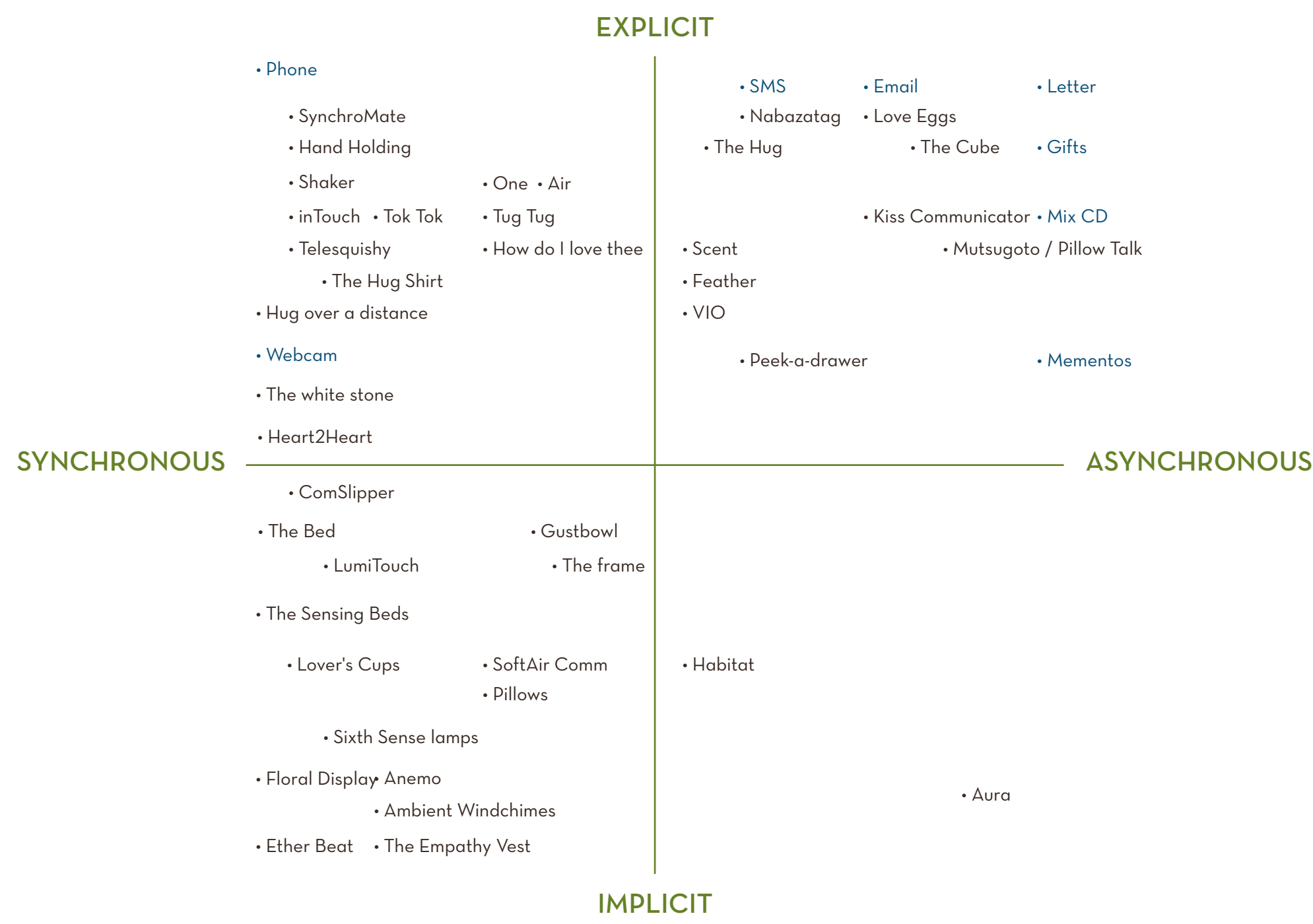


# Slow Messaging

Intimate communication for couples living at a distance

Information technology increasingly mediates communication between people, particularly when they live at a distance. For couples in long-distance relationships these technologies are a primary means of exchanging not only information but also emotions. This project explores the communication needs of couples living at a distance to design an intimate and emotional means of interaction specifically for this context.

## LITERATURE + PROJECT REVIEW

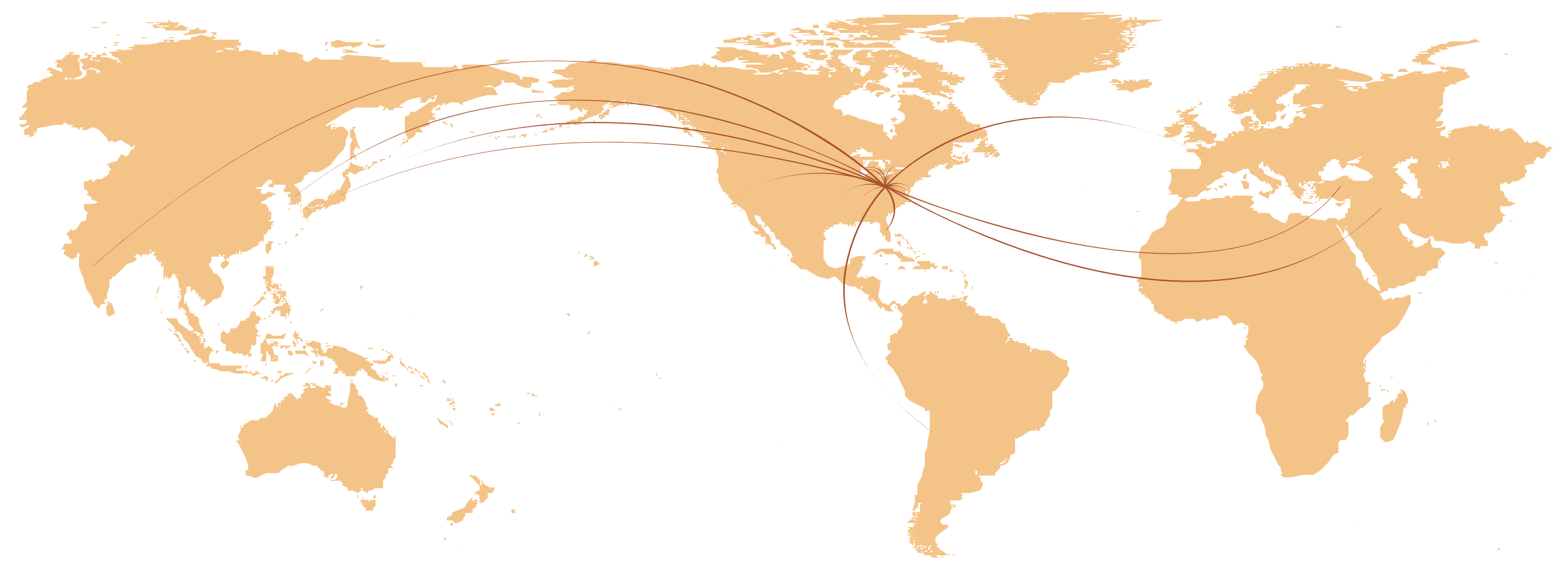


An initial literature review focused on relevant work from design, HCI, and communication fields. The matrix on the left plots research projects along with commercial products and common mediums of communication according to explicitness and synchronicity. I chose these descriptors because they represent two important considerations for people living at a distance: means of interaction and time.

The majority of relevant projects are synchronous in nature with varying levels of explicitness. The clear opportunity area is in the lower right quadrant of the matrix representing implicit and asynchronous communication. This discovery informed my user research studies where among other topics I focused on better understanding the advantages and drawbacks of asynchronous and implicit communication.

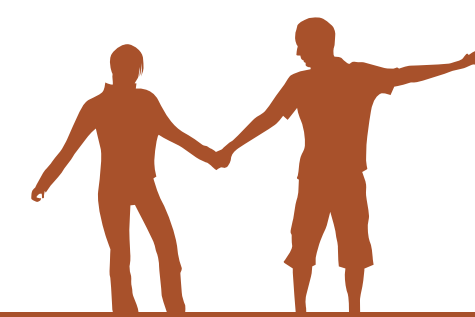
- < Research projects/products
- < Existing communication methods

## INTERVIEWS

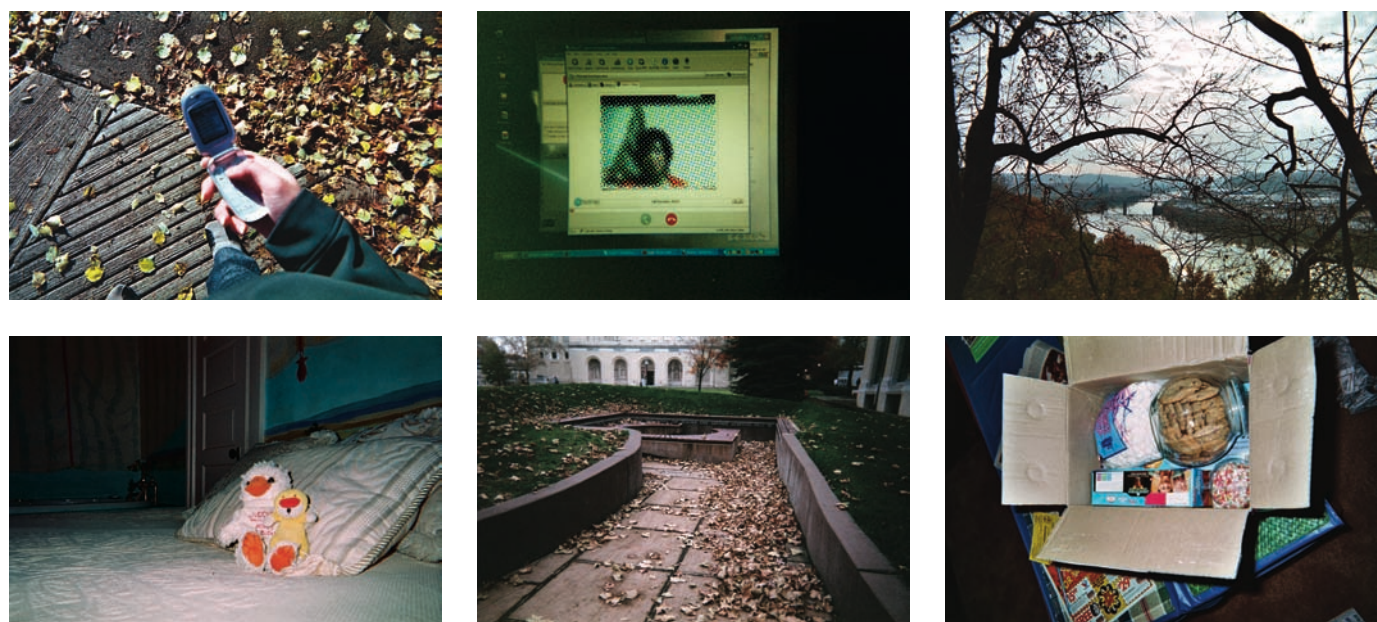


Twenty-two in person interviews were conducted with people currently, or recently, in long-distance relationships. These participants, eleven men and eleven women, are living away from their partner for a variety of reasons including school, work, and military deployment. There was also diversity in the distance of separation as shown

on the above map, which plots each person's relationship between Pittsburgh and his or her partner. These interviews established a high level understanding of problems and opportunities and provided initial contact with five participants who would participate in the longer web-based journal study.



## WEB + PHOTO JOURNAL



Participants living in Pittsburgh were given a disposable camera and asked to document objects, moments, and places that remind them of their partner.

Five interviewees living in Pittsburgh agreed to recruit their distant partners and participate in an eight-day web questionnaire and photo journal. These couples, consisting of four men and six women, represented a range of relational situations and geographic distances as well as diversity in amount of time separated. Because both partners were participating their answers could be compared and contrasted. The quotes on the right give a sample of the feelings expressed through the journals.

"I would say the content of the letter was secondary to the act of sending it."

"There is longevity in tangibility."

"When my partner would surprise me... it would always make my day."

"The most meaningful communication is when one of us goes out of our way to do something for the other."

"I know that if I tell her where I am she will have a true memory of being in that place with me."

"Really difficult... to find a common time to talk."

"Slower communication by email can be a very different emotional experience."

"I miss you too just doesn't seem like enough."

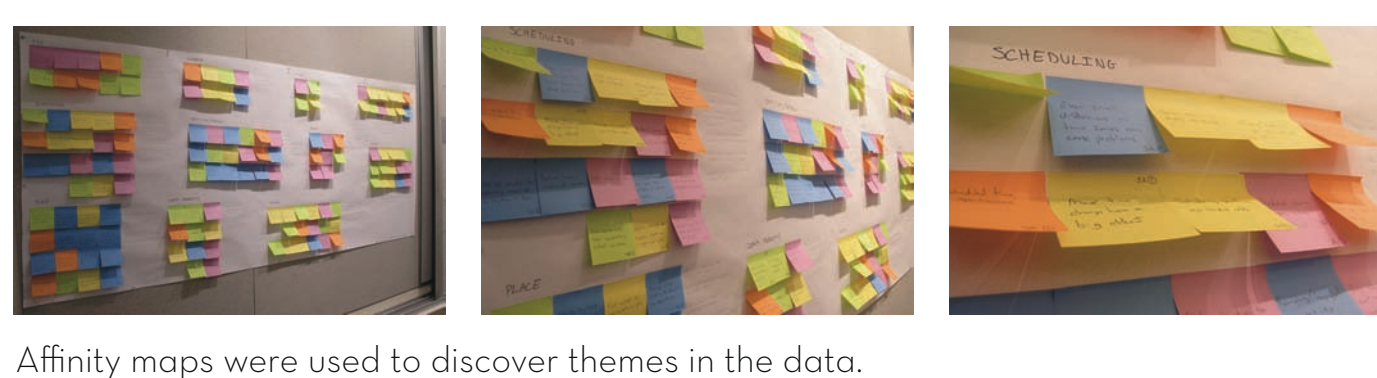
"I silently say hello to him when I see those spots—imaging him when he was there."

"I want to know everything that he wants to tell me—not just what we have time for."

## SYNTHESIS + ANALYSIS

### EMERGENT THEMES

The data from the web and photo journals were clustered and synthesized into high-level categories that informed an in-depth analysis. Throughout the process unexpected results and design implications were noted.



Affinity maps were used to discover themes in the data.

types of communication	time and space	problems, struggles, concerns	being present
Text/IM/Email Phone Tangible Music Non-Verbal Surprise	Time Social Lives Place Scheduling	I Miss... Communication Problems Technical Problems Effects of LDR	Visits Objects Symbols

### LOST IN MEDIATION

The content of communication for long-distance couples focuses on daily events and relational maintenance. A wide range of both traditional and new mediums are used but despite regular communication and visits there are activities and emotions that go missing.

Slow Messaging will address these losses by exploring and validating design concepts that seek to meet these needs. A key goal of this project is to deal with types of communication that are currently lacking or unavailable in existing solutions.

### Communication at a Distance



### What Gets Lost



### PRESENCE IN ABSENCE

Analysis of the research allowed a framework of understanding to be developed, centered on the notion of presence-in-absence. All forms of communication described by participants can be thought of in terms of presence, including routine phone calls, special songs, and shared memories. The right two quadrants represent the most intimate forms of communication where participants desired quality

over quantity, effort over simplicity, and reflection on the overall relationship over individual information exchange. Design concepts for Slow Messaging will focus on presence through objects or experiences because these offer the most potential for intimate interaction at a distance. Initial validation of design ideas will concentrate on determining desire for either enduring or ephemeral communication.

