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RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AMONG STUDENTS OF SELECT UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH-EAST AND SOUTH-SOUTH, NIGERIA

IBEKWE, Chinedu¹

EJEM, Agwu Agwu, PhD²

FREDFISH, Tom Godwin, PhD³

UKONU, Michael Chimeze⁴

¹Department of Mass Communication, Imo State, University, Owerri

²Department of Mass Communication, Maurid Polytechnic, Mbiaso, Akwa Ibom State

³International Institute of Journalism Uyo

⁴Department of Mass Communication, Imo State, University, Owerri

Emails: chinacsdalima@gmail.com, ejemagwu@gmail.com, tomfredfish005@yahoo.com,

ukonum@gmail.com

Corresponding author: IBEKWE Chinedu, chinacsdalima@gmail.com.

ABSTRACT

The study examined the relevance of social exchange theory in interpersonal communication among students of select universities in south-east and south-south, Nigeria. The objectives of the study among others were to: find out the perceived level of interpersonal interactions among students and examine the tenet of the social exchange theory that mostly influences interpersonal communication among the students. The researchers adopted the social exchange theory to support this work because of its appropriateness. This study employed the descriptive survey research design. Using the Cozby's table for sample size determination below, 370 persons were drawn from a population of 41,201 from the selected schools. Finding revealed that the assumptions of the social exchange theory are relevant in explaining interpersonal communication choices among students, especially with regard to the pursuit of mutual benefits and emotional support ($\bar{x} = 3.82$): students are mostly influenced by mutual benefits in their interpersonal interactions choices; they also look out for interactions that will cost them less in their interpersonal interactions ($\bar{x} = 3.73$). Based on the findings, it was recommended that universities should set up counseling centers in schools or include interpersonal interactions in the academic curricula of all students to teach them the right motivations for interpersonal interactions.

Keywords: Communication, Influence, Perception, Social Exchange, Theory, Interpersonal.

Introduction

Individuals engage in a series of interdependent interactions that generate obligations among the exchange parties. One of the ways that individuals engage in a series of interdependent interactions is in interpersonal communication (Blau, 1964, as cited in Mitchell, Cropanzola & Quinsberry, 2012). Interpersonal communication is often defined as the communication that takes place between people who are interdependent and have some knowledge of each other (Wood, 2015, Berger, 2018).

Interpersonal communication is relational in nature; it takes place in a relationship, and the way we communicate depends on the kind of relationship we have with the other person. It often includes face-to-face exchange of messages, which may take the form of a certain tone of voice, facial expressions, body language and gestures. Bajracharya (2018) explains that the level of one's interpersonal communication skills is measured through the effectiveness of meaning transferred through the message. However, all interpersonal exchanges including interpersonal communication and interpersonal relationships are predicated on mutuality as well as rotation and exchange of roles. That is why it was said that a series of mutual exchanges strengthen the quality of the relationship between the exchange parties, which thereby produces beneficial and productive behaviours. It is on the premise of that mutuality that the social exchange theory was birthed.

Social exchange theory is a concept based on the notion that a relationship between two people is created through a process of cost-benefit analysis (Smith & Hamon, 2012, p. 251). The theory also proposes that relationships are no longer profitable – when costs outweigh rewards – or when a party sees another relationship as more profitable, the relationship is likely to be terminated for a better one (Serenko & Bontis, 2016; Smith & Hamon, 2012). Exchange is the underlying principle in interpersonal communication (Berger, 2008), the level of one's interpersonal communication skills is measured through the effectiveness of transferring messages to others and the ability of the communicating parties to meet the communication needs and expectations of the other (Redmond, 2015). Empirical evidence seems to show that there is a consensus that interpersonal communication is predicated on the social exchange theory. It is on that note that this researcher intends to examine if the assumptions of the social exchange theory are truly relevant in explaining interpersonal communication among students.

Statement of the Problem

It is widely assumed, based on the social exchange theory, that people reveal certain information about themselves to others if they expect mutual benefits of reciprocity, commitments and trust (Canary & Stafford, 1992, Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor, 2001, Weinberger, Levi-Keren, Landler-Pardo & Elyashiv, 2020). The psychological structures of young people predispose them to emotional adventures (Moradi, Faghiharam & Ghasempour, 2018), so without doubt, students engage in emotional and committed interactions but how do they fare in that regards since they are also faced with broader concerns such as the commitment to achieving success in examination and self-development? Empirical investigations regarding the validity of those assumptions are rare, thereby bringing to question the extent to which the expectations of mutual benefits of reciprocity, commitments and trust influence interpersonal interactions in those settings. Therefore, in an academic environment such as universities in Southeastern and South-South, Nigeria, what predicates the interpersonal interactions and deep-seated exchange of information, ideas and feelings between two or more students? Is it essentially the desire to pass examinations or generally on pleasure, reciprocity, commitments and trust, which are the indices of the social exchange theory?

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. Find out the perceived level of interpersonal interactions among students of universities in Southeastern and South-South, Nigeria;
2. Examine the assumption of the social exchange theory that mostly influence interpersonal communication among students;
3. Assess the perceived costs and rewards of various interpersonal interactions among students;
4. Know if the values of students contribute to the choice of who they interpersonally communicate with.

Review of Related Literature

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is an exchange of information between two or more people (Berger, 2018). It is also an area of study and research that seeks to understand how humans use verbal and nonverbal cues to accomplish a number of personal and relational goals. While there are many definitions available, interpersonal communication is often defined by Wood (2015) as the communication that takes place between people who are interdependent and have some knowledge of each other. Similarly, Heil (2010) sees it as what one uses with both spoken and written words as the basis to form and maintain personal relationships with others.

Knapp and Daly (2012) explain that interpersonal communication came to being when men began to exchange ideas and thoughts to one another. It is a kind of communication in which people communicate their feeling, ideas, emotions and information face to face to each other. It can be in verbal or non-verbal form. Interpersonal communication is not only about what is said and what is received but also about how it is said, how the body language used, and what was the facial expression.

In simple words, it can be inferred that the communication between two people is referred as Interpersonal communication. It is one of the basic means of communication. The interpersonal communication skills can be improved by practice, knowledge and feedback. The interpersonal communication takes place when two people are at same place and aware of each other's presence, no matter how unintentional or unpremeditated it is. It may not be in the form of speech, it may be a gesture, an expression, the dress, or the body.

The Concept of Social Exchange

A social exchange is an exchange between two or more actors (in communication or any other relational situation) where each actor offers some good or outcome the other values (Lawler et al., 2000; Okpobiri & Nwosu, 2016). All exchanges involve some degree of mutual dependence, where each actor depends on her partner in order to receive some desired good or outcome (Molm, 1994). Mutual dependence, and thus exchanges, create a risk of renegeing since one actor may provide a desired good for his partner and receive a less than desired good or nothing in return (Molm et al., 2000).

Exchanges among parties are predicated on the level of trust, confidence and certainty shown by the parties involved. Negotiated exchanges tend to entail less uncertainty than reciprocated exchanges. Negotiated exchanges involve both parties agreeing to the terms of exchange—who

provides what to whom and for what in return—and consist of the bilateral giving of the benefits agreed upon (Molm et al., 2000). Uncertainty in exchange is reduced, if not eliminated, once the terms of an exchange are agreed upon—actors know what they are getting for what they are giving, and they can choose to engage in the exchange or not' (Molm et al., 2000, p. 1401).

Review of Related Studies

Guan (2014) investigated cultural values and social exchange in long-distance dating relationships among American and Chinese participants. When participants were asked to report their partners' use of maintenance behaviours, both American and Chinese reported assurances as the most frequently used strategy, which mostly met their expectations. Regarding the correlation between the fulfillment of comparison level and relational satisfaction, Americans showed that satisfaction was positively associated with positivity, assurances, and tasks. For the Chinese, satisfaction was positively correlated with tasks, but negatively correlated with openness.

Parameswari (2015) studied interpersonal relationships among college students and concludes that there is a significant gender difference in expressed inclusion and wanted control dimensions of interpersonal relationship. Further, arts discipline students significantly differed from science discipline students in wanted control. There was a significant difference in expressed inclusion and wanted affection based on order of birth of the students.

Opic (2016) concludes that no gender differences were established (between female and male teachers) in the appraisal of the quality of interpersonal relations with pupils (on two subscales). The correlation analysis confirmed a low negative statistically significant correlation between the years of service and the subscale rough verbal and physical treatment.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on social exchange theory. Developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959) as cited in Nwodu (2016), social exchange theory contends that individuals make different assessments about relationship satisfaction and make different decisions about relationship commitment based on two values: rewards and costs. The theory examines the interplay and balance between the rewards an individual received from a certain relationship and the costs that he or she expended in that relationship. The implication of anchoring this study on the social exchange theory is that it forms the fulcrum of this study; in that this study intends to evaluate the extent to which this interpersonal communication among students are predicated on the assumptions of the Social exchange theory.

Methodology

This study employed the descriptive survey research design. The study population consisted of students of Imo State University, Owerri and Akwa Ibom State University, Ikot Akpadem. From the matriculation lists of the past four years, the total number of students in both schools is 40,201. Using the Cozby's table for sample size determination below, 370 persons were drawn from a population of 40201. Proportional and multi-stage cluster sampling techniques were used. The proportionate sampling procedure was used in determining the proportion of the population of each faculty in relation to the total population. In the multi-stage cluster sampling technique: the researchers listed the faculties in both schools and dividing them into departments; randomly selected two departments from each of the faculties; drew a sample frame of the number of students in each of the departments

selected; and shared the allocated sample from each faculty between the two departments that were randomly selected.

A set of structured questionnaire was distributed using surveymonkey.com, an online survey platform for identifying and sending instruments to target respondents and having them click out their responses and submit. The platform was used as this study was conducted during the government imposed lockdown occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. Test of reliability showed a coefficient of 0.89.

Data Presentation and Analysis

All 370 copies of questionnaire distributed were returned, but only 360 returned copies were found completed and usable, resulting in an effective response rate of 97.2 per cent.

Table 1: Opinions on perceived level of interpersonal interactions among students

Options	Frequency	Percent
High	338	94
Low	22	6
Total	360	100

From the presentation in Table 1, majority (94%) of the respondents stated that the level of interpersonal interactions among the students is high. The implication is the respondents are adequately utilized interpersonal interaction in their day to day activities.

Table 2: Rewards influence interpersonal interactions choices

Options	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Decision
Strongly disagree	50	14	3.65	High
Disagree	20	6		
Agree	101	28		
Strongly Agree	189	52		
Total	360	100.0		

Table 2 above indicates that majority of the sampled students strongly agreed with the claim that they are influenced by rewards in their interpersonal interactions choices. This is accentuated by a high mean value of 3.65.

Table 3: Mutual benefits influence interpersonal interactions choices

Options	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Decision
Strongly disagree	26	7	3.81	High
Disagree	32	9		
Agree	195	54		
Strongly Agree	107	30		
Total	360	100.0		

Table 3 above indicates that majority of the sampled students agreed with the claim that they are influenced by mutual benefits in their interpersonal interactions choices. This is accentuated by a high mean value of 3.81.

Table 4: Students look out for interactions that will cost them less in their interpersonal interactions choices

Options	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Decision
Strongly disagree	40	11	3.65	High
Disagree	23	7		
Agree	98	27		
Strongly Agree	199	55		
Total	360	100.0		

Table 4 above indicates that majority of the sampled students strongly agreed with the claim that they look out for interactions that will cost them less in their interpersonal interactions choices. Their responses are accentuated by a high mean value of 3.65.

Table 5: Prevalence of each of the three indices of social exchange theory (rewards or benefits, mutual benefits and cost) in interpersonal interactions choices

Options	SD	%	D	%	U	%	A	%	SA	%	Mean	Decision
Mutual benefits	7	2	41	11	82	23	110	31	120	33	3.82	Positive
Rewards	14	4	51	14	169	47	56	16	70	19	3.32	Positive
Cost (lower)	43	12	81	23	90	25	71	20	75	21	3.15	Positive

With the highest mean value of 3.82, majority of the students think that mutual benefits influence their interpersonal interactions choices the most.

Table 6: The various rewards sought by students in their interpersonal interactions

Strategies	Frequency	Percent
Emotional support	125	35
Financial support	103	29
Group studies (the student wants someone to teach him/her)	81	22
Accommodation	29	8
Material gratifications other than money	15	4
Others	7	2
Total	360	100

The result indicates that emotional support; financial support; group studies (the student wants someone to teach him/her) and accommodation were the major rewards sought by the respondents in their interpersonal interactions with fellow students.

Table 7: Gender Difference in Interpersonal Interactions among Students

Dimensions of interactions	Gender	Mean	SD	T-value
Expressed inclusion	Male	3.83	1.16	3.31
	Female	4.54	1.80	
Expressed control	Male	3.75	1.47	0.65
	Female	3.90	1.75	
Expressed affection	Male	3.72	1.32	0.29
	Female	3.66	1.92	
Wanted inclusion	Male	2.73	1.33	1.59
	Female	2.37	1.84	

Wanted control	Male	5.86	1.92	5.83
	Female	4.17	2.17	
Wanted affection	Male	3.17	1.46	1.79
	Female	2.78	1.62	

From the above table, it is seen that there is a significant gender difference in two sub-dimensions of interpersonal interactions, namely expressed inclusion and wanted control. Based the results of the t-test, females show high level of expressed inclusion compared to males.

Discussion of Findings

The finding showed that majority of the respondents agreed that the level of interpersonal interactions among the students is high. Females show high level of expressed inclusion compared to males. They prefer communicating in group. They while-away their time discussing or gossiping with their group. They feel more comfortable interacting in a group than alone. They show their real self in the group than when they are alone. This may be the reason for their high score in expressed inclusion. More so, males show high preference for wanted control than females. It is rare for males to be emotionally close in their interactions. They have different group of friends to meet their different needs. For example, males may have a friend to accompany them for shopping, another friend to guide in taking important decisions. Males may not know to effectively use the autonomy given to them. They need someone to guide them in the right direction. The implication is that the level of interpersonal interactions among students of the selected schools is high and there is a significant difference in how male and female students engage in interpersonal interactions. The finding also indicated that majority of the students (33%) strongly agreed with the claim that they are influenced by rewards in their interpersonal interactions choices. Table 3 indicates that majority of the students (45%) agreed with the claim that they are influenced by mutual benefits in their interpersonal interactions choices. Table 4 indicates that majority of the students (33%) strongly agreed with the claim that they look out for interactions that will cost them less in their interpersonal interactions choices.

Among the three indices of the social exchange theory (rewards or benefits, mutual benefits and cost) Table 5 indicates that majority of the students think that mutual benefits influence their interpersonal interactions choices the most. That is to say, students most often communicate with fellow students if they perceive or expect reasonable level of mutuality in the interaction. They communicate more with people if there is mutuality in the benefits they seek to gain in the communication. That is exactly the assumption of the social exchange theory.

True to the assumption of the social exchange theory, the finding showed that emotional support; financial support; group studies (the student wants someone to teach him/her); accommodation; material gratifications were the various rewards sought by the students in their interpersonal interactions at 92%. The implication is that the students of the selected universities mostly go into interpersonal interactions in search of emotional support, companionship and financial support. Those are the operational stems of the social exchange theory that are more relevant in explaining interpersonal communication in the selected schools.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is clear that social exchange theory is relevant in explaining interpersonal communication choices among students. Out of the three indices of the social exchange theory (rewards or benefits, mutual benefits and cost), mutual benefits influence the interpersonal interactions choices the most. However, when rewards are involved, students mostly go into interpersonal interactions in search of emotional support and financial support.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were suggested:

- i) Without prejudice to their academic commitments, more reasonable and purposeful social events that permit healthy interactions among students should be organized.
- ii) It is important to set up counseling centers in schools or include interpersonal interactions in the academic curricula of all students to teach them the right motivations for interpersonal interactions.
- iii) Not all students are expressive and extroverted. Those who cannot offer the same vibrancy but do so in the form of attention, should be considered to have given their communication rewards too.
- iv) Parents and the mass media have the huge responsibility of instilling values in the students, especially in their formative years before they gain admission in higher institutions.

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