

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

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ABSTRACT

"First love" is often understood as the earliest romantic relationship, but evidence from psycholinguistics, interpersonal communication, and autobiographical memory suggests that it is more accurately conceptualized as a narrative cognitive status. This article presents a structured narrative review and introduces a minimal measurement framework for assessing this status through three indicators: the WE Index, defined as the proportion of "we/us" pronouns relative to personal pronouns and love labels or metaphors; Perceived Responsiveness; and Age Event Compatibility as a proxy for cultural scripts. Drawing on a synthesis of more than 100 peer reviewed studies, the article proposes a process model linking WE Index to Responsiveness, Event Centrality, and First Love Labeling, with emotional intensity and age event fit acting as contextual drivers or moderators. The synthesis reveals consistent patterns: a higher WE Index is associated with higher perceived responsiveness; responsiveness facilitates shared reminiscing and increases event centrality; and higher centrality predicts the labeling of an experience as "first love," particularly when age event expectations are culturally congruent. The article also outlines a rapid operationalization package, including a 5-to-10-minute speech sample, a brief responsiveness scale, a short age event fit check, and a concise centrality measure, designed for replication in small scale research and educational contexts. As a narrative review, this framework does not estimate effect sizes and is subject to heterogeneity and retrospective bias across included studies, indicating the need for future empirical testing.

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1. Introduction (Calisto MT 10 pt)

"First love" is commonly understood as the earliest romantic relationship. However, evidence from psycholinguistics, interpersonal communication, and autobiographical memory suggests that what is labeled as "the first" is more accurately understood as a narrative cognitive status, rather than a purely chronological event or a function of emotional intensity alone. In this article, narrative cognitive status refers to a relational experience that becomes psychologically central and identity relevant because it is linguistically framed, emotionally validated, and socially reinforced in personal memory. Under this view, an experience may occur early but fail to be labeled as "first love," while a later experience may acquire this label when it fulfills these narrative and cognitive conditions.

Studies over the past decade have revealed three converging pathways that support this interpretation. First, relational language shapes appraisal and psychological distance, as reflected in the use

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of pronouns, labels, and metaphors that structure emotional meaning and dyadic identity (Bhatia et al., 2023; Mander et al., 2017; Mazzola et al., 2019). Second, emotional memory consolidation is strengthened when emotional intensity aligns with culturally shared age event scripts, increasing the likelihood that an experience becomes central within the self-narrative (Habermas et al., 2015; Koppel & Rubin, 2016; Engel et al., 2019). Third, although love at first sight has a phenomenological basis, it does not consistently result in the labeling of “first love,” suggesting the presence of an intermediate mechanism linking initial affect to long term narrative status (Zook et al., 2017). In addition, media exposure and culturally transmitted romantic templates influence expectations about when and how romantic experiences should occur, further shaping event interpretation and recall (Galloway et al., 2015).

Importantly, references to sibling interactions in this context do not denote biological sibling dynamics alone, but rather family level and peer mediated shared reminiscing processes, through which emotionally salient experiences are discussed, validated, and incorporated into autobiographical narratives. Prior work on shared remembering and conversational rehearsal indicates that such social reinforcement plays a key role in determining which events become enduring relational memories (Aleah & Vick, 2010; Gluck & Block, 2007).

Although existing literature has examined these pathways extensively, they are typically addressed in isolation, focusing on language and affect, affect and memory, or dyadic interaction patterns. More comprehensive models do exist, but they often rely on extensive multi scale instruments, longitudinal designs, or laboratory-based methods that limit their applicability in small scale research, classroom settings, or applied relational assessment. As a result, there remains a lack of a concise and accessible measurement framework that integrates language, responsiveness, and cultural scripts to predict the assignment of the “first love” label.

To address this gap, the present article proposes a minimal measurement framework that distills this complex literature into three core, easily operationalized indicators: the WE Index, Perceived Responsiveness, and Age Event Compatibility. The originality of this contribution lies not in introducing new constructs, but in simplifying and integrating well established mechanisms into a replicable framework that can be applied in short assessments, educational contexts, and exploratory research, while remaining consistent with empirical findings from the last decade. Recent literature generally examines path segments separately, language \rightarrow affect, affect \times script \rightarrow 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 in this article is how simple language markers, perceived responsiveness, and shared cultural scripts jointly predict the labeling of an experience as “first love.” Rather than testing these relationships empirically, the article aims to conceptually integrate and formalize existing evidence into a coherent and testable framework.

Accordingly, the objectives of this article are:

- (1) to formulate a minimal measurement framework that synthesizes complex and fragmented literature into three core indicators;
- (2) to provide examples of rapid operationalization, typically achievable within 5 to 10 minutes, that can be readily replicated in small scale research, educational, or applied settings; and
- (3) to propose a set of prospective hypotheses that can guide future empirical testing of the framework.

Based on the synthesized literature, three conceptual hypotheses are proposed. These hypotheses are not tested in the present article, but are intended to structure future quantitative or mixed method investigations:

- H-A (direct association). A higher WE Index is associated with higher Perceived Responsiveness in early interactions.

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- H-B (mediation). Perceived Responsiveness mediates the relationship between the WE Index and Event Centrality in autobiographical memory.
 - H-C (mediated moderation). Event Centrality mediates the relationship between Perceived Responsiveness and the labeling of “first love,” and this indirect effect is strengthened when age event fit with cultural scripts is high.

Thus, this article contributes a minimal and conceptually explicit measurement framework, grounded in recent empirical findings, that clarifies causal pathways and analytical roles while remaining accessible for researchers and practitioners seeking to assess “the first” without relying on complex or resource intensive methodological tools.

2. Method.

2.1. Design and scope

This article adopts a structured narrative review design, which differs from a systematic review in both purpose and procedure. Rather than exhaustively aggregating all available evidence or estimating pooled effect sizes, a structured narrative review emphasizes theory guided synthesis, transparent search and screening procedures, and conceptual integration across heterogeneous methods. This approach allows for analytical rigor and reproducibility at the level of search strategy, inclusion criteria, and coding, while remaining suitable for integrating experimental, survey, qualitative, and narrative studies that cannot be meaningfully combined statistically.

The review synthesizes literature across three analytic axes: (I) linguistic and psycholinguistic markers of love, including pronouns, labels, and metaphors; (ii) interpersonal communication processes, particularly perceived responsiveness and relationship maintenance; and (iii) autobiographical memory and cultural scripts, including life scripts and age event fit. The reporting focus is directed toward developing a minimal measurement framework consisting of the WE Index, Perceived Responsiveness, and Age Event Fit, without collecting or analyzing new empirical data.

A quantitative meta-analysis was not feasible because the included studies varied substantially in design, operational definitions, outcome variables, time scales, and analytical units. In addition, many relevant studies reported qualitative findings, narrative analyses, or correlational patterns without comparable effect size metrics, making statistical aggregation inappropriate beyond descriptive synthesis.

2.2. Information sources and search strategy

The literature search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, covering publications up to September 13, 2025. Bilingual search queries in Indonesian and English combined the terms first love, love at first sight, and falling in love with psycholinguistics, metaphor, pronoun, and “I love you,” as well as interpersonal communication, responsiveness, relationship maintenance, and autobiographical memory or life scripts.

Google Scholar was included to capture interdisciplinary and regionally published studies that may not be indexed consistently in commercial databases. To address reproducibility concerns, only results within the first 200 relevance ranked entries per query were screened, following common practice in narrative reviews. Screening continued until conceptual saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new constructs or relevant mechanisms emerged from additional records.

Document types included peer reviewed research articles, review papers, conference proceedings, and selected scholarly book chapters in Psychology, Linguistics, Communication, Cognitive Science, and related Social Sciences.

2.3. Inclusion-exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) conceptual or empirical relevance to at least two of the three focal domains; (b) focus on adolescent or adult populations; (c) publication in Indonesian or English; and (d) scientific peer reviewed articles or academic reviews.

Exclusion criteria included: (a) nonscientific or opinion-based publications without empirical or theoretical grounding; (b) duplicate records or abstract only versions of full studies; and (c) publications lacking a clear conceptual intersection between language, interpersonal processes, and memory or cultural scripts.

2.4. Screening procedure and brief PRISMA

Screening proceeded in three stages: deduplication, title and abstract screening, and full text eligibility assessment. The initial search yielded 147 records. After applying the inclusion and exclusion

criteria, 129 articles were retained for synthesis. The primary reasons for exclusion were weak alignment with the focal analytic axes, overly general discussion without theoretical specificity, or substantial content overlap with other included sources.

A full PRISMA flow diagram was not included due to space constraints and the narrative nature of the review. However, key screening numbers and decision points are reported here to ensure transparency and replicability.

2.5. Data extraction and reliability

From each included article, the following information was extracted: key constructs such as pronoun use, perceived responsiveness, and life scripts; methodological approach including experimental, survey, qualitative, longitudinal, or review design; main empirical or theoretical findings; and commonly used indicators or instruments, such as PRS, RMBM, and CES.

Coding was conducted by two independent reviewers using a concise codebook specifying construct definitions, marker keywords, and inclusion rules. Approximately 35 percent of the corpus was double coded to assess reliability. Inter rater agreement reached Cohen's κ values ranging from 0.72 to 0.81 across core coding categories, exceeding the a priori threshold of $\kappa \geq 0.70$. Remaining discrepancies were resolved through discussion and adjudication.

2.6. Quality assessment and bias considerations

As a structured narrative review, study quality was assessed qualitatively based on clarity of research design, adequacy of sample description, validity and prior use of measurement instruments, and coherence of analytical reasoning. Studies presenting major methodological limitations, such as very small samples without justification or the use of unvalidated tools, were retained for conceptual completeness but assigned lower interpretive weight in the synthesis.

Because this review does not aggregate quantitative outcomes, effect size estimation was not conducted, and relative strength of associations across studies could not be directly compared. In addition, as with most narrative reviews, the synthesis is subject to potential publication bias, including the overrepresentation of significant or theoretically aligned findings. These limitations are acknowledged by emphasizing convergent patterns across methods and by avoiding strong causal claims.

Future research is encouraged to empirically test the proposed framework using designs that can address these limitations, particularly longitudinal dyadic studies, daily interaction or experience sampling methods, and cross-cultural comparative designs that allow estimation of effect sizes and temporal ordering among WE language, responsiveness, and memory centrality.

2.7. Synthesis approach

The synthesis follows a thematic narrative approach in which findings are mapped onto three operational themes: (1) Language and the WE Index, (2) Perceived Responsiveness and Relationship Maintenance, and (3) Cultural Scripts and Memory Centrality. Studies were further organized by methodological type within each theme to ensure balanced representation across experimental, survey, qualitative, longitudinal, and review designs. A Theme by Method matrix was used internally to guide synthesis consistency, although numerical counts are not reported due to space constraints.

The conceptual relationships among themes are integrated into a minimal process model described in the Results and Discussion section, linking WE language to Responsiveness, Event Centrality, and First Love Labeling, with age event fit functioning as a contextual moderator.

With respect to operationalization, the WE Index denominator intentionally includes all personal pronouns, including “we/us,” to represent the full pronoun ecology of a speech sample. This design allows the index to reflect the proportional dominance of dyadic identity language relative to alternative self or partner focused references, rather than treating “we/us” as an isolated count. Including “we/us” in both the numerator and denominator ensures that the index ranges from 0 to 1 and remains comparable across samples of different lengths.

Love labels and metaphors are not included as direct numerical components of the WE Index calculation. Instead, they are treated as complementary linguistic markers that conceptually reinforce appraisal and emotional framing, and their presence is coded separately or noted qualitatively when interpreting WE Index scores.

2.8. Transparency, material availability, and limitations

This article did not involve human participants or the collection of new data; therefore, ethical approval was not required. The empirical protocol for applying the WE Index, Perceived Responsiveness,

and Age Event Fit measures is presented separately as a research agenda and illustrative framework, rather than as reviewed material.

The primary limitations of this synthesis lie in the heterogeneity of terminology, cultural contexts, and methodological approaches across the included literature. These challenges were addressed through consistent theme labeling, transparent reporting of synthesis logic, and reliance on repeatedly observed patterns rather than isolated findings. As a result, the framework should be interpreted as a theoretically grounded and testable starting point, rather than a definitive causal model.

3. Result and Discussion

The results are presented as theoretical and empirical trends derived from corpus synthesis rather than from newly generated data. Accordingly, all relationships described below should be interpreted as probabilistic and inferential patterns supported by convergent evidence across studies.

To facilitate replication, the operational definition of the WE Index is formally stated as follows:

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

In this formulation, the numerator represents explicit dyadic identity marking through first person plural pronouns. The denominator intentionally includes all personal pronouns, including "we/us," in order to capture the full pronoun ecology of a speech sample. This proportional approach reflects the relative dominance of dyadic framing compared to self-focused or partner focused references, rather than treating "we/us" as isolated counts. Including "we/us" in both the numerator and denominator allows the index to range from 0 to 1 and ensures comparability across speech samples of different lengths. Standardization per 1,000 words is recommended.

Love labels and metaphors, such as explicit declarations of love or figurative expressions, are not included as numerical components of the WE Index. Instead, they are treated as complementary linguistic markers that conceptually reinforce emotional appraisal and relational framing. Their presence is coded separately or noted qualitatively when interpreting WE Index scores.

Table 1 summarizes the main synthesized trends for each indicator across psycholinguistic experiments, dyadic and survey-based studies, and autobiographical memory research.

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 age of the event matches the cultural script; this trend is stable in adolescents and young adults.	(Fehr et al., 2014; Koppel & Rubin, 2016; Scherman, 2013; Vangelisti, 2012; Zengel et al., 2019)	Individuals who are "off-script" (uncommon age) can still have high MCS if IR/RM is strong, an exception that needs to be discussed.
Event Centrality (MCS)	Higher MCS predicts labeling as "first love"	(Alea & Vick, 2010; Gluck & Bluck, 2007; Habermas et al., 2015;	Memory bias (retrospective) can increase MCS; short-

	(FLD); supported by shared reminiscing among siblings.	Janssen & Murre, 2008; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Richards & Gross, 2006)	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).

3.2. Discussion (why & what it means)

Relevance to hypotheses.

The three conceptual hypotheses proposed in this article are supported at the level of convergent patterns, rather than causal confirmation.

H-A (WE and IR).

A shift in relational language from “I” or “you” toward “we” reflects a reframing of dyadic identity that is consistently associated with higher perceived responsiveness. Psycholinguistic evidence indicates that labels, metaphors, and lexical association patterns influence emotional appraisal and reduce perceived psychological distance (Gagné, 2012; Gleitman and Gleitman, 2022; Mander et al., 2017). These linguistic cues appear to facilitate empathic orientation and attentive listening, increasing the likelihood that partners feel understood and validated. Importantly, this relationship should be interpreted as associative, not deterministic.

H-B (Responsiveness and Event Centrality).

Perceived responsiveness functions as a mediating process that translates emotional intensity into shared narrative meaning. Through validation, elaboration, and shared reminiscing, responsive interaction increases the likelihood that a relational experience becomes central within autobiographical memory (Bodie, 2011; Gluck and Bluck, 2007; Reis et al., 2014). Thus, responsiveness does not cause memory centrality directly, but increases its probability by supporting narrative consolidation.

H-C (Centrality and First Love Labeling, moderated by scripts).

Higher memory centrality is associated with an increased likelihood that an experience is later labeled as “first love,” particularly when the timing of the event aligns with culturally shared age event scripts (Koppel and Rubin, 2016; Scherman, 2013). This pattern helps explain the love at first sight paradox: experiences may be emotionally intense, yet fail to acquire the “first” label if they lack responsive processing or script congruence (Zsok et al., 2017).

Consistency with the literature and points of conflict.

Consistent with emotional memory research, intensity alone is insufficient to establish foundational relational memories. Script context and dyadic processing play a critical role in consolidation (Habermas et al., 2015; Zengel et al., 2019). Cross cultural research further indicates that norms surrounding love declaration influence when and how relationships are narratively defined as serious or formative (Kline et al., 2008; Wilkins and Gareis, 2006).

Importantly, off script cases represent a meaningful boundary condition of the proposed framework. Individuals whose experiences occur outside culturally typical age ranges may still label an experience as “first love” when the WE Index, perceived responsiveness, and relational maintenance processes are particularly strong. This compensatory pathway does not contradict the model, but rather indicates that script congruence increases probability rather than acting as a strict requirement.

Conceptual implications.

Taken together, the synthesis supports a sequence linking relational language, responsiveness, memory centrality, and relational labeling, with cultural scripts shaping the strength and timing of these associations. This reinforces the interpretation of “first love” as a narrative cognitive status rather than a simple chronological marker.

Limitations and cautions in interpretation.

Because this synthesis integrates diverse methods, effect sizes cannot be directly compared across studies. Retrospective reporting may inflate memory centrality, and cultural variation may influence absolute WE Index values. Accordingly, comparisons are best conducted within cultural contexts or using standardized speech units.

Trend overview.

- (1) Higher WE Index is associated with higher perceived responsiveness.
 - (2) Higher responsiveness is associated with greater memory centrality.
 - (3) Greater memory centrality is associated with a higher likelihood of first love labeling.
 - (4) Age event suitability strengthens associations involving memory centrality.
- These trends are robust across the reviewed literature, although their magnitude and timing vary by cultural context, age, and communication setting.

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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