



Constructing the Self in a Line: Theme and Rheme as Self-Presentation Strategies in Online Daters' Profiles

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Abstract

A dating profile gives a writer only a few lines to make a stranger want to keep reading, which means every clause-initial choice is doing real work, whether the writer notices it or not. This paper takes that choice seriously, applying Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and, more specifically, the textual metafunction of Theme and Rheme, to self-description texts from twenty-five online daters purposively sampled across OkCupid, Bumble, Tinder, HER, and Facebook Dating. The guiding question is straightforward: how do daters use Theme and Rheme to organise what they say about themselves, and what does that organisation reveal about self-presentation strategy? Working from a qualitative document-analysis design, each self-description was segmented into independent clauses, and each clause's Theme was coded as topical (marked or unmarked), interpersonal, or textual, following Halliday's categories. Topical unmarked Theme dominates the corpus almost completely, accounting for 93.6% of all Theme choices; interpersonal Theme trails at 3.2%, textual Theme at 2.4%, and marked topical Theme barely registers at 0.8%. Daters, in other words, overwhelmingly open with a named participant, either themselves or a directly addressed "you," rather than with a qualifying circumstance or a conjunctive frame. The Rheme is where the substantive content sits: the traits, preferences, and relationship conditions a dater wants a prospective match to register first. None of this looks like stylistic accident. Theme-Rheme structuring functions here as a resource, deployed consciously or not, through which daters foreground identity claims and push qualifying detail to the background. The paper closes by considering what this means for research on online self-presentation and for how dating platforms might be designed.

Keywords: Theme and Rheme, Systemic Functional Linguistics, self-presentation, online dating, textual metafunction.

Original Research Article

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Introduction

Online dating, at its simplest, is how subscribers to dedicated digital platforms find and sustain romantic and sexual relationships with other subscribers (Orchard, 2019). Kiss.com and Match.com opened

this territory in 1994 and 1995; three decades later, more than 1,500 platforms compete for the same basic promise, and online dating has moved from a marginal courtship practice to arguably its dominant channel (Szaniawska-Schiavo, 2022). The profile sits at the centre of all this, a compact textual and



visual artefact that decides, often within seconds, whether a stranger gets a second look. Its self-description component is where the real linguistic work happens: a photograph is chosen, but a self-description is composed, word by word, which makes it the clearest site of deliberate self-construction the profile offers.

Short texts amplify small decisions, and few decisions are smaller, or more consequential, than what comes first in a clause. Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) gives this decision a name: the textual metafunction, realised grammatically through Theme and Rheme. Theme is, in Halliday's own words, "what the message is concerned with... the point of departure for what the speaker is going to say" (Halliday, 1994); Rheme is everything the clause goes on to say once that point of departure has been set, the place where new information typically lands. Because Theme occupies first position, it works like a lens: whatever follows gets read through it. What a dater chooses to place first is therefore a choice about how they wish to be read from the very first word.

Yet for something so central to a profile's success, the thematic organisation of self-description texts has drawn surprisingly little linguistic attention. Most existing scholarship on online dating profiles asks about attractiveness judgements, deception, or psychological outcomes (Fiore et al., 2008; Hitsch et al., 2004), not about the grammatical resources daters actually use to build self-presentation. SFL's textual metafunction, meanwhile, has been applied to editorials (Hamid, 2019), student writing (Arunsirot, 2013), political speech (Umiyatti, 2019), and children's picture books (Yolanda et al., 2017); the dating profile has simply not come up. That gap matters because the genre is defined by compression. A dater has a handful of clauses in which to do all their identity work, and Theme-Rheme structure is the primary grammatical resource available for deciding what comes first and what waits.

This paper takes up that gap directly: how do online daters use Theme and Rheme in their profiles? Self-description texts from twenty-five purposively selected daters are analysed to identify the Theme types in use, how often each occurs, and what

foregrounding one element over another accomplishes interpretively. The contribution is a textual-metafunction account of a genre that researchers have, so far, approached almost entirely through social-psychological or attractiveness-based lenses. Even Zhang et al.'s (2025) recent interview-based study of profile construction, arguably the most current work in the area, stays at the level of content strategy and image choice rather than descending to clause-level grammar. That gap, grammatical and metafunctional analysis of profile text remaining largely absent from the literature, is precisely what this paper addresses.

Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the study sets out to: (1) identify the types of Theme, topical unmarked, topical marked, interpersonal, and textual, that online daters draw on in composing self-description texts; (2) determine how often each Theme type occurs across the sampled profiles; and (3) interpret what these thematic choices mean rhetorically and self-presentationally for how a dater is likely to be read by a prospective match.

Research Question

This study is guided by the following research question: How do online daters use Theme and Rheme in their profiles?

Significance of the Study

Four audiences stand to gain from this study. Linguists get a Theme-Rheme account of a digital genre that has grown enormously in social importance while drawing almost no attention from systemic functional linguists, which widens the empirical base for claims about thematic patterning in short, high-stakes texts generally. Daters themselves might put the findings to more practical use: understanding how thematic choice shapes a first impression could inform when to lead with a participant-focused statement and when a conditional or interrogative opening better serves a specific goal, filtering unwanted matches, for

instance. Platform designers may find something useful here too, since the consistency of the patterns reported below suggests that prompts, templates, or word-count guidance built into profile-creation interfaces could work with users' natural thematic tendencies rather than against them. And for researchers in computer-mediated communication more broadly, this paper shows that grammatical, clause-level analysis can sit alongside the lexical and psychological approaches that have so far dominated work on online dating texts, opening a methodological path that future studies of digital self-presentation might usefully follow.

Literature Review

Online Dating Profiles as a Site of Self-Presentation

A typical online dating profile pairs a picture with an open-ended self-description, where daters set out their interests, hobbies, characteristics, and what they are looking for in a partner (Big Data E-Book, 2013). Textual space is limited on most apps and websites, so these self-descriptions end up dense: every clause has to do interpersonal and ideational work at once, with little room for a clause that does only one job. Fiore and Donath (2004) and Fiore et al. (2008) found that the photograph and the free-text component each independently predict how attractive a profile is judged to be, which confirms that the text is not decoration for the image. It persuades in its own right.

Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Textual Metafunction

Halliday's SFL treats language as three simultaneous kinds of meaning-making: ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (enacting social relationships), and textual (organising the flow of information) (Halliday, 1994). Theme and Rheme realise the textual metafunction, and together they turn a clause into a message rather than merely a string of content. Theme is the point of departure; Rheme is what the speaker goes on to say about it (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Halliday (1994) further divides Theme into three types. Topical

Theme is by far the most common in English: the first element with a function in transitivity, a participant, process, or circumstance, and it is unmarked when it coincides with the grammatical subject, marked when something else, a circumstance or a complement, is fronted instead. Interpersonal Theme covers finite verbal operators, wh-elements, vocatives, and modal adjuncts, the elements that signal stance or invite a response. Textual Theme comprises the conjunctions, relatives, and continuatives that link a clause cohesively to what precedes it (Halliday, 1994).

Empirical Applications of Theme-Rheme Analysis

Theme-Rheme analysis has by now travelled across a fair range of genres. Arunsirrot (2013), examining textual metafunction in Thai EFL students' English compositions, found that weak thematic progression tracked with weaker argumentation, evidence that thematic choice is constitutive of meaning-making rather than incidental to it. Hamid (2019), working from two research questions on Malaysian newspaper editorials, found that editorials built for direct information delivery leaned more heavily on unmarked topical Theme, while those built for cohesion made greater use of textual Theme. Yolanda et al. (2017), studying children's picture books, found nominal (topical) Theme dominating the corpus, which fits a broader tendency in narrative and self-referential genres to foreground the participant over circumstantial framing. Umiyatti (2019) analysed Theme and mood types in a political speech and found the dominant Theme types working to keep listener attention fixed on the speaker's central proposition. Jerome and Ting (2021) took the full SFL metafunctional apparatus rather than Theme alone, but their central point still applies here: separating a text's contributions by metafunction clarifies why a persuasive message is organised the way it is, a principle that transfers cleanly to the persuasive genre of the dating profile.

Together, these studies make a reasonably strong case: thematic choice is a reliable index of what a text is trying to do communicatively, topical unmarked Theme tends to dominate self-referential and

narrative genres, and departures from that pattern, textual or interpersonal Theme, usually signal specific rhetorical work such as cohesion-building or reaching out to an audience. What none of them has done is turn this apparatus on the online dating profile, even though the genre shares the key features already studied, brevity, high persuasive stakes, a strongly self-referential orientation. That is the extension this paper makes, using the same Hallidayan tools that have proved productive elsewhere.

Linguistic Studies of Online Dating Texts

A smaller body of work looks at online dating language without an SFL lens specifically. Nagarajan and Hearst (2009) found systematic vocabulary and self-description differences depending on whether a dater was after something casual or long-term. Hamilton (2020) found that particular lexical and structural choices reliably shaped how attractive or trustworthy a profile was judged to be. Schoendienst and Dang-Xuan (2011), looking at contact-initiation messages rather than profiles themselves, found that the structural properties of a message, not merely its content, predicted whether it received a reply. Hall and Pennington (2013) brought a gendered lens to the same territory and found men's and women's structural and lexical choices diverging in ways traceable to broader social scripts around dating and courtship. More recently, Cantos-Delgado and Maíz-Arévalo (2023) showed that humour in UK and Spanish dating profiles is culturally specific and does more self-presentational work than simple factual description could manage, and Zhang et al. (2025), interviewing college-educated dating-app users in China, found that profile construction routinely involves idealised self-presentation: exaggerating positive traits, selectively concealing identifying information. Self-description, on this evidence, is a managed process rather than a neutral act of disclosure. What none of these studies do is isolate Theme-Rheme structure as its own analytic category; the structural effects they report sit at the level of vocabulary, sentence type, humour, or overall self-presentation strategy. This paper complements that

literature with a finer-grained account of exactly how information is sequenced within the clause, a level of grammatical detail the broader studies do not reach.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Halliday's Theme and Rheme framework, situated within the textual metafunction of SFL. Theme is defined as the initial element of a clause that indicates what the message is about and provides the point of departure for the reader's interpretation, while Rheme is everything that follows and develops the Theme, typically carrying new information (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Marked and unmarked Theme are distinguished according to whether the Theme coincides with the unmarked subject position or is fronted from elsewhere in the clause (Saragih, 2013). Topical, interpersonal, and textual Theme are distinguished by function: topical Theme carries the experiential participant, process, or circumstance; interpersonal Theme signals stance, modality, or address; and textual Theme provides cohesive linkage to prior discourse (Halliday, 1994). This tripartite, marked/unmarked apparatus supplies the analytic categories used to classify every clause in the sampled self-description texts.

Methodology

To answer the research question above, the study adopted a qualitative document-analysis design, chosen for its suitability to close, clause-level linguistic examination of naturally occurring text. Documents were drawn from five free online dating platforms in active use in the Nigerian and international dating market: OkCupid, Bumble, Tinder, HER, and Facebook Dating. From these five platforms, twenty-five self-description texts were selected purposively, five per platform, on the basis that the pool of daters sampled should reflect a mix of heterosexual and LGBTQI+ orientations, both Black and White racial identities, and an age range of 18 to 35 years, so that the thematic patterns reported below would not be an artefact of a narrow demographic slice.

Only content already visible to the public was

collected; no private, restricted, or authentication-gated material was accessed at any point. Every dater discussed in this article appears under a pseudonym rather than any identifying username encountered during collection, and no image accompanying a text is reproduced in a form that could compromise a dater's offline identity.

Ethical Considerations

Every text analysed here was already visible to any visitor to the relevant site; no account, match, or authenticated access of any kind was needed to see it, and no private message, restricted field, or paywalled content was accessed at any stage. Usernames appear nowhere in this article. Each dater is given a pseudonym, and no self-description is paired with a detail, a full username, an exact age, a specific location, that would make its writer identifiable to a third party. Because the study works from pre-existing public text rather than intervening with living participants, and because no interviews, surveys, or direct consent processes were involved, formal institutional review was not required under the human-subjects policies applicable to the researcher's institution; the analysis instead follows the ethical norms generally accepted for linguistic research on publicly available digital text. Readers evaluating this article against a specific outlet's editorial policy are encouraged to consult that outlet's own current requirements for publicly scraped social media material, since norms in this area continue to

evolve.

Each self-description text was first broken down into its independent clauses. Every clause then received a Theme code, following Halliday's (1994) categories, topical unmarked, topical marked, interpersonal, textual, with whatever remained coded as Rheme. Where a clause carried more than one thematic element, a textual Theme immediately followed by a topical one, for instance, both were coded, consistent with how Halliday treats multiple Theme. Several self-description texts pack more than one independent clause into a single orthographic sentence, so coding proceeded clause by clause rather than sentence by sentence, ensuring that no instance of thematic choice was collapsed into, or obscured by, a neighbouring clause. Once every clause in the twenty-five-profile corpus was coded, Theme-type frequencies were tallied and expressed as percentages, giving the example-led discussion below a quantitative anchor. Illustrative profiles are reproduced in full in the next section precisely so that each percentage reported later can be traced back to the specific text from which it was derived.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The following profiles illustrate the range of thematic choices identified across the corpus. Each self-description text is presented with its Theme-Rheme segmentation, followed by an interpretive discussion.

Profile 1 (Alvin)

Theme	Rheme
Alvin (He)	is cool
He	is calm
He	is a little bit good
He	is a little bit bad
I	like female with a sense of humour
Female	smells nice

The app	says [ladies should text first]
I	see [no reason]
You	will match with people
You	will refuse to text
You	trust me

Alvin's self-description reads: "cool calm and a little bit of good and bad. I like female with great sense of humour and female smells nice, the apps says ladies should text first so I see no reason why you will match with person and refuse to text, trust me I hold conversation and I am that sweetheart you looking for." Every Theme here, "Alvin/he," "I," "female," "the app," "you," is topical unmarked, since each one lines up with the grammatical subject. That means every clause opens on a named participant: Alvin himself, women in general, the platform, or the

person reading. Nobody frames anything circumstantially first. The Rhemes do the evaluative work instead: Alvin comes across as cool, calm, a mix of good and bad; women are pleasant but slow to initiate; the reader is someone who, in Alvin's telling, should not withhold conversation. Identity claims about both writer and imagined reader arrive before any qualifying detail gets a look in, which fits a genre where a writer has only seconds to prove relevance.

Profile 2 (Jonas)

Theme	Rheme
I	enjoy playing video games
I	enjoy gyms
I	enjoy reading
I	enjoy hanging out in quiet places
I	am a big fan of pop/action [films]
I	am a big fan of TV shows
I	like watching football

Jonas's text, "My free time, I enjoy playing video games, gyms, reading and hanging out in quiet places. I'm also a big fan of pop/Action, TV Shows/watching football," runs entirely on the first-person pronoun as topical unmarked Theme. Every single Rheme hands over another leisure activity. Seven clauses in a row opening with "I" produce

something close to a list, and the effect is self-containment: Jonas reads as someone whose free time is already spoken for by solitary or homosocial pursuits, which quietly recasts dating as one activity jostling for space among several others rather than the point of the exercise.

Profile 3 (Debby)

Theme	Rheme
If you	are looking for who to invite to your house
That	is all I am getting here
You	have to lay a foundation [friendship] before [building]
I	really believe [in friendship]
I	appreciate friend[ship]

Debby's text mixes topical unmarked Theme ("you," "I") with textual Theme ("if," "that"), which link her clauses cohesively and mark a conditional, cautionary stance. "That" and "if" perform the textual function of connecting the clause to an implied prior experience of unwanted advances, while the topical Themes "you" and "I" carry the interpersonal weight of warning and self-representation respectively. The Rhemes make explicit what "you" are represented as

doing (seeking a hookup) and what "I" believes in (friendship as a precondition for anything further). The combination of textual and topical Theme here does more organisational work than in the two preceding profiles, because Debby's message depends on establishing a logical, conditional relationship between undesirable past behaviour and her present expectations.

Profile 4 (Nennyi)

Theme	Rheme
I	am the shy type
Why	is everyone looking for someone [who can hold a conversation]

Nennyi's self-description is barely two clauses long: one topical unmarked Theme ("I") and one interrogative interpersonal Theme ("why"). That wh-element does real work. It solicits a response, even an implicit one, from whoever is reading, and it puts Nennyi's frustration on the table before any actual

fact about her arrives. The Rhemes then fill in the rest: she is shy, and she is genuinely puzzled by an expectation she struggles to meet. Two clauses, two different thematic strategies. Even a text this short can manage self-presentation and audience address at the same time.

Profile 5 (David)

Theme	Rheme
As long as you	are not a bore
You	have a good sense of humour
We	are good
We	are trying to know ourselves
We	are trying to create meaningful relationships

David opens with a textual Theme ("as long as") that sets up a conditional frame, then settles into topical unmarked Theme ("you," "we") for the rest of the text. The pronoun "we" is the interesting move here. Rather than keeping himself and his prospective match as separate participants, David's Rhemes build

a shared identity that is already collaborative, "we are trying to know ourselves," "we are trying to create meaningful relationships," which projects the relationship he wants into the grammar of the profile before anyone has actually met.

Profile 6 (Tricia)

Theme	Rheme
I	am simple to be with
I	am fun to be with
If the vibe [is] no[t] pure	[I] am on my way out
You	should go straight to the point

Tricia combines topical unmarked Theme ("I," "you") with a textual/conditional Theme ("if the vibe no pure"). That conditional clause is grammatically non-standard but does exactly what David's "as long as" does: it frames an exit condition before any elaboration gets a chance. The directive Rheme attached to "you," "should go straight to the point," signals a profile built for efficiency and a low tolerance for indirection, a stance the imperative-adjacent Rheme projects on its own, without needing a separate descriptive statement to back it up.

Discussion of Findings

The research question was simple: how do online daters use Theme and Rheme in their profiles? The numbers answer it directly. Across all twenty-five profiles, topical unmarked Theme took 93.6% of all Theme choices; interpersonal Theme managed 3.2%, textual Theme 2.4%, and marked topical Theme barely 0.8%. Against Halliday's (1994) account of the textual metafunction, this distribution says that online daters build self-description texts almost entirely around a directly named participant, usually

the first-person pronoun or a directly addressed "you," rather than around circumstantial framing or explicit cohesive signalling. Unmarked topical Theme's near-total dominance points to a genre that rewards immediacy. Reading time is short, competition for attention is high, and daters default, whether they realise it or not, to the grammatical structure that puts a person, themselves or their imagined match, in the very first words a viewer sees.

Interpersonal Theme is a small slice of the total, but it means something. Realised through wh-elements and modal adjuncts like Nennyi's "why," it shows some daters using their limited space not just to describe themselves but to stage something closer to a conversation, inviting engagement before any actual exchange has begun. Textual Theme is rarer still, yet it punches above its weight wherever it shows up. Conditional connectors, "if," "as long as," let daters like Debby, David, and Tricia set qualifying conditions on a relationship before they ever describe what they want from it. That is the textual metafunction managing risk, essentially, setting expectations in a genre with no room for extended negotiation.

This lines up with Yolanda et al.'s (2017) finding that nominal (topical) Theme dominates self-referential and narrative genres, and with Hamid's (2019) finding that texts built for direct information delivery lean more on unmarked topical Theme than on textual Theme. It also fits Jerome and Ting's (2021) broader argument that separating a text's contributions by metafunction explains why persuasive messages get organised the way they do; in the dating profile, much as in the cancer-prevention posters Jerome and Ting examined, what a writer chooses to foreground cannot be pulled apart from the text's persuasive goal. Where the present findings diverge is from Arunsirrot's (2013) work on student writing, where thematic progression problems tracked with weaker communicative outcomes. Here, by contrast, thematic homogeneity, the repeated use of "I" as Theme, is not a communicative weakness. It reads as a deliberate strategy of self-focused disclosure that suits the genre.

Across every profile examined, the Rheme carries whatever a dater most wants registered, a personality trait, a leisure interest, a relationship expectation, an implicit warning, in evaluative, aspirational, or conditional form. Theme and Rheme are not neutral scaffolding in this genre. They get put to work, consciously or not, to manage the order in which a prospective partner receives information about the writer, and that ordering is itself part of what makes the profile persuasive.

There is a broader point worth making about the marked/unmarked distinction too. Halliday (1994) treats unmarked Theme as the default choice, the one that requires no special interpretive effort because it coincides with the grammatical subject. Marked topical Theme's near-total absence in this corpus, 0.8%, says online daters almost never foreground a circumstantial element, a time, place, or manner adjunct, ahead of a participant. That is worth flagging because circumstantial framing is common enough in other short self-descriptive genres: a biographical blurb or professional summary will often open with a location ("In Lagos...") or a temporal adjunct ("After years of..."). Its near-absence here suggests the dating profile is, as a genre, even more tightly oriented toward immediate, person-first disclosure than those comparable genres, possibly because a dating profile's purpose is relational and evaluative in a way a biographical blurb's is not.

One more thing emerges from the analysis: a link between Theme choice and how sincere or blunt a profile feels. Profiles built on one repeated topical Theme, Jonas's is the clearest example, read as direct and unadorned, because the grammar leaves no room for hedging once the same participant keeps getting reintroduced clause after clause. Profiles that alternate topical Theme with textual or interpersonal Theme, Debby's and Tricia's, read as more layered, since the writer is naming a participant and managing a logical or interpersonal relationship with the reader at the same time. Thematic variety, even at the low frequencies seen here, seems to track with a more complex self-presentation strategy, one where the writer is not simply listing facts but actively shaping how the reader will interpret them.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its sample size and sampling technique. Twenty-five profiles, though sufficient for the qualitative, illustrative purposes of a document-analysis design, cannot support strong generalisations about thematic patterning across the full population of online daters, and the purposive sampling technique, while appropriate for identifying rich illustrative cases, offers no assurance that daters outside the five platforms and demographic range sampled here would show the same thematic tendencies. Additionally, the coding of Theme and Rheme, while guided by explicit Hallidayan criteria, retains an interpretive element, particularly in borderline cases involving elliptical or non-standard clause structures common in informal digital writing, and a different analyst might code a small number of ambiguous clauses differently. Future studies with larger, more demographically stratified samples, and ideally involving multiple independent coders, would help establish the robustness of the patterns identified here.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper set out to examine how online daters use Theme and Rheme in their self-description texts. Working from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, the analysis of twenty-five purposively sampled profiles found topical unmarked Theme dominating the genre overwhelmingly, with interpersonal and textual Theme playing smaller, but rhetorically meaningful, supporting roles. Daters, this pattern indicates, privilege direct, participant-first self-presentation over circumstantial or purely cohesive framing, a strategy that suits a genre defined by brevity and high persuasive stakes. Theme-Rheme analysis, already productive with editorials, student writing, political speech, and children's literature, extends usefully to the online dating profile too, surfacing thematic patterning that a purely content-based or psychological analysis would miss entirely.

A few recommendations follow. Future linguistic work on dating profiles should attend to thematic structure and not just lexical content, since the ordering of information carries interpretive weight of

its own. Platform designers might note that prompts encouraging daters to lead with participant-focused statements, which is what most daters already do by instinct, are likely to align with users' natural rhetorical habits, while prompts that pull toward circumstantial or conditional framing may produce profiles that read as less immediately engaging. Future research could test whether thematic choices in dating profiles correlate with measurable outcomes, match rates, perceived attractiveness, and whether thematic patterns vary systematically by gender, sexuality, or platform design. Comparative work across cultures and languages would be worth doing too. Theme-Rheme ordering is a feature of English clause grammar generally, but it may interact differently with self-presentation norms elsewhere, and cross-linguistic dating platforms would offer a natural setting for asking whether the strategies identified here are specific to English-language self-description or reflect something closer to a universal tendency toward participant-first self-disclosure in short persuasive genres.

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