

Theories of romantic relationships:

Rusbult's investment model of commitment, satisfaction, comparison with alternatives and investment

According to Rusbult et al (2011) commitment is of central importance in relationships. This, however, depends on three contributing factors;

1. Satisfaction

Based on the concept of the comparison level (CL), where a satisfying relationship is judged by comparing rewards and costs. Each partner is satisfied if they are getting more out of the relationship than they expected based on social norms or previous experience.

2. Comparison with Alternatives

Based on the idea of CLalt, where a partner makes a judgement concerning whether a relationship with an alternative would be more beneficial (offer more rewards and less costs).

3. Investment

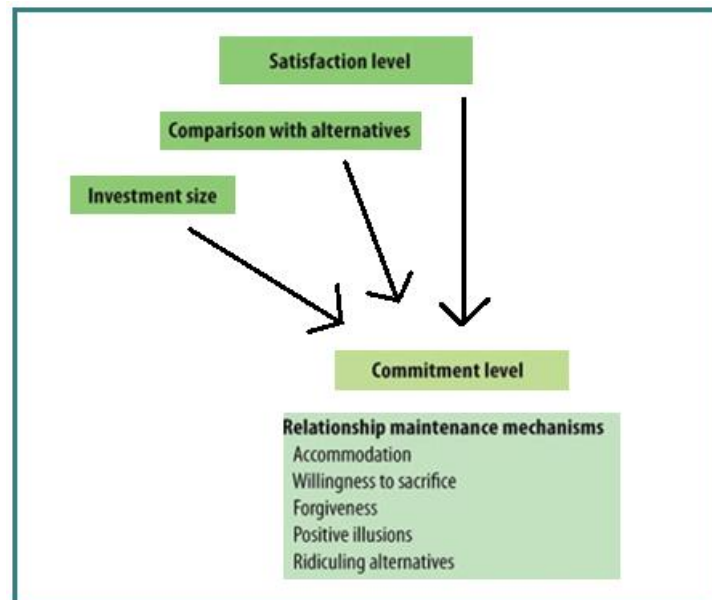
Rusbult added this idea as a key factor influencing commitment in a relationship. An investment can be understood to be the resources associated with a romantic relationship which partners would lose if the relationship were to end.

Rusbult's model proposes that commitment occurs when the CL and CLalt are high and the investment level is high. We can observe this in a relationship through 'relationship maintenance mechanisms', or behaviours which only couples who are committed to a relationship will exhibit. These include behaviours such as forgiveness, willingness to sacrifice, and being overly positive about their partner.

Rusbult also considered additional factors like equity and social support. Equity in the sense that satisfaction levels would be affected not only by how much the person has their needs met, but also by how fair the relationship is perceived to be. In terms of social support, commitment to any relationship may be influenced by family and friends. If they have a positive view of an individual's partner the relationship is more likely to be sustained.

Rusbult et al (1998) found that high levels of commitment were associated with high levels of satisfaction, lower numbers of quality alternatives and high measures of investment in the relationship.

Investment in relationships can be measured as a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic investments which have been made over the course of the relationship. Intrinsic investments are those which have been added by a single partner such as money towards a date or a gift, time spent with the person and any self-disclosures which have been made. Extrinsic investments are those which have been created or developed over the course of the relationship which are shared by both partners, such as large purchases (e.g. property) or having children.



Le and Agnew (2003) offer support for the investment model from a meta-analysis of 52 studies. They found that satisfaction, comparison with alternatives and investment size all predicted relationship commitment. Relationships in which commitment was greatest were the most stable and lasted longest.

Other supporting research comes from studies investigating 'intimate partner violence' (IPV – abusive relationships). Rusbult and Martz (1995) studied domestically abused women at a shelter and found that those most likely to return to an abusive partner reported having made the greatest investment and felt they had the fewest attractive alternatives. These women were dissatisfied with their relationships but still committed to them. Therefore, the investment model shows that satisfaction on its own cannot explain why people stay in relationships, but commitment and investment are also factors.

However, Goodfriend and Agnew (2008) argue that the model is limited because it fails to recognise the true complexity of investment, especially how planning for the future influences commitment. They suggest that there is more to investment than just the resources you have already put into a relationship. In the early stages, partners will have made very few actual investments, such as living together or purchasing in a property together. If the model included future planning, it would be a more realistic representation of real-life relationships.

