# College Student Communication Using Social Media

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## Introduction

Daft and Lengel's (1987) Media Richness Theory describes rich media as channels of communication that provide:
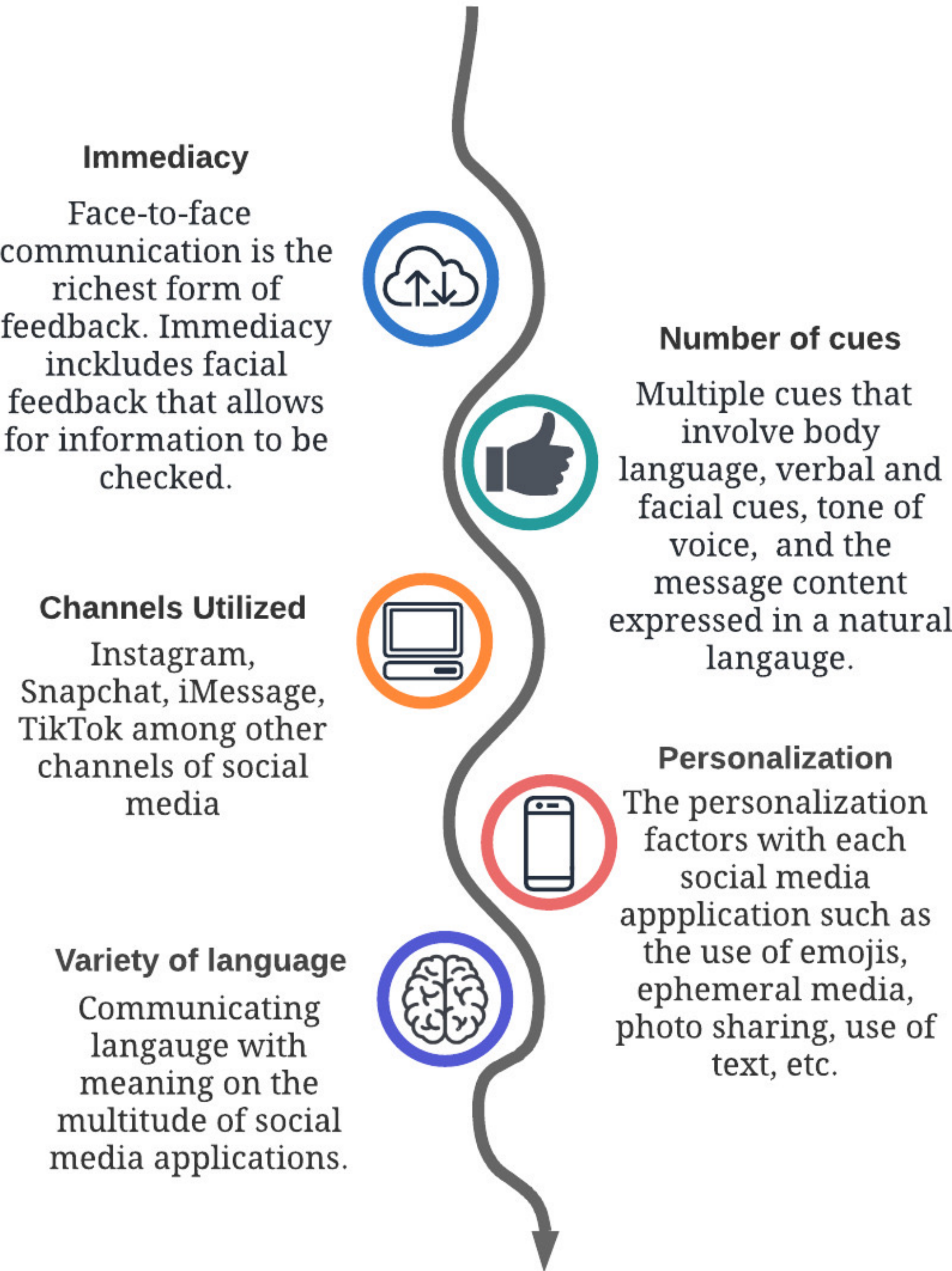- immediate feedback
- contain information from multiple verbal and non-verbal cues
- communicate language with meaning
- is directed at an individual with emotion.

Face-to-face communication is considered the richest communication channel because it provides opportunities to maximize all components of communication. An example of a low richness is a form letter or unaddressed document.

When Media Richness Theory was first conceptualized, the Internet was not commonly used by college-aged students, unlike today (Pew Research Center, 2021). Some researchers have begun to explore the level of media richness of various new technologies (e.g., Ledford, 2012; Scheer, 2011; Schiefelein, 2012). However, less is understood about media richness regarding social media applications as channels of communication.

The purpose of this study is to explore the levels of media richness of social media applications that are popular amongst college students.

## Media Richness



**Immediacy**
Face-to-face communication is the richest form of feedback. Immediacy inckludes facial feedback that allows for information to be checked.

**Number of cues**
Multiple cues that involve body language, verbal and facial cues, tone of voice, and the message content expressed in a natural langauge.

**Channels Utilized**
Instagram, Snapchat, iMessage, TikTok among other channels of social media

**Personalization**
The personalization factors with each social media appplication such as the use of emojis, ephemeral media, photo sharing, use of text, etc.

**Variety of language**
Communicating langauge with meaning on the multitude of social media applications.

## Method

**Participants**
- Students (N=57) between the ages of 18 and 22 ($M$ = 19.81, $SD$ = 1.42 ) who were enrolled in college during the Spring 2020 term.

**Materials**
- Ledford's (2012) survey ranking of components of Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986). (See Figure 1).

**Procedure**
- Participants identified and rated three social media applications with which they were most familiar and completed the online survey.
- App choices included Android Message, Discord, Facebook, GroupMe, iMessage, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pintrest, Reddit, Snapchat, Tik Tok, Tumblr, Twitter, VSCO, WhatsApp, and Other

## Results

- Overall, participants only identified 10 different apps with which they were most familiar.
- The majority chose to rate Instagram (75.43%) and Snapchat (71.92%). iMessage (42.11%) and TikTok (36.84%) were lass familiar to participants. Fewer than 14% of participants rated the other apps.
- iMessage was the highest in feedback, multiple cues, and language variety and TikTok was the lowest in feedback and multiple cues (See Table 1).

**Table 1**
*Communication in Media Richness*

| Characteristic | Instagram | | Snapchat | | iMessage | | TikTok | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $M$ | $SD$ | $M$ | $SD$ | $M$ | $SD$ | $M$ | $SD$ |
| Feedback | 5.63 | 0.98 | 5.70 | 0.86 | 5.74 | 0.71 | 5.19 | 1.26 |
| Cues | 3.90 | 1.50 | 5.22 | 1.21 | 6.15 | 0.75 | 3.47 | 1.51 |
| Language | 4.92 | 1.15 | 5.33 | 1.24 | 5.51 | 0.83 | 5.41 | 1.17 |
| Personal | 5.42 | 1.11 | 5.97 | 0.92 | 5.72 | 0.73 | 5.71 | 0.85 |

### Dependent *t*-Test

Significant differences in the levels of media richness for:
- Multiple cues, $t(2,32)$ = 5.79, $p$ < .001, d = 1.00
- Personal focus, $t(2,32)$ = 2.33, $p$ = .026, d = .41

No differences were present for:
- Feedback, $t(2,32)$ = -0.20, $p$ = .842
- Language variety $t(2,32)$ = 0.29, $p$ = .77

## Discussion

Instagram and Snapchat were the social media applications with which participants are most familiar. Earlier apps like Facebook were not selected as the most familiar to participants. This is consistent with previous findings (Pew Research Center, 2021).

In some cases, social media applications have features that differ in terms of media richness. Participants rated Snapchat as offering multiple non-verbal or non-language based cues as well as having a higher personal focus than Instagram. It is possible that other social media applications may be rated higher in other components of media richness.

The results of this pilot study may inform future work that aims to increase understanding regarding the how college students choose to use social media applications for communication. Additionally, as future findings could help students and faculty select the best applications for communication within their courses.

## Limitations

The greatest limitation to this study was sample size. Initially, we performed a repeated-measures ANOVA with the three most rated social media applications. However, the resulting sample size of 11 could not produce meaningful results ($B$ = .03).

We collected data for this study as the COVID-19 pandemic began. It is possible that the ways in which individuals used social media changed as the pandemic continued.

## References

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