



Analysis of the Chinese Dating Show *Love Actually* Using Social Penetration Theory

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Abstract. Dating shows have now penetrated the television audiences of China. The basic fundamentals of the show are to find two compatible contestants, starting them on a road of love and romance. The contestants need to reveal particular issues regarding their characters and background hoping for an attraction, and be chosen to go on a romantic outing together that could lead to the beginning of love. Two contestants named Rola and Terrance revealed the extremely intimate issues of their lives. Rola had a son and the failed results of a relationship which penetrated her in a negative way. But none of these things deterred Terrance. He was compelled to ask Rola to embark with him on date of romance. It is called the reality show, simply because it portrays the truth of love and romance. Some find happiness and contentment together, some don't. Two perfect strangers develop a relationship. It is very appealing as it uses social values. Audiences love them hoping the relationship may flourish into real life. And that the penetration of love will once again conquer. Keep with the phenomenal theory that love may sometimes need a little help.

Keywords: TV Show · Social Penetration Theory · Reality Show · Relationship

1 Introduction

The dating reality shows are quite popular and widespread in China nowadays, including stars' and celebrities' dating shows as well as normal people's dating reality shows. Recently, there has been a special dating reality show of normal people called *Love Actually* (2021–2022) [1] attracting lots of audiences. The dating guests in the show are all in their 30s and have varied experiences of relationships and social identities, being labeled as high-quality single men and women. Rola, one female guest in *Love Actually*, is a well-known and skillful cooking blogger on the Internet and has a son. The male guests in *Love Actually* are basically affluent with high social statuses such as Terrance as an advertising planning director and Urick as a returnee dentist. Following the arrangements that the show program group organized in *Love Actually*, the guests experienced getting to know each participant, developing relationships with each other, and also choosing to give up developing relationships with someone.

Noticeably, the social penetration theory is found to be used and illustrated in this dating reality show. The social penetration theory is developed by Irwin Altman and

Dalmas Taylor in 1973 for studying how people develop interpersonal intimacy [2]. The program group of *Love Actually* made the arrangements from the perspective of the social penetration theory that people self-disclose their multi-layered structure of personalities deeper and wider in the stages of relationship development. And social exchange theory can also be noticed through every choice and decision change of the dating show guests in *Love Actually*.

2 Self-disclosure and Relationship Development Stages

The show arranged different communication circumstances and dating ways to gradually make the guests develop a deeper and deeper intimate relationship following the four stages of relationship development through self-disclosure, which is the process of openness and transparency in that people naturally exchange confidences. When first meeting someone, self-disclosure occurs quickly [3]. At the first meeting, the guests gave their self-introductions including their ages, jobs, and hobbies, sharing both the deeper layers and more aspects of their selves. According to the law of reciprocity, self-disclosure is reciprocal [4]. The guests in the show exchanged the same depth and level of their private information. All the participants left some impression on others in the first meeting. During the chatting part, the female dating guest Rola had impressed several male guests with her funny and cute characteristics. Then she was invited by the male guest Terrence who got interested in her to have a date. As interpersonal exchange progresses stage by stage from the superficial to the more intimate, people's real selves are revealed, like peeling back the layers of an onion [5]. During the first one-on-one date, Rola and Terrence revealed more personal matters mutually, sharing common topics as well as some values and forming the understanding of a few layers of each other's shown personalities. They were attracted to each other through their self-disclosures. Meanwhile, their relationship developed closer from the orientation stage to the exploratory affective stage. Social penetration is an orderly process containing 4 stages over time, which are the orientation stage for the first meet, the exploratory affective stage showing some layers of a personality, the affective stage, and the stable stage [6]. With the following datings, Rola and Terrence walked into the affective stage of the relationship development by discussing private topics and revealing almost their entire personalities. For instance, Rola told Terrence she had a son and Terrence said that he didn't mind it at all and that he also had a daughter [7]. At the stable stage, the most intimate topics about their private selves were continuously disclosed in a high degree of spontaneity, according to Carpenter and Greene (2015) [8]. Terrence and Rola revealed a lot of more private issues spontaneously and honestly, and both of them had the same predictions that the other had the intention to spend the rest of their life with them, which could tell that their relationship was about to be in the stable stage where their core values and beliefs are shared with three open expressions of thoughts, feelings as well as behaviors, in addition to which, both of them were able to predict each other's emotional reactions (*ibid*).

3 Social Exchange Theory

What is more, the social exchange theory can be used to explain the phenomena of intimate relationship development found in *Love Actually*. The social exchange theory is developed by psychologists John Thibaut and Harold Kelley, and borrowed by Altman and Taylor for understanding the process of self-disclosure as studying the social penetration theory [9]. The social exchange theory posits that relationship development is formed by weighing mutual cost and benefit as well as comparing alternatives. The analysis of costs and benefits contains 3 types of relational measurements, which are the relational outcome, relational satisfaction, and relational stability [10]. At the beginning of the show, the male and female guests chatted with each guest online anonymously, having some interest as well as the impression of the guests without being able to match with specific ones among them. Later as the guests gathered together offline for the first time, they matched the impression from online communication before with specific participants in reality during their face-to-face chatting, leaving some new impressions to others with friendly greetings. The relational outcome can be seen apparently in this stage where male and female guests made decisions based on attributes on the surface layer [11]. Initially, the guests made decisions based on the surface layer of the self-disclosure of others to predict the outcome of the interaction. They chose to interact with and invite someone to have a date if the potential rewards, such as happiness, pleasure, and comfort gained from someone's personality or good-looking appearance when having the personal dating, are greater than the cost they paid, such as spending time or money on the person. Therefore, considering the potential rewards from the surface layer, two male guests both chose to fry eggs as breakfast for Rola after hearing Rola say she needed to eat fried eggs every morning. What is more, by measuring the relational outcomes, Terrence asked Rola to have a date with him. Later on, while they were dating, Rola continued self-disclosure and told Terrence more about her private matters that she had a son and she cherished and loved her son so much, but she had experienced that many people failed to accept the fact of dating with a woman who has a child when considering developing an intimate relationship with her. Terrence immediately held Rola's arm and said that he as well as his family and friends did not mind it at all. After that, Rola expressed her feelings that the response and reaction of Terrence during that date touched her deeply, and Rola said that was because no one before had ever said such touching words to her. The concept of relational satisfaction as well as the comparison level (CL) can be found during this period. The social exchange theory offers two standards of comparison that Rola and the other guests in the show use to evaluate their interpersonal outcomes through dates, and the first one of the comparison standards refers to the relative satisfaction that evaluating how happy or depressed an interpersonal outcome makes Rola feel [12]. From the perspective of relational satisfaction, Rola measured by the comparison level that the level of reward from the behavior of Terrence was quite high compared to her experience before, making the interaction and relationship development between Rola and Terrence worthwhile. Additionally, Terrence was not the only one to whom Rola revealed that private information. Right before the dating between Rola and Terrence, Rola also accepted a date invitation proposed by another male guest in the show named Urick, who had also been in the affective stage of relationship development with Rola during that period. Rola self-disclosed the

same private information about her son and her feelings in depth towards her son to Urick. However, Urick kept silent and thought for a while, and eventually, he replied to Rola with one short sentence, saying that he kind of liked children, without adding more expression to Rola. The response from Urick was equivocal and not quite sincere for Rola, making her disappointed in Urick and their further relationship development. Therefore, according to the relational satisfaction of Rola by comparing the outcome from communicating with Terrence, the comparison level of reward from Urick was relatively low. At the end of the dating reality show, Rola was more willing to have a romantic relationship with Terrence rather than with Urick. The relational stability can be found in analyzing the level of reward in different kinds of relationships for choosing one relationship over other possible relationships, measured by the comparison level of alternatives (CL(alt)), which is the other one of the comparison standards according to the social exchange theory. At the end of the dating reality show, when the guests in the show were asked to choose the participant that they eventually want to determine a romantic relationship with, Rola compared the outcomes of her interaction with Terrence against the interaction with Urick and evaluated the intimate relationship development between her and Terrence as the higher comparison level of alternatives. As a final result of the relationship development of the guests in the show *Love Actually*, Rola accepted Terrence's love confession and chose Terrence as her romantic partner after declining Urick's confession to her.

4 De-penetration Stage in Relationship Development

The de-penetration stage also occurred in the relationship development between Rola and Urick in the dating reality show. Social de-penetration, which can be also called de-escalation or dissolution, is a stage that can possibly happen in relationship development as the individual self-disclosure is reduced as a result of interpersonal conflict and relational stressors [6]. De-penetration is the withdrawal of previously shared areas that can happen in every stage of relationship development as self-disclosure continues [13]. It can be caused by conflicts of different values or some interactions that fail to meet the date's expectations in the show *Love Actually*. When Rola reveal her private information that she had already had a child for years and she cherished her son very much, which was in fact a way of seeking Urick's attitude towards Rola's personal life status and life experience, Urick's reaction failed to convey enough acceptable and supportive attitude to Rola and her life status, which was unable to meet Rola's expectations to Urick when Rola considering to choose a romantic partner who can accept she had a child. Due to Urick's insincere reactions being at a low level of Rola's relational satisfaction, the de-penetration happened gradually between them, and Rola gradually became unwilling to continue their intimate relationship further as a potential romantic partner. Later, Rola determined to stop dating and self-disclosing further with Urick, in addition to this, they did not talk about topics of romantic relationships and views of love like before anymore.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Chinese dating reality show *Love Actually* reflected the phenomenon that social penetration theory discusses and how people develop interpersonal intimacy during dating. The dating participants in *Love Actually* became closer and closer through self-disclosure, which more or less brought dissatisfaction or conflicts of values and led the intimate relationships between the dating guests in the show to the de-penetration stage. However, it is undoubted that most of the time during the dates, self-disclosure helped develop relationships between the dating guests in further relationship stages. What is more, the ideas and values in social exchange theory that self-interest motivated and cost-and-benefit measurement guides participants' decisions in every stage of interpersonal relationship development among the dating guests in the show. Since dating reality shows take a bigger and bigger part in the Chinese TV program field nowadays, the application of social penetration theory can be studied much further so that it can be beneficial and instructive to the creative production of dating reality shows as well as interpersonal intimate relationship development in real life.

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