Understanding the Meaning of Strong Ties: How Media Multiplexity Functions to Maintain Close Relationships

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate the proposition made by Media Multiplexity Theory, which states that strong ties employ more modes for communication than weak ones do. Specifically, the study aimed to identify and understand which particular aspects of a strong tie influence multimodality in communication with our close relational partners. Analysis of the data resulted in the emergence of three aspects (themes) of strong ties that drive multimodality: (1) Level of Confidence, (2) Level of Resource Exchange, and (3) Level of Dependence. The findings suggest that these factors of strong ties have a strong influence on our decisions to employ multiple media to communicate with our close relational partners.

Keywords: Media Multiplexity, strong ties, interpersonal relationships, media use

In a time where communication is no longer limited to face-to-face interaction, it is imperative to investigate the various communicative channels now available to us, and to critically examine how we implement and utilize them in maintaining our relationships. The new platforms for communication now linking us all together are technologically possible due to computer mediation, which allows communication to transcend time and distance to connect us with ease and efficiency. The capabilities offered by new media have facilitated the erosion of former obstacles that made communication more difficult, time consuming, and temporally restrictive. These affordances have provided people with the tools to enhance communication and the relationships sustained by that communication.

Computer technologies have redefined the nature of our communication in that they have erased boundaries that previously disabled the communication process. The synchronicity of communication through messaging (i.e. emails, text messages, etc.), in conjunction with the geographical scope of these technologies, has eliminated the boundary to communication that used to exist due to distance and time difference.

The accessibility of these channels, in addition to their easily navigable features, leads to increased use of the channels, and thus increased amounts communication. More communication has the ability to enhance relational maintenance and strengthen relational ties, which often leads to greater overall communicative satisfaction.

With so many opportunities for connection and the minimal effort it requires, our relationships are changing based on the speed and scope of communication, as well as the multiple channels available for that communication. Now that most of the population employs multiple modes for communicating (simply because these means are available), it becomes important to examine the effects of these multiple media. Given these new circumstances in

communication, scholars have taken to investigating what impact using multiple modes of communication has on our relationships, both weak and strong.

Research on this topic resulted in the conception of Media Multiplexity Theory (MMT), which states that dyads with stronger ties use more media to maintain their relationships. This suggests that relational partners who use multiple mediums for communication possess stronger bonds than those who use only one means of communication. The theory also asserts that it is the relationship between individuals that determines how media is used, as opposed to media determining tie strength. However, the theory maintains that across time, tie strength and media cause each other.

Extant literature on this topic is primarily focused on how multi-modality both influences weak and strong ties, as well as how it potentially activates latent ties. Most research explores the impact of media multiplexity on closeness, relational satisfaction, and communicative satisfaction in relationships. The majority of studies and seek to explore if factors external to the communication process, such as geographic distance or sex, have any significant effects on the typical trajectory proposed by MMT, such that it deviates from what is expected.

However, little research has been done to critically examine the quality of the relationships sustained by multi-modality beyond the fact that it promotes "strong ties." With my own multi-modal relational experiences as a framework, I will investigate the gaps that current literature has failed to fill. Additionally, I aim to draw attention to the quality and nuanced nature of strong ties that are sustained through communication across multiple mediums. I look next to the inner workings of MMT to uncover how the theory's tenets facilitate varying types of connections: a) Strong ties, b) Weak ties, and c) Latent ties. These concepts are explored in what follows.

Strong Ties

In terms of Media Multiplexity Theory (MMT), strong ties are defined as close, interpersonal relationships that are dependent on the devotion of time, the level of emotional intensity and intimacy, and services that are mutually and reciprocally exchanged within a dyad (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, & Schnneider, 2013; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Miczo, Donahue, & Mariani, 2011). Under the MMT lens, strong ties are said to use more media to maintain their relationships, thus suggesting that multi-modality in relational communication is integral to the strengthening of a tie. It is also important to note that multiple modes for communication generally leads to increased quantities of communication.

A study on Internet connectivity effects, as conducted by the author of MMT herself, investigated the validity of MMT propositions as it pertained to co-located ties and distanced ties. Haythornthwaite (2005) conducted research on co-located researchers (i.e. relational connections that are extremely proximate, like researchers in the same office) and their experiences with social interaction amongst each other.

The study found that the researchers, though frequently engaging in a variety of work and social interactions, were able to make the distinctions between colleagues, acquaintances, friends, and close friends with regard to levels of closeness and intimacy (Haythornthwaite, 2005). The distinctions were made on the basis of MMT tenets in that the level of closeness and intimacy were gauged by evaluating the number of channels used to communicate, the signification of the channel (emails often signify workplace relations, while face-to-face channels are usually reserved for stronger interpersonal ties), and the frequency of that communication (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Participants of the study found that ties employing multiple media were stronger than those who utilized less media (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

These findings were also confirmed in another study on media multiplexity, where distinctions were made among "casual friends," "close friends," and "best friends" on the basis of MMT's principles (Ledbetter, 2009). Given that the basis for making the distinctions rested on the principles of the theory for both studies, it is safe to say that MMT is extremely valid in its' suppositions, and thus is an adequate theory to employ in research. A large body of extant literature on MMT continues to confirm Haythornthwaite's findings and support her theory.

Other research investigating the strength of strong ties focused on friendship quality, computer mediated communication (CMC) motives, and relational maintenance to test the validity of MMT (Miczo et al., 2011). Researchers found that CMC motives, which can be seen as motives for using varying channels to communicate, were comprised of needs for inclusion, affection, and acceptance—all of which are characteristics of strong relational ties. The fact that motives for employing communicative channels were grounded in the nature and strength of the tie confirms that it is tie strength that predicts media use, which is a crucial assumption proposed by MMT (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Miczo et al., 2011).

Strong ties are thus both maintained and enhanced with the implementation of multiple modes of communication. We're more likely to develop stronger ties with people we have more continuous opportunities for communication with (Haythornthwaite, 2005), making the association between multi-modality of communication channels and the closeness of a tie (as proposed by MMT) a very logical connection. As previously noted, more channels generally tends to imply increased quantities of communication. This aids in understanding how using more mediums leads to stronger ties, especially given our tendency to communicate more with those we're closest to.

Weak Ties

Though the term "weak" typically connotes relationships of lesser importance, MMT sees weak ties as equally important to strong ones, as they have their own set of relational characteristics that make them valuable, albeit in a very different way. While strong ties imply close interpersonal relationships, weak ties have a plethora of relational implications that vary circumstantially.

While weak ties may not provide the emotional benefits or support frequently derived from strong ties, they open the door to a wider selection of accessible resources (Haythornthwaite, 2002). In other words, while strong ties rely on a dyadic structure, weak ties facilitate more network-oriented relationships that lack the intimacy of strong ties, but merit from the impersonal nature of networked connections. MMT argues that while weak ties lack in quality, they are multiplied through the use of multiple modes for communication (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Ledbetter, 2009; Miczo, et al., 2011). Surely quality is more important to an interpersonal relationship, but when it comes to networking for social movements, per se, it is more beneficial to have more connections than fewer, closer ones.

Current literature investigating weak ties typically defines them as task-oriented connections that serve non-relational functions (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Ledbetter, 2009). That being said, it is work environments that are usually studied to investigate weak ties and how they're sustained by multi-modal communication. A study investigating the media use patterns of distance learners (those who partake in online classes with virtual features) revealed that weak ties were fostered by the channels used to collaborate on tasks, such as online discussion boards, email, and instant messaging (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

The students who formed numerous weak ties, as opposed to a few strong ones, reported using mostly email to collaborate with other students to complete assignments. Previous research on this topic has identified email as a common channel for weak ties, especially those in the workplace (Haythornthwaite, 2002). While students who reported strong ties associated that connection with exchanging information and socializing, students who formed weak ties attributed it to task oriented communication and resource exchanges (Haythornthwaite, 2005). More resources in a work-related context are much more useful than having more friends in the same context, making weak ties much more important than they sound.

Media multiplexity, and the weak ties it fosters, are extremely helpful to social movements, international exchanges, and other large scale, broad scope interactions. For example, a social movement working to ban tobacco sales in grocery stores is a big undertaking that requires all hands on deck. The Internet, and its many affordances, would allow for advocates of this movement to gain support from all around the world through communicating across various channels with various people, and perhaps attract the attention of powerful people; people with the money to fundraise this movement. A once unpromising social movement can thus turn into powerful, influential one thanks to the formation of many weak ties used to comprise a network. This speaks to how important weak ties are, and how multimodality has the power to impact the world on a global scale.

Perhaps the most important thing to take away from understanding the importance of MMT to weak ties is that media creates new connections where they did not exist before (Haythornthwaite, 2002). While mulitmodality strengthens existing strong ties, it has the power to create new (weak) ties and facilitate the expansion of those ties into a network. The power of these weak ties illustrates the importance of media multiplexity in all types of relationships, not

just interpersonal ones. As it were, Media Multiplexity Theory asserts that multimodality cannot only create ties where they didn't previously exist, but can generate connections essentially out of thin air.

Latent Ties

Latent ties in MMT are defined as connections that are available *technically*, even if not yet activated *socially* (Haythornthwaite, 2002). In other words, they are potential relationships that can be attained through communication media. A good example is the "people you may know" feature on Facebook, as it shows you people who are one or two degrees away from you within your existing social network (i.e. friends of your friends, or friends of your friend's friends). The latent tie is not to be undervalued, as it links people together who may have otherwise never interacted. It has the potential to forge important meaningful bonds in a progression from latent to weak ties, and oftentimes bonds graduate from latent to weak to strong.

That being said, latent ties can grow into either or both weak and strong ties, each of which have their own importance with regard to overall relational and communicative satisfaction. Latent ties are most frequently found on social network sites (SNS) due to their (SNS) temporal structure, which makes your friend's social network viewable, and your social network viewable to your friends. It is that capability that allows latent ties to exist and form via these platforms (Haythornthwaite, 2005; Ledbetter, 2009).

Latent ties are not explored in extant research nearly as much as weak and strong ties because they are much less predictable. While they are integral to MMT, they lie dormant until "activated socially" (Haythornthwaite, 2002), making them elusive until brought to life through interaction. It is difficult to speculate as to how and why people choose to enact latent ties, as

there is just as much chance of a person "friending" someone on the people you may know list as there is a chance of them not "friending" someone, or choosing to "friend" someone else. That being said, there is no way to predict when or why people choose to undertake a latent tie given such spontaneity.

The research that does address latent ties is research about social network sites, because the term "latent ties" essentially defines one of the largest capabilities afforded by an SNS: the ability to map out social networks and aid in their expansion. That being said, the body of literature investigating SNS's typically identifies latent ties as made possible by SNS's, but acknowledges that what is made of those proposed, theoretical ties is in the hands of the site user (Haythornthwaite, 2005; Miczo et al., 2011).

Despite their mystery, latent ties still uphold the principles of MMT in that tie strength predicts media use: if you don't know a person and there is no tie at all, you likely won't be communicating through any channel. However, for those who do choose to communicate, they typically follow the path posed by MMT, which states that media use occurs on a unidimensional scale, such that those who only use one medium tend to use that one same medium, and those who use two mediums tend to use the same two mediums, and so on. This unidimensional scale, thus, is the one thing that connects all of the ties: strong, weak, and latent, as they will all follow this sequence upon their inception. As the tie is strengthened, dyads will typically employ more media to sustain and enhance these ties, as postulated by MMT.

Future Directions

Though media multiplexity has been explored in academic research, there are a number of gaps that still need to be filled in order for us to understand the implications that our ties have on our media use, and vice versa. Extant literature has primarily examined what media

multiplexity is, how it works, and the functions it serves; but has failed to investigate how tie strength determines media use, and why it isn't the other way around. Additionally, little research has been done on specific relationships such as interpersonal, romantic, and familial relationships.

It is imperative that research on MMT continues to address those gaps because channels for communication multiply each day, and in order for us to understand how these increased levels of communication will impact our society, communication channels need to be studied, and theories need to be proposed. With the rapid growth of these technologies, it will prove beneficial to researchers to be ahead of the game when it comes to understanding the impacts of multimodality on communication and relationships. At this point in time, scholars still need to address the following question:

RQ: What are the specific aspects of tie strength that predict media use in strong, interpersonal relationships?

Method

Research for this study was done using qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted using a phenomenological approach that sought to understand the phenomenon of Media Multiplexity Theory (MMT) and how it functions to maintain close, interpersonal relationships. Detailed accounts of participants' experiences with this topic were explored in depth.

Data Collection

Participants.

For this study, six participants who were multimodal in their communication, tech savvy, and had a close interpersonal relationship to report on were interviewed in a private setting for

approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. To ensure the participants' confidentiality, they were all given pseudonyms. There were three male and three females in the sample: Kate (28 years-old), Mary (35 years-old), Emily (28 years-old) Parker (22 years-old), Justin (30 years-old), and Saul (35 years-old). Five of the participants live in a metropolitan city in the Midwest, while one participant lived in suburban, western town.

Procedures.

The study was conducted at a private University in northern California in the Fall semester of 2015. Interviews took place in my own home, and I used convenience sampling when selecting my participants. I chose to interview people I knew well so as to possess a better understanding of their relational habits, and thus draw more accurate conclusions about their experience with multimodal communication in their close relationships.

Semi-structured interviews were recorded and then transcribed, resulting in forty-three pages total of transcriptions from the six interviews conducted. All of the interviews were performed after matters of informed consent were thoroughly discussed and agreed to, at which point the interviews commenced.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis that proceeded in a three-step sequence. Next, significant themes, patterns, and quotations that emerged from the data were identified and coded using open coding methods. Finally, the interpretations made during analysis resulted in the emergence of three core themes: (1) Level of Confidence, (2) Level of Resource Exchange, and (3) Level of Dependence. These common themes are further explored below.

Analysis

Level of Confidence

Strong relationships are comprised of several factors, many of which are unique to that specific relational tie and not necessarily present in others. There are some friends we feel comfortable telling our secrets to, while we may not put the same amount of trust in other friends, despite our closeness with them. Just as there are nuances in character, so too are there nuances in relational dynamics. Confidence in a relationship, or level of trust, is one characteristic that participants described as being a major element of their strong tie that motivated communication across multiple channels.

Participants contended that they communicate more with, and across more channels, with the friends they trust most. When asked why she communicated on more channels with one close friend than another, Kate claimed that:

> I think I probably talk more with her than my other friends. We talk on text, Facebook, phone calls, Skype, and sometimes email. I don't usually email with my friends, but sometimes we like to share our work with each other…I only use all those mediums with her, probably because I know she'll be always be there…and I can trust her with anything

Kate suggests that the reason talks (more) across more channels with one particular friend than her other close ties is because of her assurance that this friend is trustworthy, both with information, and in the sense that she can be trusted to always be present in Kate's life.

This indicates that trust is a central motive to multimodal communication. Kate also went on to say that she tended to use Snapchat more when talking with friends who she didn't trust as much, which implies that her disclosures on Snapchat were likely only made on the basis of the affordances of the platform (i.e. Snapchat's are only viewable for several seconds before they're erased and inaccessible). When asked if she text messaged with these friends she trusted less

than her "best friend," Kate replied: "Not as much…I don't want anyone I don't fully trust having like, concrete proof of things I've said. I'm always scared someone's going to use it against me somehow."

This anecdote further suggests that confidence and the use of multiple modes for communication are closely linked in that some channels are better suited for less trusted friends, thus limiting those friendships to only one or two mediums for communicating. Conversely, there are many more media options available to our trusted friends, as there are no restrictions in the relational communication, and therefore the most can be made out of multiple mediums.

Justin also spoke to the differences in platforms and how different relationships thrived on different mediums due to the level of trust and assurance:

> My two best friends live in different cities than me, so we're always keeping up on text and Instagram. My buddy Jacob is the one I trust with my life, and while I love Eric, I probably couldn't even trust him to show up to my wedding, he's just that kind of guy. I text Jacob everyday, and maybe once or twice a week with Eric. Maybe it's just two different relationships, but one of the major differences is trust for sure

Justin's descriptions of the relational differences between Jacob and Eric index trust as a communication motive in general, but specifically a motive for multimodal communication. Justin later mentioned that he and Jacob talk on the phone at least weakly, share articles on Facebook, and send Snapchat photos of their kids regularly. This anecdote further promotes the idea that confidence in a relationship is not only an indicator of closeness, but of multimodality of communication. Justin asserts that he, like Kate, communicates (more) across more channels with his more trusted friend, Jacob, than with his less trustworthy friend, Eric.

Saul, a former soldier, explained that he had a many close friends from the army who he keeps up with on Facebook, but only a handful of his closest friends from the army are the one's he talks on the phone with, goes on vacation with, and keeps track of on social media. When asked what it was about those friends that caused him to communicate across numerous channels, he asserted:

> When you're fighting for your life and your country, the people who you're surrounded with better as hell be people you trust. If they're not, you're screwed. The buddies I keep in touch with most and actively try to see are the ones who saved my life on multiple occasions. They're a big reason that I'm still here and that I was lucky enough to have children, so yeah, I'm gonna send them a Christmas card, call them on their birthday, and try to fly out to see them as much as I can

While Saul's idea of trust is probably the most extreme of all the participants, his contention still hinges on trust as a motivation for communication, and likely communication across multiple mediums. This supports the idea that confidence is a strong predictor of multimodal communication in close, interpersonal friendships.

Emily shared similar sentiments regarding trustworthiness as it relates to communication channels. She explained that though she is extremely close with one of her dear friends, Sara, she did not communicate with her through any mediums aside from face-to-face interaction and phone calls. When asked why she thought that was the case, Emily hesitated upon her reply:

> Um…I guess she's just not the friend I tell a lot of personal stuff to. We're close because we're similar, like in music taste and we work in the same field, but I don't have any need or desire to talk with her on social media or anything, probably just because it seems unnecessary—I mean, what would I say that we can't talk about at a lunch date?

Given that Emily doesn't share much personal information with Sara, it could be argued that the lack of disclosure is a result of distrust, or simply less trust than she has for other close friends. She and Sara are limited to phone calls and in-person interactions because their relational dynamic would not be suited to Facebook messages, Skype sessions, and the like. In fact, if they were forced to communicate across multiple channels, it would likely be awkward because it's unnecessary for them—they can say what they need to say through their preferred mediums, and spreading it across multiple ones would serve no purpose.

Conversely, for someone like Justin, each platform serves a purpose and is used with reason. Snapchat for Justin and his friend Jacob functions to share photos of their kids—information they share with one another because of their level of closeness and trust. While for them personal disclosures are saved for phone calls, and mutual interests confined to Facebook, it is clear to see how trust and multimodality of communication have a positive correlation.

Level of Resource Exchange

Another element integral to close relationships is the degree to which one can and does rely on their friend or relational partner for certain resources, which most often entails the exchanges of advice, emotional support, and perhaps even financial assistance. Given that these types of exchanges call for interpersonal communication, it is safe to assume that relational partners' conversations include the exchange of these resources. Due to the sensitive nature of giving and receiving such resources like support, negotiating exchanges requires extensive conversation that is typically laden with emotion. Participants' accounts confirmed that exchanging resources requires more conversation than other types of exchanges, such as information exchange.

During his interview, Parker was asked what he discusses with his close friends over different channels such as phone calls, text messages, and emails. He explained that most of the communication consisted of information exchange in the form of catching one another up on recent life events, new endeavors, etc. Parker claims that he leaves information exchange for phone calls mostly, because it gives him the ability to discuss more things than he could if he were communicating through texts or emails. When asked which friend he uses the most communication channels with and why, Parker lightheartedly commented:

> [Laughs] Well, probably my best friend Sean. He's also my financial advisor, so a lot of the time I'm calling him on his work phone or emailing him asking questions. We talk about other stuff too, though. I talk with him mostly on the phone, in person, or through text. I don't know why I have so many different ways for getting in touch with him…probably because I have different conversational needs. Some are just better communicated through different means, I guess

Parker's account suggests that different types of communication are better relayed through some channels more than others. His explanation indexes how people designate certain communication to particular channels based on how appropriate the content is for a given media. He explains that for financial advice, he usually resorts to emails or formal work phone calls with his friend Sean. This implies that it is necessary to use multiple mediums to communicate, as particular mediums are conducive to the exchange of resources, such as advice, while others may better facilitate different types of communication.

Emily reaffirms the notion that different types of messages are best construed through different channels of communication in her explanation of her relationship with her best friend, Ashley:

> When my dear friend died, I needed Ashley to be there, I needed her close…You can't "be there" for someone over email, or texting, or Facebook, especially not when it comes to stuff like that…If someone emailed me asking for support for the death of their friend, I almost think that would be inappropriate, that's the wrong way to go about it I think

Emily's quote illustrates an extreme example, but one that strongly supports the reoccurring theme among the participants that certain messages should be communicated through certain channels.

Similarly, Mary explains how her relationship with her closest friend is reliant on multiple mediums for communicating different messages. She claims that, "When I need emotional support, I call Margot or go directly to see her. If I'm just looking to talk for the sake of talking, I can just call her or text her and that will suffice." This reinforces the idea that close relationships are dependent on multiple mediums to satisfy multiple, differing needs. Certain needs demand certain communicative channels, and when it comes to exchanging resources, Mary prefers to verbally communicate, whether it is in person or via phone call. When asked why she doesn't instead email her best friend, Margot, when she needs advice, she argues:

> I wouldn't email about that sort of thing, that wouldn't be at all comforting…I'd have to wait eagerly for a reply, I'd have no sense of how she felt because I wouldn't be able to pick up on the tone of her voice, it just wouldn't be helpful, like, I might as well not reach out at all if it had to be that way when I really need help

Mary's account reinforces what Parker had discovered about communicating about the exchange of resources in a relationship: that it's best communicated in the appropriate channel. What channel that happens to be may vary amongst people, but the participants consensus shows that employing multiple mediums for communication is a reflection of the level of the strength of

the tie, as stated by MMT. The aspect of tie strength that drives multimodality in communication is the comfort with and ability to exchange resources in the first place.

Level of Dependence

The amount of communication and how we communicate with our close relational partners is strongly linked to how much we depend on them. Dependence can encompass trust and the exchange of resources, but it also entails many other factors, such as how well the person knows us (we tend to depend on the people who know us best, as they're most aware of our needs), how the person fits into our lives (if they are liked and accepted by our loved ones, if they're "socially acceptable" on the whole), and how frequently they appear in our lives (if they are someone we see everyday or talk to with frequency). These are just some of the factors that determine how dependent we are on our relational partners, and as with confidence and resource exchange, our level of dependence will inform our communication media choices.

Kate contends that she is most dependent on the person who she considers to be her best friend, Laura. She also explains that part of that dependence can be seen in the excessive amounts of communication exchanged between them, and in how that communication is expressed differently given different mediums When asked what specifically about Laura and the relationship led her to be so dependent, she stated:

> She's just integral to my life, she's like a sister, not just to me, but to my brothers, and my parents look at her like a daughter. It's the same way with me and her family, we just have so much history and are so familiar with each other, and losing that would be unimaginable…I guess I'm most dependent on her because I can't envision my life without her

This speaks to the multiple facets of a relationship and how dependence is comprised of varying factors. It also suggests that we communicate more across more channels with those whom we're dependent on, if for no other reason than that we're familiar enough with them to be comfortable with all of the varying modes for communicating. We can pester them without fearing that they will reject us, just as we can send fifteen texts in a row and not worry about seeming needy or annoying. This ability can be seen as allowing for the use of any and all mediums, as we saw with trust, there are less medium restrictions and limitations with people we're comfortable with. That being said, relational partners who are dependent on one another will likely use more mediums to communicate for various reasons, one being that they simply can.

Saul explains his unique relationship with his best friend Susan, who has been his friend since childhood. Saul claims that since they grew up and learned life lessons together as friends, he'd be lost without her, or at least he had no idea where he would be had it not been for her. He asserts that he is most dependent on her because, in addition to being his best friend, she is reliable and always has been. He explains that he has always been able to be dependent on her, and would likely continue to be.

Upon admitting that he communicated most with and across the most channels with Susan out of all of his friends, he was asked what it was about Susan that drove him to communicate so much and through so many channels as he did. He explains:

> I don't know…she has just always been there and always will be. We went to college together, we live a few blocks away so I see her all the time. I'm just confident that when it comes to her, I'll always have someone to listen and be there for me. I can show up at her door unannounced and it's totally fine. We're just that close I guess

This depiction of his best friend further confirms the notion that the level of dependence in a relationship is strongly associated with the number of channels (and amount of communication) one uses in such close personal relationships. Saul expresses dependence as being a result of the duration of the relationship, the frequency of communication and contact, and how she fits in his life.

While these are only a few factors of dependence, they reflect the way that dependence determines communication media use. Additionally, these factors reaffirm that relationships with a high level of dependence tend to also maintain a strong sense of comfort, which has been found to influence the usage of multiple mediums for communication. All of the participants, when discussing their friend they are most dependent on, also reported high levels of comfort and how that comfort led to multimodality in communication.

Discussion

The themes reviewed in the analysis illustrate the aspects of relational strength and closeness that influence multimodality in communication with our strong ties. Media Multiplexity Theory states that strong ties employ more channels for communication than weaker ties, and this study sought to understand and uncover what it is specifically about strong ties that motivates multimodality in communication. The themes that emerged in analysis provide a multifaceted framework illustrating what it is about strong ties that leads to communication across multiple channels. The framework was comprised of three levels: the level of confidence, the level of resource exchange, and the level of dependence present in a strong tie. The participants' accounts accurately answered the research question and fulfilled the aim of the study, which was to understand what drives communicative multimodality beyond the umbrella term of "strong tie."

Limitations

The study, however, had a few limitations. A larger sample size could have yielded different results, or perhaps just more conclusive ones. Given that media use is extremely common in adolescents, this study could have benefitted from teenagers' perspectives on multimodality, perhaps leading to different implications regarding tie strength. Seeing as how the participants shared many of the same opinions and experiences, a focus group could have allowed for collaborative ideas, which may have revealed more information than individual interviews alone.

Future Directions

Future studies on this topic would do well to acquire a larger, more diverse sample of individuals. It would be extremely beneficial to understanding this phenomenon if a focus group were used as the means of data collection, as the participants' may discover more about their media use if discussing it with other media using individuals rather than with a (mostly) silent interviewer.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to reflect on MMT's proposition that strong ties employ more channels for communication, and proceed to examine what the specific aspects of strong relational ties are that influence multimodality of communication. After exploring extant literature on this topic and conducting qualitative interviews, three aspects of tie strength emerged: The level of confidence, the level of resource exchange, and the level of dependence in strong relational ties. The research found that these three aspects were integral to the definition of strong ties as it relates to the implications that strong ties have on media multiplexity in communication. Participants' accounts confirmed that these were the driving aspects of a strong

tie that motivated multimodal communication with their close relational partners. These aspects aid in explaining the phenomenon of Media Multiplexity Theory itself, and thus raise awareness about how and why we communicate the way we do with our strong ties.

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