult to control [20]; however, since the Furhat platform does not easily support a gender-neutral appearance, the choice was made to use a basic Furhat template of a woman's face. Woman-presenting avatars are commonly used in electronic-health applications, and are often perceived as preferable to other avatar designs [23].

Non-verbal behaviour was selected to support the designed persona and interaction style: for example, the robot would maintain eye contact during the interaction, smile to indicate warmth, provide gentle nods as backchannel signals, and avoid sharp or dramatic gestures. Figure 1 shows the final selected robot appearance.

3 Method

We carried out a within-participants user study where each participant experienced both versions of the system, a robot-guided meditation and an audio-only meditation. Ten participants were recruited for this study: all participants were undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 23. While this sample size is modest, it is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study and with comparable within-subjects HRI studies in literature [25].

Each session involved three main stages: a pre-experiment questionnaire, two guided meditations, and a post-experiment interview. The pre-experiment questionnaire was designed to capture background information: previous experience with meditation, familiarity with social robots, and general comfort level with technology. Following this, participants completed two guided meditation sessions: one delivered by the Furhat robot and one delivered in an audio-only format. All participants experienced both conditions and the order was randomised for each participant, to minimise ordering effects such as fatigue or expectation bias [8].

After each meditation session, the participant completed a Likert-scale questionnaire that consisted of fifteen statements related to perceived social presence and overall experience. The first fourteen statements, which were based on a previous study [10], were divided into five categories: *Presence*, *Engagement*, *Emotional Support*, *Perceived Attention*, and *Realism/Naturalness*. The final statement asked the participant whether they felt aware during the interaction that the meditation guide was not human.

After completing both meditations, the participant took part in a semi-structured interview allowing participants to reflect on their experiences in more depth and to compare the two conditions. Mainly open-ended questions were used, to make sure that participants could discuss their comfort levels, perceived presence and connection with the guide, and overall attitudes towards the use of social robots in intimate social contexts. Participants were also asked directly which condition they preferred.

3.1 Ethical Considerations

Given that this study involves human participants engaging in a personally intimate activity, ethical considerations were central to the design of the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from our university before beginning, and measures were taken to make sure that the study was conducted responsibly and with appropriate care for participant wellbeing. All participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet, outlining the purpose of the study, what their participation would involve, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participation was entirely voluntary and no incentives were offered that could have influenced decisions to take part. To protect participant anonymity, all data was anonymised at the point of collection and participants were assigned numerical identifiers, and the data was only accessed by the research team. The meditation context introduced additional complexity around emotional sensitivity. Participants were made aware in the information sheet that the guided meditation could arouse unexpected emotional responses and were reminded of their right to stop the session at any point if they felt uncomfortable. Participants were also fully debriefed on the study's aims at the end.

4 Results

The data collected for this experiment was analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques, enabling statistical comparison of the two conditions along with a deeper interpretation of participant experiences.

4.1 Quantitative Results

To analyse the results on the social-presence questionnaire, the average values for each category of social presence were calculated (Figure 2). A clear and consistent pattern emerges from this visualisation: the Furhat condition appears to score higher than the audio-only condition across all five categories, especially in the categories of attentiveness and naturalness. To determine whether the observed differences were statistically significant, a paired Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted on the mean overall scores (the rightmost set of bars). On the overall scores, the test indicated ($W=3.5, p=0.014$) that the Furhat-guided meditation had a significantly higher perceived social presence compared to the disembodied, audio-only condition.

4.2 Qualitative Results

We consider the responses to the pre-experiment questionnaire as well as the semi-structured interview. The results are reported descriptively, with supporting excerpts from participant responses where appropriate.

4.2.1 Pre-Experiment Questionnaire Insights. The short questionnaire completed prior to the experiment revealed some notable differences in participants' prior experience with meditation. Four participants reporting having previous experiences with meditative practices, with one reporting that they currently meditate regularly. The participant who regularly meditated had clearer expectations for the system, and also gave the harshest feedback on the Furhat meditation, whereas less experienced participants tended to approach the session with fewer preconceived notions. None of the participants reported having prior experiences with an embodied social robot; however, approximately half of the participants were computer science students, so quite likely have a baseline familiarity with emerging technologies and conversational interfaces.

4.2.2 Thematic Analysis of Interview Data. An open coding process was employed, where text was labelled with descriptive codes capturing the sentiment of each response, and then grouped together into broader emergent themes. This approach allowed patterns and recurring themes across participants to be identified and developed. The key themes developed are presented below, alongside some representative quotes.

Embodied Presence Enhances Experience. A prominent theme was that the physical presence of the robot enhanced the meditation experience, contributing to a stronger sense of engagement and social presence. This sense of presence was not limited to just visual perception, but also extended to physical awareness of the robot in the environment. One participant perfectly described how this added to the experience:

> *"It[the Furhat robot]'s very shiny so you could feel the heat coming through... that's like a sense of presence"*

Similarly, participants reported a feeling that "something was there" during the meditation, which contributed to comfort and immersion during the experience. Others described the robot as feeling like a companion during the session, even if it was not something human-like. Across most interviews, participants associated the embodied nature of the robot with a strong sense of presence, compared to the audio-only condition.

Initial Discomfort Diminishing Over Time. Another recurring theme was initial discomfort with the robot, which often diminished over the course of the interaction. Several participants described that the experience felt unusual or "weird" at first, but became more comfortable as the session progressed and they adjusted to the Furhat's presence:

> *"It was a bit weird at first, but once I closed my eyes, it was quite nice."*

In several cases, participants chose to close their eyes during the experience and reported that this reduced their awareness of the robot as an artificial entity and allowed them to engage more with the meditation, in some ways creating an experience more similar to the audio-only condition.

Persistent Feeling of Being Observed. This pattern of gaining comfort over time was not universal and two of the participants reported persistent discomfort, particularly relating to the feeling of being observed. One participant noted:

> *"I was kind of nervous whether or not she was watching me"*

This suggests variability in how participants respond to embodied agents, with some requiring time to adjust and others remaining more cautious throughout.

Importance of Clear Boundaries. Participants expressed views on the role of the robot, highlighting the importance of maintaining clear boundaries. Most participants preferred to frame the robot as a guide, rather than a replacement for human interaction. There was a general consensus that the robot should support reflection without emotional involvement:

> *"The fact it didn't really ask questions about me made it non-invasive."*

Concerns about over-dependence on a system like this were raised repeatedly:

> *"You're kind of running the risk of somebody becoming too dependent on something that's not a person"*

Users placed importance on the system keeping an appropriate distance: they were comfortable with the robot acting as a structured guide, but were cautious about expanding its role into more emotionally sensitive and complex domains.

Preference for the Robot Guide. The majority of participants (8/10) expressed a preference for the robot-guided meditation over the audio-only meditation. The robot was commonly described as more engaging and personable, with the physical presence improving the experience:

> *"It felt slightly more personal... there was something there that I could sense"*

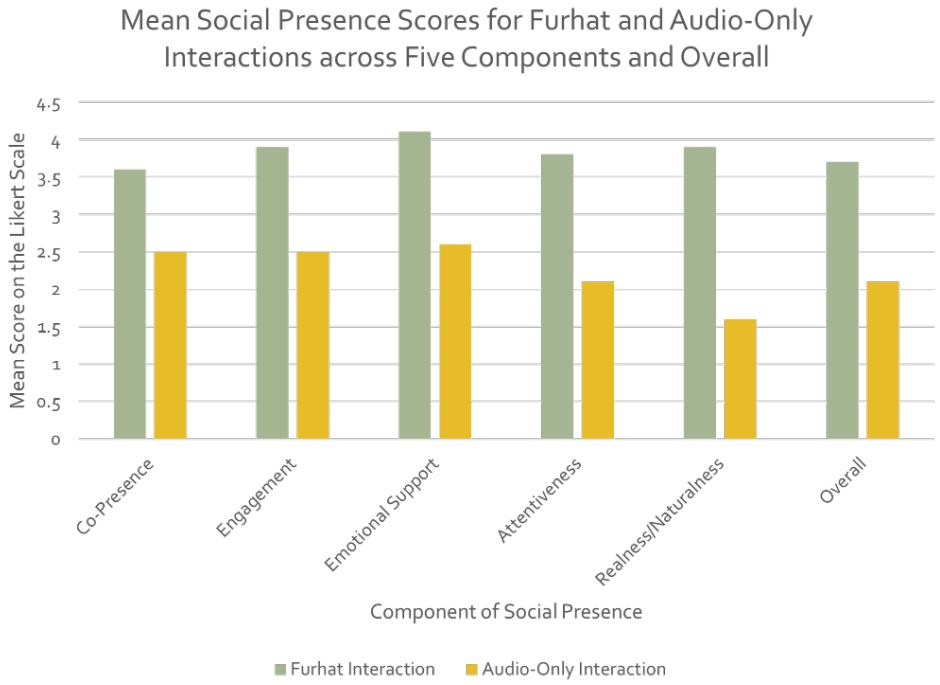

Figure 2: Mean results across five components and overall for the social-presence questionnaire

Many participants remarked that they found this form of interaction more engaging than a traditional audio guide and enjoyed it more. Even the two participants who preferred the audio condition did acknowledge that the robot created a stronger sense of presence; they just personally did not like it and felt like they were being watched.

5 Discussion

The results of the user study clearly demonstrate that embodiment has a strong positive effect on perceived social presence and engagement, in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses. These findings align with existing research in human-robot interaction, which suggests that physical embodiment enhances social presence by providing spatial cues, physical grounding and perceived agency [15]. However, it is important to note that this increased engagement did not necessarily imply deeper emotional connection or human equivalence. Instead, participants appeared to engage with the robot as a present but non-human entity, suggesting that embodiment enhances interaction without fully replicating human experience. Embodied interaction appears to enhance social presence without needing users to believe that the robot is genuinely human or alive—a finding consistent with the assertion that "social presence occurs when users feel that a form, behaviour, or sensory experience indicates the presence of another intelligence" [2], suggesting that the value of physical presence in this context lies in enriching the meditation experience, rather than simulating a genuine human connection.

The effect of embodiment on user comfort was nuanced, revealing both positive and negative influences. Using the quantitative social presence data, the higher average scores for the robot suggest that users found this interaction more comfortable and engaging overall. Qualitative findings also supported this, with many participants describing the feeling of being relaxed and at ease during the robot-guided meditation, although for many this comfort only developed over time. This finding is consistent with research on robot acceptance that highlights the role of prior exposure in shaping user attitudes [21]. The fact that none of the participants had prior experience with an embodied social robot meant that their baseline expectations were likely shaped by cultural representation of robots [19] that tend to emphasise the uncanny instead of the calm and supportive. Not all participants experienced this transition: a few reported persistent discomfort, primarily associated with the feeling of being observed.

The findings suggest that embodiment does not significantly enhance perceived authenticity, despite increasing social presence: most participants agreed with the statement *I was constantly aware that the guide was not a real social presence.* This distinction between social presence and authenticity is important: while embodiment increased the feeling of social presence, it did not blur the boundary between human and machine. The results show that a robot can generate a sense of co-presence and engagement without users perceiving it as a genuine social being.

There is a clear indication of preference for embodied guidance over audio-only interaction, although this does not come without complexity. A key reason for this preference appears to be the increased sense of presence and immersion: the robot created a more

focused and contained environment for the meditation, reducing distractions and enhancing engagement. However, this preference was not unanimous, and some preferred the audio-only condition due to its non-intrusive nature, particularly when it came to perceived observation. The participants who preferred audio did not reject the robot because they felt it failed technically or felt robotic, they rejected it because the dynamic it introduced conflicted with their personal views of how meditation should be. A more adaptive system that could change its presence and attentiveness based on individual user preferences might address this variability more effectively than a single fixed interaction design.

6 Summary, Limitations, and Future Directions

We investigated how embodiment enhances or diminishes perceived social presence, comfort and authenticity in a meditation experience, using a loving-kindness guided meditation system implemented on a Furhat robot. We carried out a mixed-methods, within-participants user study with ten participants, each of whom experienced the embodied meditation alongside a speech-only version. Perceived social presence was measured quantitatively, while qualitative data was gathered through post-experiment semi-structured interviews. The results showed that the Furhat condition generated higher perceived social presence than the audio-only condition on average; qualitative findings reinforced these results, with the majority of participants describing a stronger sense of engagement and companionship with the robot guide. The effect on user comfort was more variable, with many participants finding the embodied interaction initially uncomfortable, and a small subset of participants reporting discomfort throughout the session due to feelings of being observed. On the topic of authenticity, participants consistently recognised the robot as an artificial entity, even when they felt significant social presence and comfort with it. The value of the physical embodiment in this context does not lie in approximating human presence, but in creating a distinct kind of calm and guiding presence that audio cannot provide on its own.

The most notable limitation of this study is its sample size: with ten participants, the study was appropriately exploratory and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was suitable for the small sample with ordinal data, but a larger sample would have allowed for more powerful quantitative analysis. Future work would benefit from using a substantially larger and more demographically diverse group of participants: for example, there were indications in the results that participants who had more experience with meditation had a particularly negative response to the robot embodiment. A second limitation is the shortness of each interaction. Research on robot acceptance [7] suggests that attitudes become more positive with frequent interaction, suggesting that a longitudinal study where participants interact with the robot over a period of days, weeks or months could prove more insightful, shedding more light on whether comfort evolves over time and whether the discomfort reported by some participants is a persistent problem or just a temporary adjustment effect.

Overall, this work highlights how embodiment can enrich meditation interfaces not by approximating human authenticity, but by offering a carefully bounded sense of authenticity that is appropriate to CUIs in this type of personally intimate space.

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