

A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW ON SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY (2020-2024)

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Abstract

Social Exchange Theory is an important foundation for explaining relationships and interactions between humans. This study aims to examine how this theory has been used, explained, and developed by researchers over the past five years, from 2020 to 2024. This study was conducted using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, analyzing various articles published in reputable journals such as Scopus and Google Scholar. Twenty articles were used in this study. The analysis shows that social exchange theory has undergone a shift in its perspective, from initially emphasizing economic exchange and rational logic to now focusing more on psychology, moral values, and humanism. Throughout its development, this theory has not only explained relationships between individuals and organizations but also encompassed digital relationships and focused on sustainability. Concepts such as trust, reciprocity, fairness, and sustainability have become key elements that indicate the direction of this theory's development. Thus, Social Exchange Theory is now considered not merely a theory of reciprocity but rather a general framework for understanding the meaning and trust that connect people in various social relationships.

Keywords: Social Exchange Theory, Systematic Literature Review, Theory Development, Social Relations.

1. Introduction

Every social relationship we experience, whether within family, close friends, or within society, is always linked to a process of give and take. When someone helps or listens to another's concerns, they not only want to receive something in return for their own benefit, but also to feel trusted, have a genuine connection, and respect each other. Such exchanges become part of social relationships. These simple actions eventually developed into an influential theory, Social Exchange Theory. This theory stems from the view that every social relationship is formed due to mutually beneficial exchanges, whether in the form of tangible benefits such as help and support, or non-material things such as respect, trust, and recognition. George C. Homans (1958) first proposed this idea by emphasizing that social interactions occur because someone weighs the rewards received and the costs incurred. This idea was later developed by Peter Blau (1964), who showed that social relationships are not only about rational exchanges, but also involve psychological factors such as trust and appreciation.

Over time, social exchange theory has ceased to be seen as simply a rational model for understanding human behavior. The increasingly complex social world, technological advances, and changes in how humans interact require this theory to be understood from a broader perspective. Social relationships now occur not only in economic or organizational contexts, but also encompass digital interactions, emotional relationships, and deeper human values. In the past five years (2020–2024), social exchange theory has undergone significant development and adjustment. Many researchers have begun to view the theory from a more psychological and relational perspective. Human interactions are now viewed not only as reciprocal transactions but also as forms of emotional connection driven by trust, empathy, and a sense of belonging. These changes demonstrate that social exchange theory continues to evolve, adapting to the dynamics of how humans build and understand relationships. Through this study, the author attempts to comprehensively examine the development of social exchange theory in the period 2020–2024. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study aims to identify how this theory has been used, explained, and developed

by researchers. Ultimately, the goal is to understand how this theory has evolved from a classical concept focused on the exchange of benefits to a more humanistic theory, emphasizing psychological meaning, trust, and social values in human relationships.

2. Research Methodology

This research uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, a research method that involves reviewing, selecting, and analyzing various scientific articles in a neat and organized manner. This approach aims to comprehensively understand the development and theoretical direction of a particular topic. Unlike a typical literature review, which only provides a general overview, an SLR aims to combine previous research findings to gain a deeper and more focused understanding. In this study, the SLR was used to examine the development of Social Exchange Theory (SET) from 2020 to 2024. The systematic literature review in this study followed the stages adopted from the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) model. This model was chosen because it provides clear guidance in the process of searching, screening, and analyzing literature. In general, this research procedure consists of four main stages:

1. Identification

At this stage, researchers searched for various scientific articles related to the topic of Social Exchange Theory through several online databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar. The keywords used include: "Social Exchange Theory".

2. Screening

The articles found were then checked based on the title, abstract, and year of publication to determine whether they were in accordance with the research focus. Only articles published between 2020 and 2024 were retained for further analysis.

3. Eligibility

At this stage, researchers read the articles that passed the screening thoroughly to assess whether they are appropriate to the research objectives. Articles that did not explicitly discuss Social Exchange Theory or did not focus on the development of the theory were not included in the analysis.

4. Inclusion

Articles that met the eligibility criteria were then selected for in-depth analysis. These articles form the basis for compiling a theoretical synthesis in this study. To ensure that the study results remain relevant and of high quality, this study applies several selection criteria, namely as follows:

Publication time: Articles published between 2020 and 2024.

Article type: Must be a scientific journal article that has gone through an editing process by experts (peer-reviewed).

Indexing: Articles are published in journals listed in Scopus, or available on Google Scholar and have a good academic reputation.

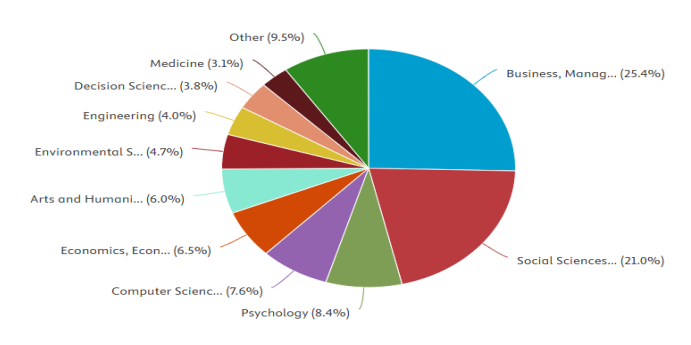
Language: Articles are written in English.

Article content: The article must directly discuss, use, or develop Social Exchange Theory as its primary theoretical basis.

3. Results and Discussion

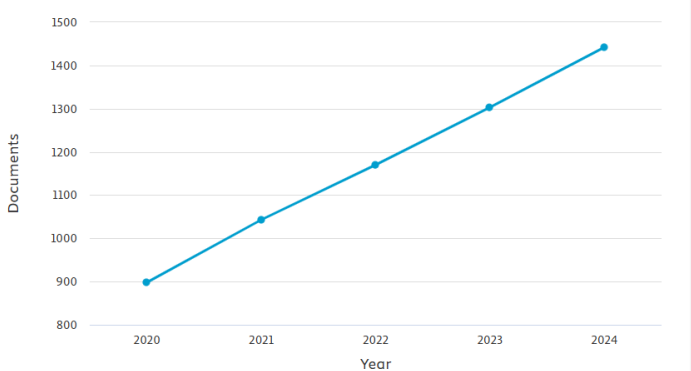
A systematic search conducted through the Scopus and Google Scholar databases found several articles discussing the use and development of social exchange theory (SET) during the period 2020 to 2024. Using the keyword "Social Exchange Theory" and for the period 2020 to 2024, there were 5,856 articles. After a screening process, 150 articles were found. After going through another selection process and applying eligibility criteria, namely articles that focused on discussing Social Exchange Theory, there were 20 main articles that were considered the most relevant and representative of the objectives of this study. To understand general publication trends, an initial analysis was conducted using Scopus' Analyze Search feature. The results provide an overview of the distribution of publications by year, field of study, and most frequently used journals.

Documents by subject area



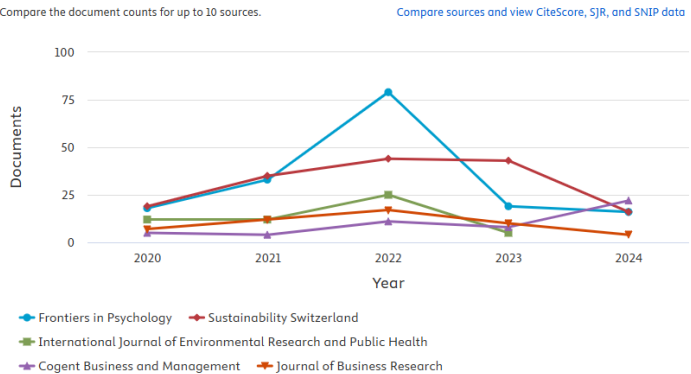
Based on the analysis, the fields of Business, Management & Accounting and Social Sciences produced the most publications, more than 46%, indicating that the concept of Social Exchange Theory is often used in research on organizational management, workplace behavior, and various social phenomena. Furthermore, the fields of Psychology and Computer Science also made important contributions, showing that this theory is applied in the study of individual behavior and interactions in digital systems and the relationship between humans and computers.

Documents by year



Based on the analysis, the number of published articles increased dramatically from 2020 to 2024, from 898 to 1,442 documents. This trend indicates growing research interest in the topic worldwide. This continued increase indicates that this field is gaining importance and growing in the international scientific literature.

Documents per year by source



Publications on this topic are found in various journals spanning several fields, particularly psychology, sustainability, and business. The journal Frontiers in Psychology and Sustainability (Switzerland) is the source with the

most articles, indicating a high level of interest in behavioral approaches and sustainability perspectives in this research. One of the most significant developments in the literature from 2020 to 2024 is the shift in theoretical focus from an economic to a more social basis. In the past, as Homans (1958) and Blau (1964) explained, social relations were considered rational processes in which individuals weighed the benefits and costs of each interaction. However, recent research has shown that social relations are not always based solely on rational calculations. For example, research by Ahmad et al. (2023) shows that human relationships are now also influenced by psychological exchanges, such as trust, feelings, and personal meanings. This research shifts social exchange theory from a transactional approach to a more relationship- and emotion-based approach.

Another important development in social exchange theory over the past five years is the growing emphasis on moral, cultural, and social values. An article by Wikaningrum and Mas'ud (2020) states that social exchange theory must be understood through the lens of values and spirituality. They propose a values-based social capital framework, in which good social relationships are based not only on exchange but also on a sense of fairness, honesty, and established social rules. In addition to moral values, this theory is also beginning to be linked to sustainability issues. Chong Zhou et al. (2024) used social exchange theory to explain how trust in relationships and influence strategies can increase customer participation in environmentally friendly practices. The results of the study indicate that SET theory has now evolved to explain the exchange of values between people, organizations, and the environment.

In addition to its evolving meaning, social exchange theory is also increasingly being applied in various contexts. Research by Marques et al. (2024) used the SET concept to explain collaboration between universities and the industrial sector. They found that sustainable relationships can only be established if they are based on trust, commitment, and knowledge exchange. This demonstrates that social exchange theory can now explain relationships not only between individuals, but also between organizations and within broader social systems. In today's digital era, social exchange theory applies not only to face-to-face interactions but also to virtual relationships and online experiences. Waheed et al. (2024) state that user satisfaction, a sense of fairness, social benefits, and personal enjoyment are new forms of reciprocal exchange in digital environments.

4. Conclusion

Based on a systematic review of 20 articles published between 2020 and 2024, it can be concluded that Social Exchange Theory (SET) has undergone significant conceptual development in the past five years. While the theory previously focused solely on economic exchange and rational policy, it has now evolved into a theory that also emphasizes psychological, moral, and humanistic aspects. The results of the systematic literature review (SLR) indicate four main directions of theory development, namely:

1. Shift from a focus on economic exchange to psychological and relational relationships.

Today, modern social relationships are seen not only as an exchange of economic benefits, but also encompass things like trust, empathy, and emotional support. The SET model is now used to explain the dynamics of relationships between individuals and organizations based on mutual trust and commitment.

2. Integration of social, moral and sustainable values.

This theory now includes elements such as justice, moral norms, and social responsibility. Recent research suggests that social exchange can also occur in the context of sustainability, where the relationship between humans and the environment is viewed as a form of exchange of values.

3. Application of theory in collaborative and cross-cultural contexts.

SET has proven flexible in explaining social relations in a variety of situations, including cooperation between organizations, collaboration between academia and industry, and relationships involving different cultures. The theory is now more contextual and inclusive, adapting to cultural differences and social values.

4. Adaptation to the digital era and social modernization.

In the technological era, social relationships are now heavily influenced by digital platforms. The successful use of SET to understand interactions based on fairness, security, and user satisfaction in digital contexts demonstrates the theory's growing reach into psychological and virtual environments.

This study concludes that Social Exchange Theory remains relevant and adaptable today. Over the past five years, the theory has evolved, not because the ideas themselves have changed, but because people have understood it differently. Previously, Blau and Homans viewed social exchange from the perspective of rational benefits and reciprocity. Now,

researchers see it more deeply, as a form of exchange based on trust, moral values, and even responsibility toward the environment and others.

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