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Original Research Article

## **Reading the Picture: A Visual Grammar Analysis of Profile Photographs in Online Dating**

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**Abstract:** The profile photograph is often the first thing, sometimes the only thing, a prospective match actually looks at before deciding whether to engage further. This paper applies Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar to the profile photographs of twenty-five purposively sampled online daters drawn from OkCupid, Bumble, Tinder, HER, and Facebook Dating, asking how online daters use visual elements to convey meaningful information about themselves. Using a qualitative document-analysis design, each profile photograph was examined for its representational meaning (the participants, processes, and circumstances depicted), interactive meaning (gaze, social distance, camera angle), and compositional meaning (information value, salience, framing), following Kress and van Leeuwen's tripartite metafunctional framework. Daters make deliberate choices, not always fully conscious ones, about pose, attire, background, camera distance, and framing to construct representational meanings of affluence, availability, shyness, openness, or sexual candour. These choices are frequently calibrated to reinforce claims made in the accompanying self-description text. Interactive meaning gets shaped chiefly through camera angle and gaze, with front-facing, eye-level shots dominating the corpus and signalling equality and openness between the represented dater and the viewing participant. Compositional meaning, realised through the salience of the human figure against its background and the framing of the image within the platform's visual conventions, channels viewer attention further toward specific identity claims. The paper concludes that profile photographs are not passive supplements to the textual self-description. They're an independently meaningful semiotic resource governed by identifiable visual-grammatical regularities. Implications for the study of multimodal self-presentation are discussed.

**Keywords:** Visual Grammar, Kress And Van Leeuwen, Online Dating, Profile Photographs, Multimodal Self-Presentation

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## Introduction

Online dating profiles combine two distinct semiotic resources: a self-description text and a profile photograph. The text gets composed word by word and can be revised deliberately. The photograph, though, is usually what a viewer encounters first, before any text is even read, and a first impression formed from an image can be hard to shake even when the text underneath tells a different story. Fiore et al. (2008) found profile photographs consistently rated among the strongest predictors of a profile's perceived attractiveness. Ifensor, Madu, and Asika (2022) found something similar: profile photographs attracted engagement from prospective partners more strongly than verbal content alone on the iFlirt dating platform. Given how much weight the photograph carries, a systematic account of how meaning actually gets built visually within dating profiles matters a lot for the study of digital self-presentation.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that images, like language, form a coherent semiotic system, one capable of realising representational, interactive, and compositional meanings, in direct parallel to Halliday's (1994) ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions in verbal language. Their theory of visual grammar treats visual choices, who or what's depicted, from what angle, at what distance, with what framing, as systematically meaningful rather than incidental. That gives researchers a principled vocabulary for describing exactly how an image communicates. Applied to the dating profile photograph, this framework lets an analyst move past an impressionistic sense that "the picture looks confident" or "the picture looks affluent," toward a specific account of which visual choices, pose, gaze, background, and camera distance are actually producing that impression.

Despite how much profile photographs matter to online dating outcomes, and despite visual grammar's demonstrated productivity in analysing advertisements (Ahmed et al., 2021), websites (Ping, 2018), textbooks (Salbego et al., 2015), posters (Zhang, 2023), no published study has applied Kress and van Leeuwen's framework specifically to online dating profile photographs. That's a real gap, because the dating profile photograph is a distinctive kind of image. Unlike an advertisement or a poster, it's created by the same person it represents, for the specific purpose of attracting a romantic or sexual partner, under conditions of real self-consciousness about how the image will be read.

This paper addresses that gap by asking: how do online daters use visual elements in their profiles? Twenty-five purposively sampled profile photographs are analysed using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions, with representative examples examined closely to show the visual strategies daters use to construct the impressions they want. A 2025 experimental study of Tinder-style profiles found that manipulated visual properties of a profile photograph, richness, blurriness, and degree of beautification measurably shifted viewers' dating-outcome judgements (Dai & Xia, 2025). That gives further empirical confirmation that the visual-grammatical choices examined qualitatively here carry real, measurable interpretive consequences, not just academic ones.

## **Aim and Objectives**

The overarching aim of this study is to describe how the visual grammar of the profile photograph contributes to a dater's self-presentation. Toward that aim, the study catalogues the representational choices, participants, pose, attire, setting, visible in the sampled photographs; catalogues the interactive choices, gaze, social distance, camera angle, realised in the same images; catalogues the compositional choices, information value, salience, framing, that organise each image as a whole; and interprets how these three layers of choice combine into specific, recognisable identity claims.

## **Research Question**

One question drives the analysis that follows: how do online daters use visual elements in their profiles?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study should matter to a few different audiences. For linguists and multimodal discourse analysts, it extends visual grammar analysis, which had mostly been applied to commercial and institutional imagery, into the more personal, self-authored genre of the dating profile photograph. It tests whether Kress and van Leeuwen's categories, built largely around professionally produced images, actually hold up when applied to informally composed, self-taken or self-selected photographs. For online daters, this study offers a way of understanding why certain photographs might get read a certain way by viewers, which could inform more deliberate choices about pose, background, and framing. For dating-platform designers, understanding the visual-grammatical regularities that keep showing up across successful and unsuccessful profile photographs could inform the photo-selection guidance offered to users. And for researchers of digital self-presentation more broadly, this shows that visual grammar analysis can work alongside text-based linguistic analysis to give a fuller picture of how identity gets built multimodally online.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Role of the Photograph in Online Dating**

An online dating profile typically consists of a picture component alongside an open-ended self-description text (Big Data E-Book, 2013). Fiore and Donath (2004) and Fiore et al. (2008) established early on that the profile photograph works as an independent predictor of perceived attractiveness, separate from whatever persuasive effect the text has. Van Der Heide, D'Angelo, and Schumaker (2012) found that photographic self-presentation exerts a distinct, sometimes dominant, effect on impression formation relative to verbal self-presentation on social networking profiles. That's consistent with the broader intuition that images get processed fast, often before any accompanying text gets read in detail. Ifensor, Madu, and Asika (2022), studying the iFlirt dating platform, found profile photographs attracting friendship and engagement for profile owners more effectively than verbal resources did, which directly backs up the case for a dedicated visual analysis of the dating profile photograph. More recently, Degen and Kleeberg-Niepage (2023) looked at how online daters strategically select and read photographs as visual self-presentation

devices. Zhang et al. (2025), interviewing college-educated dating-app users, found daters routinely picking idealised photographs that exaggerate positive personality traits and strategically hide identifying information, confirming that the visual side of a dating profile isn't incidental or unplanned but the product of deliberate choices. Dai and Xia (2025) went further and showed experimentally that manipulating specific visual properties of a dating profile photograph, image richness, blurriness, and beautification, produces measurable shifts in viewers' evaluations. That's behavioural confirmation of the interpretive weight visual grammar analysis assigns to these kinds of choices.

### **Kress and van Leeuwen's Theory of Visual Grammar**

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) proposed that visual images, like verbal language, are structured by a systemic grammar capable of realising three metafunctions, running in parallel to Halliday's account of language: representational meaning (parallel to the ideational metafunction), interactive meaning (parallel to the interpersonal metafunction), compositional meaning (parallel to the textual metafunction) (Kalantzis & Cope, 2022; Feng & Espindola, 2013). Representational meaning concerns the represented participants, processes, and circumstances depicted inside an image. It distinguishes narrative processes (action, reactional, mental, verbal processes realised through vectors) from conceptual processes (classificational, analytical, symbolic structures) (Sun, 2017). Interactive meaning concerns the relationship built between the represented participants and the image's viewers, realised through gaze (demand versus offer), social distance (close-up, medium, or long shot), and camera angle (high, eye-level, or low). Each of these implies a particular relation of power, intimacy, or equality between viewer and viewed (Widayanti, 2016; Fattah & Sultan, 2020). Compositional meaning concerns how the representational and interactive elements of an image get integrated into a coherent visual whole, through information value (where elements sit according to given/new and ideal/real zones), salience (how visually prominent elements are, through size, contrast, focus), and framing (whether there are dividing lines that connect or separate elements) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

### **Empirical Applications of Visual Grammar**

A handful of studies show what visual grammar analysis can do across genres. Ahmed, Bilal, Asgar, and Zaman (2021) analysed six advertisements from Punjabi educational institutions using Kress and van Leeuwen's framework and found representational, interactive, and compositional choices working together to shape and persuade viewers' attitudes toward the advertised institutions. They concluded that non-verbal, visual language carries persuasive potential comparable to verbal language. Salbego, Heberle, and Balen (2015) looked at images in English textbooks and found the representational, interactive, and compositional structure of textbook visuals meaningfully scaffolding language learners' comprehension, which underscores that visual grammar analysis has pedagogical applications too, not just commercial ones. Ping (2018) analysed the homepage of a corporate website and found colour playing a decisive role in interactive meaning, shaping how viewers understood the company's operating philosophy, while

information value in the compositional metafunction shaped the overall narrative the website communicated. Zhang (2023) looked at promotional poster images for an animated film and found posters increasingly favouring narrative representation, indirect eye contact, and personalised information value, salience, and framing, reflecting how visual persuasion conventions evolve over time.

None of these studies looks at the profile photograph in online dating, though. Which is a little odd, given the genre shares key features, a persuasive purpose, a self-selected or self-produced represented participant, high communicative stakes, with the advertisements, websites, and posters already studied through this framework. This paper extends visual grammar analysis to this genre, using the same Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) apparatus that has already proved productive in advertising, web design, and promotional imagery.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar, which treats images as a coherent semiotic system capable of realising representational, interactive, and compositional meanings, in systematic parallel to Halliday's (1994) three metafunctions of language. This framework suits the study of profile photographs well, because it lets the represented participant (the dater as depicted), the interactive relationship (between the dater and the viewer), and the compositional arrangement (how the image organises visual attention) get analysed as distinct but interacting dimensions of meaning. Each one contributes independently to the overall impression a photograph creates.

### **Methodology**

To answer the research question, a qualitative document-analysis design was used here, applied to images rather than verbal text. The image corpus was drawn from the same five free dating platforms examined in the companion studies of this larger project: OkCupid, Bumble, Tinder, HER, and Facebook Dating, twenty-five profiles purposively selected, five per platform. As with the companion analyses, selection deliberately spanned ages 18 to 35, both heterosexual and LGBTQI+ orientations, and both Black and White racial identities, so the visual-grammatical patterns reported below would reflect a reasonably broad cross-section of the dating-app population rather than a narrow one.

The unit of analysis is the primary profile photograph publicly displayed on each of the twenty-five selected profiles. Only images already visible to the public were looked at; no gated or authentication-restricted content was accessed at any point. Where a photograph is described below, identifying details have been generalised or blurred out, and pseudonyms stand in for any username encountered during collection, in line with standard ethical practice for research drawing on publicly posted social media content. Each photograph was coded holistically against Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) three metafunctions: representational meaning (participants, pose, attire, setting), interactive meaning (gaze, social distance, camera angle), and compositional meaning (information

value, salience, framing). Holistic rather than sequential coding was necessary here because, unlike a verbal clause, which can be broken into discrete thematic units, a photograph presents all its representational, interactive, and compositional cues to the viewer at once. Full descriptions of each illustrative photograph are given in the next section, so the summary judgements in Table 1 can be traced back to specific visual detail.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Working with real photographs of identifiable individuals raises ethical questions beyond what verbal text alone raises, and this study treats those questions as its own methodological concern, not an afterthought. Every photograph examined was, at the time of collection, openly viewable by any visitor to the relevant platform. No account, no match, no other authenticated interaction was needed; no private or restricted images were accessed. No photograph is reproduced in this article. All analysis proceeds through verbal description only, and every description was written to avoid naming a specific platform username, exact age, precise location, or any other detail that would make the person depicted easily identifiable to a reader. Some photographs in the sampled corpus include revealing or sexually suggestive attire. These are described only as much as necessary to support the visual-grammatical analysis, noting, say, that an image emphasises exposed skin as part of its representational meaning, and no image is described in a way meant to be salacious or to invite extra scrutiny of the individual beyond what the analysis actually requires. As with the companion textual analyses of this corpus, the study looks at pre-existing public material rather than intervening with living participants or collecting new personal data, so formal institutional review wasn't sought. Researchers or editors working under a stricter policy specifically for image-based social media data are encouraged to raise this directly during review, since norms in this area are still developing and can differ by outlet.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The following profile photographs illustrate the range of visual strategies found across the corpus.

#### **Profile 1 (Alvin)**

Alvin's profile photograph depicts him as a tall, fair-complexioned man in his thirties, shown in full-body view, standing in a black polo shirt and sky-blue jeans, with a black bag slung over one shoulder, hands in his pockets, against a visually pleasant background. Representatively, the combination of semi-formal attire (the polo, styled hair) and casual elements (jeans, an informally slung bag) constructs a hybrid identity that lines up with Alvin's self-description as "a little bit of good and bad." The pleasant, well-kept-looking background and the styled bag together suggest a degree of material comfort. Interactively, the photograph is shot from a front-facing, eye-level angle, which, per Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework, signals equality between the represented participant and the viewer rather than dominance either way. It's an offer image rather than a demand one, since Alvin's gaze doesn't directly confront the viewer but sits oriented

outward, relaxed. Compositionally, Alvin's full figure occupies the central salience of the frame, with the background kept visually subordinate, so viewer attention goes squarely to his attire and posture as the main bearers of meaning.

### **Profile 2 (Jonas)**

Jonas's photograph shows him seated shirtless in a relaxation setting, holding a can of an alcoholic beverage in one hand, with a phone and power bank visible on a nearby table, and a physique that suggests regular exercise. Representatively, the absence of a shirt, the alcoholic beverage, and the visibly muscular build together construct an image of leisurely, informal masculinity, not professional or romantic formality, which lines up with his textual self-description emphasising gym attendance, gaming, and football. The power bank, a small but telling circumstantial detail, adds a representational note of habitual device use, reinforcing the textual claim that his free time gets taken up by media-related leisure. Interactively, the seated, relaxed pose and the lack of direct address to the camera construct an offer image, positioning the viewer as an observer of Jonas's leisure rather than someone he's directly addressing. Compositionally, Jonas's torso is the most salient element of the frame, foregrounded through both size and central positioning, with the surrounding domestic setting rendered fairly marginal. That reinforces the idea that physique and leisure activity, not any narrative or contextual detail, are what the image is actually built around.

### **Profile 3 (Debby)**

Debby's photograph depicts a woman in her twenties wearing a white singlet without a brassiere, with visible nipples through the fabric, in a pose that foregrounds her figure. Representatively, the deliberate exposure constructs a seductive self-presentation aimed at the visual assertion of sexual availability, an interpretation that the viewer's contextual knowledge of the dating-app genre reinforces. Interactively, the framing invites a demand-style engagement, where the viewer's attention gets directed insistently toward the represented participant's body, a visual strategy that produces, in terms of the broader study this analysis belongs to, the perception among interactive participants that Debby is oriented toward casual sexual encounters, a perception that seems to sit somewhat at odds with the more cautious, filtering stance evident in her self-description text. Compositionally, the high salience given to the exposed part of the image, achieved through central framing and contrast against the singlet's fabric, directs viewer attention straight to the represented participant's body ahead of anything else, background or setting, that might otherwise contextualise the image.

### **Profile 4 (Nennyi)**

Nennyi's photograph shows a young woman seated with her legs crossed, wearing a polo shirt and trousers, holding a handbag, occupying only part of the available seating space, photographed alone. Representatively, the closed body posture, crossed legs, and restrained use of space construct an impression of reserve consistent with her textual self-description as "the shy type." Interactively, the lack of direct engagement with the camera, combined with the solitary setting, produces an offer image that doesn't invite the

viewer's immediate address, mirroring the withdrawn, non-confrontational stance the pose itself suggests. Compositionally, the modest visual space Nennyi's figure occupies relative to the available frame constructs a lower degree of salience than you see in, say, Alvin's or Jonas's photographs, a compositional choice that reinforces rather than contradicts the representational and interactive meanings of reserve already identified.

### **Profile 5 (David)**

David's photograph depicts a young man seated alone, supporting his head with one hand, an iPhone in the other, a tablet visible on a nearby table, wearing a recognisably expensive shirt and eyeglasses. Representatively, the head-supporting gesture is a widely recognised visual convention for boredom or contemplation, while the branded, expensive attire and multiple visible devices construct an impression of material comfort. Interactively, the lack of direct camera engagement and the inward-directed gesture, hand to head, produce a reflective, offer-style image that doesn't solicit immediate viewer address. Compositionally, David's figure and the surrounding markers of affluence, attire, devices, and pleasant setting get comparable salience, so no single element dominates the frame. Instead, the image communicates a diffuse but consistent representational theme of comfortable boredom, which lines up closely with his textual self-description warning against "boring" conversation partners while he himself shows signs of that same boredom.

### **Profile 6 (Tricia)**

Tricia's photograph shows a young woman standing with her back partially turned to the camera, her face turned slightly toward the lens, wearing an orange singlet and a denim skirt. Representatively, the casual attire, singlet, skirt, constructs an impression of simplicity and informality, while the back-turned stance is a distinctive representational choice that can be read, given her textual self-description ("if the vibe no pure am on my way out"), as visually enacting a readiness to leave or disengage. Interactively, the partial turn away from the camera, combined with a slight facial engagement, produces an ambiguous gaze, neither fully an offer nor fully a demand, which mirrors the conditional, contingent stance of her text. Compositionally, the diagonal positioning of her body across the frame creates a dynamic, rather than static, compositional structure, reinforcing the sense of imminent movement her pose and her text both suggest.

### **Profile 7 (Osawe)**

Osawe's photograph depicts a young man with dreadlocked hair, wearing a white polo shirt, seated and facing the camera. Representatively, the dreadlocked hairstyle functions as a marked fashion and identity signifier, one that, within the Nigerian context part of this sample is drawn from, carries connotations that don't straightforwardly line up with the intellectual self-presentation ("sapiosexual") his accompanying text offers. Interactively, the seated, front-facing pose with direct camera engagement constructs a demand image, one that solicits the viewer's direct attention and, in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) terms, invites a form of social engagement or acknowledgement rather than passive observation. Compositionally, the hairstyle and the plain polo shirt get roughly

equal salience, with no single element visually dominating the frame. That produces a photograph whose representational message, fashion-consciousness, sits in some tension with, rather than reinforcing, the textual claim of sapiosexuality. It's a reminder that textual and visual components don't always align neatly, even within the same profile.

### **Profile 8 (Ibiese)**

Ibiese's photograph shows a man in his thirties standing in the fan section of a football stadium in Poland, wearing a black polo shirt and a gold necklace, with the stadium's architecture and crowd visible behind him. Representatively, the choice of setting, a live football match, itself a costly, logistically demanding form of leisure, together with the gold necklace, constructs an impression of affluence and an actively enjoyed, socially embedded lifestyle, quite different from the more static, studio-like settings seen in several other profiles in the corpus. Interactively, the outward, slightly distant gaze and the wide framing that includes a lot of background detail produce a long-shot composition that, per Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) account of social distance, suggests a more socially distant, observational relationship between viewer and viewed than the close or medium shots seen in profiles like Debby's or Osawe's. Compositionally, the stadium setting gets substantial salience alongside Ibiese's figure, a departure from profiles where the represented participant dominates the frame, and the background is subordinate. Her setting and participant share compositional weight, reinforcing the representational message that Ibiese's identity is partly built through his participation in a specific, visibly enjoyable, resource-intensive social world.

### **Cross-Profile Patterns**

Across the twenty-five profiles in the broader corpus these seven are drawn from, a few recurring visual-grammatical patterns show up. Front-facing or near-front-facing camera angles dominate the sample, consistent with a general dating-platform convention favouring images that let the viewer see the represented participant's face clearly. True high- or low-angle shots, which Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) associate with power differentials between viewer and viewed, are rare, suggesting that daters generally avoid visual framings that would put either themselves or their viewers in a subordinate position. Offer images, where the represented participant doesn't directly confront the camera, are somewhat more common than demand images in the corpus, though a fair minority, Osawe's photograph is one, deploy direct gaze deliberately to pull in stronger viewer engagement. Representational choices around attire and setting are the most variable dimension across the corpus, running from markers of affluence (David, Alvin) to markers of leisure and physicality (Jonas) to markers of reserve (Nennyi) to markers of sexual candour (Debby). That suggests that while the interactive and compositional dimensions of these photographs converge on a fairly narrow set of conventions, representational meaning remains the main place where individual daters actually differentiate themselves.

## Discussion of Findings

The question motivating this study asked how online daters use visual elements in their profiles. The analysis above, summarised in Table 1, answers this by showing that online daters are meticulous, whether consciously or not, about the visual elements accompanying their self-description texts. Pose, attire, background, and camera framing all contribute measurably to the representational, interactive, and compositional meaning potentials Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identify.

**Table 1.** Summary of interactive and representational visual-grammatical features across eight illustrative profiles.

| Profile | Gaze / Angle         | Social Distance       | Dominant Representational Meaning |
|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Alvin   | Offer, eye-level     | Long shot (full body) | Affluence, hybrid formality       |
| Jonas   | Offer, eye-level     | Medium shot           | Leisure, physicality              |
| Debby   | Demand, eye-level    | Close-up              | Sexual candour                    |
| Nennyi  | Offer, eye-level     | Medium-long shot      | Reserve, shyness                  |
| David   | Offer, eye-level     | Medium shot           | Affluence, boredom                |
| Tricia  | Ambiguous, eye-level | Medium shot           | Contingent readiness to depart    |
| Osawe   | Demand, eye-level    | Medium shot           | Fashion-consciousness             |
| Ibiese  | Offer, eye-level     | Long shot             | Social affluence, lifestyle       |

The findings show most profile photographs in the corpus favour front-facing, eye-level, offer-style compositions, a pattern that fits a genre where daters generally want to come across as approachable and non-threatening rather than dominant or subordinate. Where deviations from this pattern show up, Osawe's demand-style direct gaze, Debby's high-salience, seduction-oriented composition, these deviations track specific, identifiable communicative goals, soliciting direct engagement and asserting sexual availability respectively, rather than being random stylistic variation. This supports Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) foundational claim that visual choices are systematically, not incidentally, meaningful. Every visual-grammatical choice observed in this corpus can be tied to a plausible interpretive effect on the viewing participant. These qualitative interpretations line up with Dai and Xia's (2025) experimental finding that manipulated visual properties of dating profile photographs produce measurable shifts in viewer judgment, which lends independent empirical support to the claim that the visual choices catalogued in Table 1 are functionally consequential for real dating outcomes, not just analytically interesting.

These findings line up with those of Ahmed et al. (2021), Salbego et al. (2015), Ping (2018), and Zhang (2023), each of which found representational, interactive, and compositional choices working together to shape viewer interpretation and persuasive

effect across genres ranging from advertisements to textbooks to promotional posters. This study extends that line of work by showing the same visual-grammatical regularities operating in a genre, the self-produced dating profile photograph, that's different from previously studied genres in one important way: it's created by amateur, non-professional image-makers, under conditions of high personal stake and real self-consciousness. That daters nonetheless deploy visual grammar in ways that closely track patterns seen in professionally produced commercial imagery suggests the visual-grammatical conventions Kress and van Leeuwen describe aren't simply the product of professional training. They reflect broader, more widely shared cultural conventions for presenting yourself and others, visually.

A further point concerns the frequent, though not universal, alignment between representational meaning in the photograph and content in the accompanying self-description text. Profiles like Alvin's, Jonas's, Nennyi's, and David's representational visual meaning closely reinforces textual claims, producing a strongly unified multimodal self-presentation. In Osawe's profile, though, the fashion-oriented representational meaning of the dreadlocked hairstyle sits somewhat in tension with the textual claim of sapiosexuality. That shows alignment between text and image is a tendency, not a guaranteed feature of the genre, and that visual grammar analysis can catch points of multimodal tension that a purely textual analysis would miss entirely. A companion study focused specifically on how textual and visual components sync up across this same corpus goes into this more fully.

The variation in social distance across the corpus, from the close, high-salience framing of Debby's photograph to the more distant, socially observational framing of Ibiese's stadium image, further shows that compositional and interactive choices aren't uniform across the genre but get calibrated to different self-presentational goals. A close, high-salience composition tends to foreground the body and invite a more intimate or evaluative viewer response, while a long-shot composition that embeds the participant within a rich social setting tends to foreground lifestyle and social embeddedness over physical scrutiny. Both strategies show up within the same broad genre of dating profile photography, which suggests daters, whether deliberately or intuitively, pick compositional strategies suited to whatever aspect of themselves, physical attractiveness, lifestyle, personality, or social standing, they most want to foreground.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study's conclusions should be read alongside a few real constraints. Twenty-five profile photographs, while enough to illustrate a range of visual-grammatical strategies, can't support strong generalisations about visual choice across the full population of online daters, and purposive sampling doesn't guarantee representativeness across age groups, cultures, platforms, or, importantly, the technical quality and circumstances of photography available to different daters. Visual grammar coding, unlike more mechanical content analysis, involves a fair amount of interpretive judgement, especially for representational meaning, where the analyst has to draw on cultural and contextual

knowledge, the connotations of a dreadlocked hairstyle in a Nigerian context, say, that not every reader will have equal access to or agree on. A different analyst, or one from a different cultural background, might read some of the representational meanings identified here somewhat differently. Future studies with larger samples and multiple independent coders, ideally from varied cultural backgrounds, would help establish how robust and cross-culturally valid these interpretations actually are.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper asked how online daters use visual elements in their profiles. Working from Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar, the analysis of twenty-five purposively sampled profile photographs found daters making consistent, identifiable visual-grammatical choices, favouring front-facing, eye-level, largely offer-style compositions, while varying more in the representational content of attire, pose, and setting used to build specific identity claims like affluence, availability, reserve, or candour. Visual grammar analysis, already productive with advertisements, websites, textbooks, and promotional posters, extends usefully to the self-produced online dating profile photograph, too. It shows this genre of image, despite being made informally by non-professional image-makers, follows visual-grammatical regularities pretty close to those seen in professionally produced persuasive imagery.

A few practical and research implications follow from this. Future research on online dating self-presentation should treat the profile photograph as an independently meaningful semiotic resource worth analysing in its own right, not just an illustrative accompaniment to the self-description text. Dating-platform designers might think about offering users guidance informed by visual grammar principles, encouraging front-facing, well-framed images that avoid extreme camera angles associated with dominance or submission, for instance, since that kind of guidance would line up with conventions daters already seem to favour intuitively. Future research should look at whether specific visual-grammatical choices correlate with measurable outcomes like match rates, and whether cultural background systematically shapes both the production and interpretation of representational meaning in profile photographs, an especially pressing question given that this study found at least one representational element, hairstyle, carrying culturally specific connotations that may not travel the same way across different viewing communities. Comparative, cross-cultural research would be particularly valuable for figuring out which visual-grammatical patterns found here are broadly general and which are specific to the cultural and platform context this study's sample came from. Longitudinal research tracking the same daters' photograph choices over time, and any changes in match outcomes that go with them, would further help establish causal, rather than just associative, relationships between specific visual-grammatical choices and dating success.

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