

Application of Exchange, Network, and Rational Choice Theory to a Modern Social Issue

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Introduction

Social media is a useful modern issue through which to compare [social exchange theory](#), network theory, and rational choice theory. Platforms enable people to maintain relationships, seek information, display identity, build professional connections, organize political activity, and exchange emotional support. At the same time, they expose users to surveillance, harassment, misinformation, social comparison, privacy loss, and demands on attention. No single sociological theory explains all of these outcomes. Social [exchange theory](#) is strongest when analysing reciprocity and perceived rewards; network theory explains how patterns of ties distribute information and influence; rational choice theory clarifies decisions made under perceived costs, benefits, and constraints.

The theories must also be adapted to an environment shaped by platform algorithms and commercial design. Online interaction is not simply face-to-face exchange moved onto a screen. Platforms rank content, recommend contacts, define visible reactions, collect data, and make some actions easier than others. Users make choices, but those choices occur inside technical and economic structures that shape what they see and what becomes rewarding.

The Modern Social Issue: Participation in Platformed Social Life

The issue examined here is why people continue to participate in social media despite well-known risks. Participation can include posting, liking, sharing, commenting, joining groups, following news, messaging friends, consuming entertainment, or maintaining a professional profile. The benefits are immediate and varied: belonging, recognition, information, convenience, opportunity, and amusement. The costs may be delayed or difficult to measure: lost time, anxiety, reputational harm, unwanted data collection, conflict, and exposure to misleading content.

This tension makes social media especially suitable for theoretical comparison. Exchange theory asks what users give and receive. Network theory asks how position and connection patterns affect outcomes. Rational choice theory asks how users evaluate alternatives. The platform perspective asks how companies organize the environment in which all three processes occur. (Blau, 1964)

Social Exchange Theory: Reciprocity and Unequal Rewards

Social exchange theory treats interaction as an exchange of valued resources. These resources need not be money. Attention, approval, advice, emotional care, information, status, and access can all function as rewards. Costs can include time, effort, embarrassment, conflict, obligation, and uncertainty. People tend to continue relationships that meet or exceed their expectations and compare them with available alternatives.

Likes, Comments, and Recognition

A visible reaction is a small unit of social reward. A user posts a photograph and receives likes, comments, or private messages. The response signals recognition and may encourage future posting. Reciprocity can develop: users respond to those who respond to them, congratulate people who previously congratulated them, or share content from people who support their own work. Surma's study of Facebook reciprocity supports the relevance of exchange processes in online networks. (Surma, 2016)

Yet online reciprocity is not always balanced. A creator may provide entertainment to thousands of followers while receiving attention, advertising revenue, or status from only a fraction of them. A user may repeatedly provide emotional support in a group without receiving comparable help. Exchange theory helps identify dissatisfaction when perceived costs become greater than rewards, but it should not assume that people calculate every action consciously. Norms of friendship, care, identity, and morality can motivate giving even without an expected direct return.

Comparison Levels and Social Media Fatigue

Users judge an online experience against expectations. A person who expects connection may be disappointed by superficial reactions. Someone who expects professional exposure may tolerate frequent posting because the possible career benefit is high. Fatigue develops when maintenance demands, repeated conflict, privacy concerns, or low-quality content reduce the perceived value of participation. The user may deactivate an account, limit posting, move to a private group, or switch platforms. Logan, Bright, and Grau connect social media fatigue with rational evaluation, but the same behaviour can be interpreted as withdrawal from an exchange that no longer feels rewarding. (Logan et al., 2018)

Network Theory: Structure Matters More Than Individual Intention

Network theory examines nodes and ties. Nodes may be people, organizations, pages, or accounts; ties may represent friendship, following, communication, collaboration, or information flow. The theory shifts attention from personal preference to relational structure. Two users with identical skills can have different outcomes because one occupies a central position connected to influential groups while the other remains peripheral.

Strong Ties, Weak Ties, and Bridging

Strong ties often provide trust, frequent communication, and emotional support. Weak ties connect individuals to information and opportunities outside their immediate circle. A former classmate, professional acquaintance, or distant follower may share a job vacancy that close family members do not know about. A bridging user who connects otherwise separate communities can influence how information travels.

Online platforms make weak ties easier to maintain, but the existence of a connection does not prove meaningful interaction. A person may have thousands of followers and little dependable support. Network size should therefore be distinguished from tie quality. Measures such as centrality, density, clustering, and brokerage describe structure, but their social meaning depends on context. (Granovetter, 1973)

Information Diffusion and Misinformation

Network structure helps explain why some content spreads rapidly. Messages move through hubs, tightly connected groups, and bridges between communities. Repetition from several contacts can create the impression that a claim is widely accepted, even when the information originated from one unreliable source. Homophily—the tendency to connect with similar people—can produce clusters in which users encounter reinforcing views and fewer corrections.

Network theory is therefore more effective than individual exchange theory for understanding large-scale diffusion. A person may share a claim for attention or identity reasons, but the reach of that claim depends on network position and platform amplification. The theory also explains why removing one prominent account may alter information flow while leaving the broader community intact.

Rational Choice Theory: Decisions Under Imperfect

Information

Rational choice theory assumes that actors select actions they believe will best advance their preferences under constraints. “Rational” does not mean objectively correct, fully informed, or morally desirable. A user can make a rational choice based on incomplete information and still experience a poor outcome. The theory is useful for examining whether to join a platform, reveal personal information, respond to conflict, pay for promotion, or leave a group.

Privacy Calculations

Users often exchange data for convenience, personalization, free access, or social participation. The benefit is immediate; the potential cost of profiling, data breach, discrimination, or future misuse is uncertain. This imbalance can produce a privacy paradox in which people express concern but continue disclosing information. From a rational choice perspective, the behaviour may reflect uncertainty, low perceived probability of harm, lack of practical alternatives, or the high social cost of nonparticipation.

Business and Professional Use

Organizations use social media because it can reduce recruitment, advertising, and customer-contact costs. A firm may build networks with applicants and customers because the expected return exceeds the cost of content production and monitoring. Rahman and colleagues apply social network theory to e-recruitment, while rational choice explains why managers select platforms that provide access to desired labour pools. The decision remains constrained by platform fees, algorithm changes, brand risk, and unequal access to audience data. (Liu et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2020)

Leaving Is Not Always a Free Choice

The theory becomes weaker when it treats platform exit as an uncomplicated alternative. People may depend on a platform for family contact, school information, business sales, political participation, or employment. Network effects make a service more valuable as more relevant people use it. Even a dissatisfied user may remain because the cost of losing the network is higher than the cost of continued participation. This is a rational response to constraint, but it also demonstrates platform power.

Algorithms as an Additional Layer of Social

Structure

Early exchange and rational choice theories did not anticipate privately controlled ranking systems that mediate interaction at enormous scale. An algorithm selects which posts appear, recommends accounts, predicts engagement, and may privilege content likely to hold attention. The user does not choose from all available information; the user chooses from a curated set. This changes both rewards and networks.

When provocative content receives rapid interaction, the platform may distribute it further. Attention becomes a reward for the creator, the network expands the content, and users rationally learn that emotionally intense material produces visibility. The three theories therefore operate together, but the platform is not a neutral container. It defines reaction buttons, visibility metrics, moderation rules, advertising systems, and data access. A complete sociological analysis must include this institutional actor.

Applying the Theories to Online Harassment

Online harassment illustrates the differences among the theories. Exchange theory may interpret harassment as behaviour rewarded by peer approval, attention, or a sense of dominance. If sanctions and social disapproval increase the costs, the behaviour may decline. Network theory examines how groups coordinate attacks, how targets become visible, and how blocking or moderation changes pathways. Rational choice theory considers whether a harasser expects anonymity, low punishment, and high status within a group.

These explanations are useful but incomplete without power and culture. Harassment is not simply a mutually negotiated exchange. Gender, race, sexuality, disability, political identity, and public visibility affect who is targeted and whose reports are taken seriously. Critical and feminist theories may therefore explain inequalities that the three selected approaches understate.

Applying the Theories to Online Mutual Aid

The same platforms can support mutual aid. Users exchange money, information, transport, childcare, housing leads, or emotional support. Social exchange theory explains reciprocity and trust; network theory explains how requests move through communities; rational choice explains why donors select causes and why recipients choose particular groups. Strong community norms may also create generalized reciprocity: one person helps another without expecting repayment from that individual because members expect the network to support people when needed.

Platform design affects visibility and credibility. Requests from well-connected users may spread widely, while equally urgent needs from peripheral users remain unseen. This shows why good

intentions do not guarantee equal outcomes.

Which Theory Is Most Effective?

No theory is universally superior. Social exchange theory best explains interpersonal reciprocity, perceived support, and the continuation or withdrawal of relationships. Network theory best explains diffusion, influence, centrality, brokerage, and unequal access created by structure. Rational choice theory best explains decisions among alternatives when users perceive different costs and benefits.

For social media as a whole, network theory has the greatest explanatory reach because platform outcomes depend heavily on connection patterns and algorithmic distribution. However, network structure alone cannot explain why people value particular rewards or decide to disclose information. The strongest analysis combines the theories and places them within political economy: platforms seek revenue, advertisers seek attention, users seek social and practical benefits, and algorithms coordinate these interests unevenly.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Exchange and rational choice language can make relationships appear excessively calculating. People act from habit, emotion, solidarity, identity, and moral commitment. Network measures can describe connections while overlooking the meaning of those connections. All three theories may understate structural inequality and the commercial collection of user data.

Research also faces ethical problems. Public posts are not automatically ethically available for unlimited analysis. Users may not expect their messages to be archived, profiled, or quoted. Studies should consider consent, anonymization, vulnerable populations, and the risk that network maps can reveal identities even when names are removed.

Conclusion

Exchange, network, and rational choice theories each explain important dimensions of social media participation. Exchange theory shows why attention, support, and reciprocity sustain interaction; network theory reveals how ties and positions distribute influence; rational choice theory explains privacy decisions, platform selection, and withdrawal under constraint. Their limitations become visible when algorithms and corporate power are ignored. Social media is best understood as a platformed social environment in which interpersonal exchange, network structure, individual choice, and commercial design continuously shape one another.

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