The 'First' Metric: The 'WE' Index, Responsiveness, and Cultural Scripts

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ABSTRACT

"First love" is often understood as the earliest relationship, but evidence from psycholinguistics, interpersonal communication, and autobiographical memory suggests that it is more accurately viewed as a narrative-cognitive status. This brief article introduces a minimal measurement framework for assessing this status through three indicators: the WE Index (the proportion of "we/us" pronouns relative to personal pronouns plus love labels/metaphors), Perceived Responsiveness, and Age-Event Compatibility as a proxy for cultural scripts. Relying on a structured narrative review of >100 studies, we map a process model of WE → Responsiveness → Event Centrality → First Love Labeling, with emotional intensity and age–event fit as drivers/moderators. The synthesis reveals consistent patterns: Higher WE indices correlate with higher responsiveness; responsiveness supports shared reminiscing and increases centrality; centrality predicts "first love" labeling, particularly when age-event expectations are met. The researchers present a quick operationalization (5-10 minute speech sample, 3-6 item responsiveness scale, 1-2 item fit check, and brief centrality measure) that is ready for replication. Conclusion: this framework summarizes complex literature into a clear, measurable, and testable starter kit, while providing practical contributions to relational assessment and education.

1. Introduction

"First love" is often assumed to be simply the earliest romantic relationship a person experiences, but research shows that the idea is more complex than chronology. Findings in psycholinguistics indicate that the label first love shapes how individuals organize and recall their early emotional memories. Interpersonal communication, especially conversations, teasing, and shared stories with siblings or peers further reinforces which relationship becomes symbolically important. Autobiographical memory research also shows that people reconstruct past events based on emotion and narrative coherence, not strict timing. Therefore, what is called "the first" is actually a narrative-cognitive construct created through the combined influence of language, emotion, and social interactions.

Studies over the past decade have revealed three relevant pathways: (i) relational language modulates appraisal and psychological distance, for example, the effects of labels/metaphors and the distribution of lexical associations on emotion processing (Bahtiar et al., 2023; Mandera et al., 2017; Mazzuca et al., 2019); (ii) emotional memory strengthens when emotional intensity matches cultural age–event scripts and contributes to the centrality of events in self-narratives (Habermas et al., 2015; Koppel & Rubin, 2016; Zengel et al., 2019); (iii) the phenomenon of love at first sight has a phenomenological basis but does not always lead to the labeling of "first love," indicating the existence of an intermediate mechanism that has not been briefly mapped (Zsok et al., 2017). In addition, media exposure and cultural templates have been shown to influence romantic expectations and event scripts (Galloway et al., 2015).

Recent literature generally examines path segments separately, language → affect, affect × script → memory, or dyadic dynamics, but there is rarely a concise measurement framework that combines all three to predict the assignment of the "first" label. This article offers a minimal yet scientific approach: three easily operationalized indicators, namely the WE Index (ratio of "we" pronouns to "I/you" + occurrence of love labels/metaphors), Perceived Responsiveness, and Age-Event Compatibility as a proxy for life scripts. The originality of this study lies in the simplification of the theoretical framework into a replicable measurement package that can be directly applied to small studies/classes/practices, while remaining consistent with the empirical evidence of the last decade.

Problems, objectives, and hypotheses. The problem addressed: how do simple language markers, responsiveness, and shared cultural scripts predict the labeling of "first love"? The objectives of this article are (1) to formulate a minimal measurement framework that filters complex literature into three core indicators; (2) to provide examples of rapid operationalization (5-10 minutes) that can be replicated; and (3) to propose three rapid test hypotheses:

1.H-A. A higher WE index predicts higher Responsiveness in early interactions.

2.H-B. Responsiveness mediates the effect of the WE Index on Event Centrality in memory.

3.H-C. Event Centrality mediates the effect of Responsiveness on the labeling of "first love," and this effect is strengthened when age, event fit is high.

Thus, this article contributes a minimal measurement framework, in line with the latest findings, that makes it easier for researchers and practitioners to assess "the first" without complicated methodological tools.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design and Scope

This article is a structured narrative review that synthesizes the literature on three axes: (i) linguistic/psycholinguistic markers of love (including pronouns, labels, metaphors), (ii) interpersonal communication (responsiveness and relationship maintenance), and (iii) autobiographical memory/cultural scripts (life scripts, age–event fit). The reporting focus is directed at a minimal measurement framework: the WE Index, Perceived Responsiveness, and Age-Event Fit, without collecting new data.

2.2. Information Sources and Search Strategy

The search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar until September 13, 2025. Bilingual queries (Indonesian English) combined the terms first love/love at first sight/falling in love × psycholinguistics/metaphor/pronoun/"I love you" × interpersonal communication/responsiveness/relationship maintenance × autobiographical memory/life scripts. Document types included research articles, reviews, proceedings, and selected book chapters in the fields of Psychology, Linguistics, Communication, Cognitive Science, and Social Sciences.

2.3. Inclusion-Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion: (a) relevance to ≥2 of the three focus areas; (b) adolescent-adult population; (c) Indonesian/English language; (d) scientific (peer-reviewed) manuscript or academic review.

Exclusion: (a) non-scientific/opinion papers without empirical basis; (b) duplicates or abstract versions of the same study; (c) topics that do not have a clear conceptual intersection with language, interpersonal memory.

2.4. Screening Procedure and Brief PRISMA

Screening was conducted in stages: deduplication, title–abstract screening, then full-text eligibility. The working corpus consisted of 147 records; after assessing relevance and eligibility, 129 articles were included in the synthesis. The main reasons for exclusion included weak relevance to the focus axis, overly general discussion, or overlapping content.

2.5. Data Extraction and Reliability

From each article, the following were extracted: key constructs (e.g., pronouns, responsiveness, life scripts), methods (experimental, survey, qualitative, longitudinal, review), main findings, theoretical contributions, and commonly used indicators/tools (e.g., PRS, RMBM, CES). Coding was performed by two independent reviewers using a concise codebook (definitions, marker keywords, and inclusion rules). Inter-rater agreement was targeted at Cohen's κ ≥ 0.70; disagreements were resolved through discussion and adjudication.

2.6. Quality Assessment and Bias Considerations

As a narrative review, quality assessment was conducted qualitatively based on the clarity of the design, sample description, validity of measurement tools, and accuracy of analysis. Studies with major limitations (e.g., very small sample size without justification, or untested tools) were noted in the synthesis notes and given more cautious interpretive weight. No meta-analysis of effects was performed due to the heterogeneity of designs and indicators.

2.7. Synthesis Approach

The synthesis follows a thematic-narrative approach: findings are mapped to the three operational themes of this article (Language/WE Index; Responsiveness & Maintenance; Cultural Scripts & Memory Centrality). The Theme × Method matrix (number of articles per method type in each theme). The conceptual relationships between themes are woven into a minimal model reported in the results/discussion (path WE → Responsiveness → Centrality → Labeling with age–event fit as a moderator).

2.8. Transparency, Material Availability, and Limitations

This article did not involve human participants or new data; therefore, ethical approval was not required. The design of the empirical protocol utilizing the WE Index, Responsivity, and age-event fit is provided separately as a research agenda and is not part of the data reviewed here. The main limitation lies in the heterogeneity of terms and cultural contexts, which is addressed through consistent theme labeling and reporting of key references per finding.

3. Result and Discussion

The results are presented as trends from corpus synthesis (not raw data). To facilitate replication, the operational definition of the WE Index is formally stated:

$$WE\ Index = \frac{number\ of\ pronouns\ "we" + "us"}{number\ of\ personal\ pronouns\ (I/me,\ you/you,\ we/us)}$$

In equation (1), the numerator represents the dyadic identity marker ("we/us"), while the denominator includes all personal pronouns that appear in the speech excerpt (standard units are recommended per 1,000 words). The WE Index value ranges from 0 to 1; the closer it is to 1, the stronger the "we" framing.

Table 1 summarizes the main findings per indicator and consistent trends across approaches (psycholinguistic experiments, surveys/dyadic, and memory studies), accompanied by key references from the last 10 years.

Table 1. Summary of findings synthesized by indicator (trends & key references)

Indicators	Findings/trends (processed data)	Key references (last 10 years & classic topics)	Notes on variation/conflict
WE Index (language)	A higher proportion of "we/us" correlates with perceived responsiveness and maintenance intentions; love labels/metaphors increase appraisal (priming effect).	(Chai et al., 2018; Gagné, 2012; Gleitman & Gleitman, 2022; Mandera et al., 2017; Paetzold & Specia, 2016)	Cross-cultural variation in the weight of the term "I love you" (Duda & Bergner, 2017; Gibson, 2015a; Kline et al., 2008; Wilkins & Gareis, 2006; Zangwill, 2013) may reduce the absolute comparability of scores.
Perceived responsiveness (IR)	High IR is associated with closeness and shared narratives; it bridges intensity to event centrality.	(Bahtiar et al., 2023; Bodie, 2011; Kamal, 2023; Reis et al., 2014; Yoo et al., 2014)	In acute conflict, IR may be temporarily low even when the pronoun "we" is high; interaction context control is necessary.
Age-Event Suitability (SC)	NAS (emotional intensity) is more likely to result in MCS (memory centrality) when the	(Fehr et al., 2014; Koppel & Rubin, 2016; Scherman, 2013;	Individuals who are "off-script" (uncommon age) can still have high MCS if IR/RM

		age of the event matches the cultural script; this trend is stable in adolescents and young adults.	Vangelisti, 2012; Zengel et al., 2019)	is strong, an exception that needs to be discussed.
Event Centrality (MCS)	Higher MCS predicts labeling as "first love" (FLD); supported by shared reminiscing among siblings.	(Alea & Vick, 2010; Gluck & Bluck, 2007; Habermas et al., 2015; Janssen & Murre, 2008; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Richards & Gross, 2006)	Memory bias (retrospective) can increase MCS; short-term follow-up reduces distortion.
First love labeling (FLD)	The probability of FLD increases when the path WE → IR → MCS is strong and SC is high; love at first sight is not always labeled "first."	(Graham, 2011; Impett & Peplau, 2006; Masarik et al., 2013; Stafford, 2011; Zsok et al., 2017)	Cross-culturally, the norm of declaring "love" influences the timing of FLD (Epstein et al., 2013; Galloway et al., 2015; Gori, 2011; Karandashev, 2015; Riela et al., 2010).

Source: Author

3.2. Discussion (why & what it means)

Relevance to hypotheses. The three brief hypotheses of this article are supported by patterns from the synthesis:

1. H-A (WE → IR): The shift in language from "I, you" to "we" indicates a reframing of dyadic identity that correlates with perceived responsiveness. Psycholinguistic findings show that labels/metaphors and lexical association distribution reinforce positive appraisal (Gagné, 2012; Gleitman & Gleitman, 2022; Jodai, 2011; Lieber et al., 2015; Mandera et al., 2017), which in turn facilitates empathic orientation in conversation (Jingxia et al., 2015; Przybylinski & Andersen, 2012; Sandri et al., 2022; Scollo & Carbaugh, 2013). Mechanistically, linguistic markers decrease psychological distance and signal commitment, making partners more likely to listen, understand, and validate.

2. H-B (mediation of IR → MCS): Responsiveness acts as a conversion engine from intensity to shared narrative, through validation, elaboration, and shared reminiscing, which increases the centrality of events (Bodie, 2011; Gluck & Bluck, 2007; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2002; Reis et al., 2014; Sprechera & Felmleeb, 2000). In other words, unifying language facilitates IR; IR then anchors the experience to coherent autobiographical memory (MCS).

3. H-C (MCS → FLD; moderated by SC): High MCS predicts labeling an experience as "first love" (FLD), especially when age-event fit aligns with cultural scripts (Bahtiar et al., 2024; Koppel & Rubin, 2016; Scherman, 2013; Schoenfeld et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2017). This explains the love at first sight paradox: experiences can be very intense, but without IR/RM support and without age, event fit, the "first" label is not always assigned (Zsok et al., 2017).

a. Consistency with the literature & points of conflict.

Consistent with studies of emotional memory, intensity alone does not guarantee "founding" memories of a relationship; script context and dyadic processing determine consolidation (Habermas et al., 2015; Szekely et al., 2004; Van Giezen et al., 2005; Wood & Kenyon, 2018; Zengel et al., 2019). On the other hand, several cross-cultural studies report different norms of love declaration (Gibson, 2015b; Khan & Haider, 2015; Kline et al., 2008; Schmid & Huber, 2019; Wilkins & Gareis, 2006), so the linguistic threshold for being considered "serious" varies. Minor conflicts arise in off-script contexts (e.g., older age): some individuals still label "first" thanks to very strong IR/RM. This variation does not reject the model, but rather indicates a compensatory pathway: when SC is low, the very strong WE → IR → MCS pathway can still lead to FLD, but the probability is smaller, and the timing is often delayed (Decuyper et al., 2012; Galloway et al., 2015; Gordon & Baucom, 2009; Hirschberger et al., 2009; Stafford, 2011).

b. Conceptual implications.

The above discussion confirms the sequence language → responsiveness → memory → label, with cultural scripts as boundary conditions. This pattern crystallizes the view of "first love" as a narrative-cognitive status, not merely a chronological sequence, and explains why intense "fleeting" experiences may not become "the first," and how non-chronological (adult/post-traumatic) experiences can become "the first" when the narrative is fulfilled.

c. Limitations & cautions in interpretation.

This synthesis combines diverse methods (experiments, dyadic surveys, narrative studies), so effect sizes across studies cannot be directly compared. In addition, retrospective bias may inflate MCS; therefore, some studies recommend short-term follow-ups to examine the stability of centrality. Cross-cultural variations in term load and rites may also affect the absolute value of the WE Index; comparisons should therefore be intra-cultural or use standardized scores (per 1,000 words).

Trend overview (rather than numerical description):

(1) Higher WE → higher IR;

(2) Higher IR → higher MCS;

(3) Higher MCS → more likely FLD;

(4) High SC reinforces (2) and (3).

These four trends are consistent across most relevant studies, although the timing and magnitude of the effects vary according to culture, age, and communication medium.

4. Conclusion

This article concludes that "first love" is best understood as a narrative-cognitive status that can be measured concisely through three markers: the WE Index (the proportion of "we/us" pronouns to personal pronouns), Perceived Responsiveness, and Age-Event Compatibility as a proxy for cultural scripts. A synthesis of the literature reveals a consistent pattern: a higher WE Index correlates with higher responsiveness; responsiveness facilitates shared reminiscing and increases the centrality of the event in memory; and centrality predicts the labelling of "first love," especially when the age of the event matches cultural expectations. Thus, the research objective is to formulate a minimal measurement framework that can explain and predict the assignment of the "first" label is fulfilled.

The practical implications are straightforward: this framework provides a replicable starter kit for rapid assessment (a 5-10 minute speech sample for the WE Index, a brief responsiveness scale, an age-event fit check, and a concise measure of centrality) and provides direction for interventions based on relational language and listening/validation in relationship education and couples counselling. Because these conclusions are derived from a narrative review, further verification through planned testing (e.g., a series of hypotheses H-A, H-B, H-C) remains necessary to map effect sizes and cultural boundaries with greater precision.

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