Relationships in Psychology

Welcome to this comprehensive guide on the Relationships topic from the AQA A-Level Psychology specification (section 4.3.2). This presentation covers evolutionary explanations for partner preferences, factors affecting attraction, theories of romantic relationships, virtual relationships in social media, and parasocial relationships.

Each section includes test questions with allocated marks to help you prepare for your examinations. Use these to assess your understanding and practice your exam technique.

🧠 **by Stephen Renwick**

Evolutionary Explanations for Partner Preferences

Evolutionary psychology suggests that our partner preferences evolved to maximise reproductive success. Sexual selection theory proposes that certain traits are preferred because they signal reproductive fitness.

Male preferences: Men typically prefer physical attractiveness and youth as these signal fertility. Cross-cultural studies show men consistently value these traits.

Female preferences: Women typically prefer resources and status as these signal ability to provide for offspring. They also value commitment as this ensures continued resource provision.

These preferences reflect different reproductive strategies based on parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972). Females have higher obligatory parental investment (pregnancy, lactation) and therefore are more selective about mates.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY,
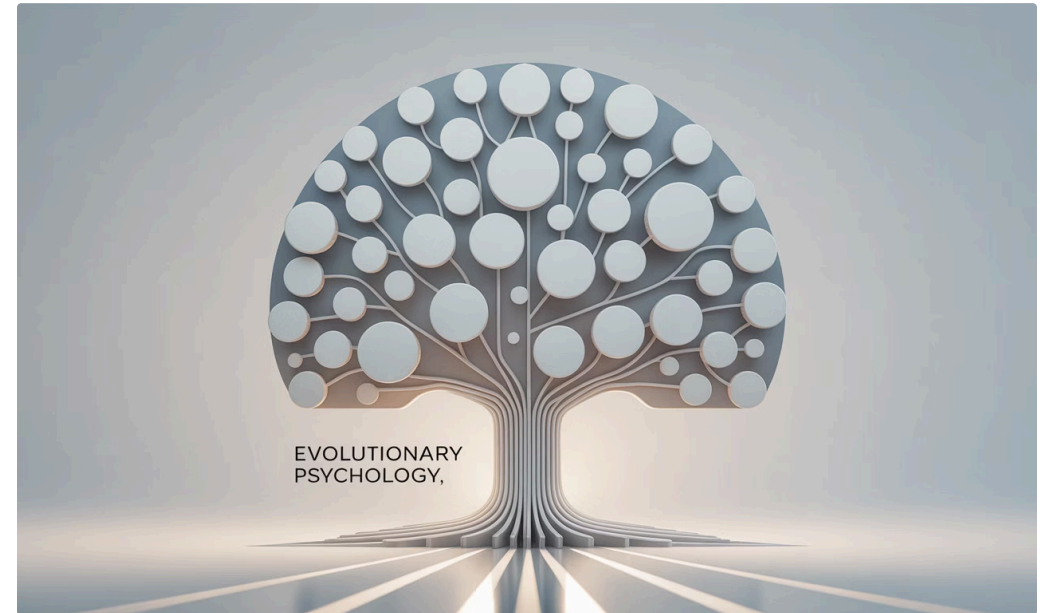
Test Question: Explain how sexual selection theory accounts for gender differences in partner preferences. (4 marks)

Answer guidance: 1 mark for explaining sexual selection theory, 1 mark for describing male preferences with example, 1 mark for describing female preferences with example, 1 mark for linking to reproductive strategies.

Evolutionary Explanations: Evidence and Evaluation

Supporting Evidence

Buss (1989) conducted a cross-cultural study across 37 cultures, finding consistent gender differences in mate preferences that align with evolutionary predictions. Men valued physical attractiveness more, while women valued financial prospects more.

Critical Evaluation

These theories have been criticised for being reductionist, ignoring cultural and social factors. Modern studies show that as gender equality increases in societies, mate preferences become more similar between genders (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Alternative Explanations

Social role theory suggests that mate preferences reflect gender roles rather than evolved mechanisms. Economic factors and changing social norms influence partner preferences beyond evolutionary explanations.

Test Question: Evaluate evolutionary explanations of partner preferences. (8 marks)

Answer guidance: 4 marks for AO1 (description of evolutionary explanations) and 4 marks for AO3 (evaluation points including supporting studies, methodological issues, cultural variations, and alternative explanations).

Factors Affecting Attraction: Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure involves revealing personal information about oneself to another person. It plays a crucial role in the development of romantic relationships.

Reciprocal self-disclosure: When one person discloses information, the other is likely to reciprocate. This creates mutual vulnerability and trust.

Depth and breadth: Relationships typically develop from shallow, non-intimate disclosures to deeper, more personal ones over time.

Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) describes relationship development as a process of increasing self-disclosure, like peeling layers of an onion.

Research by Collins & Miller (1994) found that we like people who disclose to us, we disclose more to people we like, and people like us more after we disclose to them – creating a positive feedback loop.

Self Disclosure in Psychology
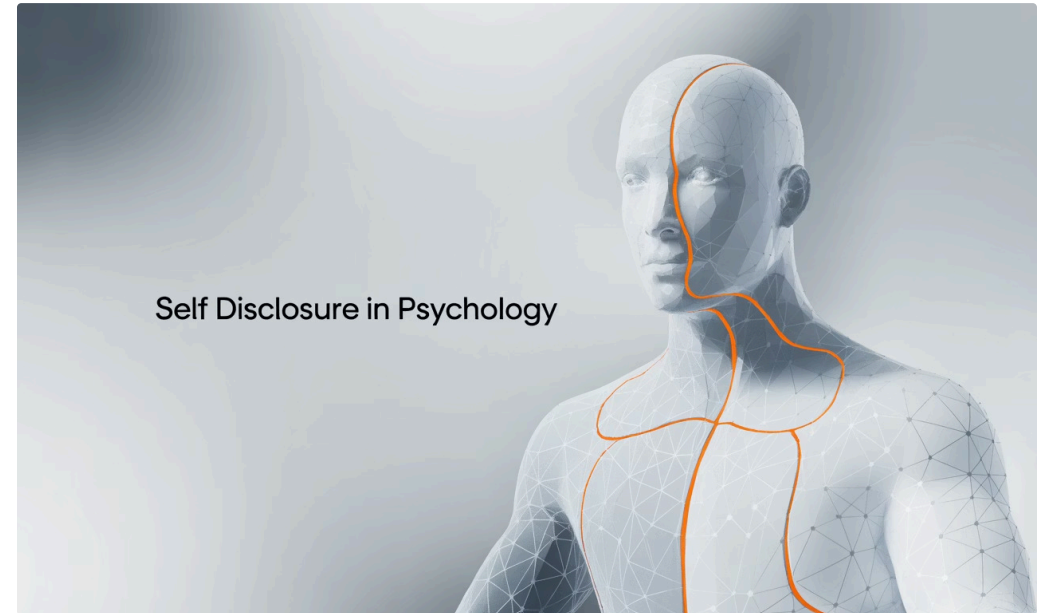
Test Question: Explain how self-disclosure contributes to the development of romantic relationships. (6 marks)

Answer guidance: 1-2 marks for basic definition, 3-4 marks for explaining reciprocity and social penetration theory, 5-6 marks for detailed explanation with reference to research evidence and the feedback loop of disclosure and liking.

Factors Affecting Attraction: Physical Attractiveness

Physical Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness significantly influences initial attraction. Features considered attractive often signal health and fertility, including facial symmetry, clear skin, and certain body proportions.

The Matching Hypothesis

Proposed by Walster et al. (1966), this suggests people are more likely to form successful relationships with those of similar attractiveness levels. We realistically assess our own attractiveness and seek partners of comparable attractiveness to avoid rejection.

Evidence for the matching hypothesis comes from Walster's "Computer Dance" study, where participants were randomly paired for a dance regardless of attractiveness. Follow-up showed that despite random assignment, those who continued dating tended to be of similar attractiveness levels.

However, the theory has been criticised. Later research by Walster found that both men and women preferred highly attractive partners regardless of their own attractiveness. Other factors like proximity and similarity may be more important in long-term relationships.

Test Question: Describe and evaluate the matching hypothesis as an explanation for attraction in romantic relationships. (8 marks)

Answer guidance: 4 marks for AO1 (description of the hypothesis and supporting studies) and 4 marks for AO3 (evaluation points including contradictory evidence, methodological issues, and the role of other factors).

Factors Affecting Attraction: Filter Theory

Filter theory, proposed by Kerckhoff and Davis (1962), suggests that we use a series of filters to narrow down potential partners from the field of eligibles:

Social Demography Filter

The first filter involves social and demographic factors such as age, ethnicity, social class, education, and geographical proximity. We typically meet and interact with people who share similar demographic characteristics.

Similarity Filter

The second filter involves similarity in attitudes, values, interests, and beliefs. We are attracted to people who share our worldview and validate our opinions. This creates cognitive consistency and reduces conflict.

Complementarity Filter

The final filter involves complementary needs and personality traits. According to this principle, we may be attracted to people whose personality traits complement our own, creating a balanced relationship where each person's needs are met.

Kerckhoff and Davis's longitudinal study of dating couples found that similarity in values predicted relationship success in the early stages, while complementary needs became more important later.

Test Question: Outline filter theory as an explanation for attraction in romantic relationships. (4 marks)

Answer guidance: 1 mark for basic description of filter theory, 1 mark for each filter explained (social demography, similarity, complementarity), 1 mark for reference to supporting research.

Theories of Romantic Relationships: Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) views relationships as exchanges where people seek to maximise rewards and minimise costs:

- Rewards include companionship, support, love, and sex
- Costs include time, effort, and lost opportunities

Key concepts:

- **Profit = Rewards - Costs**: People seek relationships with the highest profit
- **Comparison Level (CL)**: Our expectation of rewards based on past experiences
- **Comparison Level for Alternatives (CLalt)**: The profit we expect from the best available alternative relationship

If profit > CL, we are satisfied with the relationship. If profit < CLalt, we may leave the relationship for a better alternative.

Social Exchange Theory"

Test Question: Using social exchange theory, explain why a person might stay in a relationship despite experiencing some problems. (6 marks)

Answer guidance: 1-2 marks for basic description of SET, 3-4 marks for explaining relevant concepts (profit, CL, CLalt), 5-6 marks for detailed application to the scenario with examples of how rewards might outweigh costs or how CLalt might be low.

Theories of Romantic Relationships: Equity Theory

Equity theory (Walster et al., 1978) extends social exchange theory by suggesting that people are not just concerned with maximising their own rewards, but also with fairness in relationships.

Key Principles

A relationship is equitable when the ratio of rewards to costs is perceived as equal for both partners. The formula is: Person A's outcomes/inputs = Person B's outcomes/inputs.

Inequity Distress

Both under-benefiting (getting less than you contribute) and over-benefiting (getting more than you contribute) can cause distress. Under-benefiting leads to feelings of anger and resentment, while over-benefiting can cause guilt.

Restoring Equity

People try to restore equity by changing their inputs/outcomes, changing their partner's inputs/outcomes, changing their perceptions, or leaving the relationship.
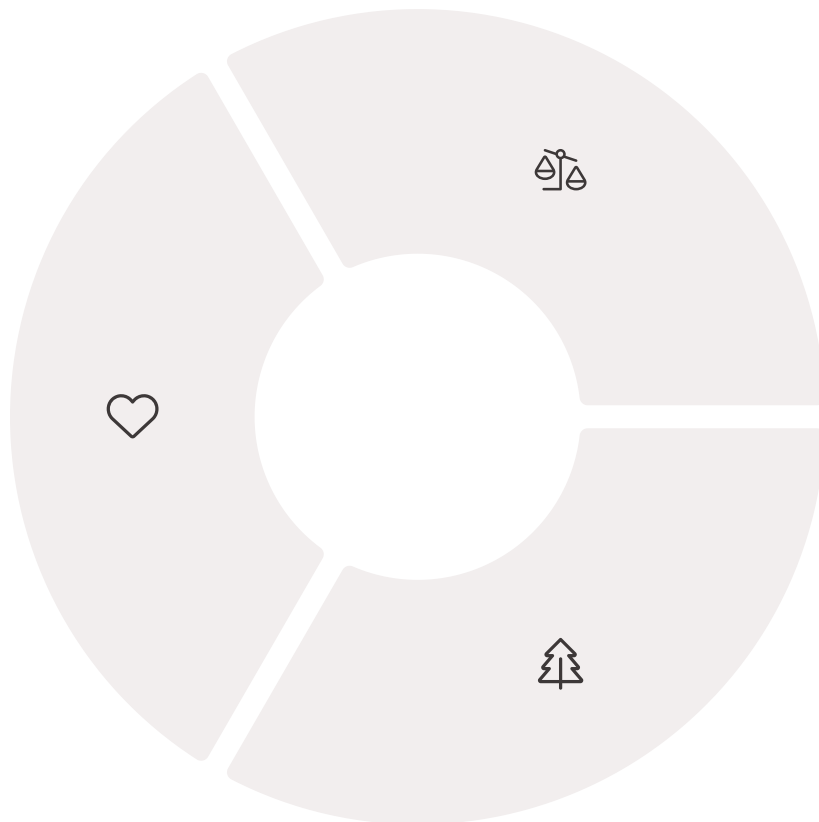
Research by Hatfield et al. (1979) found that couples who perceived their relationships as equitable reported greater satisfaction and longevity compared to those in inequitable relationships.

Test Question: Compare equity theory with social exchange theory as explanations for maintenance of romantic relationships. (8 marks)

Answer guidance: 4 marks for AO1 (description of both theories) and 4 marks for AO3 (comparison points including similarities, differences, supporting evidence, and limitations of each).

Theories of Romantic Relationships: Rusbult's Investment Model

Rusbult's investment model (1983) explains commitment in relationships based on three factors:

The model predicts that commitment leads to relationship persistence and pro-relationship behaviours like accommodation and sacrifice.

Research support comes from Rusbult's longitudinal studies showing that these three factors predict commitment levels and relationship longevity better than satisfaction alone.

The model has been criticised for being too rational and ignoring emotional factors. It also doesn't account for cultural differences in how relationships are valued.

RUSBULT'S INVESTMENT MODEL

♡ Satisfaction

The positive feelings and rewards derived from the relationship. High satisfaction increases commitment.

⚖ Comparison with Alternatives

The perceived quality of available alternative relationships. Poor alternatives increase commitment.
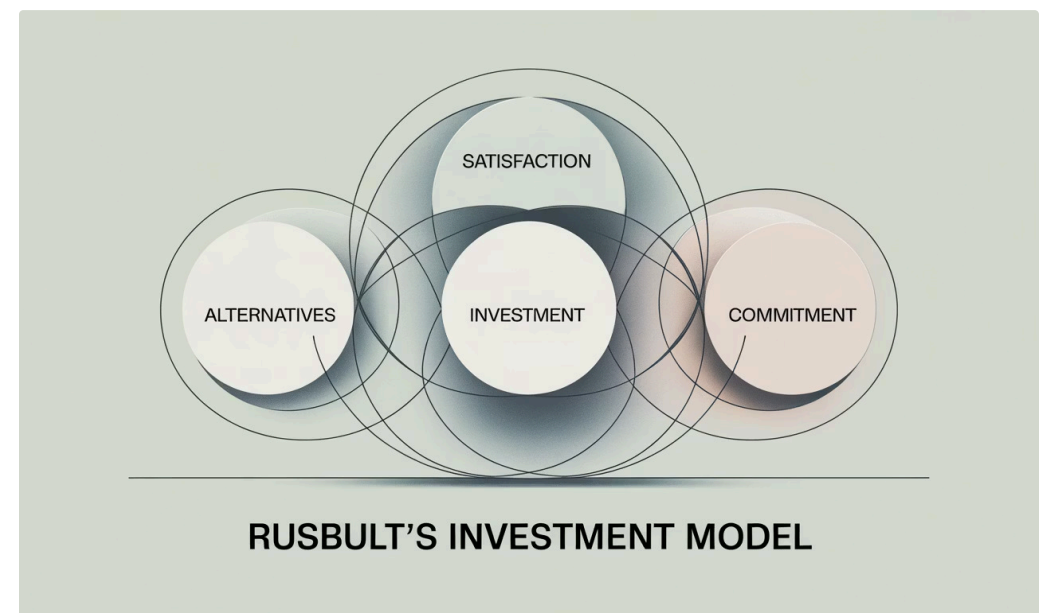
🌲 Investment Size

Resources put into the relationship that would be lost if it ended (time, emotional energy, shared possessions, mutual friends). Greater investment increases commitment.

Test Question: Explain how Rusbult's investment model accounts for why people stay in unsatisfying relationships. (6 marks)

Answer guidance: 1-2 marks for basic description of the model, 3-4 marks for explaining the three factors, 5-6 marks for detailed application to unsatisfying relationships with reference to research evidence.

Duck's Phase Model of Relationship Breakdown

Steve Duck (1982) proposed that relationship breakdown occurs through four distinct phases:

Intra-psychic Phase — 1

One partner becomes dissatisfied and privately evaluates the relationship's costs and benefits. They may focus on partner's faults and consider whether to express dissatisfaction. This phase involves internal thoughts and feelings not yet communicated.

2 — Dyadic Phase

The dissatisfied partner confronts the other about problems. Couples may negotiate and attempt to resolve issues. This phase involves direct communication between partners and may include arguments, discussions about change, or ultimatums.

Social Phase — 3

The breakdown becomes public as partners tell their social networks. Friends and family take sides and offer support. This phase involves managing public image and seeking validation for one's position in the breakdown.

4 — Grave Dressing Phase

Partners create and share accounts of why the relationship ended, often assigning blame. They adjust to new identities as single people and learn from the experience. This phase involves psychological healing and preparation for future relationships.

Test Question: Describe Duck's phase model of relationship breakdown and evaluate its usefulness in understanding how relationships end. (12 marks)

Answer guidance: 6 marks for AO1 (description of the four phases with examples) and 6 marks for AO3 (evaluation points including supporting evidence, cultural limitations, individual differences, and whether all relationships follow this pattern).

Virtual Relationships in Social Media

Virtual relationships are those formed and maintained primarily through digital communication rather than face-to-face interaction. These relationships have unique characteristics:

- **Reduced cues:** Lack of non-verbal cues can lead to misunderstandings but also reduce prejudice based on appearance

- **Asynchronous communication:** Allows time to craft responses and manage self-presentation

- **Geographic independence:** Enables connections regardless of physical location

- **Multiple relationships:** Facilitates maintaining numerous connections simultaneously

McKenna & Bargh (2000) found that people with marginalised identities may find it easier to form meaningful relationships online where they can be more authentic without fear of rejection.

Bridging worlds: Connecting through digital spaces
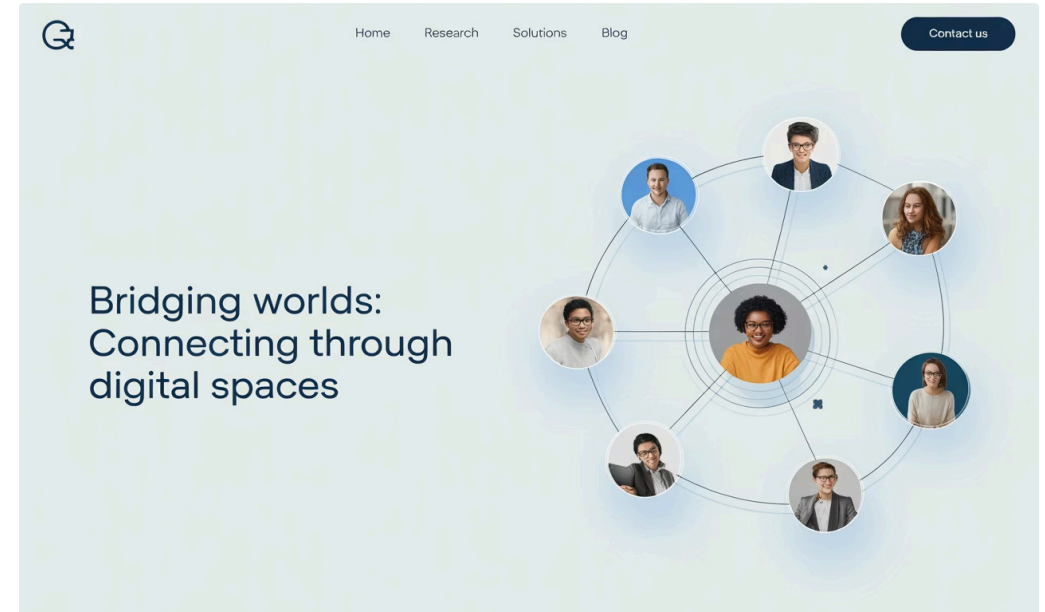
Test Question: Discuss two differences between virtual relationships and face-to-face relationships. (4 marks)

Answer guidance: 2 marks for each difference clearly explained with reference to psychological concepts or research. Potential differences include reduced cues, asynchronous communication, geographic independence, or self-disclosure patterns.

Self-Disclosure in Virtual Relationships

Absence of Gating

Physical appearance, visible disability, or stuttering can act as "gates" preventing relationship formation in face-to-face contexts. Online, these gates are removed, allowing relationships to develop based on shared interests rather than physical attributes.

Perceived Anonymity

The feeling of being anonymous online can lead to greater self-disclosure. People may reveal personal information more quickly than in face-to-face relationships, a phenomenon known as the "online disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004).

Accelerated Intimacy

The combination of reduced gating and increased self-disclosure can lead to accelerated intimacy in virtual relationships. Joinson (2001) found that CMC (computer-mediated communication) produced higher levels of self-disclosure than face-to-face communication.

However, there are concerns about the authenticity of virtual relationships. The hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996) suggests that online communicators create idealised perceptions of each other due to selective self-presentation and the tendency to fill in gaps with positive assumptions.

Test Question: Explain how the absence of gating features affects self-disclosure in virtual relationships. (6 marks)

Answer guidance: 1-2 marks for defining gating features and self-disclosure, 3-4 marks for explaining the relationship between them with examples, 5-6 marks for detailed explanation with reference to research evidence and theoretical models.

Parasocial Relationships: Definition and Levels

Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships where an individual feels a connection with a media figure (celebrity, fictional character, influencer) who is unaware of the individual's existence.

Horton & Wohl (1956) first described this phenomenon in relation to television personalities. Modern parasocial relationships extend to social media influencers, YouTubers, and other digital personalities.

Levels of Parasocial Relationships:

Transportation

Becoming absorbed in a media narrative temporarily. This is the most basic level and involves short-term engagement.

Parasocial Interaction

Feeling like you're interacting with the media figure during consumption. This includes talking to the screen or feeling that the personality is speaking directly to you.

Parasocial Relationship

Developing an ongoing sense of connection that extends beyond media consumption. This includes thinking about the figure when not consuming media.

The intensity of parasocial relationships can vary from casual interest to intense emotional investment. At extreme levels, it may develop into celebrity worship syndrome, characterised by obsessive thoughts and behaviours.

Social media has intensified parasocial relationships by creating an illusion of reciprocity and accessibility. When influencers respond to comments or share personal details, followers may feel a stronger sense of connection.

Test Question: Describe the different levels of parasocial relationships and explain how social media has changed these relationships. (8 marks)

Answer guidance: 4 marks for AO1 (description of the levels with examples) and 4 marks for AO3 (explanation of how social media has intensified or changed parasocial relationships).

Parasocial Relationships: Theoretical Explanations

The Absorption-Addiction Model

Developed by McCutcheon et al. (2002), this model proposes that parasocial relationships develop through three stages:

1 Entertainment-Social Stage

Initial attraction based on entertainment value and social aspects. Fans enjoy discussing the celebrity with others and are attracted to the celebrity's ability to entertain.

2 Intense-Personal Stage

Development of more intense feelings. Fans feel a special bond with the celebrity and seek more information about their personal life. There's a compulsive element to their interest.

3 Borderline-Pathological Stage

Extreme absorption and addiction. Fans have unrealistic fantasies about the celebrity and may believe they have a special relationship. This can lead to problematic behaviours.

Attachment Theory Explanation

Attachment theory suggests that parasocial relationships may function as attachment relationships, particularly for people with insecure attachment styles. Cole & Leets (1999) found that people with anxious-ambivalent attachment styles reported stronger parasocial relationships, possibly using them as a safe way to experience closeness without risk of rejection.

Greenwood & Long (2011) found that parasocial relationships can provide a sense of belonging and emotional regulation similar to real relationships, especially for those who feel isolated.

Test Question: Compare the absorption-addiction model and attachment theory as explanations for parasocial relationships. (8 marks)

Answer guidance: 4 marks for AO1 (description of both explanations) and 4 marks for AO3 (comparison points including similarities, differences, supporting evidence, and limitations of each).

Revision and Exam Preparation

Key Study Summary

Buss (1989)	Cross-cultural study of mate preferences
Walster et al. (1966)	"Computer Dance" study on matching hypothesis
Kerckhoff & Davis (1962)	Filter theory longitudinal study
Rusbult (1983)	Investment model and relationship commitment
McKenna & Bargh (2000)	Online relationships and marginalised identities

Exam Tips

- Use psychological terminology accurately
- Support explanations with relevant studies
- Consider methodological issues in relationship research
- Discuss both supporting and contradicting evidence
- Apply theories to real-world examples

Practice Essay Questions

1. Discuss evolutionary explanations for partner preferences. (16 marks)

2. Evaluate theories of romantic relationships. (16 marks)

3. Compare virtual relationships with face-to-face relationships. (16 marks)

4. Discuss explanations for parasocial relationships. (16 marks)

Remember to allocate your time based on mark value: approximately 1.5 minutes per mark. For 16-mark questions, spend about 24 minutes, with roughly half on AO1 (description) and half on AO3 (evaluation).