

Unveiling Interpersonal Depth: Social Penetration and Friendship Types in Nat Gould's *Fast as the Wind*

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Abstract

Interpersonal relationships and friendship are central themes in literary works, yet they are rarely examined through communication theories such as Social Penetration Theory. This study addresses the limited application of communication theories in literary analysis by examining interpersonal relationships in *Fast as the Wind* by Nat Gould. It highlights the contribution of integrating communication theory into literary studies, particularly in understanding character interaction and relational development. A qualitative descriptive method is employed using content analysis of dialogues and narrative elements that reflect communication patterns and self-disclosure. The analysis reveals that social penetration occurs through four stages: orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange, and stable exchange, indicating a progression from superficial interaction to deeper emotional intimacy. Three types of friendship are identified: reciprocal, receptive, and associative, with reciprocal friendship as the most dominant. The results further show that trust, self-disclosure, and social context play significant roles in shaping interpersonal depth and relational dynamics among characters. The horse racing setting not only creates competition but also fosters cooperation and strong interpersonal bonds. These findings reinforce the relevance of communication theories in literary analysis and expand their applicability in interpreting interpersonal dynamics in fictional narratives.

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1. Introduction

Literature is a form of artistic expression that reflects human experiences, emotions, and social realities through imaginative language. Beyond its aesthetic function, literature provides a medium for examining interpersonal relationships and social interactions. Astuti (2021) defines literature as a creative work constructed by an author, while Efrizah (2025) emphasizes that literature represents a dynamic interaction between language, culture, and contemporary contexts in a multicultural and digital era. Thus, literary works can be understood as representations of human relationships that allow analysis through communication perspectives.

One of the most prominent forms of literature is the novel, which presents a broad representation of human experiences, including interpersonal relationships. According to Mulyono (2022), novels explore themes such as love, conflict, struggle, and friendship, allowing readers to understand the complexity of human behavior and emotional development. As such, novels offer a relevant context for analyzing how interpersonal relationships are formed and developed within specific social settings. In this sense, literary

works can be viewed as representations of social and interpersonal dynamics that enable deeper interpretation through theoretical perspectives (Purwarno & Efrizah, 2025).

Friendship is one of the most essential aspects of human relationships frequently portrayed in novels. It involves emotional closeness, trust, and mutual support, forming a significant part of individuals' social lives (Intan et al., 2021). Through friendship, individuals share experiences, thoughts, and feelings, creating meaningful interpersonal bonds. In literary narratives, friendship is not static but develops dynamically through interaction, communication, and situational contexts.

To analyze the development of friendship, this study applies Social Penetration Theory proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973). This theory explains that interpersonal relationships develop gradually through self-disclosure, moving from superficial communication to deeper and more intimate levels (Sari, 2023; Putri et al., 2025). The process is commonly illustrated through the "onion model," where each layer represents increasing levels of personal disclosure and intimacy. Therefore, Social Penetration Theory offers a systematic and analytical framework for examining how relational depth is constructed within literary texts.

This study focuses on the novel *Fast as the Wind* by Nat Gould, which portrays interpersonal relationships within the context of horse racing and family life. The story follows Picton Woodridge in his efforts to prove his brother's innocence while maintaining relationships with other characters such as Dick Langford and Rita Langford. These interactions provide a rich representation of relational dynamics shaped by trust, loyalty, and shared experiences, making the novel particularly relevant for theory-driven analysis of interpersonal relationships.

Despite the growing number of studies on interpersonal relationships in literary works, most previous research has primarily focused on general themes of friendship or character relationships without applying a specific communication theory as an analytical framework, resulting in largely descriptive interpretations that fail to explain how relational processes develop.

Furthermore, although Social Penetration Theory has been widely applied in communication studies, its application in literary analysis, particularly in examining friendship in novels, remains limited. Previous literary studies have examined relationships among characters through descriptive analysis of interaction and emotional bonds. For example, studies by Khairunnisa and Manugeran (2021) explore interpersonal dynamics in literary texts; however, such studies do not employ communication theories to explain relational development. In contrast, other literary studies focus on broader ideological and thematic issues. Efrizah and Purwarno (2026), for instance, analyze literary texts through ideological perspectives, emphasizing macro-level interpretations rather than interpersonal processes.

These contrasting approaches indicate a critical gap in literary studies, where interpersonal relationship development has not been sufficiently examined through a systematic theoretical framework. In addition, research on Nat Gould's *Fast as the Wind* is still scarce, with most discussions emphasizing issues of justice and conflict rather than relational dynamics. This limitation highlights the need to integrate communication theory into literary analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of character relationships.

This study contributes theoretically by extending the application of Social Penetration Theory into literary studies, methodologically by employing qualitative content analysis to examine relational processes within narrative texts, and academically by enriching interdisciplinary research between communication and literature. Moreover, unlike previous studies that emphasize descriptive interpretations, this study offers a novel perspective by systematically applying Social Penetration Theory to examine relational depth and

interpersonal dynamics in a literary context, thereby bridging communication theory and literary analysis.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze the levels of social penetration and the types of friendship depicted in Nat Gould's novel *Fast as the Wind*. The research problems are formulated as follows:

1. What are the levels of social penetration depicted in Nat Gould's novel *Fast as the Wind*?
2. What types of friendship are portrayed among the characters in Nat Gould's novel *Fast as the Wind*?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Penetration Theory

Social Penetration Theory, proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973), explains how interpersonal relationships develop through gradual self-disclosure. The theory emphasizes that relationships evolve from superficial interactions to deeper levels of intimacy as individuals begin to share more personal information (Griffin et al., 2019). This process reflects the dynamic nature of human communication, where trust and closeness are built over time.

A central concept in this theory is the onion model, which illustrates personality as consisting of multiple layers. The outer layer represents general information such as physical appearance and basic identity, while deeper layers contain personal values, emotions, and private experiences. As relationships develop, individuals gradually reveal these deeper layers, leading to stronger emotional connections.

Self-disclosure is the core mechanism of social penetration. It refers to the process of sharing personal information with others, which enables relationship development. This process is reciprocal, meaning that when one individual shares information, the other tends to respond similarly. Such reciprocity is essential for building intimacy, reducing uncertainty, and strengthening interpersonal bonds.

Recent studies in communication and literary analysis indicate that interpersonal relationships in narrative texts are dynamic and influenced by social and psychological factors, yet the systematic application of Social Penetration Theory in literary contexts remains limited.

2.2 Stages of Social Penetration

Altman and Taylor (1973) identify four main stages in the development of interpersonal relationships:

1. **Orientation Stage**
This is the initial stage where communication is superficial and limited to general information. Individuals tend to be cautious and avoid conflict.
2. **Exploratory Affective Exchange Stage**
At this stage, individuals begin to share opinions and preferences. Communication becomes more relaxed, and a basic level of trust starts to develop.
3. **Affective Exchange Stage**
Relationships become closer as individuals share more personal experiences and emotions. There is greater openness, although some sensitive topics may still be protected.
4. **Stable Exchange Stage**
This is the deepest level of relationship development, characterized by high intimacy, trust, and mutual understanding. Communication becomes open, honest, and efficient.

These stages demonstrate that relationship development is a gradual process, moving from surface-level interaction to deep emotional connection.

However, existing studies often treat these stages as general communication patterns and rarely contextualize them within literary narratives, where relational development is shaped by plot, setting, and character construction.

2.3 Friendship

Friendship is an interpersonal relationship characterized by mutual support, trust, and positive interaction. According to Wright (in Septian & Pardi, 2022), friendship involves a productive and supportive relationship that contributes to individual development. It is not only a source of emotional comfort but also a means of personal growth.

In social contexts, friendship provides a safe space for individuals to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment. This aligns with the concept of social penetration, where openness and trust are essential for deepening relationships. Therefore, friendship can be understood as a dynamic relationship shaped by communication, shared experiences, and emotional connection.

Previous literary studies also highlight that literary texts can represent complex human and social relationships, which can be interpreted through specific theoretical frameworks to reveal deeper meanings (Efrizah & Purwarno, 2026). However, this study primarily focuses on ecological and ideological aspects rather than interpersonal relationships among characters. Similarly, friendship in novels reflects complex emotional bonds and interpersonal dynamics that can be analyzed through theoretical perspectives (Khairunnisa & Manugeran, 2021). Nevertheless, the analysis tends to remain descriptive and does not systematically apply a communication-based framework. Furthermore, Desiyanti et al. (2024) emphasize that character development in novels is closely related to social interactions and relationships, yet the study mainly focuses on individual development rather than the dynamics of friendship itself. These differences indicate that previous studies have not fully examined friendship as a process of interpersonal development using a communication theory, particularly in integrating relational depth and interaction patterns within literary texts.

2.4 Types of Friendship

Wright (in Blieszner et al., 2019) categorizes friendship into three main types:

1. Reciprocal Friendship
A balanced relationship in which both individuals equally give and receive support, trust, and care.
2. Receptive Friendship
An unbalanced relationship where one individual gives more support while the other receives more, yet both still benefit from the relationship.
3. Associative Friendship
A casual relationship based on social interaction, such as between classmates or colleagues, without deep emotional involvement.

These types of friendship help explain the variation in relationship closeness and interaction patterns among individuals. Nevertheless, previous studies rarely integrate friendship types with stages of interpersonal development, resulting in a limited understanding of how different forms of friendship correspond to varying levels of relational depth in literary narratives.

Therefore, this study positions itself at the intersection of communication and literary studies by applying Social Penetration Theory to analyze both the stages of interpersonal

development and the types of friendship in a literary context. Unlike previous studies that focus on ideological issues, descriptive character analysis, or individual development, this research offers an integrated framework for examining interpersonal depth and friendship types in Nat Gould's *Fast as the Wind*.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze social penetration and friendship in Nat Gould's novel *Fast as the Wind*. A qualitative approach is appropriate because this research focuses on interpreting meanings and understanding interpersonal relationships as represented in literary texts. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is used to explore and interpret the meaning of social or human problems, particularly through textual analysis and in-depth interpretation. In literary studies, this approach is relevant for examining characters, dialogues, and narrative structures to reveal meanings related to human experiences and social interactions.

The descriptive method is used to systematically describe how friendship is formed, developed, and represented through the characters in the novel. This approach allows the researcher to interpret the process of self-disclosure and the development of intimacy based on Social Penetration Theory, as well as to classify the types of friendship depicted in the story.

The primary data source of this study is the novel *Fast as the Wind* by Nat Gould. The unit of analysis in this study consists of dialogue exchanges and narrative segments that explicitly represent interpersonal interactions, self-disclosure, and relational development among characters. The data include selected dialogue units and narrative descriptions that reflect communication patterns and friendship dynamics. The data were collected through close reading of the novel, followed by identifying and selecting relevant parts related to friendship and social penetration.

The data analysis was conducted using a thematic coding process. First, the researcher performed open coding by identifying segments of dialogue and narration related to interpersonal interaction and self-disclosure. Second, axial coding was applied to categorize the data into the four stages of social penetration (orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange, and stable exchange) and the three types of friendship (reciprocal, receptive, and associative). Third, selective coding was conducted to interpret patterns and relationships between stages of social penetration and types of friendship.

The data analysis in this study follows the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and focused on relevant data while excluding unnecessary information. Then, the data were organized and presented in a descriptive form to identify patterns of relationship development. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the data based on Social Penetration Theory and friendship classification to explain how interpersonal relationships develop and what types of friendship are represented in the novel.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applies credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is achieved through prolonged engagement with the text and careful data selection. Dependability is ensured by maintaining a clear and consistent analytical procedure throughout the study. Confirmability is established by grounding interpretations in textual evidence, such as direct quotations from the novel, to minimize researcher bias.

4. Discussion

4.1 Levels of Social Penetration in *Fast as the Wind*

The analysis of *Fast as the Wind* demonstrates that interpersonal relationships among the characters evolve through gradual stages of social penetration, as proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973). These stages are reflected through patterns of communication, emotional involvement, and the depth of self-disclosure within the horse racing environment.

At the orientation stage, communication remains superficial and limited to general topics. This stage can be observed in the early interactions among characters such as Picton Woodridge and members of the racing community, including Dick Langford. Their conversations tend to focus on shared environments, such as horse racing activities and social settings, without involving personal or emotional disclosure. This reflects the cautious nature of initial interactions, where individuals aim to maintain a positive impression and avoid conflict.

However, even at this stage, the novel suggests that social interaction is important in building connections, as seen in the statement:

“It’s not just about the races; it’s about the relationships we build.”

This suggests that even at the orientation stage, interpersonal awareness is already embedded within the social structure of the narrative, indicating that relationship formation is not entirely neutral or superficial. Rather than functioning merely as an initial stage, the orientation phase in this novel appears to be socially conditioned by the shared environment of horse racing, which accelerates relational awareness. This finding extends Social Penetration Theory by showing that early-stage interaction may already contain implicit relational intentions shaped by context.

As relationships develop, they move into the exploratory affective exchange stage, where individuals begin to share personal preferences, opinions, and limited emotional expressions. This stage is evident in Picton’s interactions with Dick and Rita, where communication becomes more relaxed and open. The characters begin to move beyond formal interaction and show signs of familiarity and trust.

The process of increasing openness is also supported by the existence of mutual understanding within the community, as reflected in the idea that relationships are built through shared experiences and communication. This indicates that the breadth of communication expands, allowing individuals to explore different aspects of each other’s personalities.

The affective exchange stage represents a deeper level of interpersonal communication, where individuals begin to express personal feelings and emotional concerns. In the novel, this stage is clearly reflected in Picton’s relationship with Rita and his emotional connection with Hector. At this level, communication is no longer limited to surface-level topics but involves deeper emotional engagement.

This is supported by the statement:

“It’s not just the financial backing, but the trust you’ve placed in us that truly counts.”

This suggests that emotional trust operates not only as an outcome of social penetration but also as a driving force that accelerates movement between stages. Unlike the linear progression proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973), the findings indicate a more dynamic process in which trust can precede deeper disclosure, particularly in high-stakes social environments. This extends the theory by highlighting the role of contextual urgency in shaping relational depth. In addition, emotional openness is also reflected in supportive interactions among characters, such as:

“Your willingness to listen and understand my concerns means the world to me.”

This suggests that self-disclosure in the novel is not purely informational but relationally strategic, functioning to reinforce emotional bonds rather than merely reveal personal content. This challenges the traditional view of self-disclosure as a gradual and neutral process, showing instead that it can be intentionally used to sustain interpersonal closeness.

At the stable exchange stage, relationships reach the highest level of intimacy, characterized by mutual trust, openness, and strong emotional bonds. This stage is reflected in the consistent loyalty and support among characters, especially in challenging situations such as Hector’s imprisonment and Picton’s struggle.

The stability of these relationships is reinforced by shared values and long-term commitment, as seen in the statement:

“Our friendship is built on mutual respect and support. I’m here for you, always.”

This quotation reflects a level of communication where individuals fully understand and trust each other, which is the defining characteristic of stable exchange. At this stage, relationships become predictable, and individuals can anticipate each other’s responses and behaviors.

Moreover, the analysis shows that social penetration in the novel is influenced by the context of the horse racing environment, which combines cooperation and competition. While competition may create tension, it also strengthens relationships through shared experiences and mutual dependence. This indicates that social penetration is not only a linear process but also dynamic, influenced by situational factors.

Another important aspect is the presence of reciprocity in self-disclosure, where openness from one character encourages openness from another. This can be observed in the balanced exchange of emotional support among characters, reinforcing the development of intimacy.

Furthermore, these findings differ from previous studies that tend to treat social penetration as a relatively structured and progressive process of self-disclosure (Sari, 2023). In contrast, this study demonstrates that relational development in literary contexts is highly influenced by narrative setting and character motivation, suggesting that Social Penetration Theory requires contextual adaptation when applied to fictional texts. This indicates that interpersonal development in literature is not always linear, but may fluctuate depending on situational and emotional dynamics, thereby extending the conventional understanding of the theory.

Overall, the novel illustrates that social penetration occurs gradually through stages of communication, moving from superficial interaction to deep emotional connection. The findings support the theory that intimacy develops through continuous interaction, trust, and mutual self-disclosure, while also extending it by emphasizing the role of context and relational strategy.

4.2 Types of Friendship in *Fast as the Wind*

The findings also reveal that different types of friendship are represented in the novel, based on Wright’s classification (in Blieszner et al., 2019). These include reciprocal

friendship, receptive friendship, and associative friendship, each reflecting different levels of closeness and interaction.

First, reciprocal friendship is the most dominant type found in the novel. This type is characterized by mutual support, balance, and equality in the relationship. The interaction between Picton and Rita clearly reflects this type, as both characters contribute emotionally and support each other.

This is evident in the statement:

“Our friendship is built on mutual respect and support. I’m here for you, always.”

This suggests that reciprocal friendship in the novel is not only based on balance but also on emotional interdependence, where both characters rely on each other to maintain psychological stability. This expands Wright’s classification by indicating that reciprocity may involve deeper emotional dependency rather than simple equality of exchange.

Receptive friendship is reflected in relationships where one individual plays a more supportive role, while the other receives emotional support. This type of friendship emphasizes empathy, understanding, and the willingness to listen.

This is clearly illustrated in the statement:

“Your willingness to listen and understand my concerns means the world to me.”

This suggests that receptive friendship, often considered unbalanced, may still produce strong relational bonds through emotional asymmetry. Rather than being a weaker form of friendship, this type demonstrates that imbalance can coexist with meaningful interpersonal connection, particularly in situations requiring empathy and support.

Receptive friendship is also evident in situations where characters provide reassurance and emotional comfort, especially during moments of difficulty. This indicates that friendship is not only based on equality but also on the ability to respond to the emotional needs of others.

Associative friendship is observed in relationships that are based on shared activities, professional interaction, and mutual respect. This type of friendship is common in the broader horse racing community, where individuals interact as colleagues or acquaintances.

This is reflected in the statement:

“Our shared interests and mutual respect have forged a bond...”

This suggests that associative friendship functions as a structural foundation for deeper relationships, rather than merely a superficial interaction. In this context, shared activities serve as an entry point for potential social penetration, indicating that even low-intimacy relationships hold the potential for development.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that these types of friendship are closely related to the levels of social penetration. Reciprocal friendship tends to develop at deeper levels of penetration, while associative friendship remains at a more superficial level. Receptive friendship may occur at different levels depending on the degree of emotional involvement. This relationship between social penetration and friendship types indicates that interpersonal relationships are dynamic and influenced by both emotional and situational factors.

These findings contrast with previous literary studies that primarily describe friendship as static categories (Khairunnisa & Manugeran, 2021), as this study demonstrates that friendship types are fluid and interconnected with the stages of social penetration. This

indicates that friendship should be understood as a dynamic process rather than a fixed classification.

4.3 The Role of Trust, Social Context, and Relationship Dynamics

An important finding of this study is that trust, social context, and relational dynamics play a crucial role in shaping interpersonal relationships in *Fast as the Wind*. These elements are closely related to the process of social penetration and significantly influence the formation and development of friendship among the characters.

Trust emerges as a fundamental aspect of relationship development. In line with Social Penetration Theory, self-disclosure becomes more meaningful when it is supported by trust (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This is reflected in the statement:

“It’s not just the financial backing, but the trust you’ve placed in us that truly counts.”

This indicates that relationships in the novel are not merely based on external or material factors, but are deeply rooted in emotional trust. As trust increases, characters become more willing to share personal thoughts and feelings, which leads to deeper levels of intimacy.

In addition, self-disclosure is closely related to emotional support, as seen in the interaction:

“Your willingness to listen and understand my concerns means the world to me.”

This shows that openness and empathy are essential components in strengthening interpersonal bonds. The willingness to listen and understand reflects a deeper level of communication, which supports the development of both social penetration and friendship.

Furthermore, the social context of the horse racing environment also plays a significant role in shaping relationships. Although the environment is highly competitive, it also fosters cooperation and mutual dependence among individuals. This is reflected in the statement:

“It’s not just about the races; it’s about the relationships we build.”

This suggests that shared experiences and social interaction contribute significantly to the development of relationships.

The findings also indicate that interpersonal relationships in the novel are dynamic rather than static. Relationships may develop, strengthen, or fluctuate depending on situational pressures and character motivations. This suggests that social penetration does not always follow a strictly linear progression, but may shift depending on contextual and emotional factors, thereby extending the original framework of the theory.

Moreover, there is a strong interconnection between the levels of social penetration and the types of friendship identified in this study. Deeper levels of penetration tend to result in reciprocal friendship, characterized by mutual support and emotional closeness, whereas more superficial interactions are associated with associative friendship, which is based on shared activities rather than emotional intimacy. This finding suggests that friendship types are not independent categories but are closely shaped by the depth of interpersonal communication, as reflected in the following statement:

“Our shared interests and mutual respect have forged a bond...”

This suggests that not all relationships reach the same level of intimacy, and that different types of friendship emerge depending on the depth of interaction and emotional

involvement. It also reinforces the idea that relational development is both gradual and context-dependent. This study contributes theoretically by demonstrating that trust, self-disclosure, and social context function as interconnected variables that shape both the depth and type of interpersonal relationships. Unlike previous studies that examine these elements separately, the findings reveal that they operate simultaneously within the process of relational development. This integrated perspective offers a more holistic understanding of interpersonal dynamics in literary narratives.

4.4 Discussion Summary

The findings of this study indicate that social penetration and friendship in *Fast as the Wind* are closely interconnected. The development of interpersonal relationships is influenced by gradual self-disclosure, trust, and emotional interaction among the characters.

The analysis shows that relationships evolve through different stages of social penetration, from superficial interaction to deep emotional intimacy. At the same time, various types of friendship, namely reciprocal, receptive, and associative, emerge depending on the level of closeness and interaction.

In addition, the social environment of horse racing plays a significant role in shaping these relationships, demonstrating that competition and cooperation can coexist in the development of interpersonal bonds.

Therefore, this study not only confirms the relevance of Social Penetration Theory in literary analysis but also extends it by emphasizing the importance of context, relational strategy, and emotional dynamics in shaping interpersonal depth. These findings suggest that literary texts provide a unique space for reinterpreting communication theories, particularly in understanding how friendship evolves within complex social environments.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes social penetration and types of friendship in Nat Gould's novel *Fast as the Wind* by applying Social Penetration Theory and the classification of friendship. The findings show that interpersonal relationships among the characters develop through gradual stages, starting from superficial interaction to deeper emotional intimacy. These stages are reflected in the characters' communication patterns, levels of self-disclosure, and emotional involvement.

The analysis confirms that the stages of social penetration, namely orientation, exploratory affective, affective exchange, and stable exchange, are represented in the novel. However, the findings suggest that the development of relationships is not always strictly linear, as it is influenced by trust, situational conditions, and the social context of the narrative. This indicates that Social Penetration Theory can be applied more flexibly when used to interpret interpersonal relationships in literary texts.

In addition, the study identifies three main types of friendship, namely reciprocal, receptive, and associative. Reciprocal friendship appears as the most dominant type, reflecting balanced emotional exchange, while receptive and associative friendships show different levels of emotional involvement. The findings also indicate that the types of friendship are closely related to the levels of social penetration, suggesting that relational depth and friendship patterns develop simultaneously rather than separately.

Theoretically, this study shows that Social Penetration Theory is not only relevant for analyzing real-life communication but can also be used to understand how interpersonal relationships are constructed in literary narratives. In terms of practical contribution, this study demonstrates that literary works can be analyzed through a communication perspective to reveal how trust, self-disclosure, and emotional interaction shape relationships between characters. However, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single novel,

which limits the scope of the findings. Second, the analysis is based on qualitative interpretation, which may lead to different results if examined from other perspectives. Therefore, future research is suggested to examine similar issues in different literary works or cultural contexts, as well as to conduct comparative studies to gain a broader understanding of social penetration and friendship in literature.

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