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Once Upon a Swipe: The Impact of Storytelling on Dating Profile Appeal

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Inspired by storytelling's success in promoting brand–customer connections, this research investigated its potential to facilitate relationship formation in the dating market. In three studies, single participants evaluated dating profiles featuring either narrative or nonnarrative self-presentations of a potential partner. These manipulated self-presentations encompassed written texts (Study 1), pictorial representations (Study 2), and a 2 × 2 factorial design combining both modalities (Study 3). After viewing the profile, participants reported their empathy for and their romantic interest in the profiled individual. Results revealed that narrative self-presentations intensified empathy, especially when both written and pictorial self-presentations were displayed narratively. This heightened empathy, in turn, predicted greater interest in the profiled individual, including actual efforts to reconnect. These findings demonstrate that the inherent self-promotion in dating profiles, similarly to product marketing, is substantially enhanced by incorporating storytelling—a strategy that fosters deeper initial connection and perceived closeness between potential partners even before they contact each other.

Public Policy Relevance Statement
In a world of seemingly limitless potential partners, people often engage in self-promotion to stand out, typically highlighting their most desirable qualities. In three studies, we demonstrate that storytelling—a technique proven effective for brand promotion in marketing—is similarly powerful in the dating scene. Narrative presentations foster a sense of connection in an otherwise detached and objectifying medium, suggesting that how people present themselves may be as crucial as what they choose to reveal.

Keywords: online dating, storytelling, narrativity, self-presentation, attraction

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Storytelling—producing a plot that involves characters who navigate causally connected events over time—can create emotional bonding between storytellers and their audience (Escalas, 2004a, 2004b; Van Laer et al., 2014). Through this transformational process, story receivers become absorbed in a story, actively interpreting its narrative, imagining its plot, and developing empathy for its characters (Van Laer et al., 2014, 2019). Such dynamics have proven effective in marketing, where storytelling boosts identification with the brand and the likelihood of purchasing its products (see review by Junior et al., 2023). We propose that, in the context of online dating, profiles may similarly serve to promote the self as a "product" and thus can benefit from the same storytelling techniques. Our research specifically examined whether storytelling within online dating profiles' self-presentation facilitates relationship initiation by enhancing romantic interest in potential partners.

The Impact of Storytelling on Story Receivers

Storytelling has universally shaped human social life since its beginning (Barthes & Duisit, 1975; Van Laer et al., 2014). From cradle to grave, people immerse themselves in narratives that, beyond being entertaining, function to build connections and transmit cultural norms, values, and knowledge (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Van Laer et al., 2014). Such experience often allows stories to provide a basis for making judgments and decisions about the people, objects, and events they portray (Junior et al., 2023; Schank & Abelson, 1995). Still, for stories to exert their full influence, they must transport receivers from their immediate reality into the narrative world (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000). This "narrative transportation" requires two key elements: empathic connection with characters—understanding and feeling the world from their perspective—and vivid imagining of the plot, which creates the sensation of experiencing the events firsthand (Van Laer et al., 2014). Overall, stories composed of entertaining plots and authentic, relatable characters who struggle with conflicting desires or goals are more likely to draw people into the

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narrative, capturing their imagination and heightening their emotional engagement (Adamson et al., 2006; McDonald, 2009).

The power of narrative transportation to foster such deep engagement may manifest in tangible physiological, psychological, and behavioral changes. Exposure to stories leads, for example, to increased levels of oxytocin—the neuropeptide associated with social bonding—improved mood, and prosocial behavior (Brockington et al., 2021; Zak, 2015). Given that such transportation can arouse strong feelings toward story characters, shape attitudes, and influence behavior consistent with the narrative's message (Green, 2006; Green & Brock, 2000; Van Laer et al., 2014), it is no wonder that storytelling has been adopted as a marketing tool (Junior et al., 2023). Indeed, when people emotionally identify with a character and feel part of the story's world, they engage in experiential rather than analytical processing that reduces their resistance to persuasive messaging and makes them more receptive to cognitive change compared with exposure to data and facts or a sequence of propositions alone (Adaval et al., 2007; Van Laer et al., 2014). Hence, with the help of intriguing stories, brands can set themselves apart from others, capture potential customers' attention, and elicit emotions (Brechman & Purvis, 2015; Lee et al., 2016) that spark desire for the brand or its products and drive positive evaluations (Grace & Kaufman, 2013; Mora & Livat, 2013; Mora & Moscarola, 2010), ultimately increasing purchase probability (Clarke et al., 2012; Junior et al., 2023; Olson et al., 2020).

Online dating—a prevalent avenue for seeking romantic partners (Anderson et al., 2020)—can be as competitive as the marketing world, as the term "dating market" attests. In such an environment, an appealing profile serves as an initial gateway to continued contact (Ellison et al., 2012), motivating date seekers to present themselves favorably compared with potential rivals (Birnbaum, Iluz, et al., 2020; Toma et al., 2008). To do so, date seekers often use self-promotion strategies, enhancing their appearance or emphasizing qualities that potential partners find attractive (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006; Zytko et al., 2014), like intelligence and sense of humor (Greengross & Miller, 2011; Sparks et al., 2020). Within this context, storytelling may prove particularly effective in drawing potential partners' attention. By fostering an illusion of emotional connection with a stranger in an otherwise impersonal medium, stories can create a gratifying experience that can become positively associated with the profiled individual, thereby enhancing their desirability—much as it does for brands (Junior et al., 2023; Van Laer et al., 2014). Supporting this reasoning, research manipulating narrativity on a simulated social networking site (not specific to dating) revealed that narrative posts fostered greater closeness and social attraction (friendship interest) toward their apparent creators compared with nonnarrative posts (Lin & Utz, 2017). Nevertheless, these findings do not necessarily apply to online dating, as impression formation in a romantic context may be driven by distinct goals (e.g., securing a suitable partner) than in nonromantic social networking (e.g., encountering interesting people), potentially making people responsive to different evaluative cues.

The Present Research

The present research explored the effects of self-presentation narrativity in online dating profiles on empathy and romantic interest toward the profiled individual. Marketing research has documented that compelling narratives instill a sense of connection with brands and offer rewarding experiences (Crespo et al., 2023; Junior et al., 2023; Van Laer et al., 2014). In the context of dating, storytelling may similarly elicit empathy by inviting recipients to imagine another person's experiences (Green & Brock, 2000; Van Laer et al., 2014). Such empathy, in turn, can enhance romantic attraction by increasing feelings of understanding and emotional connection (Birnbaum et al., 2024). Storytelling may also implicitly signal desirable attributes in potential partners, such as intelligence and humor (Greengross & Miller, 2011; Sparks et al., 2020)—qualities often integral to effective narrative expression (Allen & Mayer, 2022). Storytelling, therefore, may not only make a profile feel more authentic and emotionally engaging but also serve as a cue for assessing a potential partner's mate value. Accordingly, we proposed the following hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 1 (H1):* A potential partner's narrative (vs. nonnarrative) self-presentation (i.e., the target's profile text) in a dating profile would elicit greater empathy and romantic interest toward that partner.

In marketing, empathy evoked by narratives can directly influence consumers' desire for products and indirectly impact their purchasing intentions and behavior (Junior et al., 2023). Analogously, in the dating context, we expected that story receivers' empathy for the profiled individual would translate into relational motivation, prompting greater desire to connect with that individual.

> *Hypothesis 2 (H2):* Empathy for the profiled individual would mediate the effect of narrative self-presentation on romantic interest.

In all studies, we tested this mediation using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013, Model 4), which estimates the total effect of narrativity on romantic interest (c), the direct effect controlling for empathy (c'), and the indirect effect via empathy (ab). Thus, our analytic approach allowed us to determine whether narrative self-presentation predicts romantic interest directly, indirectly through empathy, or indirectly only (i.e., a significant indirect effect in the absence of a significant direct effect).

We tested these hypotheses in three studies. In all studies, single participants evaluated dating profiles that were manipulated to feature either narrative or nonnarrative self-presentations of a potential partner. After viewing the profile, participants reported their empathy for and romantic interest in the profiled individual. In Study 1, these manipulated self-presentations encompassed written texts. The narrative and nonnarrative self-presentations contained identical basic information, but in the narrative condition, this information was structured as a story with a plot involving the profiled individual experiencing causally connected events over time (Escalas, 2004a, 2004b).

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate these effects using pictorial self-presentations, a modality with a stronger impact on impression formation in online dating profiles (Van der Zanden et al., 2022). We also examined whether the predicted self-reported interest in the profiled individual would translate into actual efforts to interact again with them. For this reason, participants were asked to message the profiled individual, and these messages were subsequently coded for expressed interest in future interactions. In Study 3, we integrated the

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key manipulations from Studies 1 and 2. This approach, which better simulates real dating profiles where both text and photos contribute to impression formation (Van der Zanden et al., 2020, 2022), allowed us to examine whether combining narrative structures in both modalities would yield the most potent effects on empathy and interest toward the profiled individual.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Empathy and romantic interest toward the potential partner would be highest when both pictorial and written self-presentations were narrative, reflecting an interaction between the two modalities.

Study 1

Study 1 was designed to establish a causal link between narrativity in written self-presentations in dating profiles and both empathy and romantic interest toward the profiled individual. It also sought to provide an initial test of the hypothesis that empathy would mediate the effect of narrative self-presentation on romantic interest toward that individual. By manipulating the structure of a dating profile's text and presenting identical information either as a coherent story or as a list of facts, this study examined whether storytelling per se, independent of content, shapes impression formation and the accompanying emotional and behavioral intentions in dating contexts.

Method

Participants

A total of 131 single (not in a romantic relationship) students from a non-U.S. university participated for course credit. Sample size was justified by an a priori G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2009), indicating 80% power to detect a medium effect ($d = 0.50$) at $\alpha = .05$. The sample included 66 women and 65 men, with ages ranging from 20 to 40 years ($M = 24.84$, $SD = 3.15$). The vast majority identified as heterosexual (99.2%; $n = 130$), whereas one participant (0.8%) identified as pansexual.

Measures and Procedure

Participants who consented to join a study on online dating impressions attended a single 30-min laboratory session. Before the session, each participant was randomly assigned to one of two conditions, determining whether they would later evaluate a dating profile featuring either a narrative or a nonnarrative self-presentation. Upon arrival, an experimenter explained that participants would first create their own dating profile and then evaluate the profile of a potential partner—ostensibly another participant in a separate room, who would reciprocally evaluate their profile. The initial task of creating participants' own profile was designed to establish a consistent and shared context for the later profile evaluation. To complete their profile, participants had their photo taken by the experimenter, uploaded this photo, and provided their first name, age, and city of residence, along with a written self-presentation of at least four lines.

After creating their profile, participants viewed the dating profile of the potential partner whose attractiveness had been previously established (Birnbaum et al., 2023). The potential partner's profile displayed the same basic information across both conditions (photo, name, age, and city of residence), mirroring the participant's own profile structure. However, depending on the participant's assigned condition, the profile featured either a narrative or a nonnarrative self-presentation. The self-presentations in both conditions contained the same core information. They differed only in structural elements characteristic of a narrative (i.e., a plot centered on the profiled individual, involving a temporally ordered sequence of events with causal connections between them; Escalas, 2004a, 2004b). In all studies, male-target and female-target versions were identical except for target photographs (male vs. female) and corresponding gendered identifiers, where applicable; Appendix A presents one complete set for concision.

Upon reviewing the profile, participants completed five manipulation check items adapted from Escalas (2004b) to assess the perceived narrative structure of the potential partner's self-presentation (e.g., "To what extent does this self-presentation focus on specific events rather than on generalizations?" and "To what extent does this self-presentation have a well-delineated beginning, middle, and ending?"; $\alpha = .76$). Participants also completed three items adapted from Sharon-David et al. (2019) to assess feelings of empathy toward the potential partner (e.g., "To what extent did you feel that you managed to put yourself in the shoes of the other participant and understand who they are and their life story?"; $\alpha = .72$). In addition, they completed three items assessing their romantic interest in the potential partner (Birnbaum et al., 2018; e.g., "To what extent would you be interested in dating the other participant?" and "To what extent are you interested in a long-term relationship with the other participant?"; $\alpha = .94$). All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much so*). To conclude the session, participants provided demographic information (e.g., age and number of past romantic relationships) and were debriefed.

Results

Manipulation Check

An independent samples t test on the perception of self-presentation narrativity yielded the expected effect. Participants in the narrative condition rated the written self-presentation as significantly more narrative than participants in the nonnarrative condition. All t test statistics (means, SDs, effect sizes, and confidence intervals [CIs]) are shown in Table 1.

Main Analyses

As expected, a t test revealed that participants in the narrative condition reported significantly higher empathy toward the potential partner compared with those in the nonnarrative condition. However, contrary to our prediction, a t test on interest in the potential partner did not yield the hypothesized effect, showing no significant differences in interest between the narrative and nonnarrative conditions (see Table 1). Thus, *H1* was partially supported in Study 1: Narrative (vs. nonnarrative) written self-presentations increased empathy but did not directly increase romantic interest.

To examine our hypothesis about mediation, we used PROCESS (Hayes, 2013, Model 4). In this model, manipulated self-presentation narrativity served as the predictor (X; nonnarrative = −1, narrative = 1), empathy toward the potential partner was the mediator (M), and interest in the potential partner was the outcome variable (Y).

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Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Statistics, and Effect Sizes of Profile Evaluations for the Experimental Conditions (Study 1)

Profile evaluations	Narrativity		$t(129)$	Cohen's d	95% CI for Cohen's d
	High	Low			
Perceived narrativity	3.79 (0.77)	3.53 (0.66)	2.08*	0.36	[0.02, 0.71]
Empathy toward the profiled individual	3.51 (0.82)	3.09 (0.70)	3.11*	0.54	[0.19, 0.89]
Interest in the profiled individual	3.48 (1.10)	3.42 (1.08)	0.03	0.05	[−0.29, 0.39]

Note. $N = 131$. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. CI = confidence interval.
* $p < .05$.

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Figure 1 shows the final model. The results indicated that the 95% CI of the indirect effect of narrativity on interest through empathy did not include zero and, thus, is considered significant ($b = .13$, $SE = .04$, $\beta = .12$, 95% CI [.04, .21], 5,000 bootstrapped samples). These findings support our hypothesized mediation model, indicating that narrative written self-presentations increased empathy toward the potential partner, which, in turn, predicted greater interest in that partner. Thus, *H2* was supported in Study 1. Importantly, in this PROCESS model, the direct effect of narrativity on romantic interest controlling for empathy (c') was not significant, indicating an indirect-only pattern. Consistent with this, the total effect of narrativity on romantic interest (c) was negligible (Figure 1; $\beta = .03$, which, in this two-variable model, is equivalent to the zero-order correlation).

Study 2

Study 2 sought to extend these findings to the visual modality, which plays a particularly influential role in impression formation on online dating platforms (Van der Zanden et al., 2022). Specifically, we examined whether narrativity conveyed through sequences of photos—depicting a person's daily life as an unfolding story versus a disconnected set of images lacking a coherent context—would similarly increase empathy, which, in turn, would intensify romantic interest toward the profiled individual. In addition, this study introduced a behavioral index of romantic interest, coding participants' messages to the confederate, to assess whether narrative profiles not only elicit empathic responses but also motivate concrete efforts to reconnect with that individual.

Method

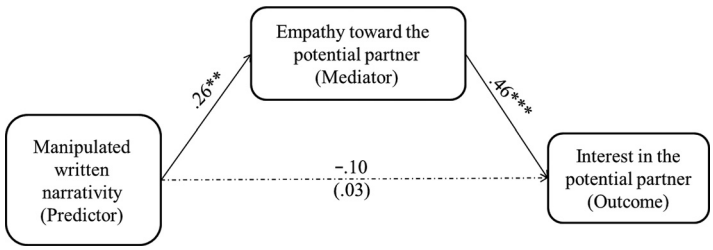
Participants

A total of 130 single (not in a romantic relationship) students from a non-U.S. university participated for course credit. Sample size was justified by an a priori G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2009), indicating 80% power to detect a medium effect ($d = 0.50$) at $\alpha = .05$. The sample included 65 women and 65 men, with ages ranging from 20 to 34 years ($M = 24.62$, $SD = 2.55$). All participants identified as heterosexual.

Measures and Procedure

This study adapted the procedure from Study 1, replacing written self-presentations with pictorial ones and adding a behavioral measure of interest in future interactions with the other participant (a confederate). Participants first created a profile including their first name, age, and city of residence, then they uploaded five photographs intended to represent who they are. Subsequently, they viewed a confederate's profile mirroring this structure, which contained five photos manipulated for narrativity. In the narrative condition, the photos depicted the confederate across varied, context-rich situations intentionally selected and sequenced to unfold like a typical day in their life, from morning through evening. Specifically,

Figure 1
Mediation Model Showing That Empathy Toward the Potential Partner Mediated the Association Between the Manipulated Self-Presentation Narrativity in Dating Profiles and Interest in That Partner in Study 1



Note. Path coefficients are standardized. The value in parentheses is from the analysis of the effect without empathy in the equation. The nonnarrative condition was coded as −1, and the narrative condition was coded as 1.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

the photos captured early activities like exercising or studying, progressed through daily routines, such as cooking, and culminated in evening engagements like socializing or family interactions. This chronological presentation of distinct facets of the confederate's life and relationships was designed to collectively reveal an interconnected portrayal of the confederate's current life story. In the nonnarrative condition, photos showed the same confederate in neutral settings (e.g., in a park and on a street) lacking this interconnected, storytelling context. Appendix B illustrates these profiles.

After viewing the assigned profile, all participants were invited to message the confederate. These messages served as the behavioral measure and were subsequently coded for expressed interest in future interactions. Participants then completed questionnaires similar to those used in Study 1, assessing perceived pictorial narrative structure (four items; $\alpha = .82$), empathy toward the confederate ($\alpha = .78$), and romantic interest in the confederate ($\alpha = .90$). Finally, participants provided demographic information and were debriefed.

Coding Expressed Interest in Future Interactions

Participants messages to the confederate were independently coded by two psychology students who were unaware of experimental conditions or hypotheses. The coders evaluated the extent to which each message expressed romantic interest and desire for future interaction with the confederate (manifested through actions like flirting, complimenting, or proposing dates). Ratings were made on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*), following a coding scheme successfully used in prior research (e.g., Birnbaum, Zholtack, et al., 2020; Birnbaum et al. 2022). Interrater reliability was high (intraclass correlation coefficient = .89), and the two coders' ratings were averaged to create a composite score for each participant.

Results

Manipulation Check

A *t* test on the perception of pictorial self-presentation narrativity yielded the expected effect. Participants in the narrative condition rated the pictorial self-presentation as significantly more narrative than participants in the nonnarrative condition. All *t* test statistics (means, *SD*s, effect sizes, and CIs) are shown in Table 2.

Main Analyses

As expected, *t* tests revealed that participants in the narrative condition reported significantly higher empathy toward the confederate and marginally significantly higher self-reported interest in them compared with those in the nonnarrative condition. However, contrary to our prediction, the narrativity manipulation did not significantly affect coded interest ratings (see Table 2). Thus, *H1* received partial support in Study 2: Narrative (vs. nonnarrative) pictorial self-presentations increased empathy and marginally increased self-reported interest but did not significantly affect coded interest.

To examine our hypothesis about mediation, we used PROCESS (Hayes, 2013, Model 4). In this model, manipulated pictorial narrativity served as the predictor (*X*; nonnarrative = −1, narrative = 1), empathy toward the confederate was the mediator (*M*), and coded interest in the confederate was the outcome variable (*Y*). Figure 2 shows the final model. The results indicated that the 95% CI of the indirect effect of narrativity on interest through empathy did not include zero and, thus, is considered significant ($b = .08$, $SE = .04$, $\beta = .07$, 95% CI [.01, .14], 5,000 bootstrapped samples). These findings support our hypothesis that narrative pictorial self-presentation increases empathy toward the potential partner, which, in turn, predicts greater interest in that partner, as rated by independent observers. Thus, *H2* was supported in Study 2. Importantly, in this PROCESS model, the direct effect of pictorial narrativity on coded interest controlling for empathy (c') was not significant, indicating that narrativity predicted coded romantic interest indirectly via empathy, rather than directly. Consistent with this, the total effect of pictorial narrativity on coded interest (c) was small and not significant (Figure 2; $\beta = .12$, which, in this two-variable model, is equivalent to the zero-order correlation).

Study 3

Building on the prior experiments, Study 3 integrated the textual and pictorial manipulations in a 2 × 2 factorial design to examine their joint and interactive effects on empathy and romantic interest toward the profiled individual. This approach provided a more ecologically valid simulation of real dating profiles, where written and visual cues co-occur and together shape impression formation (Van der Zanden et al., 2020, 2022). Specifically, the study tested whether combining narrative structures across both modalities would produce the strongest empathic engagement and romantic interest, thereby revealing whether multimodal storytelling amplifies the persuasive power of narrative self-presentation in online dating.

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, Statistics, and Effect Sizes of Profile Evaluations for the Experimental Conditions (Study 2)

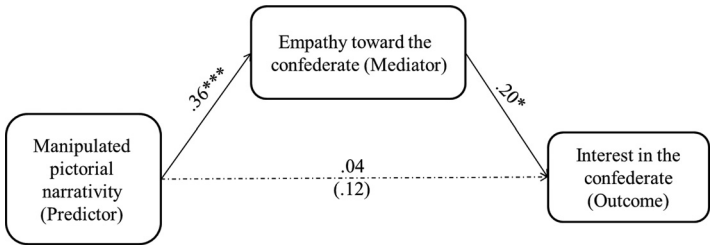
Profile evaluations	Narrativity		$t(128)$	Cohen's *d*	95% CI for Cohen's *d*
	High	Low			
Perceived narrativity	3.47 (0.86)	2.52 (0.71)	6.83***	1.20	[0.82, 1.57]
Empathy toward the profiled individual	2.89 (0.89)	2.25 (0.71)	4.41***	0.77	[0.42, 1.13]
Self-reported interest in the profiled individual	3.29 (0.98)	2.97 (1.02)	1.79#	0.32	[−0.04, 0.66]
Coded interest in the profiled individual	4.00 (1.00)	3.73 (1.28)	1.33	0.23	[−0.11, 0.58]

Note. $N = 130$. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. CI = confidence interval.
$p = .07$. *** $p < .001$.

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Figure 2

Mediation Model Showing That Empathy Toward the Confederate Mediated the Association Between the Manipulated Pictorial Self-Presentation Narrativity in Dating Profiles and Interest in That Confederate in Study 2



Note. Path coefficients are standardized. The value in parentheses is from the analysis of the effect without empathy in the equation. The nonnarrative condition was coded as −1, and the narrative condition was coded as 1.
* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Method

Participants

A total of 333 single (not in a romantic relationship) students from a non-U.S. university volunteered for this study. Sample size was justified by an a priori power analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) for a 2 × 2 between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA). The analysis was set to detect a small-to-medium effect size ($f = 0.17$) for either the main effects or the interaction effect with 80% power at $\alpha = .05$. This calculation indicated a required total sample size of 275 participants. We recruited more participants than needed because the Qualtrics experiment link was distributed online, resulting in a larger than anticipated number of responses. The sample included 183 women and 150 men, with ages ranging from 20 to 35 years ($M = 24.47$, $SD = 2.30$). The vast majority identified as heterosexual (97.6%; $n = 325$), whereas two participants identified as pansexual or bisexual (0.6%), and six declined to state their orientation (1.8%).

Measures and Procedure

This study combined the manipulations from Study 1 (Written Self-Presentation: Narrative vs. Nonnarrative) and Study 2 (Pictorial Self-Presentation: Narrative vs. Nonnarrative) in a 2 × 2 factorial design. Unlike the previous studies, it was conducted online via Qualtrics. After consenting online, participants were randomly assigned to evaluate a dating profile of an attractive potential partner. The same individual appeared across all conditions. The profile presented either a narrative or nonnarrative written self-presentation and five self-descriptive photos that were either narratively interconnected or not, corresponding to the four experimental conditions. To ensure findings were not unique to the specific stimuli used previously, both the written presentation and the photographs differed from those used in Studies 1 and 2 (see Appendix C). After viewing the assigned profile, participants completed the questionnaires used in Study 2, assessing perceived narrative structure ($\alpha = .73$), empathy toward the profiled individual ($\alpha = .74$), and romantic interest in the profiled individual ($\alpha = .87$) before providing demographic information.

Results

Manipulation Check

A Written Self-Presentation (Narrative vs. Nonnarrative) × Pictorial Self-Presentation (Narrative vs. Nonnarrative) ANOVA on the perceived narrativity of the self-presentation yielded a significant main effect of written self-presentation, $F(1, 329) = 7.87$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .023$, 95% CI [.01, .06]. As expected, participants in the narrative condition rated the written self-presentation as significantly more narrative ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.82$) than participants in the nonnarrative condition ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.85$). The analysis also yielded a significant main effect of pictorial self-presentation, $F(1, 329) = 4.69$, $p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$, 95% CI [.01, .05]. As expected, participants in the narrative condition rated the pictorial self-presentation as significantly more narrative ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.81$) than participants in the nonnarrative condition ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.88$). The Written Self-Presentation × Pictorial Self-Presentation interaction was not significant, $F(1, 329) = 0.001$, $p = .997$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, 95% CI [.00, .00].

Main Analyses

An ANOVA on empathy toward the profiled individual revealed no significant main effect for pictorial self-presentation, $F(1, 329) = 1.77$, $p = .185$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$, 95% CI [.00, .03]. However, a significant main effect was found for written self-presentation, $F(1, 329) = 6.96$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .021$, 95% CI [.01, .06]. A significant Written Self-Presentation × Pictorial Self-Presentation interaction qualified this effect, $F(1, 329) = 3.86$, $p = .050$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$, 95% CI [.00, .04], suggesting that the influence of the written self-presentation on empathy depended on the pictorial context. Simple effects tests revealed that when the pictorial self-presentation was narrative, a narrative written self-presentation elicited significantly higher empathy than a nonnarrative one, $F(1, 329) = 10.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .032$, 95% CI [.01, .08]. However, written narrativity had no significant effect on empathy when the pictorial self-presentation was nonnarrative, $F(1, 329) = 0.22$, $p = .638$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, 95% CI [.00, .02]. Overall, in line with our hypotheses, the highest empathy ratings were observed when both pictorial and written self-presentations were narrative (see Table 3).

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Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations of Profile Evaluations for the Experimental Conditions (Study 3)

Experimental conditions	Perceived narrativity	Empathy toward the profiled individual	Interest in the profiled individual
Narrative pictorial			
Narrative written	3.43 (0.75)	3.21 (0.86)	3.15 (0.93)
Nonnarrative written	3.17 (0.83)	2.75 (0.87)	3.15 (0.90)
Nonnarrative pictorial			
Narrative written	3.23 (0.88)	2.88 (0.95)	3.31 (1.01)
Nonnarrative written	2.97 (0.85)	2.81 (0.92)	3.08 (0.92)

Note. $N = 333$. Items were rated on 5-point Likert scales. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. CI = confidence interval.

The ANOVA on interest in the profiled individual revealed no significant main effect for pictorial self-presentation, $F(1, 329) = 0.16$, $p = .688$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, 95% CI [.00, .01]. Similarly, the main effect for written self-presentation was not significant, $F(1, 329) = 1.18$, $p = .278$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, 95% CI [.00, .03], nor was the Written Self-Presentation × Pictorial Self-Presentation interaction, $F(1, 329) = 1.29$, $p = .257$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, 95% CI [.00, .03]. Thus, neither *H1* nor *H3* was supported for romantic interest in Study 3.

To examine our hypothesis about mediation, we used PROCESS (Hayes, 2013, Model 4). For this specific analysis, we strategically focused on two of the four experimental groups: (a) the fully narrative condition (narrative written and narrative pictorial self-presentations) and (b) the fully nonnarrative condition (nonnarrative written and nonnarrative pictorial self-presentations). This targeted comparison allows for a parsimonious and direct assessment of the impact of consistent narrativity (vs. consistent nonnarrativity), minimizing potential confounds or interpretational complexities that could arise from the mixed-modality conditions (e.g., narrative written with nonnarrative pictorial). In this model, manipulated narrativity served as the predictor (*X*; nonnarrative = −1, narrative = 1), empathy toward the profiled individual was the mediator (*M*), and interest in the profiled individual was the outcome variable (*Y*). Figure 3 shows the final model. The results indicated that the 95% CI of the indirect effect of narrativity on interest through empathy did not include zero and, thus, is considered significant ($b = .07$, $SE = .03$, $\beta = .08$, 95% CI [.02, .14], 5,000 bootstrapped samples).

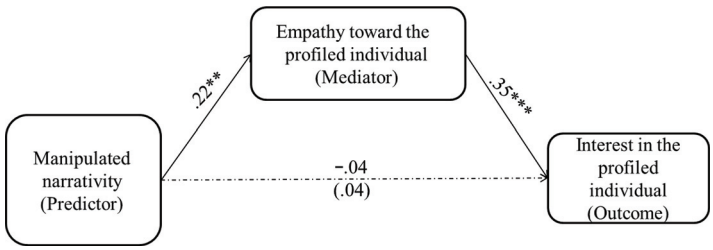
These findings support our hypothesis that narrative self-presentation increases empathy toward the potential partner, which, in turn, predicts greater interest in that partner. Thus, *H2* was supported in Study 3 (in the targeted comparison between the fully narrative and fully nonnarrative conditions). Importantly, in this PROCESS model, the direct effect of narrativity on romantic interest controlling for empathy (c') was not significant, indicating that narrativity predicted romantic interest indirectly via empathy, rather than directly. Consistent with this, the total effect of narrativity on romantic interest (c) was negligible (Figure 3; $\beta = .04$, which, in this two-variable model, is equivalent to the zero-order association).

General Discussion

In a world of seemingly limitless potential partners, people often engage in self-promotion to stand out in a crowded dating market, typically by presenting appealing photos and highlighting their most desirable qualities in their written descriptions (Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2006; Zytko et al., 2014). Those seeking dates, in turn, develop complementary strategies that help them choose a suitable partner among the available options (Best & Delmege, 2012), forming impressions based on such visual and textual self-presentations (Van der Zanden et al., 2020, 2022). In the present research, we demonstrate that storytelling—a technique proven effective for brand promotion in marketing (Junior et al., 2023; Van Laer et al., 2014)—is similarly effective for self-promotion within the dating scene.

Across three studies, we found that narrative self-presentations in online dating profiles intensified empathy for the profiled individual. This heightened empathy, in turn, predicted greater romantic interest in the profiled individual. Specifically, Study 1 established this mediation effect in manipulated narrative versus nonnarrative written self-presentations. Study 2 showed that this effect is replicated using pictorial self-presentations and extends to actual behaviors, manifested as efforts to reconnect with the

Figure 3
Mediation Model Showing That Empathy Toward the Profiled Individual Mediated the Association Between the Manipulated Self-Presentation Narrativity in Dating Profiles and Interest in That Individual in Study 3



Note. Path coefficients are standardized. The value in parentheses is from the analysis of the effect without empathy in the equation. The nonnarrative condition was coded as −1, and the narrative condition was coded as 1.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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profiled individual. Study 3 replicated this effect while using ecologically valid profiles that combine both written and pictorial self-presentations, thus closely resembling real dating platforms. It also extended this finding, revealing that the combination of narrative text and images elicited the strongest empathic responses toward the profiled individual.

The efficacy of storytelling observed in our studies aligns with the narrative transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000). This theory posits that when people become absorbed in a story, they are transported from their present existence into the narrative plot, experiencing its events as though they are part of this story and feeling empathic connections with its characters (Gerrig, 1993; Van Laer et al., 2014). Marketing research has extensively leveraged this, demonstrating that compelling stories catch consumer attention, foster connection to brands, increase the desire for their products, and eventually enhance purchase likelihood (Crespo et al., 2023; Junior et al., 2023; Van Laer et al., 2014). Our findings indicate that this transformative process is similarly potent in the unilateral phase of online dating, when date seekers are merely exposed to potential partners' profiles without yet initiating contact. During this critical initial stage—a "gatekeeper" for relationship formation (Birnbaum, 2018; Birnbaum & Finkel, 2015; Ellison et al., 2012)—date seekers navigate an overwhelming array of options, often relying on limited and potentially deceptive information (Gibbs et al., 2011; Toma et al., 2008). Consequently, profiles that can distinguish themselves and favorably capture attention are more likely to transition to actual contact (Ellison et al., 2012).

Our findings demonstrate that narrative self-presentation increases the likelihood of initiating contact with a profiled individual by fostering empathic bonding, even before direct interaction occurs. This early empathic connection may be particularly powerful in motivating individuals to overcome common psychological barriers inherent to online dating, such as rejection or deception fears caused by the uncertainty surrounding this medium (Birnbaum et al., 2018; Gibbs et al., 2011). Beyond instilling a sense of connection in an otherwise estranged and objectifying medium (Daniels et al., 2022; Ward, 2016), storytelling may function as a valuable signal that allows date seekers to assess potential partners' mate value. Narrative profiles may convey intelligence, creativity, and willingness to invest in a relationship, signaled through the individual's expressive capabilities and the effort invested in creating their self-presentation. Such perceived qualities, inferred from storytelling competence, may further heighten romantic interest by signaling compatibility and long-term relationship potential.

These conclusions should, however, be interpreted with caution, because, contrary to our predictions, narrative self-presentation increased romantic interest only indirectly, through empathy, but not directly. This pattern suggests that storytelling may not immediately heighten romantic interest in the absence of emotional engagement but rather exerts its influence through the empathic connection it fosters. That is, narratives do not make profiled individuals seem more attractive on their own; they draw people in by encouraging perspective-taking and emotional resonance, which then translate into interest. Similar patterns have been observed in marketing research, showing that empathy directly affects consumers' desire for products but only indirectly shapes their purchasing behavior (Junior et al., 2023). The lack of a direct effect, therefore, does not undermine the mediation model; rather, it highlights that empathy functions as the critical psychological mechanism translating narrative engagement into attraction. In real-life dating contexts, this means that storytelling may not spark instant desire but can gradually cultivate interest by deepening perceived understanding and connection.

We also did not assess perceptions of the profiled individual's desirable traits (e.g., humor and creativity) or overall mate value, which might mediate the effect of narrative self-presentation on romantic interest. Similarly, we did not assess other potential mediators, such as the entertainment value or perceived rewardingness of viewing a narrative profile. It is also necessary to clarify whether the effects of pictorial narratives in Studies 2 and 3 stemmed from the compelling narrative content itself or from the additional contextual information that made the profiles appear more varied and relatable. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating measures of perceived desirable traits, overall mate value, and entertainment value to develop a more comprehensive theoretical model explaining how and why storytelling enhances romantic prospects in online dating.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our findings demonstrate that the inherent self-promotion in dating profiles, like in marketing (Junior et al., 2023; Van Laer et al., 2014), is substantially enhanced by storytelling—a strategy that fosters deeper connection and perceived closeness, even before any contact is initiated. Although people often maximize their appeal to desirable partners through selective self-disclosure or even exaggerated presentations (Guadagno et al., 2012; Walther, 2007), our research reveals that how people present themselves may be as crucial as what they choose to reveal, especially when it offers a more authentic alternative to problematic self-promotion strategies. By humanizing profiles and encouraging genuine emotional engagement, storytelling may actively counter the objectifying nature of online dating platforms (Daniels et al., 2022; Ward, 2016), motivating date seekers to view profiled individuals as fellow human beings rather than mere commodities. In this way, storytelling creates a rewarding emotional experience that transcends detached evaluation or simple fact-gathering, paving the way for more meaningful initial interactions. Still, whether this initial storytelling advantage in facilitating contact initiation translates into meaningful long-term relationship outcomes remains a question for future investigation.

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(*Appendices follow*)

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Appendix A

The Narrative Self-Presentation (Study 1)

"Hi there, I'm Dan. For as long as I can remember, I've been breathing art. My grandfather, may his memory be blessed, believed that music connects people, and at age 7 he gave me a guitar that became an inseparable part of me. After graduating from high school, I flew with my friends on a trip to South America. I remember the incredible landscapes, the amazing local food, and the extreme activities. I must tell you, the deep conversations with the people I met there taught me to appreciate what's important in life. Toward the end of the trip, I had to decide whether to stay in art or go in a new direction. I won't leave you in suspense. Today, I'm an economics student working in high-tech. But don't worry, the guitar is still part of me. If I'm not studying or working, you'll find me hiking with friends and family, running, or playing music. But mostly, I love ending the day with a glass of wine and a guitar on the balcony. If you find yourself nodding with a smile, I'd love to get to know you."

The Non-narrative Self-Presentation (Study 1)

"Dan. I come from a world of art. I learned to play guitar from a young age. My first guitar was a gift from my grandfather. Even today, I play quite a lot. It's my main hobby. After graduating from high school, I traveled to South America with friends. This trip was long and unforgettable. I tried many different types of sports, extreme activities, and also experienced various foods. At different points in my life, especially during the trip, I met many people with whom I had some meaningful conversations. As I was preparing to return from South America, I enrolled in studies for a bachelor's degree in economics at the university. Today I am an economics student. At the same time, I work in the high-tech industry. In my free time, I run and hike with my friends and my family. At the end of the day, I drink a glass of wine and play the guitar. I would love to get to know you."



Because the actual confederates' photos are confidential, we present AI-generated schematic illustrations modeled after the originals.

(*Appendices continue*)

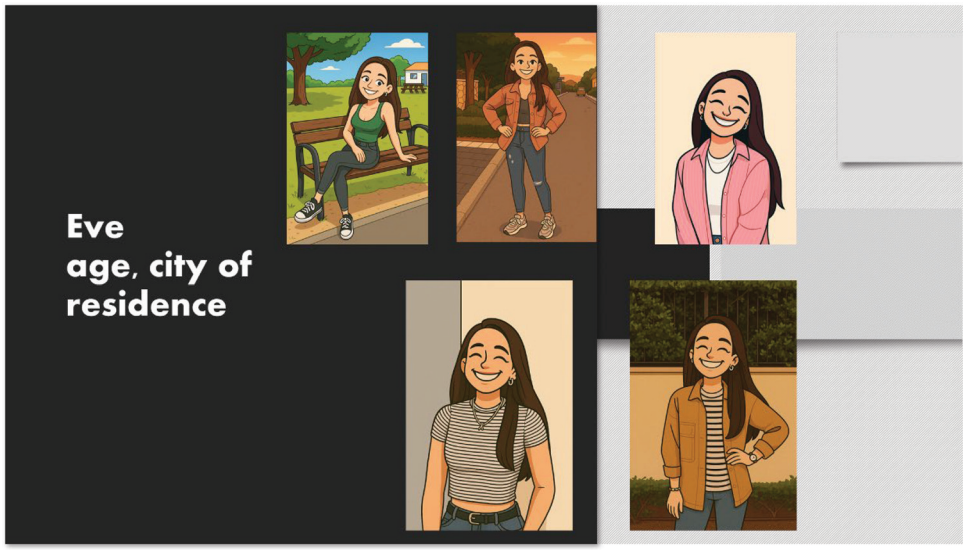
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Appendix B

An Illustrative Narrative Self-Presentation (Study 2)



An Illustrative Non-narrative Self-Presentation (Study 2)



Because the actual confederates' photos are confidential, we present AI-generated schematic illustrations modeled after the originals.

(*Appendices continue*)

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Appendix C

The Narrative Self-Presentation (Study 3)

"Hey there, I'm Ariel. I grew up in the suburbs, but as much as I love it, I felt it was right for me to forge my own independent path in the big city. Don't worry, as my neighbors would tell you, this isn't your typical bachelor pad—the smell of my pancakes fills the entire building. So, every now and then, I find myself hosting friends, getting to enjoy two of my favorite pastimes along the way. When I'm not with friends or walking my dog Lassie, my little niece Annie jumps at the chance for some quality time together, which usually means a private judo lesson. Still, those are just hobbies. The truth is most of my day is spent immersed in my law degree studies. In short, I'm here looking for my best friend."

The Non-narrative Self-Presentation (Study 3)

"Hi there, I'm Ariel, 26 years old, a third-year law student at the university. I've been living in the big city for a year, but I'm originally from the suburbs. I love cooking (especially pancakes) and hosting friends, so one of my favorite ways to spend time is combining the two. I really love dogs, and I have a small poodle puppy at home named Lassie. I also train in different types of sports, mainly martial arts, or babysit for Annie, my little niece. The rest of the time I'm immersed in my studies. I'm here looking for my best friend."

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