

**Utilising Social Penetration Theory and Social Exchange Theory to  
Facilitate Relationship Formation Amongst International University  
Students: Action Research Project**

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### **Abstract**

The challenges of being a stranger at a new university can be quite daunting. In most cases, the lack of social interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds undermines mental stability, class participation, and acceptance. To address this problem, an action research study was conducted grounded in Social Penetration Theory and Social Exchange Theory. Using these theories as a framework, a relevant learning activity was designed to foster relationships among international first-year undergraduate students. The action research involved planning and implementing a series of six-week workshops to develop learners' relational skills through the application of SPT and SET theories. Among other students who participated in the workshop, there were twenty-four new international undergraduate students. In the first place, the method used involved participants keeping a journal. Apart from pre- and post-questionnaires, observations were made along the way. The first change worth noticing was the level of confidence in developing relationships. Cultural differences were observed not only in language and nonverbal aspects of communication, but also in expectations regarding personal dynamics. Action research yielded several insights into the use of Western-derived theories in multicultural settings. The current action research project helps to evaluate two main sociopsychological theories, providing counselling professionals with relevant information.

**Key Words:** *Social Penetration Theory, Social Exchange Theory, action research, international students, relationship formation*

### ***Introduction and Rationale***

Strong personal and romantic relationships influence many aspects of human social life, as they correlate closely with psychological resilience, emotional well-being, and even academic success (Gómez-López, 2018). For students relocating to other countries, adjusting to new social norms is difficult enough on its own, particularly due to language barriers in communication.

This problem was identified in the practice of providing student support in a large European university where a considerable number of international students have enrolled. According to analysis of referral statistics and peer mentor reports gathered over two consecutive academic years, many first-year students from abroad experience feelings of social isolation. Moreover, many of these students struggle to make friends, as their attempts at relationship-building tend to remain superficial, despite their social activity. In this case, the problem appears to be not a lack of social desire but a lack of practical approaches to relationship formation in a culturally diverse environment.

To address the outlined issue, social psychology offers several theoretical bases that can help understand and overcome difficulties in communicating with new people. Firstly, Social Penetration Theory (SPT), proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973), describes the process of relationship building as a gradual progression from low-level to high-level self-disclosures. Secondly, according to Social Exchange Theory (SET) developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), relationships are seen as an evaluation process in which the ratio of expected benefits to costs is considered.

There are a number of theories that explain the development of interpersonal relationships. Some of them include attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979), uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and relational dialectics theory.

(Baxter, 1988). However, the current study uses social penetration theory (SPT) and social exchange theory (SET) for several reasons. First, the theory based on the role of self-disclosure as the main way of developing interpersonal relationships can be very important in an educational setting, since the issue of disclosure can be analysed explicitly. Second, the motivational component of SET allows one to explain why people enter into or end certain types of relationships. This aspect is especially relevant for international students, who have real concerns regarding the cost-effectiveness of the process of relationship formation.

Even though SPT and SET are supported by abundant literature (Tran et al., 2019; Sprecher et al., 2018), their use in practice remains insufficiently studied. As part of this action research study, the following question is addressed: How can the principles of Social Penetration Theory and Social Exchange Theory be applied in an educational workshop to support relationship formation among first-year international students, and what would this practice reveal?

In this case, the selected methodology is practitioner-led action research, which involves systematic planning, implementation, observation, and reflection on the educational workshop facilitated by the researcher herself (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). In the course of conducting the study, a practice-based evaluation of theoretical foundations and recommendations for practitioners will be obtained.

In many European countries, increasing numbers of international students have influenced the student experience in urban universities, where they account for anywhere from one-fifth to two-fifths of all students enrolled (Volansky, 2023). As this trend continues to increase, issues of belonging become even more relevant. Disconnection is usually associated with decreased academic performance and retention. This means that institutions must deal not only with increased costs, but also with increased personal problems experienced by learners. Rather than speculating

about possible solutions, it is vital to rely on strategies known to enhance a sense of belonging. While this paper addresses a local issue, its implications go beyond.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

#### **2.1 Social Penetration Theory**

Social Penetration Theory (SPT) proposes a systematic understanding of the progression of relationship development through incremental self-disclosure of an individual (Zainudin & Sharifah, 2020). According to Altman and Taylor (1973), the personality structure of the individual can be viewed like an onion, composed of several layers, ranging from publicly known characteristics on the surface to deeply personal values, beliefs, and emotional experiences at the core. Two main parameters of this process include the breadth of topics discussed among individuals and the personal importance of the information exchanged.

A key feature of SPT is the rule of reciprocity, according to which people tend to provide a reciprocating response, in the form of self-disclosure, to the degree offered by another person (Pennington, 2015). Self-disclosure helps build trust and facilitate emotional bonding only when done at the right time. In contrast, untimely or excessive self-disclosure can cause embarrassment and hinder relationship building (Reis & Shaver, 2018). Several phases in the progression of relationship development have been described in social penetration theory: the orientation phase, characterised by polite and conventional discourse; the exploratory affective exchange phase, where the individual begins sharing opinions; the affective exchange phase, marked by sharing personal values and emotions; and the stable exchange phase, reached only by some relationships, characterised by openness and consistent flow of information.

Relationships may also regress due to conflicts, betrayal, or life circumstances, leading to a return to shallow forms of communication (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005).

Contemporary research shows significant differences in the amount of appropriate self-disclosure across cultures and among people with different personality orientations (Sprecher et al., 2018).

## **2.2 Social Exchange Theory**

Whereas SPT mainly focuses on the communicative aspects of relationship development, SET examines relationships in terms of evaluation and motivation. According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959), people evaluate their relationships by comparing the benefits – emotional support, company, mental stimulation, and social connection – associated with their relationships with their costs – such as time investment, vulnerability, potential conflicts, and the opportunity cost of other possible relationships.

There are two main concepts of SET: comparison level and comparison level for alternatives. The comparison level (CL) is the criterion used to evaluate relational outcomes. It is formed as a result of past experiences and observation of other relationships. Satisfaction occurs when relational outcomes surpass the comparison level, and dissatisfaction occurs when relational outcomes are below CL. The comparison level for alternatives (CLalt) means the quality of the best alternative relationship. According to Kim and Auh (2019) and Rusbult et al. (2011), the greatest commitment will be achieved when relational outcomes are above CL and CLalt. One of the most influential modifications of SET has been presented by Rusbult et al. (2011).

The investment model of commitment includes not only the evaluation of benefits and costs but also investment as an additional factor of relationship stability. It means that

shared experiences, emotions, and time spent together increase the cost of exiting the relationship, regardless of the relationship's current level of satisfaction. This modification has been thoroughly confirmed in various relationships and cultural contexts (Tran et al., 2019).

### **2.3 Theoretical Developments and Cross-Cultural Considerations**

Both theories have become much more sophisticated since their creation. SPT has been expanded to accommodate the process of relationship establishment in digital environments, where limited social cues enable faster self-disclosure than in face-to-face communication (Ruppel et al., 2017). SET has been refined to include considerations of equity and interdependence (Stafford, 2020). These theories acknowledge that evaluating relationships involves complex factors such as emotions, culture, and social roles and cannot rely exclusively on cost-benefit calculations.

In particular, the present study examines the cultural limitations of both theories. SPT is focused exclusively on verbal self-disclosure as the means of achieving intimacy. This idea is based on predominant Western cultural values concerning individuality and expressiveness. In contrast, in collectivistic cultures, other ways of communication have been found, including maintaining harmony with others, saving face, and considering appropriate context (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2017). Similarly, in many cultures, family obligations, social roles, and collectivistic values are more important than personal preferences. This fact was taken into account when designing the present intervention and analysing its outcomes.

## **2.4 Critical Evaluation of Both Frameworks**

The main strength of SPT is its empirical basis and straightforward explanation of the process of establishing relationships, which can provide useful recommendations for both individuals and therapists working with couples. At the same time, the criticism of SPT concerns the lack of flexibility in describing relational development stages and the prioritisation of verbal over non-verbal communication (Smithson, 2025; Sprecher et al., 2018). SET provides excellent predictions of relationship satisfaction and stability, accounting for alternatives and investment in relationships. This helps explain relationship persistence and the reasons for ending relationships (Suls & Wills, 2024). On the other hand, SET may be accused of reductionism in its approach to emotionally complex phenomena in intimate relationships (Crocker et al., 2017). Combining the strengths of both theories leads to an optimal description of close relationships.

## **2.5 Integration of SPT and SET**

Despite SPT and SET having been explored separately, combining the two theories yields a more holistic and realistic model of relational development. SPT describes the development of relationships as a process of growing intimacy, driven by the increasing amount of personal information exchanged across the five stages. In contrast, according to SET, the development of relationships involves being motivated. Individuals assess the options for relational investments by applying a cost-benefit ratio to estimate the value of particular relationship types.

In practice, however, the communicative and motivational dimensions of relational behaviour are interrelated (Vasilic, 2022). Therefore, to explain relational development, it is necessary to consider both dimensions. An example of an international student starting studies at a university illustrates the issue perfectly well. With respect to SPT, to advance through all five stages and develop close relations with new peers, the

An individual needs to engage in reciprocal interaction by exchanging increasing amounts of personal information. Nonetheless, to understand why some mingling individuals fail to develop personal relationships, it is important to explore SET. Despite mingling, students will consider the costs of building relationships and find that new associations are not worth the effort.

Thus, through combining SPT and SET, professionals can attempt to address both dimensions of relational behaviour. In relation to SPT, practices might help students improve their communicative skills while focusing on specific aspects of interpersonal communication in foreign cultural environments (Bondarchuk et al., 2024). At the same time, SET will enable them to assess whether their approaches to making judgements about possible connections involve prejudices or stereotypes that prevent them from establishing new ties (Nelson & Olson, 2023).

Furthermore, integration of SPT and SET is also substantiated by critical remarks made concerning both theories. As described in Section 2.4, the major drawback of SPT is its lack of a motivational component. SET has been criticised for neglecting communicative issues related to cost-benefit assessments. Consequently, by integrating both SPT and SET, these criticisms will be addressed to a large extent. The value of SPT lies in its comprehensive description of communicative interaction, thereby allowing the cost-benefit analysis to be based on actual relationships between people. Differences in trust levels influence communicative behaviour, making decisions easier to predict using the motivational theory of SET.

Thus, SPT and SET helped develop a program that addresses both communicative and motivational dimensions of relational development. As part of the intervention, the designed workshop (see Section 4) pays equal attention to both dimensions. At the same time, compared with most interventions, the simultaneous improvement of communicative skills and motivational readiness to make new friends is the distinctive feature of the present program.

### ***Methodology and Research Approach***

Action research is used in this research study. This involves cycles of planning, doing, observing, and reflecting, through which the researcher can address practical issues while developing knowledge transferable across contexts. This type of research is always informed by reflection on well-thought-out, tested, observed, and then improved actions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McNiff, 2017). Most of the time, it is led by practitioners themselves, making it a blend of practice and theory. By addressing important concerns and improving them, knowledge is developed that will benefit others as well.

This study took place during the autumn semester at the European University campus. Twenty-four participants, crossing international borders, came together for this study: fourteen females and ten males. They hailed from 11 countries across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Participants were selected through a voluntary international student orientation programme. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. This study complied with the ethical standards for practitioner research established at the university where the research was conducted. Ethics board review was not required, as no sensitive personal data was involved in the study and participation was entirely voluntary (Mozerky et al., 2020). Participant anonymity was maintained throughout the study.

Among the information collected, three distinct forms emerged throughout the research. Each participant completed matching pre- and post-workshop questionnaires, both before and after the sessions. The questionnaires were tailor-made for this study by the researchers and used well-known constructs from the social penetration theory and social exchange theory. To measure confidence in starting relationships and ease of sharing personal information, questions came from Reis and Shaver's (2018) interpersonal process model of intimacy. To gauge how satisfied people were with their relationships, the team examined Rusbult et al.'s (2011) Investment Model. Each question used a five-point Likert scale, except for overall

relational satisfaction, which ranged from 1 to 10. To ensure clarity, two volunteers reviewed the questionnaire and provided feedback that the researchers used to improve it before the main study. Every week, participants kept personal logs, noting conversations, difficulties, and sudden insights. The facilitator tracked everyone's involvement each week, spotting patterns as the program went on. They used thematic analysis of journal and observation notes, inductively identifying themes and linking them to SPT and SET. Additionally, questionnaire data were analysed with descriptive statistics.

### ***Action and Intervention: Workshop Design and Implementation***

The workshop programme on the development of relationship skills included six sessions. All six sessions were 90 minutes long and were organised twice monthly throughout the autumn semester. The twice-monthly frequency was deliberately selected based on the literature on action research, with the reflection cycle approach in mind. As a result, the participants had sufficient time to reflect on the knowledge acquired in the previous session, try it out in real life in their social relations, gather empirical data, and return with it. Sessions were facilitated by the researcher as part of small group work and included 24 participants. The environment created was emotionally safe and culturally conscious. Key ideas from both SPT and SET were integrated into every session, but not explicitly explained. These concepts presupposed no prior knowledge of academic theory; they were implemented practically and were understandable to anyone.

All six sessions told the stories of imaginary students who met at university, gradually becoming best friends and romantic partners. Two first-year students, Maria and Ahmed, coming from Brazil and Egypt, respectively, served as illustrators of SPT stages and SET concepts. Through the tale of their progress from close friends to romantic partners, different concepts were demonstrated. These characters were always considered relatable by the participants, thus making a context-based case as a teaching strategy in relationship skills training appropriate.

**Session 1 – Understanding Relationship Layers (SPT: Orientation and Breadth):**

At the beginning of the session, participants studied the meaning of the relationship layers. They became familiar with the well-known model of relationship layers called the onion, developed by Altman & Taylor (1973). For each participant, there was a blank diagram with concentric circles in front of them. Participants had to describe everything about themselves in circles: the outermost circle included the data everyone knew about them; the middle circles contained opinions, preferences, and beliefs; the inner ones – the deepest emotions and core values. After that, everyone discussed their drawings and compared them, thus understanding personally how open they are to others and discovering cultural differences among participants. In conclusion, stories of their meeting and developing familiarity were shared.

**Session 2 – Reciprocity in Practice (SPT: Reciprocity and Pacing):** In this class, reciprocal disclosure was used as the platform for relational development. This involved an activity in which the participant had cards arranged from easy issues, such as favourite meals and travel experiences, to more complex issues, including family, tough times in one's life, and feelings. The activity consisted of discussing any topics each partner desired, but stopping whenever they felt uncomfortable. However, the most important thing was the reciprocity of disclosure: only when the second person opened themselves to an equal extent was there reciprocal disclosure, which was crucial for SPT. At the end, the discussion focused on participants' perceptions of starting disclosure and on situations in which there was no reciprocation; the participants analysed the role of culture in this regard. The tale continued, sharing how Ahmed and Maria discovered the importance of reciprocal disclosure in making further relational progress.

**Session 3 – What Do You Value in a Relationship? (SET: Comparison Level and Reward-Cost Evaluation):** In this session, participants understood the concepts of SET and the comparison level. However, no technical vocabulary was used. Firstly, each participant fulfilled the assignment by making a list of the five most desirable

relationship rewards and the three most expensive aspects of close relationships. Then, small groups were formed to compare individual results and observe the sharp differences in how rewards and costs were valued across cultures. Secondly, everyone had to reflect on their initial beliefs about relationships and check whether they are still valid. This session ended with a story about Maria's discovery of the power of Ahmed's influence in her life, as an example of the cost-benefit evaluation according to SPT.

**Session 4 – Cultural Communication Styles and Relational Expectations (Cross-Cultural Application):** In session four, culture played an important role in both SPT and SET theories. From cross-cultural communication theory, as proposed by Ting-Toomey & Dorjee (2017), in relation to face negotiation theory, it was observed that cultures differ in what constitutes appropriate self-disclosure and the expression of affection in such contexts. The case studies provided were reflective of challenges in relation to cross-cultural relations, where self-disclosure and openness were considered appropriate or not. The participants were asked to present cases in which cross-cultural communication posed challenges, especially when they misunderstood a person's intentions. Diverse communication styles were positively recognised during the session, reflecting the assumption underlying SPT and SET that Western communication norms should be used by default. The fourth session stands out among the others because it is viewed as highly successful in fostering a sense of relational curiosity towards other cultures.

**Session 5 – Dealing with Difficulties and Relationship Regressions (SPT Regression and SET Investment):** The truth that the development of a relationship follows a non-linear process becomes apparent once regression is considered. Regression is understood as a return to the superficial stages of a relationship following difficulty, frustration, and misunderstanding. Following Knobloch & Solomon's (2005) definition of regression, role-play activities based on actual experiences were performed. Common challenges people face when trying to establish strong connections were revealed during the session. Moreover, it became clear how these obstacles could be overcome through specific actions and words. Once the discussion

of overcoming relationship issues began, the topic of investments in SET emerged. Attention was paid to the influence of the number of invested efforts, experience, and time on willingness to solve problems despite strong negative feelings. The example of Maria and Ahmed showed a conflict between the two, but there was a gradual shift in how they spoke.

### **Session 6 – Reflecting on Progress, Reconsidering Goals, and Further Plan of**

**Action:** This last session was aimed at participants reflecting on the goals they wanted to achieve through the relations they established within the workshop programme. Thus, they were supposed to reflect on the level of the SPT stage they had reached and on the existing reward-cost balance of their relationships, as defined by SET. Using the provided reflective writing template, participants named the relationships they developed through the programme, indicated the corresponding SPT stage, and reflected on the reward-cost balance and investment potential of each relationship. It is worth noting that Maria and Ahmed's story ended with a stable exchange phase in their relationship.

## ***Findings and Outcomes***

### **5.1 Quantitative Findings**

The pre- and post-intervention data gathered via questionnaire indicated a significant positive shift across all evaluated dimensions. After the intervention, more people felt moderately or highly confident starting new connections, rising from 38% to 79%. Moving beyond numbers, nearly 9 out of 10 now recognise that culture shapes ways of speaking, up from less than half before. Scoring higher on another front, average relationship satisfaction climbed from 4.2 to 6.8 points across a scale of ten. Starting where hesitation once stood, three-quarters said they became comfortable sharing personal thoughts when others do too - a jump from just one-third earlier. Patterns like these appear clearly laid out in Table 1 that follows.

**Table 1. Pre- and Post-Intervention Self-Report Data (N = 24)**

Measure	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention
Confidence in initiating relationships (% moderate or high)	38%	79%
Understanding of cultural communication differences (% moderate or high)	42%	88%
Mean relational satisfaction (scale 1–10)	4.2	6.8
Comfort with reciprocal self-disclosure (% moderate or high)	33%	75%

## 5.2 Qualitative Findings

Four main themes emerged through thematic analysis of participants' reflective journals and facilitator observations.

**Theme 1 – Disclosing as a Learnable Skill:** Several participants admitted having previously perceived self-disclosure as an intuitive or immutable trait rather than an acquired ability that could be contextualised. After Session 1 and Session 2, some students reported using the concept of self-disclosure awareness in actual communication situations. As stated by one of the students, "I realised I was always waiting for others to go first without realising that others were also doing the same thing. By simply disclosing myself, my communication improved." This theme is closely aligned with SPT's idea of reciprocal disclosure as a relationship engine.

**Theme 2 – Reframing Relational Norms Within a Collectivist Culture:** Surprisingly, those raised in tightly knit communities across East Asia and the Middle East found the

session affirmed their usual way of sharing personal matters. Their hesitation, often mistaken for discomfort, turned out to reflect cultural norms rather than inner doubt. Far from feeling behind, they reported relief when their quiet manner received recognition. What stood out was how simply seeing their behaviour acknowledged made a difference. Not mastery alone, but acceptance, emerged as key to growth in these settings.

**Theme 3 – Increased Awareness of Relational Evaluation:** Many participants engaged with SET's cost-benefit framework, expressing their awareness of the value of thinking of relations from this perspective. In particular, they discussed re-evaluating some of their previous one-sided relationships. They became more confident about investing emotional effort in building social ties they had previously avoided due to uncertainty.

**Theme 4 – Limitations of Western Approaches Within Multicultural Contexts:** Group discussions during a few sessions revealed conflicts between collectivist and individualist perceptions of interpersonal relationships as implied in both SPT and SET. Several students from family-oriented cultures noted how their relational obligations influenced their decisions. However, this apparent constraint in both models proved valuable, shaping how the action research initiative was later refined. Despite seeming like a drawback at first glance, it played a central role in guiding adjustments to the process.

**Theme 5 – The Role of Digital Communication in Relationship Building:** In an unexpected twist, journal entries revealed the importance of technology in initiating and developing relational connections. While some participants found that sending messages made it easier to reach out than in physical encounters, this corroborates the findings of Ruppel et al. (2017), who found that self-disclosure is quicker in online communication. However, these same participants had difficulty moving beyond their digital interactions to make a physical connection, suggesting a disconnect between

digital and physical connection-building. Neither SPT nor SET directly address this issue, potentially leading to an oversight in skill development.

From session to session, a shift became visible: participants grew more open and more curious about cultural differences. These changes matched what was already noted earlier. What stood out most was not just consistency but progression over time. Each meeting added depth, building on prior discussions. The facilitators saw it clearly by the fifth and sixth meetings. Their notes reflected both expected outcomes and subtle shifts hard to measure at first. Growth unfolded slowly, almost quietly.

By examining the findings from both perspectives, one can conclude that the method proved effective, as confidence levels increased, there was greater appreciation of diversity, and there was an enhanced sense of unity within the group – all of which was reflected in the pre-post tests. Personal testimonies provided additional insight into how these changes occurred. There is no question about the validity of the conclusions reached, as specific examples in personal reflections support positive survey responses indicating greater comfort with voicing opinions.

### ***Reflections and Implications for Practice***

The action research project has generated two layers of reflection: practical and theoretical.

In terms of practical reflections, the workshops demonstrated the potential of educational activities grounded in theoretical knowledge to help international university students build relationships. Implementation of SPT and SET ideas within the framework of activity-based learning created a safe environment where participants could learn about the theoretical foundations of the concepts and develop the skills needed to build relationships. Of particular importance seems to be the extended length of the programme – six classes over one semester - since it allowed participants to

apply knowledge acquired in one session to another and to build sufficient mutual trust to take part in the programme's activities.

Nevertheless, this study has shown that both SPT and SET are built on culturally specific assumptions about how people communicate. The main point here is that both SPT and SET presuppose an open exchange of inner experiences along with the calculated consideration of potential gains and losses. Such a mindset may not be characteristic of all people. In the design of the next stages involving SPT and SET, it is necessary to pay much greater attention to the cultural dimension from the very beginning of program development. The analysis of information from experts such as Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2017) may serve as the basis for such a design.

Various recommendations for higher education practitioners regarding international university students may be provided. First, there is a need to recognise the significance of designing a theoretically grounded relationship skills training programme as a proactive part of the support activities for international students. Next, any relationship skills training programs must necessarily be regarded as culturally sensitive initiatives aiming to include cultural diversity among their goals. Otherwise, applying SPT and SET ideas will make students from collectivist cultures feel they are failing to meet expectations (Hargreaves & Elhawary, 2021). Finally, the use of practitioner-led action research techniques, such as reflective observations, log-keeping, reflective journals, and questionnaires, appears to be a valuable way to generate knowledge about practice.

A fourth recommendation is about integrating digital communication into relationship skills programs. Theme 5 showed that participants often struggle to move from initiating contact online to maintaining those relationships in person. Because of this, workshop leaders need to make the digital-to-physical transition a specific focus. They could achieve this with different activities. For instance, there could be guided sessions where participants plan and reflect on meetings with people they initially connected with online. Staff could also lead chats on how disclosures and social hints vary between digital and

face-to-face settings. Using the breadth and depth framework helps students think about moving from online to real-life interactions. Since international students often use apps like WhatsApp for social connections in new places, we should give them tools to bridge this gap. Adding these methods to relationship skill sets would be really helpful and relevant today.

It should be noted that this research has some limitations. First, with just 24 participants, generalising its findings is difficult due to the lack of a control group, so that the changes could be caused by factors other than this workshop. Also, as mentioned above, the data were gathered based on people's experiences rather than on measurable data, allowing participants to say what they thought sounded better rather than tell the truth because they felt observed. Since a single person did the data interpretation, a subjective approach influenced the analysis, making the inclusion of third-party observers necessary next time (Gelman & Hennig, 2017). Despite the results being acquired, these limitations should be considered when concluding. Finally, while this is just the first cycle of action research, the longevity of the findings remains unknown. The limitations stated here seem to act more like opportunities.

For future research, several issues could be considered. Follow-up interviews should be conducted to determine whether the effects observed during the research are sustainable. Comparative research could be conducted to understand the comparative effectiveness of SPT and SET relative to other models of relationship building. In addition, research on SPT and SET adaptation for collectivist cultures should be performed.

### ***Declarations***

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author has declared no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the host institution. Participants' anonymity was ensured throughout the process. There was no acquisition of personal data by the researcher. Consent forms were provided to all participants. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the research at any time.

**AI Use Disclosure:** The language editing, grammar, and formatting technologies were used in writing this paper. However, no help was received in designing the study, collecting and analysing data, or building the theoretical argument.

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