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ASSESSMENT OF THE APPLICATION OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY IN ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The emergence of digital communication technologies and social media platforms has transformed the ways university students initiate, develop, maintain, evaluate, and terminate interpersonal relationships. This study assessed the application of Social Exchange Theory (SET) in online relationships among university students in Nigeria, with particular attention to the principles of rewards, costs, reciprocity, trust, perceived value, and relationship alternatives. The study adopted a qualitative research design and employed in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 students purposively selected from six universities in Nigeria: Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Obafemi Awolowo University, University of Ilorin, Thomas Adewumi University, Al-Hikmah University, and Kwara State University. Data were analysed thematically based on the major constructs of Social Exchange Theory. The findings generated nine themes. The study revealed that emotional support, companionship, friendship, academic assistance, information sharing, networking, career opportunities, and economic benefits constitute important rewards that encourage the formation and maintenance of online relationships. Reciprocity, consistency, trust, mutual effort, respect, and perceived value were found to reinforce continued investment in such relationships. Conversely, time wastage, competing demands, miscommunication, dishonesty, emotional stress, disappointment, privacy concerns, financial demands, and exploitation emerged as significant relational costs that could weaken relationship continuity. The findings further showed that students evaluate online relationships largely according to the balance between perceived rewards and costs, with relationships more likely to continue when benefits, mutuality, and trust outweigh negative experiences. The study concludes that Social Exchange Theory remains a relevant framework for understanding contemporary online relationships among university students in Nigeria, although its application must account for the emotional, psychological, social, and digital contexts that shape contemporary interpersonal exchanges.

Keywords: Social Exchange Theory, Online Relationships, Social Media, University Students

Introduction

Social relationships are the base of human life and are very important for a person to live for their mind to be okay and for society to grow (Ahmad et al., 2023). One of the ways to explain these kinds of connections is Social Exchange Theory (SET) which gives a clear way to understand how people connect by looking at the back and forth of things that are important good things and duties (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2023). Social exchange theory (SET) is one of the ways to understand how people connect and talk with

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each other in the Nigeria society. These exchanges are not in companies but the way to think has changed to online connections and talks. Cropanzano et al. (2017) Said that SET starts when a person tries to get something from another person the other person gives a response that's fair and then a connection is made. SET says that people's connections change over time through exchanges where people check if the good things are more than the bad things (Chernyak -Hai & Rabenu 2018). The theory thinks that people are smart. They are also limited by what is normal and what is happening around them and that connections work better when the good things people see are more than the bad things (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al. 2023). The roots of Social Exchange Theory can be found in books about society and people (Ahmad et al., 2023). The theory was later expanded by Blau (1964) who said that social exchanges are different from money things because they have more to do with promises, trust, long time exchanges and feeling connected. Blau (1964) argued that even though money exchanges happen away and are clear social exchanges often have promises that can be late not clear or not real (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005; Ahmad et al., 2023). So people decide if staying in a connection is better than leaving it for another connection.

Scholars sees Social Exchange Theory much more than just about money (Ahmad, et al 2023). These scholars argue that exchanges include not things you can touch like money and items but also things you can't touch like love, trust, emotional support, respect, loyalty being noticed, information being with someone and being liked (Vangelisti, & Perlman 2018; Ellison, & Vitak, 2015; Muldoon, Gould, & Joullié 2024). These kinds of exchanges often have effect on how long a connection lasts than things you can buy because they help people feel closer and promise to stay. Because of this SET changed from a way to look at money and benefits into a more complex way that explains how people feel how they act, how they are with others and how they work (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al. 2023). The lasting use of Social Exchange Theory is obvious in the twenty-first century when the world is connected technology is better social media is everywhere online dating sites, online groups, money problems and new ways of thinking have changed how people connect (Kanwal et al. 2020). Today's connections use both meetings and online talks at the same time. These changes have made people expect things about being fair feeling things, trust staying together and keeping a connection, which means people need to think about Social Exchange Theory in new ways (Ahmad et al. 2023).

The good part of Social Exchange Theory (SET) is not because it says that people talk by giving and taking but also because it has clear ideas about how people act, being fair depending on others and how connections end (Igwe & Durrheim 2024). SET is one of the important ways to understand why people start, keep make stronger or end connections because people always think about what they get and what they have to give (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2023). People say that when people talk they are not giving and taking money or services but also giving and taking things that can't be seen like love, trust, loyalty, respect, emotional help, information being liked being with someone being noticed and being committed (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al. 2023).

Human relationships are one of the important places where Social Exchange Theory (SET) has been used because almost every time people meet they exchange something that is real, emotional, mental or symbolic (Reis, & Gable 2015). The theory says that connections come, grow and stay because people keep giving and taking from each other and always check if they are getting more than they are giving (Chernyak-Hai, & Rabenu 2018). Of seeing connections just as feelings or instinct SET sees them as active systems where people give and take and these are shaped by thinking about being fair, trust and staying together (Chernyak-Hai, & Rabenu 2018). Modern thinking says that what happens in connections has many parts and is not just about money or things. People give love being with someone, emotional help, advice, information, respect being noticed, trust, loyalty and being liked (Vangelisti, & Perlman 2018). SET also says that how happy people are in a connection depends not on what they get but also on what they expect and what other options they have (Mishra, & Mund 2024). For example, in a love connection between couples there are certain things that women often expect in their relationships like checking in calling, remembering special days and showing love in different ways and they

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look at other relationships to see if they are good enough. If these expectations are not met one person might look for connections to see if they want to keep this one or leave it. Using the ideas of how good a connection's how good other options are people decide if their current connections are meeting or going beyond what they expect and if other connections could be better (Mishra, & Mund 2024). One of the ideas in Social Exchange Theory is that people look at what they get and what they give (Zhang, Takahashi, & Rezwan 2025). Benefits are both things you can see and things you can't like love being with someone, trust, emotional help being liked, money security, things you do together and growing as a person.

Social media, online dating sites, online groups and mobile phones have changed how people talk to each other by changing how they get close trust share about themselves give back and keep connections (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall 2017). Romantic relationships are still one of the studied uses of Social Exchange Theory because they involve continuous giving of love being committed, trust, closeness being with someone, emotional help and sharing things (Wu, & Lv 2024). SET says that people start and stay in love connections when they think the good parts are more, than the parts and when other options don't look as good. Being committed to a connection shows how people keep checking if they are happy if they give back if they trust and what they expect in the future (Muldoon, Gould, & Joullié 2024). Cropanzano et al. (2017) Said that that people may not give back in the way they want because of things that they cannot control. Also, Greco et al. (2019) Looked at how negative work actions returned between two people and said that negative work actions are given back with the same strength and amount between the two people. Even though Social Exchange Theory has created a lot of research across sociology, psychology, management and communication studies most of the studies have focused on behavior in organizations, leadership how employees perform how committed employees are to their workplace and how they act in a way. Fewer studies look at how the theory explains how relationships change in today's world outside of work. The study wants to check how social exchange theory is being used and how relevant it is to human relationships

Statement of the Problem

Taylor, Zhao and Bazarova (2022) say that social media creates a situation where the same online actions can help people connect and also cause them to feel disconnected in relationships. The online world has also changed how relationships are built. Goldberg, Yeshua -Katz and Marciano (2022) found that features of media like being able to search be seen, stay anonymous keep things forever save data and change things affect how romantic relationships are built and shorten some of the steps that used to happen in real life. Arikewuyo et al. (2021) Found that using social media sites can help people feel satisfied and loved in romantic relationships but can also cause jealousy watching each other, cheating and being distracted. So the main issue is not just if young people have relationships online. How the features of the online world affect the quality, how long the relationships last and how people see them. Relationships in the world can get stronger when online talks offer chances for often talking, emotional support sharing personal things feeling safe and keeping a sense of being together even when far away. Ahmad et al. (2023) Found that being active on media is linked to having good relationships and trust made the link between social media use, good things from the relationship and having good relationships stronger. On the hand relationships can get weaker when online communication causes watching, jealousy, comparing, misunderstanding, too much talking, other choices or thinking that one person is giving more to the relationship than the other. Arikewuyo et al. (2022) Also found that using media was connected to problems in romantic relationships with jealousy, cheating and checking on each other being big reasons for the problems.

Social Exchange Theory is important for understanding this because it looks at actions as exchanges where people look at what they get what they lose what they expect, if they give back and what other choices they have. Even though the theory was around before the world, Ahmad et al. (2023) Show that it still matters for relationships by using ideas like rewards, costs, giving back fairness and trust in virtual relationships. Still the cost and reward thinking from Social Exchange Theory is more complicated in relationships because the benefits and losses from online actions are not always clear or the same for both people. This problem is especially important

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for Generation Z because young people have grown up in a world where online communication's part of everyday life. Recent studies show that young people do not just use media as another way to have relationships; the online places can become part of the relationship itself. Bello et al. (2025) Found a link between Instagram and Twitter posts and relationships among students in Generation Z. The study said that social media posts affected how people see themselves how they talk and how happy they are in their relationships while managed pictures of relationships helped shape how people saw romantic relationships. Many problems in relationships are directly connected to the main ideas of Social Exchange Theory. The first is about rewards and costs

Online relationships can bring companionship, emotional support, attention, information, fun feeling accepted and chances for closeness. They can also cost time make people tired cause jealousy, risk privacy create conflict and bring confusion. Ahmad et al. (2023) Found that having things and trust are important parts of relationships on social media while Urbonavicius et al. (2021) Showed that trust not trusting, worrying about privacy and feeling in control affect how people act online. Coundouris et al. (2021) Also found that using media can be linked to both good and bad results in relationships. These findings make us wonder if students keep being in relationships because the good things and bad things are balanced or if other things like being attached what other people expect or fearing losing the relationship make people stay in relationships even when there are problems. Arikewuyo et al. (2021) Looked at how using many social media apps affects relationships between 25 partners and found that social media helps with happiness and love but can also cause jealousy checking on each other cheating and getting distracted. Coundouris et al. (2021) After looking at 53 groups with 13,873 people gave proof that using social media sites can have both good and bad effects on how good a relationship is. Taylor et al. (2022) After looking at research on relationships also said that social media makes a puzzle of being connected and disconnected. All these studies show that online media has an effect on how good relationships are but they mostly look at using social media the results of relationships, conflict, jealousy checking on each other or being close rather than looking directly at how the ideas of Social Exchange Theory are used in everyday online relationships of university students. The research shows some problems. Most of the existing studies look at how social media affects the quality of relationships not how Social Exchange Theory is used to explain online relationship actions. The tends to fix this gap by looking at how Social Exchange Theory's used in online relationships among students of some universities in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

To assess the extent to which the principles of Social Exchange Theory, particularly rewards, costs, reciprocity, trust and perceived alternatives, are applied in online relationships among students of selected universities in Nigeria.

To examine the influence of perceived rewards and costs on the formation, maintenance and continuity of online relationships among students of selected universities in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has been one of the important ways to understand relationships, social actions, how people act in organizations how people talk and how relationships last (Ahmad, et al. (2023). Since it emergence in the 1950s the theory has kept changing from a way to explain how people act in relationships to a full way that covers many areas and explains how people build, keep, think about and end relationships based on what they believe they get from others (Ahmad et al. 2023; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The roots of Social Exchange Theory are older than when it was talked about in sociology. In his study of the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski (1922) saw that giving gifts and helping others was not about money but about making trust being part of a group being respected and long-term relationships. Also Mauss (1925) said that social exchanges involve promises to give, take and give back which makes bonds instead of just one-time deals. The start of Social Exchange Theory is usually connected to George C. Homans, whose article, Social Behaviour as Exchange, published in 1958 said that social actions can be seen as exchanges that are controlled by how people are rewarded. Homans (1958) said

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that people act because they want to get something from others and actions that are rewarded are more likely to happen while actions that cause problems or cost too much are less likely to happen. According to Homans social actions are like actions where people try to get as much as they can while losing as little as possible. Unlike economic exchanges that have real things social exchanges include both real and not real things, like approval, love, respect, status, company, emotional support, information and being recognized (Homans, 1958). Blau took the theory further by looking at it from a social view. Blau (1964) said that social exchanges are actions people take because they want to get something from others. According to Blau (1964) what makes social exchanges different is that people are not sure what they will get back. Unlike money exchanges, where the rulesre clear social exchanges depend a lot on trust and being sure that others will do the right thing because the exact way, when and how much someone gives back can't always be known. This uncertainty makes trust a must for relationships that last. Scholars today still agree with Blau saying that trust is one of the things that keep relationships strong in both real life and online (Ahmad et al. 2023).

Another big step in how people think about Social Exchange Theory came from Thibaut and Harold H. Kelley. Their important book, The Social Psychology of Groups (1959) introduced the idea of depending on each other saying that how relationships turn out depends not on what each person gets and loses but also on how much each person needs the other. They said people judge relationships by two ideas: the comparison level, which is what people think they should get from a relationship and the comparison level, for alternatives, which is what people believe they could get from other relationships deserve based on experiences and societal expectations and the comparison level for alternatives, which reflects the attractiveness of alternative relationships. One of the enduring concepts within SET is the principle of reciprocity. Although reciprocity had long been recognized within anthropology it was systematically conceptualized by Alvin Gouldner, who described reciprocity as a moral norm governing human interactions. Gouldner (1960) argued that individuals generally feel obligated to return benefits received from others and avoid harming those who have provided assistance. Reciprocity therefore serves as a mechanism that promotes cooperation, trust, stability and social order. Modern scholars continue to regard reciprocity as the mechanism through which exchange relationships develop and endure (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005; Ahmad et al. 2023). Contemporary conceptualizations of Social Exchange Theory extend beyond the economic metaphor that characterized its early formulations. Than viewing exchanges solely as calculations of material gains and losses recent scholarship recognizes that exchanges encompass emotional psychological, symbolic, informational and relational resources. A comprehensive systematic review conducted by Ahmad et al. (2023) Which synthesized 3,649 publications and critically examined 46 conceptual studies concluded that modern SET has evolved from emphasizing economic transactions to recognizing psychological exchanges involving trust, commitment, emotions, identity, respect, belongingness and moral obligations.

Social Exchange Theory: Constructs, Proponents and Criticism

The major constructs of SET include rewards, costs, comparison level, comparison level for alternatives, reciprocity, dependence and power. Rewards refer to benefits obtained from a relationship, such as affection, companionship, social support, status or material assistance. Costs refer to the aspects of a relationship including time, emotional strain, conflict or financial expenditure (Thibaut & Kelley 1959). The construct of comparison level represents an individual's standard for evaluating relationship outcomes based on experiences and social expectations. Comparison level for alternatives refers to the perceived quality of the available alternative relationship. Individuals are more likely to leave a relationship when attractive alternatives exist and current outcomes fall below expectations (Thibaut & Kelley 1959). Reciprocity is another construct. Gouldner (1960) described reciprocity as a social norm requiring individuals to return benefits received from others. Reciprocity creates obligations. Helps sustain long-term relationships. Dependence occurs when one party values a relationship than available alternatives while power arises from asymmetries in dependence (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). The principal proponents of SET include George Homans, John Thibaut, Harold Kelley, Peter Blau and Richard Emerson. Homans introduced exchange principles (Homans, 1958); Thibaut and Kelley developed

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interdependence theory (1959); Blau linked exchange to structure and power (1964); and Emerson (1976) integrated exchange with network and power relations. Modern scholars have extended these constructs to relational contexts. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) emphasized obligations, trust and socio-emotional exchange while Ahmad et al. (2023) Highlighted exchanges and emotional investments as increasingly important dimensions of contemporary social interactions. Despite its influence SET has attracted criticism. One major criticism is that the theory assumes individuals behave primarily as calculators seeking to maximize rewards and minimize costs. Critics argue that many human actions are motivated by emotions, moral commitments, cultural values and altruism than calculated self-interest (Miller, 2005). Another criticism concerns the reduction of relationships to economic metaphors. Human relationships often involve love, sacrifice, loyalty and identity which cannot always be adequately measured as rewards or costs. Rosenfeld (2005) argued that exchange-based explanations may oversimplify mate selection and relationship dynamics in societies characterized by diverse social and cultural factors.

Scholars have also questioned the theory's assumption of reciprocity and balance. Mills (1979) distinguished between exchange relationships, where benefits are expected to be repaid and communal relationships, where individuals provide support without keeping account of exact returns. This distinction suggests that not all close relationships operate according to exchange principles. Furthermore, critics note that SET has historically paid attention to power inequalities, gender norms, culture and social structures. Contemporary reviews observe that many applications of the theory focus narrowly on transactions while neglecting identity, context and structural constraints (Madison et al. 2025). These criticisms have encouraged scholars to incorporate emotions, culture, trust and social norms into exchange-based explanations. Relatedly, Cropanzano et al. (2017) Argue that one of the weaknesses of SET lies in its limited predictive capability. They contend that researchers frequently use the theory to explain events after they have occurred than to make precise predictions before they occur. Their comprehensive review identified four conceptual problems: overlapping constructs, inadequate differentiation between positive and negative exchanges assumptions that positive and negative exchanges exist on a single continuum and insufficiently precise behavioural predictions. To address these shortcomings, they proposed a conceptual model that incorporates both the hedonic value of exchanges and the activity involved in exchange processes thereby improving the theorys explanatory and predictive power

Social Exchange and Human Relationships

Human relationships refer to enduring social connections between individuals involving interaction, communication, emotional attachment and mutual influence. Relationship scholars describe relationships as associations characterized by interdependence, shared experiences and ongoing interaction (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2018). Human relationships may be romantic, friendship-based, professional or community-oriented (Canary, & Yum 2015). They provide support, identity, belonging, companionship and practical assistance. Communication scholars emphasize that relationships are constructed and maintained through communication processes such as self-disclosure, responsiveness and conflict management (Nickola & James 2017). Contemporary relationship research recognizes that relationships are dynamic than static. Social Exchange Theory (SET) has become one of the widely applied theoretical frameworks for explaining the formation, maintenance and dissolution of human relationships. The theory posits that interpersonal relationships are built upon exchanges of valued resources, where individuals consciously or unconsciously evaluate the rewards and costs associated with their interactions (Vangelisti et al, 2026). Although the earliest formulations of the theory emphasized analogies contemporary scholars argue that exchanges within human relationships extend beyond material benefits to include emotional support, affection, trust, companionship, information, social approval and psychological security (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005; Ahmad et al. 2023). The application of Social Exchange Theory to relationships is founded on the assumption that individuals seek relationships capable of satisfying their personal emotional, social and psychological needs. According to Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018) individuals are motivated to engage in interactions that maximize rewards while minimizing costs. Although this proposition originated within

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sociology subsequent scholars have demonstrated that relational rewards frequently include intangible outcomes such as intimacy, respect, empathy, companionship, emotional reassurance and social belonging rather than material benefits alone (Cropanzano, et al 2017; Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley 1959). Contemporary systematic reviews further indicate that modern interpretations of SET increasingly emphasize transactions recognizing that emotions, identity and trust constitute valuable exchange resources within interpersonal relationships (Ahmad et al. 2023).

Human relationships develop through repeated interactions in which both parties exchange forms of resources. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) explain that exchange relationships begin with an initiating action by one individual followed by responses that gradually develop into enduring social relationships characterized by mutual obligations and trust. This process explains why friendships, marriages, family relationships and professional associations often strengthen over time as repeated positive exchanges reinforce commitment and relational satisfaction. Conversely relationships characterized by conflict, inequity or unreciprocated investments are more likely to deteriorate because the perceived costs outweigh the expected rewards (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005). One of the important contributions of SET to relationship studies is its explanation of relationship satisfaction. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) proposed that satisfaction depends on the comparison between relationship outcomes and an individual's comparison level, which is influenced by previous experiences, cultural expectations and personal aspirations. Individuals relationships as satisfying when outcomes exceed expectations and dissatisfying when expected rewards are not realized. Furthermore, the concept of comparison level for alternatives explains why individuals sometimes terminate existing relationships in favour of attractive alternatives. These propositions remain highly relevant in societies where increased mobility and digital communication have expanded opportunities for forming alternative interpersonal relationships (Ahmad et al. 2023).

The social exchange concept provides a lens for understanding how human relationships are formed and maintained. Individuals often evaluate whether relationships provide support, companionship, recognition or other valued outcomes relative to the effort invested. According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959) relationship satisfaction depends on perceived outcomes compared with expectations. In friendships and romantic relationships exchange may involve affection, attention, support, information and shared experiences, than monetary resources. Blau (1964) emphasized that social exchanges frequently involve rewards whose value depends on social meaning and reciprocity. Users evaluate partners based on perceived compatibility, emotional rewards, social status and opportunity costs. Social media also alters reciprocity by making support, attention and validation publicly visible through likes, comments and interactions (Davlembayeva,2021). Scholars have therefore applied SET to relationships, online communities and mediated communication (Ahmad et al. 2023). In contemporary marriages and partnerships exchange processes involve labor, financial contributions, household responsibilities and social support. Relationship satisfaction is often linked to perceptions of contribution and appreciation rather than strictly equal transactions (Rzeszutek et al. 2026). The theory thus remains useful for explaining why some relationships strengthen through support while others deteriorate when exchanges are perceived as unfair.

The dynamics of relationships have undergone remarkable transformation in the twenty-first century due to globalization, technological advancement, urbanization, economic uncertainty, changing family structures and the rapid proliferation of digital communication platforms (Davlembayeva, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos 2020). These developments have significantly altered how individuals initiate, develop, maintain and terminate relationships (Davlembayeva, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos 2020). Despite these transformations Social Exchange Theory (SET) remains one of the most relevant frameworks for explaining relationship behaviour because contemporary relationships continue to involve continuous evaluations of rewards, costs, reciprocity, commitment and relational outcomes (Ahmad et al., 2023). Contemporary relationships increasingly transcend boundaries through digital technologies such as social networking sites, online dating applications, instant messaging platforms and virtual communities

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(Jaidka, Ahuja, & Ng 2024). These technologies have expanded opportunities for interaction while simultaneously increasing individual's awareness of alternative relationships. Consequently, relationship decisions are no longer restricted by proximity but are influenced by digital accessibility, online communication and virtual social networks (Davlembayeva, 2021). Recent communication research demonstrates that interpersonal communication significantly influences decisions, particularly during the initial stages of relationship formation, where communication serves as a means of revealing intentions establishing trust and persuading others to pursue relational commitment (Thye et al. 2024).

The emergence of media has also transformed the exchange resources valued within contemporary relationships. Unlike interpersonal interactions digital relationships involve the exchange of symbolic resources such as online attention, likes, comments, emotional validation, digital visibility and virtual social support (Papaoikonomou & Valor2016). These symbolic exchanges often influence self-esteem, relational satisfaction and commitment in ways to face-to-face interactions. Ahmad et al. (2023) Argue that modern SET has evolved to include these symbolic resources recognizing that emotional reassurance, identity affirmation and online support constitute valuable forms of social exchange within contemporary society. Romantic relationships have equally experienced transformation. Contemporary partners increasingly negotiate issues relating to career aspirations, financial independence, gender equality, shared responsibilities and digital communication (Mishra, & Mund 2024; Muldoon, Gould, & Joullié 2024). These changing expectations require reciprocity and flexibility than earlier relationship models. Relationship satisfaction increasingly depends on responsiveness, effective communication, trust, emotional availability and perceived fairness rather than solely on traditional gender roles or economic dependence (Ellison, & Vitak 2015). Murray and Pascuzzi (2024) argue that individuals continuously regulate behaviour by evaluating whether relationships provide emotional safety, responsiveness and protection against interpersonal vulnerability thereby extending classical exchange explanations to include psychological security. The workplace similarly represents a context for contemporary exchange relationships. Employees and employers continuously exchange effort, commitment, knowledge, recognition, support and organizational resources (Deng, Wang, Aime, Wang Sivanathan, & Kim 2021). Analytic evidence indicates that high-quality social exchange relationships significantly enhance employee cooperation, innovation organizational commitment and performance demonstrating the continuing applicability of SET within modern organizational environments (Wu & Lv 2024). Despite its relevance contemporary scholars emphasize that SET should not be interpreted solely through economic metaphors. Rather modern relationships are increasingly characterized by intelligence, mutual respect, trust, empathy, cultural diversity and digital interdependence. Consequently, SET has evolved from explaining reciprocal transactions to explaining multidimensional exchanges involving emotional, informational, symbolic, psychological and relational resources (Ahmad et al. 2023).

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design. The qualitative design is considered appropriate because the study is concerned with issues such as perceived rewards, costs, reciprocity, trust, satisfaction, commitment and alternatives in online relationships. The study employed the in-depth semi-structured interview method for data collection. The interview guide was developed from the objectives of the study and the major constructs of Social Exchange Theory. The study was conducted among students drawn from six selected universities in Nigeria. The selected institutions are Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH), Ogbomoso; Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife; University of Ilorin (UNILORIN), Ilorin; Thomas Adewumi University, Oko-Irese; Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin; and Kwara State University (KWASU), Malete. The selection of these institutions provides variation in institutional ownership, location and university environment. LAUTECH is a public technological university located in Ogbomoso, while OAU, UNILORIN and KWASU are public universities located in different parts of Southwestern and North-Central Nigeria. Thomas Adewumi University and Al-Hikmah University provide private-university contexts. The inclusion of students from these different institutional environments is intended to provide variation in students' experiences of digital communication and online relationships.

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The study involved 18 informants, comprising three informants from each of the six selected universities. The decision to use 18 informants is based on the qualitative principle of information power and data saturation rather than statistical power. Hennink and Kaiser (2022), in a systematic review of empirical studies examining saturation, found that saturation was commonly achieved within approximately 9–17 interviews in studies involving relatively homogeneous populations and narrowly defined objectives. The proposed 18 informants therefore provide a reasonable initial sample that exceeds the range identified in that systematic review while also allowing the researcher to obtain perspectives from all six selected universities. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved. The study employed a purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is appropriate because the researcher requires informants who possess direct experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The data collected from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. To ensure the confidentiality of the informants, the use of anonymous identifications was applied. All informants were identified with informants 1–14. The interviews were conducted English Language for analysis and reporting purposes. The interviews were thematically analyzed.

Findings

The interview questions prompted informants to relay their experiences concerning the phenomenon. However, the findings in this study provided nine themes. The emergent themes reflect the informants' lived experiences on application of social exchange theory in human relationships. The emergent themes are (i) Emotional and Social Rewards as a Basis for Relationship Formation (ii) Academic and Informational Rewards Encourage Relationship Formation and Maintenance (iii) Networking, Career and Economic Rewards Influence Relationship Formation (iv) Reciprocity and Mutual Benefit Sustain Online Relationships (v) Consistency, Trust and Perceived Value Reinforce Continued Investment (vi) Time Wastage and Competing Demands Constitute Major Relational Costs (vii) Miscommunication, Dishonesty and Emotional Stress Reduce Relationship Continuity (viii) Financial Demands and Exploitation Negatively Affect Relationship Continuity (ix) The Balance Between Perceived Rewards and Costs Determines Relationship Continuity

Theme 1: Emotional and Social Rewards as a Basis for Relationship Formation

This theme describes the emotional and interpersonal benefits students expect or receive from online relationships. The responses indicate that companionship, emotional support, friendship, care and meaningful communication make online relationships attractive and encourage students to establish and sustain such connections. The interview responses indicate that emotional support, companionship, friendship, care and meaningful communication are major rewards that attract students to establish and maintain online relationships. The participants' accounts suggest that students are drawn to online relationships when they perceive that such relationships can provide someone to talk to, listen to them, understand them or offer emotional encouragement.

Recounting the benefits received from online relationships, Informant 1 stated:

"Well, I think emotional support, access to useful information especially if the person is always active, good communication and sometimes financial assistance." The informant further narrated a personal experience, saying, "Yes, I once became close to someone (Zainab) who is ready to listen to my rants anytime and day." (Informant 1, TAU)

Also, Informant 3 explained that online relationships provide emotional and social benefits, stating: "I receive emotional support, companionship, useful information, and easy communication." Recounting how these benefits influenced the relationship, the informant added: "The emotional support and understanding I received encouraged me to maintain the relationship." (Informant 3, TAU)

Similarly, Informant 8 recounted: "I get companionship, emotional support and someone to talk to, especially when I'm bored or going through something." The informant further explained, "There was a time I was going through a difficult period and someone I met online was always checking up on me and encouraging me. Even though we were not physically close, the person made me feel supported." (Informant 8, ALHIKMAH)

In the same vein, Informant 11 stated: "I receive companionship, emotional support, good communication, and the opportunity to meet new people and learn from them."

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Recounting a specific experience, the informant noted: "I once met someone online who was always supportive and available to listen to me when I had problems. The care and encouragement I received made me want to continue the relationship." (Informant 11, OAU)

Theme 2: Academic and Informational Rewards Encourage Relationship Formation and Maintenance

The participants also identified academic assistance, information sharing, advice and knowledge acquisition as important rewards derived from online relationships. The responses suggest that students are more likely to maintain relationships when the interactions contribute to their academic work, personal knowledge or intellectual development.

Recounting an academic experience, Informant 5 stated: "Emotional support, friendship and connection, academic help like sharing notes and information, networking opportunities, and a space to express myself and learn new things." The informant further narrated: "During exam period, a friend I met online helped me understand difficult topics and sent me study materials. Because of that support, I decided to keep the relationship and also support them in return." (Informant 5, LAUTECH)

Also, Informant 9 (LAUTECH) recounted a similar experience: "During a stressful semester, an online friend listened to me and gave study tips daily. That support made me keep talking to them and meet up more often online." The informant also identified "learning from each other" among the expectations associated with online relationships. (Informant 9, LAUTECH)

Similarly, Informant 14 narrated: "Yes. During exams, a friend I met on WhatsApp sent me past questions and explained difficult topics. Because that help improved my grades, I decided to keep the friendship and we still talk today." The informant further identified "mutual support academic help, business opportunities, and learning from each other" as expected benefits. (Informant 14, ALHIKMAH)

Furthermore, Informant 13 recounted how an online relationship provided useful academic information: "There was a time that I need to get information concerning my project from the school of my study and then my old school mate from that school that I met online helped me with useful information." The informant added: "They are very important because it helps me to maintain the online relationship and by so doing, it improves my communication skills, I am able to get more useful information." (Informant 13, KWASU)

Theme 3: Networking, Career and Economic Rewards Influence Relationship Formation

The findings further show that students form online relationships when they perceive opportunities for networking, career development, professional advancement and business benefits. Thus, online relationships can provide instrumental rewards beyond emotional companionship and friendship.

Explaining the motivation for developing online relationships, Informant 2 stated: "If I see the potential of someone who has some values that I can benefit from and I can reciprocate career wise and personal development." When asked what makes the informant continue investing in the relationship, the response was simply: "I will say it's consistency." (Informant 2, TAU)

Also, Informant 6 recounted the opportunities associated with online interaction, stating: "Keeping in touch daily has helped me receive opportunities. People's status updates, stories, and posts give me access to information and insights I wouldn't have gotten otherwise." The informant further stated that these experiences "encouraged me to continue." (Informant 6, UNILORIN)

A particularly strong economic example was provided by Informant 10 who stated: "Some also support me by patronizing my small perfume business, which I send to them through logistics." The informant explained further: "The possibility of gaining a potential customer, especially for my perfume business, encourages me to develop some online relationships." (Informant 10, LAUTECH)

Similarly, Informant 14 identified business opportunities as one of the expected rewards, stating: "The expectation of mutual support academic help, business opportunities, and learning from each other." (Informant 14, ALHIKMAH)

Theme 4: Reciprocity and Mutual Benefit Sustain Online Relationships

One of the strongest themes emerging from

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the interviews is reciprocity. Participants repeatedly indicated that they are more willing to maintain online relationships when both parties contribute to the relationship and derive benefits from it. One-sided relationships were generally viewed as less attractive and less sustainable. Explaining what makes an online relationship worthwhile, Informant 1 stated: "I believe for any relationship to be worthwhile, both sides should gain something positive." The informant further emphasised: "If only relationship can provide emotional support and trust, I am more likely to value and maintain it. However, benefit shouldn't be one sided." (Informant 1, TAU)

Also, Informant 5 (LAUTECH) gave a clear example of reciprocal exchange, explaining: "During exam period, a friend I met online helped me understand difficult topics and sent me study materials. Because of that support, I decided to keep the relationship and also support them in return." (Informant 5, LAUTECH)

Similarly, Informant 7 stated: "They are very important. If an online relationship gives me peace, support, genuine friendship, useful information and happiness, I consider it worthwhile. But I also consider whether the relationship is mutual and whether both people are putting in effort." The informant further explained: "I continue investing when the relationship is reciprocal and I feel valued, respected, understood and appreciated." (Informant 7, OAU)

In the same manner, Informant 8 explained: "I also continue when I feel that the relationship is mutual and I'm not the only person making the effort." The informant further stated that when the other person "makes an effort to communicate, respects me, listens to me and makes me feel valued," they are naturally willing to continue the relationship. (Informant 8, ALHIKMAH)

Most directly, Informant 14 stated: "When the relationship is reciprocal. If the person also listens, supports me, and we both benefit, then I'm willing to keep putting in effort. Consistency keep me going." (Informant 14, ALHIKMAH)

Theme 5: Consistency, Trust and Perceived Value Reinforce Continued Investment

The interview responses reveal that students do not only consider what they gain from online relationships; they also assess whether the benefits are consistent, genuine and valuable. Trust, honesty, respect, consistency and meaningful interaction therefore reinforce students' willingness to continue investing in online relationships.

Informant 2 was particularly concise when asked what sustains continued investment, stating: "I will say it's consistency." (Informant 2, TAU). Also, Informant 6 (UNILORIN) explained: "Two things: Interactivity and Value. If the person is interactive and there is value in the conversation, I will continue investing my time, attention, and emotions." (Informant 6, UNILORIN)

Similarly, Informant 9 identified several conditions for continued investment, stating: "Consistent communication, trust, mutual effort, feeling valued and understood, and seeing progress toward shared goals or meeting offline." (Informant 9, LAUTECH)

In the same vein, Informant 11 (OAU) stated: "Trust, respect, good communication, mutual understanding, and genuine care make me continue investing in the relationship." (Informant 11, OAU Male)

Furthermore, Informant 13 (KWASU) explained: "The trust, respect that I receive from such relationship makes me to continue investing my time." (Informant 13, KWASU)

Theme 6: Time Wastage and Competing Demands Constitute Major Relational Costs

Although students identify numerous benefits from online relationships, the interviews reveal that time consumption is an important perceived cost. Excessive chatting and online interaction may take students away from academic responsibilities, offline activities and other important engagements.

Informant 1 identified "spending too much time chatting" as a disadvantage, alongside misunderstandings caused by text messages. (Informant 1, TAU). Also, Informant 7 (OAU) explained: "Some disadvantages include spending too much time chatting, misunderstandings because messages can easily be misinterpreted, emotional stress, disappointment and sometimes discovering that someone is not who they claimed to be." The informant further added that "There can also be pressure to reply or maintain communication." (Informant 7, OAU)

Similarly, Informant 5 identified several costs, stating: "Miscommunication, ghosting,

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dishonesty, emotional stress, wasting time and data, and getting distracted from school work." (Informant 5, LAUTECH). Informant 9 (LAUTECH) also reported: "Miscommunication, time spent online instead of offline activities, disappointment from ghosting, privacy concerns, and emotional stress from conflicts." (Informant 9, LAUTECH)

Likewise, Informant 14 stated: "I've experienced time wastage, miscommunication, fake information, and emotional stress. Sometimes people ghost you, or you discover someone was not honest about who they are." (Informant 14, ALHIKMAH)

Theme 7: Miscommunication, Dishonesty and Emotional Stress Reduce Relationship Continuity

Another significant theme is that negative experiences such as miscommunication, dishonesty, deception and emotional stress can increase the perceived costs of online relationships and consequently reduce students' willingness to continue investing in them. Recounting such experiences, Informant 3 stated: "I have experienced misunderstandings, wasted time, emotional stress, and occasional disappointment." The informant further explained that "lying, inconsistency, and secrecy make me distrust someone." (Informant 3, TAU)

Also, Informant 4 (TAU) explained: "I have experienced misunderstandings, wasted time, and sometimes disappointment when people are not who they appear to be online." The informant further stated: "I distrust people who lie, hide important details, or behave suspiciously." (Informant 4, TAU)

Similarly, Informant 8 observed: "One major disadvantage is that you can spend a lot of time chatting with someone without really knowing their true intentions." The participant added: "Sometimes it can be emotionally draining, especially when the other person becomes too demanding or starts expecting too much attention." (Informant 8, ALHIKMAH)

Furthermore, Informant 14 stated: "I've experienced time wastage, miscommunication, fake information, and emotional stress. Sometimes people ghost you, or you discover someone was not honest about who they are." (Informant 14, ALHIKMAH)

Theme 8: Financial Demands and Exploitation Negatively Affect Relationship Continuity

Financial demands emerged as another perceived cost capable of undermining trust and damaging online relationships. Some participants expressed suspicion when online contacts requested money without an established transactional relationship, while another informant narrated an actual experience of financial disappointment.

Informant 2 stated: "One of the behaviours I would flag is if the person requests money from me when we are not in any form of transactions." (Informant 2, TAU) . Also, Informant 7 (OAU) explained: "I become suspicious when someone tells contradictory stories, constantly asks for money, avoids video calls or other forms of verification, pressures me to reveal personal information, or behaves differently from what they initially presented online." (Informant 7, OAU). Recounting a personal experience, Informant 10 narrated: "After getting along pretty well with a friend, the person asked me for money with a promise to return it, but they failed to fulfill the promise. This made me feel disappointed and affected my trust in the relationship." (Informant 10, LAUTECH). Similarly, Informant 8 stated: "I become suspicious when someone constantly lies, changes their stories, asks for money too quickly, refuses to be open about themselves, or behaves differently from how they initially presented themselves." (Informant 8, ALHIKMAH)

Theme 9: The Balance Between Perceived Rewards and Costs Determines Relationship Continuity

The overarching theme emerging from the interviews is that students appear to assess whether the rewards obtained from an online relationship outweigh the costs involved in maintaining it. Relationships are more likely to continue when students perceive meaningful benefits, mutual effort and positive experiences. Conversely, students become less willing to invest when stress, deception, one-sided effort or other costs outweigh the perceived rewards.

Informant 7 clearly captured this balance, stating: "If an online relationship gives me peace, support, genuine friendship, useful information and happiness, I consider it worthwhile. But I also consider whether the relationship is mutual and whether both

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people are putting in effort." The informant further stated: "If the relationship becomes one-sided or causes more stress than happiness, I am less likely to continue." (Informant 7, OAU). Similarly, Informant 9 (LAUTECH) explicitly described the reward-cost evaluation, stating: "If the benefits like support, respect, and fun outweigh the effort, I consider the relationship worthwhile." (Informant 9, LAUTECH)

Also, Informant 8 explained: "For me, if I'm getting genuine care, respect, support and good communication from the relationship, I feel it is worth maintaining. But if I'm not getting anything positive from it and it is only causing stress, I would rather distance myself." (Informant 8, ALHIKMAH) In the same manner, Informant 5 stated: "Very important. If the relationship gives me mutual respect, support, and growth, then I consider it worthwhile. If not, I don't invest much time in it." (Informant 5, LAUTECH). Finally, Informant 14 summarised the importance of rewards by stating: "Very important. If I'm not gaining connection, knowledge, or emotional support, I don't see the reason to keep investing in the relationship. The benefits are what make it valuable to me." (Informant 14, ALHIKMAH)

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study reveal that the principles of Social Exchange Theory are substantially evident in the way students of the selected Nigerian universities form, evaluate and maintain online relationships. Across the interviews, the participants consistently described online relationships in terms of the benefits they receive, the costs they incur, the extent to which benefits are reciprocated, the trustworthiness of the other person and the perceived value of continuing the relationship. This suggests that the participants do not approach online relationships merely as communication activities but as social exchanges in which they continuously assess what they gain, what they contribute and whether the relationship remains worthwhile. This finding is consistent with the central proposition of Social Exchange Theory that individuals evaluate social relationships according to rewards, costs, reciprocity and the expected outcomes of continued interaction. Ahmad et al. (2023), in their systematic review of Social Exchange Theory, explain that social exchange involves reciprocal interactions in which individuals evaluate the benefits and costs associated with social behaviour and relationships. The present study therefore supports Ahmad et al. (2023), as the interview evidence demonstrates that students consciously or unconsciously apply exchange principles when making decisions about online relationships

A major finding under this objective is that emotional and social rewards constitute important benefits obtained from online relationships. Participants repeatedly identified emotional support, companionship, friendship, someone to talk to, encouragement, care and meaningful communication as significant rewards. The finding on emotional and social rewards supports the findings of Hatamleh et al. (2023), that explains that psychological, social and functional benefits can strengthen social relationships. The study also found that academic and informational benefits represent another important category of rewards. Informants reported receiving study materials, project information, useful advice, knowledge and opportunities to learn from people encountered online. This finding supports Ngozi and Nwanna (2021), who investigated social media as an information and communication tool for the socioeconomic empowerment of undergraduate students in Nigeria. The findings also revealed that networking, professional opportunities and economic benefits constitute important forms of social rewards. This finding supports Agbasi and Bebenimibo (2023) who concluded that the relationships formed online can generate additional instrumental benefits such as networking, academic assistance, business patronage and career-related development. Another important finding is that reciprocity and mutual benefit are central to the students' evaluation of online relationships. This shows that reciprocity is not simply a theoretical principle imposed on the data; it is directly reflected in participants' descriptions of what makes an online relationship worthwhile.The finding strongly supports Ahmad et al. (2023), whose systematic review identifies reciprocity as a fundamental component of Social Exchange Theory. It also supports Teubner and Camacho (2023), whose experimental study of online micro-communities, explicitly grounded in Social Exchange Theory, found that online exchange structures could develop from numerous weaker connections towards fewer but stronger reciprocal exchange relationships

Trust also emerged as a critical principle

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governing online social exchange. Participants consistently associated trust with honesty, consistency, respect, transparency, keeping promises and ensuring that words correspond with actions. Conversely, lying, secrecy, contradictory stories, suspicious behaviour, avoidance of verification and inappropriate requests for money were associated with distrust. The finding supports Hatamleh et al. (2023), who found that trust plays an important role in strengthening the relationship between social media engagement and social relationships. Their findings indicate that trust can moderate the effects of social media engagement and enhance the perceived fairness and reciprocity of online exchanges. The finding also supports Cistulli and Snyder (2022), who demonstrated that the nature of social media interaction alone does not guarantee trust and that privacy and perceptions of how others behave online influence trust. With respect to costs, the findings show that students also engage in negative evaluations of online relationships. Time wastage was one of the most frequently identified costs. Informants mentioned spending excessive time chatting, spending time online instead of engaging in offline activities, wasting data and becoming distracted from school work. This finding is supported by Wu, Feng and Zhang (2024) who found a bidirectional relationship between loneliness and problematic social media use, demonstrating that intense social media involvement can become associated with problematic patterns of use. Another major cost identified was miscommunication, dishonesty, emotional stress, disappointment and deception. Participants reported that text-based communication could easily be misunderstood, while some had experienced ghosting, fake identities, conflicting stories, dishonesty and emotional exhaustion. The present finding supports the broader conclusion of Sun (2023), whose research on university students emphasised that social media use has both beneficial and detrimental implications for students' psychological well-being. Financial demands also emerged as a specific relational cost. Participants mentioned inappropriate requests for money, failed repayment and financial pressure as behaviours that damage trust.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Social Exchange Theory provides a strong and relevant framework for understanding online relationships among university students in Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that students do not engage in online relationships solely for communication purposes; rather, their decisions to initiate, maintain and continue such relationships are influenced by the perceived rewards and costs associated with the interactions. The study further concludes that emotional and social rewards are among the most important benefits that students derive from online relationships. Companionship, emotional support, friendship, care, encouragement and meaningful communication were repeatedly identified as reasons why participants valued and maintained relationships formed through online platforms. The findings therefore demonstrate that online relationships can provide important forms of emotional and interpersonal support, particularly when individuals are physically distant or require someone with whom they can communicate. The value attached to these emotional rewards indicates that students' online relationships extend beyond casual digital interaction and can develop into meaningful social connections.

The findings also demonstrate that online relationships involve substantial costs and disadvantages. Time wastage, excessive chatting, mobile data expenses, distraction from academic activities, miscommunication, ghosting, emotional stress, disappointment, privacy concerns, fake information and financial exploitation were identified as major costs. These findings indicate that online relationships cannot be regarded as universally beneficial. The same platforms that provide companionship, academic assistance, information and networking opportunities can also expose students to emotional, social, academic and financial costs. Most importantly, the study concludes that the continuity of online relationships depends substantially on the perceived balance between rewards and costs. However, when costs become greater than perceived benefits, particularly where the relationship becomes one-sided, stressful, deceptive or exploitative, students become less willing to continue investing in it. This finding provides strong support for the central assumption of Social Exchange Theory that individuals evaluate the outcomes of relationships in determining whether to maintain or discontinue them.

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Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Students should consciously cultivate reciprocity and mutuality in their online relationships. Since the study found that students are more willing to maintain relationships when they perceive mutual support, effort, respect and benefits, university students should avoid relationships that are persistently one-sided.

Universities should provide digital relationship and online safety education for students. The findings revealed concerns relating to fake identities, dishonesty, conflicting stories, inappropriate financial requests, privacy concerns and emotional stress. Universities should therefore incorporate digital literacy and online relationship safety into student orientation programmes, seminars and counselling initiatives.

Students should establish healthy boundaries concerning the amount of time and emotional energy devoted to online relationships.

Students should maximize the academic, informational and professional opportunities available through online relationships while maintaining appropriate caution.

Students should evaluate the overall quality and reward-cost balance of their online relationships and withdraw from relationships that become persistently harmful or exploitative. The study found that students are more likely to continue investing in online relationships when the benefits outweigh the costs and when they feel valued, respected, understood and supported.

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