

AQA Psychology A-level

Option 1: Relationships

Summary Notes

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Part 1 — Factors Affecting Attraction: Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure refers to the information we choose to reveal about ourselves in a romantic relationship. Its aim is to increase intimacy, understanding and empathy between partners, provided that disclosure is reciprocal.

Social Penetration Theory

Altman and Taylor (1973) proposed **Social Penetration Theory**, which suggests that relationships develop through increasing levels of self-disclosure. As partners share more personal information, they gradually “**penetrate**” **deeper** into each other’s lives, increasing **trust and intimacy**.

Self-disclosure should therefore be:

- **Gradual** – personal information is revealed over time.
- **Selective** – not everything is shared immediately.
- **Reciprocal** – both partners share information and respond with understanding.

The Onion Analogy

The theory uses an **onion analogy** to explain how relationships develop:

Layer	Type of information
Outer layers	Surface-level information, such as hobbies, interests and general opinions
Middle layers	More personal information , such as beliefs, experiences and feelings
Inner layers	Deep, private and emotionally meaningful information

As a relationship develops, partners gradually **peel away more layers**, leading to deeper and more meaningful self-disclosure. This is most likely when disclosure is **reciprocal**, as both partners demonstrate **trust, empathy and understanding**.

However, disclosing too much too soon may be negative:

- It may suggest a **lack of trust or appropriate boundaries**.
- Disclosure may become **unbalanced** if one partner shares much more than the other.
- It may make the other person **uncomfortable**, reducing the likelihood of relationship development.



Breadth and Depth

Reis and Shaver (1988) identified two important dimensions of self-disclosure:

Dimension	Meaning	Example
Breadth	The range of topics discussed	Discussing hobbies, family, work and interests
Depth	How personal and emotionally meaningful the information is	Sharing fears, insecurities or private experiences

There is often a relationship between **breadth and depth**:

- **High breadth + low depth** → many topics are discussed, but conversations remain **superficial**. *For example, conversations with strangers or colleagues.*
- **High depth too early** → sharing very personal information before sufficient **trust and reciprocity** have developed may be **off-putting**.

Therefore, successful relationship development involves gradually increasing **both the breadth and depth of self-disclosure**, while maintaining **reciprocity** between partners.

One sentence summary; Self-disclosure in romantic relationships involves a balance of breadth and depth, with intimacy developing through gradual, reciprocal sharing over time.



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A strength of Social Penetration Theory is that it has **real-world applications**, particularly in **relationship counselling**. Therapists can encourage couples to use **gradual and reciprocal self-disclosure** to improve communication and rebuild trust. For example, couples may be encouraged to share increasingly **personal thoughts and feelings** with each other. This supports the theory because it suggests that **self-disclosure increases intimacy** as relationships develop. Therefore, the theory has **practical value** because it can be used to help improve **real-life relationships**.

A further strength of Social Penetration Theory is that **research suggests self-disclosure is linked to relationship quality**. For example, **Sprecher and Hendrick (2004)** found that higher levels of self-disclosure and perceived partner disclosure were associated with greater **relationship satisfaction, love and commitment** in romantic couples. This supports Social Penetration Theory because it suggests that **mutual and reciprocal self-disclosure is associated with closer and more rewarding relationships**. Therefore, the theory has **supporting evidence**, increasing its validity as an explanation of relationship development.

A limitation of Social Penetration Theory is that it may **oversimplify how relationships develop**. The rate and degree of self-disclosure may depend on factors such as **age, familiarity and relationship context**. For example, younger people may form relationships with peers they already know, such as at school, meaning some self-disclosure may already exist. In contrast, people using **online dating** may disclose information more quickly because anonymity can make it easier to share personal information and establish intimacy. This suggests that relationships do not always develop through a **gradual increase in self-disclosure**. Therefore, the theory may have **limited explanatory power and generalisability**.

Another limitation of Social Penetration Theory is that it **may be culturally biased**. Much of the research and assumptions behind the theory are based on **Western individualist cultures**, where open self-disclosure is often seen as important for developing intimacy. In contrast, in **collectivist cultures**, such as some East Asian societies, intimacy may develop through **shared experiences, mutual obligations and social roles**, rather than increasing personal disclosure. This suggests that the importance of **breadth and depth of self-disclosure may not be universal**. Therefore, the theory may lack **cross-cultural validity and generalisability**.



Part 2 — Factors Affecting Attraction: Physical Attractiveness

1. Evolutionary Explanations

From an evolutionary perspective, humans are biologically predisposed to find certain physical traits attractive (**Shackelford & Larsen, 1997**). These preferences may have developed because particular physical characteristics can signal **health, fertility and reproductive fitness**.

Female Attractiveness	Male Attractiveness
Neotenous features – child-like features such as large eyes and a small chin may trigger protective and nurturing instincts , increasing the likelihood of survival and reproduction	Broad shoulders + narrow waist – an inverted triangle body shape may signal strength and the ability to provide and protect .
Low waist-to-hip ratio (≈ 0.7) – associated with health and fertility , suggesting greater reproductive potential.	Muscular build – may signal strength and health

Additionally, **facial symmetry** is considered a sign of genetic fitness and good health in both males and females.

2. The Halo Effect

The Halo effect (**Thorndike, 1920**) refers to the tendency to associate **physical attractiveness with positive characteristics**, even when there is no evidence that these characteristics are related.

This is summarised by the idea that “**what is beautiful is good**” (**Dion et al.**).

As a result, attractive individuals are more likely to be perceived as **trustworthy, sociable, successful and kind**. These expectations can lead to a **self-fulfilling prophecy**, where individuals develop these traits due to how they are treated by others.

3. The Matching Hypothesis

The **Matching Hypothesis** suggests that individuals are more likely to form relationships with partners who are of a **similar level of physical attractiveness**. This depends on an accurate assessment of one’s own **attractiveness or value**.

People may choose partners of similar attractiveness to:

- **reduce the likelihood of rejection**
- **increase the chances of relationship success**

Therefore, partner choice involves balancing the **desirability of a potential partner** with the **realistic chances of attaining them**.



4. Attractiveness in Long-Term Relationships

Physical attractiveness is not only important during the **early stages** of a relationship.

McNulty et al. (2008) conducted a longitudinal study on married couples to investigate the role of physical attractiveness in long-term relationships. They found that attractiveness continued to influence relationship satisfaction even after marriage.

This suggests that physical attractiveness may remain an important factor in **maintaining relationship satisfaction over time**.

One sentence summary; Physical attractiveness influences relationship formation and success through evolved preferences, cognitive biases like the halo effect and matching between partners of similar attractiveness levels.

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A strength of physical attractiveness is that it is **supported by evidence**. **Walster et al. (1966)** conducted the “computer dance” study, where university students were randomly paired for a dance. Participants completed questionnaires before the event and later rated their partner and indicated whether they wanted to see them again. The researchers found that **physical attractiveness was the strongest predictor of attraction and desire for future contact**, rather than personality or intelligence. This supports the idea that physical attractiveness is important in **initial attraction**.

A strength of research into physical attractiveness is that it has **real-world applications**. **Palmer and Peterson (2012)** found that participants rated physically attractive individuals as more **politically competent, trustworthy and mature**, even when told that they had little political knowledge. This suggests that physical attractiveness can **bias judgements of ability and character**, even when contradictory information is provided. Therefore, the research has **practical value** because it suggests that voters may be influenced by a politician's appearance rather than their actual competence.

A limitation of research into physical attractiveness is that it is **challenged by contradictory evidence**. **Feingold (1988)** conducted a meta-analysis and found only a **weak relationship between physical attractiveness and relationship success or popularity**. This suggests that physical attractiveness alone is not a strong predictor of relationship outcomes. Therefore, explanations such as the **Matching Hypothesis and Halo Effect** may have **limited validity**, as other factors such as personality and emotional compatibility may also influence relationships.

A limitation of the **Matching Hypothesis** is that partner choice may be influenced by **third-party factors**. **Sprecher (2009)** found that couples' perceived similarity was associated with **positive reactions from their social networks**, such as friends and family approving of the relationship. This suggests that even if two people are similar in physical attractiveness, their relationship may be more likely to develop and succeed when the people around them **support the relationship**. Therefore, the Matching Hypothesis may have **limited explanatory power**, as it focuses on similarity between partners but does not fully account for the **social context surrounding the relationship**.



Part 3 — Factors Affecting Attraction: Filter Theory

Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) proposed the Filter Theory of attraction, which suggests that we start with a large group of potential partners (the **field of availables**) and gradually narrow this down to a smaller group (the **field of desirables**) using a series of filters. The importance of each filter depends on the stage of the relationship.

Filter	What it involves	When it is most important
1. Social demography	Similarity in background characteristics , such as religion, ethnicity, social class, education and proximity . Proximity is particularly important because geographical closeness increases opportunities for interaction and communication.	Early relationship formation
2. Similarity of attitudes	Similarity in beliefs and values , such as views on relationships, religion and lifestyle . Greater similarity increases attraction, while major differences may lead to conflict.	Short-term relationships (up to ~18 months)
3. Complementarity	The extent to which partners' traits complement each other , meaning they "fit together" and meet each other's needs. For example, an organised partner may complement a more spontaneous partner.	Long-term relationships (18 months+)

One sentence summary; Relationships develop through a series of filters, moving from broad social factors to deeper compatibility, which increases the likelihood of a successful long-term relationship.



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A strength of Filter Theory is that it is **supported by research evidence**. **Gruber-Baldini et al. (1995)** carried out a longitudinal study of couples and found that those who were similar in **age and educational level** at the start of the relationship were more likely to remain together and have successful relationships. This supports the idea that **sociodemographic similarity acts as an important filter** when relationships develop. This is consistent with Filter Theory because people are more likely to meet and form relationships with those who are **geographically close and socially similar**, reducing the number of potential partners available to them. Therefore, the theory has **supporting evidence** and provides a useful explanation of how relationships may develop.

A strength of Filter Theory is that it has **high face validity**. The theory reflects everyday experiences of relationships, as people are more likely to form relationships with those who are **nearby** and share similar **attitudes and values**. For example, people often meet partners through **school, university or work**, where they are already surrounded by people who are geographically close and may have similar social backgrounds. Once people have met, further filters such as **similarity in attitudes, values and beliefs** can reduce the number of potential partners further. For example, someone who strongly values having children may be less likely to pursue a relationship with someone who does not want children. This supports the idea that potential partners are gradually **filtered down** as relationships develop. Therefore, Filter Theory provides a **realistic explanation of relationship formation**.

A weakness of Filter Theory is that it may **lack temporal validity**. The theory was developed before the rise of the **internet and online dating**, when partner choice was more restricted by factors such as geographical proximity and social class. Today, dating apps and social media allow people to interact with a **much wider range of potential partners**, including people they would be unlikely to meet through their immediate social environment. This means that the **field of availables is much larger**, so the original filters may be less important when people initially choose partners. Therefore, Filter Theory may have **limited relevance to contemporary relationships**, although some filters, such as similarity in values and attitudes, may still influence partner choice.

A further weakness of Filter Theory is that **contradictory evidence suggests that similarity may develop after a relationship has formed rather than being necessary at the beginning**. **Anderson et al. (2003)** found evidence of **emotional convergence**, where couples became more similar in their emotional responses over time. Similarly, **Davis and Rusbult (2001)** found an **attitude alignment effect**, where partners gradually developed more similar beliefs during the relationship. This challenges Filter Theory because it suggests that partners do not necessarily need to be similar **before** entering a relationship; instead, spending time together can cause their attitudes and emotional responses to become more alike. Therefore, Filter Theory may be **too simplistic**, as it focuses on similarity as a factor in selecting partners but does not explain how **similarity can develop within relationships**, reducing its explanatory power.



Part 4 — Theories of Romantic Relationships: Social Exchange Theory

Thibault and Kelley (1959) proposed Social Exchange Theory (SET) which explains relationships as a **cost–benefit exchange**, where individuals aim to maximise rewards and minimise costs.

This is based on the **minimax principle**, meaning people try to gain the most rewards (e.g. **emotional support, companionship, security**) for the least costs (e.g. **time, effort, stress**).

Relationships are therefore seen as an “exchange” and individuals consider the **opportunity cost**, meaning whether their time and energy would be better spent in another relationship.

Two factors influence whether a relationship is considered worthwhile:

Factor	Meaning	How it affects relationships
Comparison level (CL)	A person's expectations about what they should receive from a relationship. These are shaped by past experiences, current relationships and social influences such as the media.	High CL → expects more rewards → may be less satisfied if expectations are not met. Low CL → may be satisfied with fewer rewards .
Comparison level for alternatives (CLalt)	A person's judgement about whether they could have a better relationship elsewhere .	Better alternative → more likely to leave . No better alternative → more likely to stay , even if satisfaction is low.

Stages of Relationship Development

Thibault and Kelley suggested that all relationships develop through four stages:

- 1. Sampling stage** – individuals explore rewards and costs through early interactions and trial and error.

For example, a couple begins dating and discovers that they enjoy each other's company, but also notice things they find difficult about each other.

- 2. Bargaining stage** – partners begin to negotiate and make compromises to balance rewards and costs.



For example, one partner wants to spend more time together, while the other wants to maintain time with friends, so they agree on when they will see each other.

- 3. Commitment stage** – expectations become more stable and both partners understand the balance of rewards and costs.

*For example, the couple become more committed and develop clear expectations about **support, trust and time spent together**.*

- 4. Institutionalisation stage** – norms and expectations become fully established, making the relationship stable and predictable.

*For example, the couple develop established routines, such as **sharing responsibilities, celebrating occasions together and making decisions jointly**.*

Summary sentence; Relationships are maintained through a cost–benefit analysis where individuals compare rewards and costs, and stay in relationships when perceived rewards outweigh costs and alternatives.



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A strength of Social Exchange Theory is that it can explain why some individuals remain in **abusive or unhealthy relationships**. According to SET, people consider the balance of **rewards and costs**, as well as their **comparison level (CL)** and **comparison level for alternatives (CL_{alt})**. Although an abusive relationship may involve significant costs, such as emotional or physical harm, an individual may remain if they perceive important rewards, such as **emotional attachment, financial security or support for children**, or believe that there are no better alternatives available. This demonstrates that SET can explain why individuals may remain in relationships that appear objectively costly, as decisions are based on their **perceptions of rewards, costs and alternatives**. Therefore, SET has **explanatory value** for understanding complex real-life relationship decisions.

A further strength of Social Exchange Theory is that it has **useful real-life applications**. For example, **Integrated Behavioural Couples Therapy (IBCT)** aims to increase positive interactions and reduce negative interactions between partners. **Christensen et al. (2004)** found that couples who received IBCT showed improvements in **relationship satisfaction**, suggesting that changing the balance of positive and negative interactions can improve relationships. This supports the idea that relationship satisfaction is influenced by the **rewards and costs** experienced by partners. Therefore, SET has **practical value** because its principles can be applied to help improve distressed relationships.

A limitation of Social Exchange Theory is that it may be more useful as a **retrospective explanation of relationship breakdown than a predictive theory**. This is because concepts such as **comparison level (CL)** and **comparison level for alternatives (CL_{alt})** are based on an individual's subjective perceptions and are difficult to measure objectively. For example, it is difficult to determine exactly how large the difference between CL and CL_{alt} needs to be before someone decides to leave a relationship. This makes it difficult for researchers to **predict relationship outcomes** using the theory. Therefore, SET may have **limited scientific validity**, as its key concepts are difficult to operationalise and objectively test.

A further limitation of Social Exchange Theory is that it **underestimates the importance of equity in relationships**. SET suggests that satisfaction depends largely on whether the perceived rewards outweigh the costs, but people may also become dissatisfied when they feel that the relationship is **unfair or unequal**. For example, one partner may contribute much more time and effort to the relationship while receiving fewer benefits in return, even if the overall rewards still outweigh the costs. **Utne et al. (1984)** found that greater perceptions of **equity were associated with greater relationship satisfaction**. This suggests that people consider not only what they gain from a relationship but also whether the exchange is **fair between partners**. Therefore, SET may have **limited explanatory completeness** because it does not fully account for equity.



Part 5 — Theories of Romantic Relationships: Equity Theory

Walster et al. (1978) proposed **Equity Theory**, which suggests that successful relationships depend on **fairness**, rather than simply maximising rewards as proposed by **Social Exchange Theory**.

The theory argues that both partners should have a **similar ratio of rewards to costs**. This does not mean **equality**, where everything is exactly the same. Instead, **equity** means that both partners **perceive the relationship as fair**.

Rewards may include love, intimacy, support, and companionship, while **costs** may include conflict, effort, emotional strain, or negative behaviours such as infidelity.

Perceived Equity

Equity is **subjective**, meaning it depends on each person's **perception** of whether the relationship is fair. This means one partner may feel **over-benefitted**, while the other feels **under-benefitted**. This imbalance can lead to dissatisfaction:

Position	What they may experience
Over-benefitted	Receives more rewards than they contribute, which may lead to guilt or discomfort .
Under-benefitted	Contributes more than they receive, which may lead to anger, resentment or frustration .

The greater the **imbalance in equity**, the more likely the relationship is to become **dissatisfying and unstable**. However, couples may attempt to restore equity in two main ways:

1. **Behavioural changes** – one partner changes their behaviour to make the relationship fairer, such as **putting in more effort or increasing rewards** for the other person.
2. **Cognitive changes** – one or both partners change how they **perceive the relationship**, such as accepting certain costs as normal or lowering their expectations.

Over time, the balance of **costs and rewards can change** over the course of a relationship. For example, in the early stages, individuals may put in more effort to “**win over**” their partner. As the relationship develops, the balance may become more stable, creating a greater sense of **fairness and equity**.

One sentence summary; Equity Theory suggests that relationships are most successful when both partners perceive the balance of rewards and costs as fair, leading to satisfaction and stability.

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A strength of Equity Theory is **research support for equity and relationship satisfaction**. **Utne et al. (1984)** studied couples in long-term relationships and found that those who



perceived their relationships as **equitable** reported higher levels of satisfaction and commitment than those who felt **over- or under-benefitted**. This suggests that people are more satisfied when they feel that the **costs and rewards are fairly distributed** between themselves and their partner. The findings therefore support the main assumption of Equity Theory that perceived fairness is important for maintaining relationships.

A second strength is that **Equity Theory can explain why relationships may become dissatisfied or break down**. When partners perceive that they are **under-benefitted**, they may feel that they are contributing more to the relationship than they are receiving in return, leading to **anger, resentment and dissatisfaction**. Alternatively, an **over-benefitted** partner may experience guilt because they feel they are receiving more than they contribute. This provides a more detailed explanation of relationship dissatisfaction than simply considering the total amount of rewards and costs, as Equity Theory considers **whether these are distributed fairly between partners**. Therefore, the theory has **explanatory value** because it can explain why an otherwise rewarding relationship may still become unsatisfying when one partner perceives the relationship as unfair.

A limitation of Equity Theory is that the **importance of equity varies between individuals**. **Huseman et al. (1987)** proposed that people differ in their sensitivity to equity, identifying **benevolents**, who are comfortable giving more than they receive, and **entitleds**, who prefer to receive more than they give. This means that people can experience **inequity without necessarily becoming dissatisfied**, depending on their individual attitudes towards fairness. For example, a benevolent partner may be happy to contribute more to a relationship because they do not expect their partner to provide an equal amount in return. This challenges the assumption that people are generally motivated to restore equity. Therefore, Equity Theory may be **too simplistic**, as it does not account sufficiently for individual differences in attitudes towards fairness.

Another limitation of Equity Theory is that it may **not apply equally to all types of relationships**, reducing its **generalisability**. **Clark and Mills (2011)** distinguished between **exchange relationships**, where people expect benefits to be returned, and **communal relationships**, such as romantic relationships and close friendships, where people are more concerned with meeting each other's needs. In a romantic relationship, for example, one partner may provide considerable support when the other is struggling without expecting an immediate or equal return. This suggests that people in close relationships may be willing to accept **temporary or even long-term inequalities** because they are motivated by care and concern for their partner rather than fairness. Therefore, Equity Theory may have **limited explanatory power**.

A further limitation of Equity Theory is that **inequity does not always lead to relationship dissatisfaction**. In real relationships, partners frequently make unequal contributions because of circumstances such as **illness, unemployment, childcare or periods of stress**. For example, if one partner becomes seriously ill, the other may temporarily take on more household responsibilities without viewing the relationship as unfair. The imbalance may be accepted because the partners recognise that the situation is temporary and that contributions may change over time. This suggests that people do not necessarily compare their contributions and rewards at all times, as the **context and reason for the imbalance** can influence whether it is perceived as unfair. Therefore, Equity Theory may be **too rigid**.



Part 6 — Theories of Romantic Relationships: Rusbult's Investment Model

Rusbult (1983) proposed the **Investment Model** as an extension of Social Exchange Theory and suggests that **commitment**, rather than just satisfaction, is the key factor in maintaining relationships.

Commitment is determined by three main factors: **satisfaction level**, **comparison with alternatives (CLalt)**, and **investment size**.

Factor	What it means	Effect on Commitment
Satisfaction level	The extent to which a person feels the rewards outweigh the costs of the relationship. High rewards and low costs = high satisfaction Low rewards and high costs = low satisfaction.	High satisfaction → greater commitment. Low satisfaction → greater likelihood of considering leaving.
Comparison with alternatives (CLalt)	Whether a person believes they could have a better relationship elsewhere .	Attractive alternatives → lower commitment. Few/unattractive alternatives → greater commitment, even when satisfaction is low.
Investment size	What a person would lose if the relationship ended , including resources already put into the relationship.	Greater investment → greater commitment , as leaving would mean losing valuable resources.

There are **two** types of investment:

- **Intrinsic investment** – resources **directly** put into the relationship (e.g. time, money, effort, emotional energy)
- **Extrinsic investment** – resources that arise from the relationship (e.g. children, shared home, social expectations)

Therefore, even when **satisfaction is low**, a person may remain in a relationship if their **investment is high**, because they do not want to lose what they have invested.

Maintenance Mechanisms

Rusbult also suggested that commitment can be maintained through several **maintenance mechanisms**:



- **Derogation of alternatives** – viewing other potential partners as less attractive.
- **Positive illusions** – viewing the partner more positively than they may objectively deserve.
- **Forgiveness** – responding to negative behaviour by forgiving the partner.
- **Willingness to sacrifice** – giving up personal interests for the benefit of the relationship.
- **Accommodation** – responding constructively to conflict rather than retaliating.

One sentence summary; Commitment in relationships is determined by satisfaction, investment size and the quality of alternative relationships.

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A strength of Rusbult's Investment Model is its **ecological validity** because it can explain why people remain in **abusive or low-satisfaction relationships**. **Rusbult and Martz (1995)** found that women often returned to abusive partners despite low satisfaction because of **high investment and few alternatives**. For example, having children or being financially dependent can make leaving more difficult. This supports the model's emphasis on **investment size and quality of alternatives**, showing that commitment is not determined by satisfaction alone.

A further strength of the **Investment Model** is that it has **supporting research from different types of relationships**. **Rusbult et al. (1998)** found that **satisfaction, quality of alternatives and investment size** were significant predictors of commitment across several studies. This supports the model's claim that commitment is not determined by satisfaction alone, but results from a combination of **relationship satisfaction, alternatives and investments**. This is important because it suggests that the model can explain why people remain committed even when one factor, such as satisfaction, is relatively low. Therefore, the Investment Model has **supporting evidence and good explanatory value**.

A limitation of the Investment Model is that it may **oversimplify the role of investment in maintaining relationships**. The model emphasises existing investments, such as **time, effort and emotional energy**, as important predictors of commitment. However, **Goodfriend and Agnew (2008)** suggested that **anticipated future investments**, such as shared plans and expectations about the future, can also influence commitment. This is particularly important in newer relationships, where relatively little has been invested but commitment may still be high because partners expect to build a future together. Therefore, the Investment Model may have **limited explanatory validity** because it does not fully account for future-oriented investment.

A further limitation is that much of the research supporting the Investment Model is **correlational, meaning that cause and effect cannot be established**. For example, although investment size is associated with greater commitment, this does not prove that investment itself causes people to remain committed. It is possible that highly committed individuals are simply more likely to make greater investments in their relationships. This makes it difficult to determine whether investment is a **cause or consequence of commitment** and limits the model's ability to make accurate predictions about relationship stability. Therefore, the Investment Model may have **limited predictive validity**, reducing its scientific value.



Part 7 — Theories of Romantic Relationships: Duck's Phase Model

Duck (1982) proposed that relationship breakdown occurs through a **four-stage process**, with each stage triggered when a **threshold of dissatisfaction** is reached. As dissatisfaction increases, the focus shifts from private thoughts to discussions with the partner and eventually to the wider social network.

Stage	What happens
1. Intra-psychic stage	Private evaluation of the relationship. One or both partners weigh up costs, rewards and expectations . Dissatisfaction is usually kept private, although it may be discussed with a trusted friend.
2. Dyadic stage	Dissatisfaction becomes openly discussed between the partners . Concerns such as inequity, jealousy or increasing costs may be expressed. The couple may attempt to repair the relationship or begin moving towards ending the relationship.
3. Social stage	The breakup becomes known to friends and family , who may become involved. Social networks can provide support, take sides or influence whether the relationship continues or ends.
4. Grave-dressing stage	After the relationship has ended, both individuals attempt to rebuild their social identity and move on . They may present the breakup in a socially acceptable way , blame external circumstances or the other partner, and reflect on the relationship to prepare for future relationships.

One sentence summary; Duck's phase model suggests that relationship breakdown occurs in four stages, moving from private dissatisfaction to public breakup and eventual recovery of social identity.



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A strength of Duck's Phase Model is that it has been **refined and developed in response to new research**. The original model proposed four phases of relationship breakdown, but **Rollie and Duck (2006)** added a fifth **resurrection phase**, in which individuals reflect on the failed relationship and use what they have learned to develop future relationships. This suggests that the model is **not static** and can be modified when new evidence provides a better understanding of relationship breakdown. Therefore, the model has **scientific credibility**, as it has been developed over time to improve its explanatory power.

A further strength of Duck's Phase Model is that there is **research support for some of its phases**. **Lefebvre et al. (2012)** analysed social media posts from **208 college students** and found evidence consistent with the **social and grave-dressing phases** of Duck's model. For example, individuals used social media to communicate information about their break-ups and construct explanations for why their relationships had ended. This supports the idea that relationship breakdown involves not only private thoughts and interactions between partners but also **social processes and attempts to make sense of the breakup**. Therefore, the model has **empirical support**, increasing its validity as an explanation of relationship breakdown.

A limitation of Duck's Phase Model is that it mainly **describes how relationships break down rather than explaining why they break down**. The model identifies a sequence of processes that may occur during a breakup, but it does not provide a detailed explanation of the factors that cause the relationship to fail. In contrast, **Felmlee (1995)** proposed the **Fatal Attraction Hypothesis**, suggesting that the characteristics that initially attract someone to a partner can later become sources of dissatisfaction, such as confidence becoming dominance or protectiveness becoming jealousy. This provides an explanation for the **cause** of relationship breakdown, whereas Duck focuses more on the **process** that follows. Therefore, Duck's model may have **limited explanatory power** because it does not fully explain what causes relationships to end.

A further limitation of Duck's Phase Model is that it may be **too linear and deterministic**. The model suggests that relationships progress through a series of phases, but break-ups do not always follow the same sequence. For example, **infidelity or a sudden loss of trust** may cause a relationship to end quickly without partners progressing gradually through all of the proposed phases. Some couples may also **move backwards between phases**, such as attempting reconciliation after beginning to discuss the relationship with friends and family. This suggests that relationship breakdown is more complex and individual than a fixed sequence of stages suggests. Therefore, the model may be **too simplistic**, reducing its ability to explain the different ways relationships can end.

Another limitation of **Duck's Phase Model** is that it may suffer from **cultural bias**. The model was developed largely from **Western individualistic assumptions**, where individuals are generally expected to have greater freedom to end relationships and openly discuss relationship problems. In more **collectivist cultures**, family expectations and social obligations may play a greater role in whether relationships can end and how break-ups are managed. For example, **family involvement may make the social phase more important or may discourage a couple from separating altogether**. Therefore, Duck's model may have **limited cross-cultural validity**, as the process of relationship breakdown may differ between cultures.



Part 8 — Online Relationships

Online relationships are formed and maintained through **computer-mediated communication (CMC)**, which can change how people **communicate, present themselves and develop relationships** compared with face-to-face interactions.

1. Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure refers to revealing personal information to others. In online relationships, self-disclosure is often different from face-to-face communication because of the features of **computer-mediated communication (CMC)**.

- Self-disclosure may be **higher and faster** compared to face-to-face relationships due to anonymity and reduced social risk
- Individuals may feel less inhibited online, leading to more open expression of thoughts and feelings
- However, self-disclosure may also be **more selective**, as individuals can carefully control what information they present
- This can lead to **idealised self-presentation**, where individuals portray themselves in a more positive way than in real life

2. Use of Deception

Online relationships may increase the likelihood of deception due to reduced social cues and anonymity. Individuals may **misrepresent themselves**, including **age, appearance, personality or interests**.

- This can result in an **idealised or false identity** being presented online
- The lack of non-verbal cues (e.g. facial expressions, tone of voice) makes it harder to detect deception.
- Anonymity reduces accountability, making deceptive behaviour easier to maintain.



3. Absence of Gating

Gating refers to barriers that influence whether relationships form in face-to-face contexts.

Traditional Gates	Online Communication
Physical Attractiveness - appearance can influence initial attraction and whether someone is approached.	People can interact before seeing each other , reducing the importance of physical appearance initially.
Social Anxiety - anxiety may make it difficult to approach others or maintain face-to-face interaction.	Anonymity can reduce social pressure, making communication feel easier.
Location - physical distance limits who people can meet and interact with regularly.	People can communicate with others regardless of physical distance .
Social background - people often interact within existing social groups based on factors such as class, education or culture.	People can interact outside their usual social groups , allowing a wider range of relationships to develop.

As these gates are **reduced or removed**, individuals may form relationships they **would not have formed offline**. Relationships may therefore develop **more quickly and across a wider range of individuals**.

However, fewer real-life barriers may also make relationships **less stable and easier to end**, as there may be less social pressure, physical interaction or practical commitment that keeps people together.

One sentence summary; Online relationships are shaped by increased self-disclosure, greater potential for deception and reduced barriers to relationship formation due to the absence of gating.



AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of self-disclosure in online relationships is that it is **supported by research into the hyperpersonal model**. **Whitty and Johnson (2009)** found that online communication can involve **more direct questioning and greater self-disclosure** than face-to-face communication. This may be because online communication gives individuals greater **control over how they present themselves**, allowing them to carefully choose what information to reveal. This supports the hyperpersonal model because greater self-disclosure can allow individuals to develop **intimacy more quickly** online than they might in face-to-face relationships. Therefore, there is **research support** for the idea that online communication can facilitate self-disclosure.

A strength of online relationships is that **anonymity can encourage greater disinhibition**. **Bargh et al. (2002)** found that anonymity in computer-mediated communication can reduce social constraints and make individuals more willing to express themselves. This suggests that the reduced accountability of online communication can encourage people to **reveal personal information and behave in ways they might avoid face-to-face**. This supports explanations of online relationships that emphasise the importance of **reduced social cues and anonymity**, as these factors can change how individuals communicate with others. Therefore, anonymity provides a useful explanation for why people may behave more openly in online relationships.

A limitation of the absence of gating explanation is that it may be challenged by evidence that **online and offline relationships often overlap**. **Walther (2011)** argues that many modern relationships are “**mixed-mode**”, meaning that people communicate both online and face-to-face. This means that traditional gates, such as **physical attractiveness, geographical proximity and social background**, may still influence relationship development even when the relationship begins online. For example, people who meet through social media or dating apps may eventually meet in person, allowing physical attractiveness to become relevant. Therefore, the idea that online relationships are completely free from **gating** may be **too simplistic**.

A further limitation is that research into online relationships may have **limited temporal validity**. Much of the early research into computer-mediated communication was conducted when online communication involved **text-based platforms with few visual cues**. Modern relationships often develop through **social media, dating apps, video calls, photographs and emojis**, providing users with many more cues about another person's appearance, personality and emotions. This means that the **reduced-cues perspective** may not accurately represent how people communicate online today. Therefore, some explanations of online relationships may be **outdated**, reducing their validity when applied to contemporary online communication.



Part 9 — Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships are **one-sided relationships** where an individual forms an emotional attachment to a **celebrity or media figure who is unaware of their existence**.

Stages of Parasocial Relationships

Maltby et al. (2006) used the **Celebrity Attitude Scale**, developed by **McCutcheon et al. (2002)** to study parasocial relationships. They identified three stages of these relationships, which increase in emotional intensity and commitment:

1. Entertainment–social stage	The celebrity is mainly a source of entertainment, gossip and social discussion . Giles (2002) suggests that this can even strengthen real-life relationships because people share celebrity news and develop common interests.
2. Intense–personal stage	The individual develops a stronger emotional connection and may experience obsessive thoughts or feel a personal bond with the celebrity, despite the relationship remaining one-sided.
3. Borderline–pathological stage	The attachment becomes potentially harmful , with individuals showing obsessive or risky behaviours such as stalking, jealousy or resentment towards others who interfere with the attachment.

Factors Affecting Parasocial Relationships

Some individuals are more likely to develop intense or pathological parasocial relationships. They may be more likely to:

- have **low self-esteem**
- feel **unfulfilled in real-life relationships**
- have experienced **traumatic or major life events** (e.g. mid-life crisis)

This is explained by the **absorption–addiction model (McCutcheon et al., 2002)**, which suggests that individuals become increasingly **absorbed in celebrity interests and may develop an “addiction” to this attachment**, meaning they feel a strong need to maintain or intensify it over time.



Attachment Explanations

According to Bowlby's attachment theory, parasocial relationships may be linked to attachment type.

- **Insecure-resistant attachment** → individuals may form parasocial relationships due to a strong need for closeness and a fear of rejection, so they seek emotional reassurance from celebrities.
- **Insecure-avoidant attachment** → individuals may form parasocial relationships because they prefer emotional distance and avoid real-life intimacy, making one-sided relationships feel safer.

One sentence summary; Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional attachments where an individual forms a psychological bond with a celebrity or media figure who is unaware of their existence.

AO3 - EVALUATION

A strength of McCutcheon's absorption–addiction model is **research support for the link between psychological characteristics and parasocial relationships**. **Maltby et al. (2003)** found that different levels of parasocial involvement were associated with different personality characteristics. For example, the **borderline-pathological** level was associated with psychotic tendencies, while the **intense-personal** level was associated with neuroticism. **Maltby et al. (2005)** also found a positive relationship between **body dissatisfaction** and parasocial involvement. This suggests that individual differences and psychological characteristics may influence the **intensity of parasocial relationships**, supporting the idea that these relationships can develop along different levels of involvement. Therefore, McCutcheon's model has **supporting evidence**, increasing its validity.

A further strength of explanations of parasocial relationships is that there is **some evidence for the role of attachment experiences**. **Kienlen et al. (1997)** found that many individuals who engaged in stalking had experienced **loss or separation from a primary caregiver during childhood**. Although stalking is not the same as a parasocial relationship, the findings suggest that early relationship experiences may influence the development of **unhealthy attachment patterns** later in life. This provides some support for the idea that insecure attachment may make certain individuals more vulnerable to developing intense or maladaptive relationships with others who are emotionally unavailable. Therefore, attachment explanations have **some supporting evidence**, although the evidence is indirect.



A limitation of McCutcheon's model is that it may have **limited temporal validity**. Celebrity culture and media consumption have changed considerably since the model was developed. Much of the original research was conducted before the widespread use of **social media**, where celebrities and influencers can communicate directly with followers through comments, livestreams and other interactive features. This creates a greater sense of **reciprocity and personal connection**, even though the relationship remains largely one-sided. This may make it harder to clearly distinguish between McCutcheon's **entertainment-social and more intense levels** of involvement, as modern media can allow fans to feel personally connected to celebrities from the beginning. Therefore, the model may not fully explain **modern parasocial relationships**, reducing its contemporary validity.

A further limitation of McCutcheon's model is that it may provide a **limited explanation of individual differences in parasocial involvement**. The model explains how parasocial relationships can progress from **entertainment-social** involvement to more intense stages, but it does not fully explain why some individuals are more vulnerable to developing these relationships than others. **Attachment theory** provides an alternative explanation, as insecurely attached individuals may seek emotional connections with celebrities because they find real-life relationships more difficult or fear rejection. Therefore, attachment theory may provide **greater explanatory depth**, as it attempts to explain why some individuals are particularly vulnerable to intense parasocial relationships.

Another limitation of research into **parasocial relationships** is that much of the evidence is **correlational**, meaning that **cause and effect cannot be established**. For example, although research may find an association between **personality characteristics and parasocial involvement**, this does not show whether particular personality traits cause people to develop parasocial relationships or whether intense parasocial involvement influences their psychological characteristics. Research also often relies on **self-report measures**, such as the Celebrity Attitude Scale, which may be affected by social desirability or inaccurate reporting. Therefore, it is difficult to establish clear **cause-and-effect relationships**, reducing the scientific validity of conclusions about parasocial relationships.

