SimplyPsychology

A-LEVEL PSYCHOLOGY REVISION NOTES

Relationships

AQA Psychology 7182 (A-level only)

2025 specification · spec section 4.3.2 · A-level Paper 3

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Contents

How to use these notes. Relationships is an **A-level only** topic (Paper 3 option, AQA 7182). Key terms are in **bold**; each section ends with PEEL evaluation that can be deployed as ready-made paragraphs in 8-, 12- and 16-mark questions.

Note on the 2025 specification: **evolutionary explanations** for partner preferences (sexual selection, human reproductive behaviour) have been **removed** from the 2025 spec — past-paper questions on these are now obsolete. "Virtual relationships in social media" has been reworded to **"Online relationships"** and **"use of deception"** is a new addition to that bullet.

AQA 2025 SPECIFICATION — RELATIONSHIPS CONTENT (A-LEVEL ONLY, PAPER 3)

- **Factors affecting attraction in romantic relationships**: self-disclosure; physical attractiveness, including the matching hypothesis; filter theory, including social demography, similarity in attitudes and complementarity.
- **Theories of romantic relationships**: social exchange theory, equity theory and Rusbult's investment model of commitment, satisfaction, comparison with alternatives and investment. **Duck's phase model** of relationship breakdown: intra-psychic, dyadic, social and grave dressing phases.
- **Online relationships**: self-disclosure, use of deception, effects of absence of gating.
- **Parasocial relationships**: levels of parasocial relationships, the absorption-addiction model and the attachment theory explanation.

1 Self-Disclosure

SELF-DISCLOSURE

Self-disclosure is the process of revealing personal information about oneself — thoughts, feelings and experiences — to another person. It is considered a key factor in developing intimacy and deepening romantic attraction.

Social Penetration Theory (Altman and Taylor 1973)

Altman and Taylor proposed that relationships develop through the gradual exchange of increasingly personal information. They use an "onion" metaphor — relationships penetrate from the surface layers (small talk, demographic information) to the inner core (fears, beliefs, traumas).

Two dimensions of self-disclosure are important:

- **Breadth** — how many topics are discussed.
- **Depth** — how personal each disclosure is.

Successful relationships involve **reciprocity** — when one partner discloses, the other responds with their own disclosure of similar depth. This balanced exchange builds trust and deepens intimacy.

Key Research

Sprecher and Hendrick (2004) studied heterosexual dating couples and found strong positive correlations between satisfaction and self-disclosure. Couples who used self-disclosure (and who believed their partner self-disclosed) were more satisfied with and committed to their relationship.

Laurenceau et al. (2005) used diary entries from married couples to find that self-disclosure and partner-disclosure perceptions were significantly linked to higher levels of intimacy across daily interactions.

Evaluation

Strength — strong supporting research evidence (Sprecher and Hendrick 2004). A key strength of self-disclosure theory is robust correlational evidence. Sprecher and Hendrick found strong positive correlations between self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction. This is important because it shows the theory captures a real association between disclosure and relationship quality, supporting Altman and Taylor's claim that intimacy is built through reciprocal personal exchange. This therefore strengthens the validity of self-disclosure as a genuine factor in attraction.

Strength — applied value in couples therapy. A further strength is the theory's practical use. Couples therapists actively use disclosure techniques to help distressed relationships — encouraging partners to share more personal information at appropriate depth. Hass and Stafford (1998) found that 57% of homosexual men

and women said open and honest self-disclosure was the main way they maintained relationships. This is important because applied success in clinical and applied settings is strong indirect evidence the underlying mechanism is real.

Limitation — correlational evidence (causality unclear). A significant limitation is that most evidence is **correlational**. Self-disclosure may not *cause* satisfaction — satisfied couples may simply disclose more, or a third factor (e.g. shared values) may cause both. This is important because the theory claims a causal mechanism (disclosure → intimacy → satisfaction) that correlational data alone cannot confirm. This weakens the strength of the causal claim, although longitudinal studies (Laurenceau) partially address this.

Limitation — cultural bias. A further limitation is cultural bias. Most self-disclosure research has been conducted in Western, individualist cultures where personal disclosure is valued. Tang et al. (2013) found that men and women in collectivist cultures (e.g. China) self-disclose less personal information than those in individualist cultures — yet still report high levels of satisfaction. This is important because the theory may overstate the role of disclosure in cultures where reserve is valued. This limits cross-cultural validity.

Limitation — disclosure can damage relationships. A further limitation is that not all disclosure improves relationships. Disclosing inappropriate information too soon, or revealing very negative information, can *reduce* attraction or commitment. **Cooper and Sportolari (1997)** argued that some "boom and bust" online relationships fail because of too-early intimate disclosure followed by an inability to maintain that intimacy in person. This is important because the theory predicts more disclosure = more intimacy, but this oversimplifies. This supports a nuanced view in which the *timing* and *appropriateness* of disclosure matter more than its quantity.

Conclusion. Self-disclosure is a well-evidenced factor in romantic attraction, supported by both correlational and longitudinal research and used in applied therapeutic settings. However, the causal direction remains uncertain, cross-cultural validity is limited, and the theory must be qualified by attention to the appropriateness and timing of disclosure.

2 Physical Attractiveness and the Matching Hypothesis

Physical attractiveness is one of the most strongly evidenced factors affecting initial attraction. It influences who we approach, who we date, and how we perceive other characteristics about that person.

The Halo Effect

The **halo effect** is a cognitive bias by which we assume physically attractive people also have other positive characteristics. **Dion et al. (1972)** showed participants photographs of attractive and unattractive people and asked them to rate personality traits. Attractive people were judged as kinder, more sociable, more successful and happier — even though the participants knew nothing else about them. This shows the halo effect makes attractive people *more* attractive by association with desirable inferred traits.

The Matching Hypothesis (Walster et al. 1966)

The **matching hypothesis** proposes that people choose romantic partners of *similar* physical attractiveness to themselves — even though everyone would ideally prefer the most attractive partner possible. We balance our desire for the most attractive partner against the realistic chance of being rejected by them.

Walster et al. (1966) — Computer Dance Study

Feature	Detail
Procedure	752 student "Welcome Week" dance attendees were rated on physical attractiveness by independent judges. They were told a computer had matched them, but in fact partners were randomly assigned.
Findings	Six months later, the strongest predictor of whether the attendees wanted to see their date again was simple physical attractiveness — NOT similarity in attractiveness. This *contradicted* the matching hypothesis.

Walster and Walster (1969) — Revised Study

Walster and Walster revised the design. Participants met each other in advance and could choose. This time, the matching hypothesis was supported — participants tended to choose partners of similar attractiveness to themselves, indicating they were taking the realistic possibility of rejection into account.

Evaluation

Strength — supporting evidence from real couples (Murstein 1972). A major strength of the matching hypothesis is supporting evidence from real-world couples. Murstein (1972) photographed 99 dating and engaged couples; independent judges rated their physical attractiveness and found that the partners' attractiveness ratings were significantly more similar within couples than between random pairings of

photographs. This is important because it shows real couples are matched in attractiveness in the way the hypothesis predicts. This therefore strengthens the validity of the matching hypothesis as an account of partner choice.

Strength — research support for the halo effect. Dion et al.'s (1972) findings have been widely replicated — attractive people are consistently judged more positively across many studies and many cultures. **Palmer and Peterson (2012)** found that physically attractive people were judged as more politically competent and knowledgeable, even when participants knew nothing else about them. This is important because the halo effect has applied implications in politics, hiring and the courts — strengthening the practical significance of the research.

Limitation — original Walster computer dance study contradicts the hypothesis. A significant limitation is that Walster et al.'s (1966) original study did *not* support the matching hypothesis. Attractiveness on its own was the strongest predictor of whether people wanted to see their date again — there was no preference for partners of similar attractiveness. This is important because it suggests in low-stakes situations (where rejection costs are minimal) people seek the most attractive partner available. This restricts the hypothesis to high-stakes situations where rejection is a real cost.

Limitation — individual differences (Towhey 1979). A further limitation is that physical attractiveness matters more for some people than others. Towhey (1979) used the MACHO Scale to identify "macho" males and "feminine" females; he found these individuals were more influenced by physical attractiveness when judging others than less stereotyped individuals were. This is important because attractiveness is not a universal factor — its weight depends on dispositional factors. This restricts the generalisability of the theory.

Limitation — cultural variation. A further limitation is cultural variation in what counts as physically attractive. Cunningham et al. (1995) found that highly variable cultural standards still produced cross-cultural agreement on some features (symmetry, average features) — but many specific markers of attractiveness vary widely (e.g. body weight preferences differ markedly between Western and many non-Western cultures). This is important because if attractiveness itself is culturally relative, the matching hypothesis becomes harder to test universally.

Conclusion. Physical attractiveness is one of the most strongly evidenced factors in romantic attraction, with the halo effect well-replicated and the matching hypothesis supported by some — but not all — research. The theory works best as an account of high-stakes partner choice; it is qualified by individual differences and cultural variation.

3 Filter Theory (Kerckhoff and Davis 1962)

Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) proposed that romantic relationships develop through a series of *filters* that reduce the "field of available" partners to a "field of desirable" partners. Different filters operate at different stages of a relationship.

The Three Filters

Filter	When it operates	What it does
1. Social demography	Earliest stage	Filters by external characteristics: age, ethnicity, social class, geography, education, religion. We are most likely to meet and date people similar to us on these dimensions. Most people we never even meet because of demographic factors.
2. Similarity in attitudes	Early stage of a relationship (under 18 months)	Once two people meet, similarity of attitudes and values becomes the key filter. Kerckhoff and Davis found that similarity in attitudes predicted closeness during the first 18 months. Relationships proceed if shared values are discovered; they end if attitudes diverge too much.
3. Complementarity	Later stage of a relationship (over 18 months)	In long-term relationships, partners' needs become complementary — they fit together. One partner's needs are met by what the other partner offers. Complementarity replaces similarity as the predictor of long-term success.

Evidence

Kerckhoff and Davis (1962). Longitudinal study of 94 dating couples. Each completed questionnaires assessing attitudes (similarity) and needs (complementarity). Seven months later they were asked whether their relationships had progressed. For couples together less than 18 months, similarity was the best predictor of relationship closeness. For couples together more than 18 months, complementarity was the best predictor.

Evaluation

Strength — research support (Kerckhoff and Davis 1962). A key strength of filter theory is direct longitudinal evidence from Kerckhoff and Davis's own research. Their finding that similarity predicted closeness for short-term couples and complementarity predicted closeness for long-term couples directly supports the theory's claim that different filters operate at different stages. This is important because longitudinal data is stronger evidence than correlational snapshots — supporting the temporal claims of the theory.

Limitation — failure to replicate. A serious limitation is that subsequent research has often failed to replicate the original findings. **Levinger (1974)** reviewed studies attempting to confirm filter theory and found that the predictive power of similarity and complementarity varied substantially across samples. This is important because if the temporal pattern (similarity early, complementarity late) is not reliable, the central claim of the theory is undermined. This weakens the empirical basis of filter theory.

Limitation — temporal validity (changes in dating since 1962). A further limitation is that the theory was developed in the early 1960s when dating happened mainly through social-demographic channels (university, neighbourhood, church). The rise of **online dating** dramatically reduces the importance of geography, social class and demographics as filters. This is important because if the social-demographic filter no longer operates as it once did, the theory needs to be updated for contemporary relationships. This limits temporal validity.

Limitation — direction of causality. A further limitation is the direction of causality between similarity and attraction. **Anderson et al. (2003)** conducted a longitudinal study of cohabiting partners and found that they became *more* similar in attitudes and emotional responses over time — a process they called "emotional convergence". This is important because it suggests similarity may be a *consequence* of being in a relationship rather than a filter that produces relationships. This challenges the direction of causality in filter theory.

Limitation — 18-month cut-off may be arbitrary. A further limitation is that the 18-month boundary between "short-term" and "long-term" relationships is arbitrary and not theoretically derived. Kerckhoff and Davis themselves acknowledged this. This is important because the theory's predictions depend on this boundary, but there is no clear reason why complementarity should suddenly become important at 18 months rather than 12 or 24.

Conclusion. Filter theory provides a useful early framework for understanding how romantic relationships develop, supported by Kerckhoff and Davis's original longitudinal data. However, replication problems, the rise of online dating and the direction-of-causality issue mean the theory is best treated as an early, partial account of attraction that needs updating for modern relationship contexts.

4 Social Exchange Theory and Equity Theory

Both **Social Exchange Theory (SET)** and **Equity Theory** view romantic relationships as economic exchanges between two people. They differ in what counts as a satisfying exchange.

Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut and Kelley 1959)

SET proposes that we evaluate relationships in terms of **rewards** minus **costs**. We aim to maximise profit and minimise loss. Whether a relationship is satisfying depends on two comparisons:

- **Comparison Level (CL)** — the standard we expect from a relationship, based on our previous relationships and social norms. A relationship is satisfying if the perceived rewards exceed our CL.
- **Comparison Level for Alternatives (CLalt)** — comparison with potential alternative relationships. If the current relationship offers more than any plausible alternative, the person stays — even if rewards are below their CL.

Stages of relationship development (Thibaut and Kelley)

1. **Sampling** — exploring rewards and costs in many relationships.
2. **Bargaining** — negotiating exchanges in the early stages of one relationship.
3. **Commitment** — exchanges become predictable; the partnership is established.
4. **Institutionalisation** — norms and rules are firmly established.

Equity Theory (Walster et al. 1978)

Equity Theory builds on SET by arguing that what matters is **fairness** rather than raw profit. People are most satisfied when they perceive their *ratio of rewards to costs* as equal to their partner's ratio. Crucially:

- **Equity ≠ equality**. A partner who contributes more may also receive more — the *ratio* must be balanced, not the absolute amounts.
- **Inequity causes distress** — both under-benefiting (giving more than receiving) and over-benefiting (receiving more than giving) cause dissatisfaction, though under-benefiting is usually more distressing.
- People reduce inequity by changing inputs, perceptions, or eventually leaving the relationship.

Evaluation

Strength of equity theory — supporting research (Utne et al. 1984). A key strength of equity theory is supporting evidence. Utne et al. (1984) surveyed 118 recently married couples and found that those who rated their relationship as equitable reported significantly higher satisfaction than those who saw themselves as over- or under-benefiting. This is important because it confirms the central claim — fairness, not absolute exchange, drives satisfaction. This strengthens equity theory's predictive validity.

Strength of SET — explains relationship breakdown. A strength of SET is that it explains relationship endings, not just their start. When the CLalt rises above the current relationship's value (e.g. someone meets a more rewarding alternative), SET predicts the person will leave. This matches everyday observation and clinical experience of relationship breakdown. This is important because a theory of relationships must explain both their formation and dissolution.

Limitation of SET — vague definitions of rewards and costs. A significant limitation of SET is that **rewards and costs are subjective and poorly operationalised**. What counts as a reward to one person (e.g. emotional sharing) may be a cost to another. **Littlejohn (1989)** criticised SET for being unfalsifiable in this sense — any behaviour can be reinterpreted as either rewarding or costly. This is important because it weakens the scientific status of the theory.

Limitation — Western individualist bias. A further limitation is cultural bias. **Moghaddam (1998)** argued that "economic" theories of relationships fit individualist Western cultures but apply poorly to collectivist cultures where relationships are based on duty, family connection or arranged marriage rather than reward calculation. This is important because the theory's claim to universality is undermined. This restricts cross-cultural validity.

Limitation — equity may matter less than reward levels. A further limitation, raised by **Clark and Mills (1979)**, is the distinction between **exchange relationships** (work colleagues, business partners) and **communal relationships** (close family, romantic partners). In communal relationships, people may not track rewards and costs at all — they give freely without expecting equity. This is important because it suggests SET and equity theory may better describe casual or transactional relationships than committed romantic ones.

Limitation — gender differences. A further limitation is that women appear to be more sensitive to inequity than men. **Steil and Weltman (1991)** found that wives tended to under-benefit and husbands tended to over-benefit, but only the wives consistently reported dissatisfaction. This is important because the theory does not predict gender differences — yet they appear consistently in the data, suggesting the theory is incomplete.

Conclusion. SET and equity theory both capture aspects of how romantic relationships work — costs, rewards and fairness do matter. However, their economic framing fits Western, individualist, transactional relationships better than collectivist or communal ones, and the subjective definition of rewards and costs limits scientific testability.

5 Rusbult's Investment Model

Rusbult's (1980) investment model extends SET and equity theory to explain why some people remain committed to relationships even when satisfaction is low. The model identifies **three factors that determine commitment** and explain whether a person stays or leaves a relationship.

The Three Factors

Factor	What it means	Effect on commitment
Satisfaction	The extent to which rewards exceed costs in the relationship — similar to SET's profit calculation. Includes emotional satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, support.	Higher satisfaction → higher commitment.
Comparison with alternatives (CLalt)	The perceived attractiveness of alternative relationships (or being single). Are alternatives more rewarding than the current relationship?	Better alternatives → lower commitment. Worse / no alternatives → higher commitment.
Investment	What has been put into the relationship that would be lost if it ended. Two types: • **Intrinsic investment** — resources put directly into the relationship (time, energy, emotional disclosure). • **Extrinsic investment** — things now tied to the relationship (shared home, children, mutual friends, joint memories).	Higher investment → higher commitment, because leaving means losing the investment.

The key insight is that **commitment, not satisfaction, predicts whether a relationship lasts**. A partner with low satisfaction but high investment and few alternatives may still remain committed.

Maintenance Mechanisms

High commitment produces a set of **maintenance behaviours**:

- **Accommodation** — responding constructively to a partner's potentially destructive behaviour.
- **Willingness to sacrifice** — putting the partner's interests first.
- **Forgiveness** — overlooking past transgressions.
- **Positive illusions** — viewing the partner more favourably than they perhaps are.
- **Ridiculing alternatives** — downplaying or derogating possible alternative partners.

Evaluation

Strength — strong supporting research (Le and Agnew 2003). A major strength is robust empirical support. Le and Agnew's (2003) meta-analysis of 52 studies (over 11,000 participants) found that satisfaction, alternatives and investment all significantly predicted relationship commitment, and commitment in turn predicted whether the relationship lasted. The results held across genders, ages and cultures, and for both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. This is important because the breadth of supporting evidence across many demographics strengthens the validity of the model considerably.

Strength — explains why people stay in abusive relationships. A further strength is that the model explains the puzzling phenomenon of staying in abusive relationships. **Rusbult and Martz (1995)** found that women in abusive relationships were most likely to return to the abuser if they had high investment (e.g. shared children, financial dependence) and saw few alternatives — even when satisfaction was low. This is important because traditional reward-based theories cannot easily explain this; the investment model can. This strengthens its explanatory power and applied value in domestic-violence support work.

Limitation — correlational evidence. A significant limitation is that most evidence for the model is **correlational**. It is unclear whether commitment causes investment, investment causes commitment, or both result from a third factor. This is important because the theory makes causal claims (investment → commitment → relationship persistence) that correlation alone cannot confirm. This weakens the model's strict causal interpretation.

Limitation — measurement issues with investment. A further limitation is that "investment" is difficult to measure objectively. Self-report measures of investment may be biased by current commitment — people in committed relationships may retrospectively report higher investment. **Goodfriend and Agnew (2008)** proposed adding "future investment plans" (planned children, joint home purchase) but acknowledged measurement remains challenging. This is important because if investment cannot be measured objectively, the model's predictions become harder to test.

Limitation — over-simplified view of investment. A further limitation is that the model treats investment as a single, simple construct, when in reality different kinds of investment have different psychological weight. Children, for example, are not just a high-magnitude investment — they fundamentally change the nature of the commitment. This is important because lumping different investments together oversimplifies real relationship dynamics.

Application — clinical and applied value. Despite limitations, the investment model has clear applied value. Domestic-violence services use it to help abused partners recognise the role of investment and lack of alternatives in their commitment. Marital therapy uses it to identify which factor (satisfaction, alternatives or investment) needs work in a particular relationship. This is important because applied success demonstrates the model captures something real about how relationships persist.

Conclusion. Rusbult's investment model is one of the most well-evidenced theories of romantic relationships, with broad meta-analytic support. Its key strength — explaining commitment in low-satisfaction relationships, including abusive ones — is matched by its applied value. The main limitations are correlational evidence and measurement challenges rather than theoretical flaws.

6 Duck's Phase Model of Relationship Breakdown

Duck (1982, revised 2007) proposed that relationship breakdown is not a single event but a **four-phase process**. Each phase is triggered when a partner crosses a "threshold" — a point at which their thoughts about the relationship shift to a new stage.

The Four Phases

Phase	Threshold	What happens
1. Intra-psychic phase	"I can't stand this anymore."	One partner internally broods about dissatisfaction. They focus on the partner's failings, mull over alternatives, and may complain to trusted friends — but the dissatisfaction is still *private*. The relationship is not yet openly threatened.
2. Dyadic phase	"I would be justified in withdrawing."	The dissatisfaction is brought into the open with the partner. There are confrontations, arguments and discussions. The relationship can still be saved at this point — many couples enter therapy at this stage.
3. Social phase	"I mean it."	The breakdown becomes public. The couple's social network is told. Friends and family take sides, give advice and may help engineer the split. Once the social network knows, reconciliation becomes much harder.
4. Grave-dressing phase	"It's now inevitable."	The relationship is ended. Each partner constructs a public narrative about why it failed — usually placing blame on the other or on circumstances, but rarely themselves. This protects their reputation and supports future relationship-seeking.

The Updated Model (Rollie and Duck 2006)

Duck and Rollie added a fifth **resurrection phase**: people use their experience of breakdown to prepare for future relationships, learning what to do differently next time. This makes the model less linear — couples can re-enter earlier phases (e.g. attempt reconciliation in the dyadic phase even after social phase has begun).

Evaluation

Strength — applied value (counselling and therapy). A major strength of Duck's phase model is its clear applied value. Couples therapy can target specific phases: in the dyadic phase, communication skills can save the relationship; in the grave-dressing phase, therapists help clients construct a healthy narrative about the breakdown that supports recovery and future relationship success. This is important because applied success is strong indirect evidence the model captures real psychological stages.

Strength — captures the social nature of breakdown. A further strength is that the model uniquely emphasises the **social** phase — recognising that breakdown affects not just the couple but their network of friends and family. This is more realistic than purely individual accounts. **La Gaipa (1982)** studied how breakdowns affect social networks and found that the public construction of "who is at fault" is a real and important part of the process — supporting Duck's inclusion of the social and grave-dressing phases.

Limitation — descriptive rather than explanatory. A significant limitation is that the model *describes* what happens during breakdown but does not *explain why* relationships break down in the first place. It says nothing about the underlying causes — equity, investment, alternatives or specific events. This is important because a complete theory of breakdown should explain both the causes and the process. This limits the model's explanatory power.

Limitation — over-emphasis on dissolution as a one-way process. A further limitation is that the original (1982) model was too linear. Real breakdowns often involve re-entering earlier phases — couples reconcile briefly during the dyadic phase, separate, get back together. The revised model (Rollie and Duck 2006) acknowledges this with the resurrection phase, but the original four-phase structure still implies a one-way movement. This is important because if breakdown is genuinely non-linear, the model's predictive power is limited.

Limitation — cultural bias. A further limitation is cultural bias. The model was developed in Western individualist cultures where breakdown is typically initiated by one of the partners. In some collectivist cultures, marriages are arranged and extended families are deeply involved — the social phase may dominate from the very start. **Moghaddam et al. (1993)** have argued that Western relationship models do not transfer well to non-Western contexts. This restricts cross-cultural validity.

Limitation — methodological problems. A further limitation is methodological. Most evidence for the phase model comes from **retrospective self-report** — participants describe a past breakdown. Retrospective reports are vulnerable to memory distortion, hindsight bias and impression management. This is important because if the data on phases is biased, the structure of the model may be partly an artefact of how people *remember* rather than how breakdown actually unfolds.

Conclusion. Duck's phase model offers a useful descriptive framework for understanding the process of relationship breakdown, supported by applied success in counselling and findings on the social dimension. Its main limitations — descriptive rather than explanatory, cultural bias, retrospective evidence — restrict but do not invalidate the model.

7 Online Relationships

The 2025 AQA spec covers three aspects of **online relationships**: **self-disclosure**, **use of deception**, and the effects of **absence of gating**. "Online relationships" replaces the older "virtual relationships in social media" wording; "use of deception" is new in 2025.

Self-Disclosure Online

Self-disclosure operates differently online than face-to-face. Two main theoretical positions:

Theory	What it predicts	Key idea
Reduced cues theory (Sproull and Kiesler 1986)	**Less** self-disclosure online.	Online communication strips out non-verbal cues (facial expression, tone of voice, body language). This leads to **de-individuation** and more aggressive/impersonal interaction — less intimacy and less disclosure.
Hyperpersonal model (Walther 1996)	**More** intense and earlier self-disclosure online.	Online communication allows **selective self-presentation** — the sender can craft their message carefully. The receiver also *idealises* the sender. Combined with **anonymity**, this produces faster, deeper disclosure than in face-to-face contact — sometimes called the "stranger on a train" effect.

Use of Deception

Deception is the deliberate misrepresentation of oneself online. The 2025 spec specifically adds this. Forms of online deception include:

- **Minor self-enhancement** — using flattering photos, exaggerating success, claiming to be slightly younger/taller.
- **Catfishing** — using a fundamentally false identity (different gender, profession, or photographs of someone else entirely) to deceive others.
- **Romance scams** — using a false identity to extract money from a victim.
- **Anonymous abuse** — using the protection of anonymity to engage in behaviour the person would not engage in face-to-face (trolling, harassment).

Deception is enabled by the same features (anonymity, asynchrony, selective self-presentation) that allow positive intimacy and disclosure. Research on online deception is growing, particularly on its psychological and emotional consequences for victims.

Absence of Gating

A **"gate"** is any feature that might prevent face-to-face attraction from developing — appearance, shyness, stammer, social anxiety, age, disability or other off-putting characteristics. **McKenna and Bargh (1999)** argued that online relationships are characterised by an **absence of gating**:

- People are not initially judged by their appearance.
- Shy or socially anxious individuals can take time to compose responses.
- Personality and shared interests can develop before physical/visual factors come into play.

This produces relationships that often go deeper, faster online than face-to-face. McKenna and Bargh argued that online relationships are particularly beneficial for socially anxious and lonely individuals.

Evaluation

Strength — research support for hyperpersonal model. A key strength is supporting research. **Whitty and Joinson (2009)** reviewed online relationships and found that questions asked online tend to be more direct, probing and intimate than face-to-face — and self-presentation is more selective. This directly supports Walther's hyperpersonal model. This is important because converging evidence on selective self-presentation and faster intimacy strengthens the validity of the hyperpersonal account.

Strength — research support for absence of gating (McKenna and Bargh 2000). A further strength is direct support for the absence-of-gating idea. McKenna and Bargh (2000) found that lonely and socially anxious people are particularly likely to find rewarding relationships online — 70% of relationships started online were still ongoing two years later, compared to about 50% for relationships started offline. This is important because it shows online relationships can be more stable than offline ones for certain groups, supporting the theoretical prediction.

Strength — practical relevance (online dating). A further strength is the obvious practical relevance. The majority of new romantic relationships in the UK and US now begin online (Rosenfeld et al. 2019). Theoretical understanding of online disclosure, gating and deception has clear applied value for dating platforms, online safety education and policy.

Limitation — context-specific effects. A significant limitation is that the effects of online communication depend heavily on context. **Paine et al. (2006)** found that the willingness to self-disclose online varied substantially with the platform — more on dating sites and social media, less on professional networks. This is important because no single theory (reduced cues OR hyperpersonal) fits all online platforms. This restricts theoretical generality.

Limitation — deception undermines authentic relationships. A serious limitation is that the same features that enable positive disclosure also enable harmful deception. **Toma et al. (2008)** found that around 80% of online daters lied about something on their profile — height, weight, age. This is important because if online self-presentation is systematically deceptive, the "intimacy" built online may not survive face-to-face meetings. This is a major real-world limitation of the hyperpersonal model.

Limitation — cultural variation. A further limitation is cultural variation in online behaviour. Yum and Hara (2005) found that self-disclosure norms vary substantially between American, Japanese and Korean online users — Americans disclose most, Japanese least. This is important because theories developed in Western contexts may not generalise to other cultures. This limits cross-cultural validity.

Limitation — research lags behind technology. A further limitation is that online communication technology changes faster than research can keep up. Findings from a 2005 study using forum posts may not apply to TikTok DMs or Instagram in 2026. This is important because the temporal validity of research findings is short for online contexts. This is a persistent challenge for the field.

Conclusion. Online relationships are an increasingly central context for romantic relationship formation. The hyperpersonal model and absence of gating both have strong supporting evidence, with practical relevance for billions of users. However, widespread deception, cultural variation and the rapid pace of technological change all limit the strength of current conclusions.

8 Parasocial Relationships

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships that a fan feels they have with a celebrity (or fictional character). They develop through the fan's access to media — concerts, TV, films, social media — where the celebrity is unaware of the fan's existence. The term was coined by **Horton and Wohl (1956)**.

Levels of Parasocial Relationships (McCutcheon et al. 2002)

McCutcheon and colleagues developed the **Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS)** to measure parasocial relationships. They identified three increasingly intense levels:

Level	What it involves	Example
1. Entertainment-social	The lowest level. Fans are interested in a celebrity because they are entertaining and fun, and they enjoy discussing the celebrity with friends.	"My friends and I love to discuss what our favourite celebrity has done."
2. Intense-personal	A deeper level involving an intense, personal feeling about the celebrity. The fan thinks about the celebrity often and feels they have a special, personal connection.	"I consider my favourite celebrity to be my soulmate."
3. Borderline-pathological	The most extreme level. Fantasies become uncontrollable and the fan may be prepared to act on them (e.g. spending large sums on celebrity-related items; behaving inappropriately to gain proximity).	"If I walked through the door of my favourite celebrity's house, they would be happy to see me."

The Absorption-Addiction Model (McCutcheon 2002)

McCutcheon's **absorption-addiction model** proposes that parasocial relationships develop because individuals have **deficiencies in their real-life relationships**. The parasocial relationship provides a sense of identity and fulfilment that real relationships are not providing.

- **Absorption** — the fan focuses attention on the celebrity, becoming pre-occupied with their life. This provides a sense of identity and self-worth.
- **Addiction** — the absorption becomes addictive. The fan needs increasingly stronger involvement to maintain the same level of satisfaction. This is similar to the *tolerance* seen in substance addictions. May escalate to delusional thinking or stalking-like behaviour.

The Attachment Theory Explanation

The other explanation in the AQA spec is the **attachment theory explanation**. People with **insecure attachment styles** developed in childhood are believed to be more prone to forming parasocial relationships in adulthood:

- **Insecure-resistant attachment** — anxious about being abandoned; turn to celebrities because the relationship cannot reject them.
- **Insecure-avoidant attachment** — uncomfortable with real intimacy; find one-sided parasocial relationships safer.
- Securely attached individuals are less likely to develop intense parasocial relationships.

Cole and Leets (1999) found that insecure-resistant individuals were most likely to form parasocial relationships with TV personalities — supporting the attachment-theory account.

Evaluation

Strength — research support for absorption-addiction model (Maltby et al. 2006). A key strength is supporting evidence. Maltby et al. (2006) used the Celebrity Attitude Scale with adolescents and found that those scoring at the intense-personal level had significantly poorer mental health, lower self-esteem and higher anxiety than those at the entertainment-social level. This is important because it supports McCutcheon's claim that intense parasocial relationships compensate for deficiencies in psychological functioning and real-life relationships. This strengthens the validity of the absorption-addiction model.

Strength — supporting evidence for attachment-theory explanation. A further strength is research support for the attachment account. Cole and Leets (1999) found that insecure-resistant adolescents were significantly more likely to form intense parasocial relationships with TV characters than securely attached or insecure-avoidant adolescents. This is important because it directly supports the prediction that insecurely attached individuals are most vulnerable to parasocial attachment. This strengthens the attachment-theory account.

Limitation — correlational evidence. A significant limitation is that supporting research is **correlational**. Poor mental health may not *cause* parasocial relationships — it may be the other way round, or both may result from a third factor (loneliness, social isolation). This is important because the models claim causal mechanisms that correlational data cannot confirm. This weakens the strength of the causal interpretation.

Limitation — attachment-theory explanation contradicted by McCutcheon et al. (2006). A further limitation is that the attachment-theory account has not always been replicated. **McCutcheon et al. (2006)** measured attachment and parasocial relationship intensity in 299 American university students and found no significant difference in intensity between those with secure and insecure attachments. This is important because the model predicts a clear difference. This weakens the attachment-theory account.

Limitation — methodological issues with the CAS. A further limitation is that the Celebrity Attitude Scale is a self-report measure, vulnerable to social-desirability bias. People may understate their parasocial involvement because admitting to "borderline-pathological" level engagement is embarrassing. This is important because if data are biased downward, true levels of engagement (and any associated psychological problems) may be underestimated. This is a methodological concern for both models.

Limitation — cultural and developmental variation. A further limitation is variation across cultures and ages. Parasocial relationships are particularly common in adolescents but may decline with age; their nature also varies across cultures (e.g. K-pop fandom in East Asia has different cultural meaning than UK celebrity culture). This is important because the models are based largely on Western adult and adolescent samples — generalisability is limited.

Application — social media and the modern celebrity. A relevant point is the dramatic change in parasocial relationships in the era of social media. Influencers maintain apparent two-way interaction with millions of fans through DMs, livestreams and direct posts — blurring the line between parasocial and real relationships. This

is important because the absorption-addiction model and attachment-theory account were both developed when celebrities were more distant; their predictions may need updating for the era of Instagram, TikTok and YouTube influencer culture.

Conclusion. Parasocial relationships are well-evidenced as a real phenomenon, and both the absorption-addiction model and attachment-theory account have supporting (and contradicting) evidence. The main limitations — correlational data, methodological issues with the CAS, and the changing nature of celebrity in the social-media era — mean both explanations are best treated as partial and in need of contemporary update.

These revision notes were prepared for Simply Psychology and cover spec section 4.3.2 of the AQA Psychology 2025 specification (A-level only, Paper 3). Evolutionary explanations of partner preferences have been **removed** from the 2025 spec and are not covered. "Use of deception" in online relationships is new in 2025. For deeper coverage of any topic, see simplypsychology.org/relationships.html.