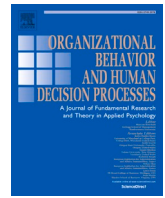




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Just be real with me: Perceived partner authenticity promotes relationship initiation via shared reality

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A B S T R A C T

Relationships are a critical component of professional life, yet people often experience difficulties forming workplace bonds. We examine the impact of perceiving one's interaction partner as authentic in an initial encounter as a key driver of relationship initiation through shared reality. Study 1, a longitudinal field study of professional networking events, revealed that perceived partner authenticity predicted relationship initiation four weeks later. Study 2 found pre-registered experimental evidence for the relationship between perceived partner authenticity and relationship initiation. Study 3 replicated these effects between pairs of new acquaintances working on a collaborative task and found that shared reality mediated the link between perceived partner authenticity and relationship initiation. In Study 4, these effects persisted for observable authenticity behaviors in conversations. Finally, Studies 5a-5b tested the causal effect of perceived partner authenticity on relationship initiation through increased shared reality. Overall, our results suggest that perceiving one's partner as authentic during initial professional encounters promotes relationship initiation by fostering shared reality.

Forming social connections with others is a critical component of achieving personal and professional success. As the world of work becomes increasingly social in nature (Grant & Parker, 2009; Oldham & Hackman, 2010) and as one-off interactions become more common due to increases in non-traditional work environments (Ashford et al., 2018; Cameron, 2022; Petriglieri et al., 2019; Schinoff et al., 2020), creating sustainable connections after first-time interactions is more important than ever. Indeed, forming lasting social bonds is related to both career success and satisfaction (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Wolff & Moser, 2009).

Despite our wealth of knowledge on the importance of relationships in professional interactions, far less is known about what sparks the formation of these bonds. To date, much of the research on the antecedents of professional relationship initiation has focused on dyadic characteristics which predispose individuals to form new connections such as proximity and similarity (e.g., McPherson et al., 2001; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018) or personality traits including extraversion and self-monitoring (e.g., Fang et al., 2015; Mehra et al., 2001). Recent research examining initial interactions presents a promising, albeit less explored avenue for understanding professional relationship initiation: specific

behaviors and resulting impressions that to lead to relationship initiation following an initial conversation. For instance, factors like having strong conversational flow (Truong et al., 2020) and talking about work versus non-work topics (Martin et al., 2022) have emerged as key drivers of relationship formation at work. However, our understanding of the elements of initial interactions conducive to professional relationship formation is still in its nascency.

One rarely acknowledged challenge in the research on the formation of professional connections is that people often find that *initiating* an interaction feels unpleasantly instrumental, transactional, and generally unsatisfying, particularly when the goal is to create a longer-lasting professional bond (e.g., to “network”; Casciaro et al., 2014; Kuwabara et al., 2018). A key driver of this resistance to relationship initiation is a sense of immorality and impureness that often arises during and after these interactions (Casciaro et al., 2014; Cha et al., 2019). Feeling “dirty” often leads individuals to avoid initiating relationships altogether (Casciaro et al., 2014), even when it is valuable for their personal and professional development. However, we lack an understanding of the behaviors enacted by conversation partners that might mitigate this resistance to building bonds.

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In the present research, we examine the impact of perceiving an interaction partner as authentic on relationship initiation. While the majority of prior research has focused on the effect of individuals' *own feelings of authenticity* on networking outcomes, less research has examined the effect of *perceiving one's interaction partner* as authentic ("perceived partner authenticity") on desired and actual relationship initiation behavior (Casciaro et al., 2014; Cha et al., 2019; c.f. Gardner et al., 2011). This omission is surprising because we know that initial interactions often elicit high self-enhancement and impression management motives (Ferris et al., 2015; Ferris & Sedikides, 2018), making one's perception of whether an interaction partner is behaving authentically (versus just trying to make a good impression) more salient. That is, perceived partner authenticity may be an especially potent driver of relationship initiation, precisely because it highlights the possibility of developing a genuine connection with another person.

More specifically, we theorize that perceived partner authenticity facilitates the experience of *shared reality*—the perception of sharing the same inner states about the world (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins et al., 2021)—a well-established predictor of interpersonal connection and the desire for relationship initiation (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). We hypothesize that perceptions of partner authenticity serve as a catalyst for relationships because they allow the natural process of consensus-building, in which conversation partners converge on common ground (Babcock et al., 2014; Deutsch & Mackesy, 1985; Hardin & Conley, 2001; Kenny & Kashy, 1994). In turn, a partner's (in)authenticity will enhance (or undermine) the experience of a shared reality: if people believe their partner's expressions are authentic, this perception is likely to serve as a foundation for developing a shared reality and in turn initiating a relationship. Conversely, if people are unsure whether their interaction partner is being genuine, they will be less able to gauge the veracity of their connection (i.e., "Do we actually see the world in the same way, or do they just want me to like them?"). Thus, we propose that during initial interactions, people may be especially attuned to indications of their interaction partner's authenticity as a precondition for establishing a shared reality with them. When their partner seems authentic and they establish a shared reality, we suggest that they will be more likely to initiate a relationship with that person.

In the present research, we use longitudinal, ecologically grounded paradigms situated in real-world networking events and conversations to examine how perceiving an interaction partner as authentic promotes relationship initiation by facilitating the experience of shared reality. We operationalize partner authenticity using both partner reports and observable authenticity behaviors. We then complement our field data with experimental evidence, allowing us to test the directionality of our hypothesized relationships and control for traditional impression management constructs. Across all studies, our results suggest that perceived partner authenticity is a potent driver of relationship initiation via shared reality.

The present research makes several core theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on professional relationships by focusing on the antecedents of professional relationship initiation. While there is a relatively extensive understanding of the outcomes of professional relationships, research on what leads to relationship initiation following an initial conversation is relatively scarce (Martin et al., 2022). We contribute to this recent work uncovering features of first-time professional conversations that lead to longer term relationship development by highlighting *how* perceptions of a conversation partner (rated by those in the conversation itself as well as by outside observers of the conversation) serve as a catalyst for a more sustained professional relationship to form.

Second, we contribute to a burgeoning literature on authenticity in workplace interactions. A small but promising body of work has considered the benefits of behavioral indicators of authenticity on job performance. For instance, customers prefer service representatives when they give authentic smiles (Grandey et al., 2005). Similarly,

customer service representatives are seen as less authentic when they give inappropriately intense emotional displays (Cheshin et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these streams of research cannot speak to the role of perceived partner authenticity on desired or actual relationship formation. We build upon their work by (1) testing whether perceiving one's conversational partner as authentic leads to relationship development and (2) identifying a mechanism underlying this effect. Specifically, we assess how perceived partner authenticity impacts shared reality, contributing to beneficial dyadic outcomes.

A third contribution of the present research is to theorize and test particular behavioral indicators of authenticity. To date, authenticity research has primarily relied on subjective perceptions of authenticity. We use a partner's behavioral indicators of authenticity (as rated by both the focal actor and outside observers) to predict the focal actor's desire to form a relationship with their interaction partner. By contributing a novel behavioral operationalization of authenticity in interpersonal interactions, we answer calls to uncover "what other factors, situational, actor-related, or observer-related, influence whether the actor is perceived as authentic" (Hewlin et al., 2020: 81) and begin to directly address the challenges inherent to accurately discerning authenticity in others (Bailey & Levy, 2022).

Finally, we contribute to the shared reality literature by identifying perceived partner authenticity as an important causal contributor to the experience of shared reality and by establishing the causal effect of shared reality on professional relationship initiation. Prior research has established that people are more likely to create shared realities when they are epistemically motivated to understand what is true and real about something (Echterhoff & Higgins, 2017; Higgins et al., 2021). No work to our knowledge has examined how a focal actor's perceptions of their interaction partner's motives can shape their sense of shared reality with that interaction partner. We show that perceiving an interaction partner is behaving authentically—expressing their true thoughts and feelings as opposed to "going along to get along"—allows people to experience a sense of sharing thoughts and feelings in common (i.e., experiencing a shared reality) with that interaction partner. Additionally, this work tests the causal effect of shared reality on professional relationship initiation, building on prior work testing the link between shared reality and desired relationship initiation with correlational methods (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). These findings contribute to the burgeoning research on the creation of shared reality in initial conversations (Koudenburg, 2018; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021).

1. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Relationships are a key source of both socio-emotional and instrumental support at work (Methot et al., 2016; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). Meaningful connections are well-established predictors of career advancement, job performance, and satisfaction in professional settings (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Ferris et al., 2009; Mann, 2018). Broadly speaking, professional connections—such as those that come about through conscious "social networking" attempts—also positively impact work outcomes (Casciaro et al., 2014; Markowitz et al., 2023; Wolff & Moser, 2009). As such, research on the importance of positive workplace relationships has risen in recent years (Dutton et al., 2010; Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). While much of this work establishes the benefits of relationships and their byproducts (such as social support and career opportunities – Kwon & Adler, 2014; Ferris et al., 2009), there is far less work regarding the antecedents of relationship formation in professional settings.

A small body of recent work points to the importance of the content of initial conversations in dictating the first impressions people make, and therefore the likelihood of future relationship formation (e.g., Martin et al., 2022; Truong et al., 2020). For example, recent work has found that when an interaction partner discusses non-work (versus work) topics (Martin et al., 2022) or highlights their career journey (versus career outcomes) in an initial professional introduction (Nault

et al., 2023) they are perceived to be more supportive and warm. This work highlights the importance of an interaction partner's behaviors in shaping first impressions and by extension relationship initiation.

We argue that one component of initial conversations that may be especially salient in guiding the formation of professional relationships is authenticity. As a multifaceted construct, authenticity can be considered from multiple angles. On the one hand, people have their own experience of authenticity, observed both at the trait level (i.e., "I am generally an authentic person"; Wood et al., 2008) and at the state level (i.e., "I feel authentic in this conversation"; Rivera et al., 2019). However, authenticity is also an attribution often made about others, assessing whether or not another person is being genuine, authentic, and true to themselves during an interaction (Bailey & Levy, 2022). We reason that when determining whether they want to form a relationship with their interaction partner, people rely not only on their own psychological experience of authenticity (as has been the focus of much prior work), but also on the perception of their interaction partner's authenticity.

Forming meaningful relationships and genuine bonds in professional contexts can be challenging due to norms for professionalism and the desire for "real" or authentic connection being at odds (Casciaro et al., 2014; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018; Pillemer, 2023). Initial interactions in professional settings often elicit high self-enhancement and impression management motives (Ferris et al., 2015; Ferris & Sedikides, 2018; Martin et al., 2022). Thus, in these interactions, people may be especially cognizant of the possibility that their conversation partner's behaviors are driven by instrumental motives, and as such may be especially attuned to their partner's behavioral indicators of authenticity. In the following section, we review literature on authenticity in professional interactions, and develop hypotheses for why perceived partner authenticity may be an especially potent driver of relationship initiation.

1.1. Perceiving one's partner as authentic in professional interactions

Authenticity—feeling or seeming like one is "true to self" in professional interactions—is an area of increasing interest to scholars of workplace relationships (Cha et al., 2019; Hewlin et al., 2020; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Martinez et al., 2017). Illustrating the importance of authenticity in professional contexts, individuals who feel able to express their authentic selves tend to experience higher job satisfaction (Cable et al., 2013; Martinez et al., 2017) and higher engagement with work (Bailey et al., 2022). Moreover, extensive research on emotional labor (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015) and facades of conformity (Hewlin, 2003; 2009) suggest that those who feel inauthentic in their work interactions tend to suffer negative consequences like burnout and a greater likelihood of turnover. That is, an individual's felt authenticity is important for their professional well-being.

In addition to the benefits of feeling authentic, research has also examined the effects of being perceived as authentic on workplace well-being and performance. Employees who are perceived as authentic are often liked more by others and experience greater affective well-being and job satisfaction (Liu & Perrewé, 2006). Individuals who convey authenticity in their speech tend to be viewed more positively (Markowitz et al., 2023). Moreover, candidates who display authentic smiles (versus inauthentic smiles or neutral expressions) are more likely to be selected for a hypothetical job (Krumhuber et al., 2007a, 2007b; Krumhuber et al., 2009), and actual job candidates high in self-verification striving (or the desire to be seen as they really are) perform better, so long as they are highly qualified (Moore et al., 2017).

Relatedly, research on Authentic Leadership ("AL"; Gardner et al., 2011) emphasizes the value of signaling authenticity in a professional context. Leaders who are perceived by their followers as exhibiting a range of behaviors associated with authenticity—defined as "a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-

awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development" (Walumbwa et al., 2008: 94)—tend to experience a range of positive outcomes related to both subjective well-being and performance for both followers and the focal leader (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Gardner et al., 2011). While this research has examined perceived authenticity in professional contexts, there are specific and unique demands placed on an organizational leader (e.g., demonstrating collective self-awareness, Steffens et al., 2021) that limit the potential generalizability to other working professionals. Further, the dynamics of leader–follower dyads may differ from those of same-status dyads. Finally, this work typically focuses on long-term relationships, while we examine the importance of authenticity during the earliest stages of relationship initiation and development.

In sum, past work suggests that in professional contexts, both *feeling* authentic and *being perceived by others* as authentic are beneficial. However, the effects of *perceiving an interaction partner* as authentic on the focal actor's desire for relationship initiation (and actual relationship initiation) has been overlooked. Given that authenticity involves the perception that inner states are aligned with outer expressions, perceiving that one's interaction partner is behaving authentically may serve as a catalyst for an initial conversation to develop into a more sustained bond. This idea is supported by research suggesting that in established relationships, perceiving one's romantic partner as authentic predicts greater relationship satisfaction and commitment, over and above one's own felt authenticity (Wickham, 2013). However, to our knowledge, the relational effects of perceiving a partner as authentic have not been examined in initial interactions.

1.2. Behavioral indicators of authenticity in professional interactions

Research in the domain of authenticity has primarily examined subjective perceptions of one's own or others' authenticity using self-report measures. Scholars have noted the challenge of discerning authenticity in others (Bailey & Levy, 2022), which is not surprising given that the inner states of others are not readily observable. In contrast, we draw upon a recent theoretical model of authenticity (Pillemer, 2023) to operationalize behavioral indicators of authenticity. Perceptions of authenticity are often based upon the extent to which a conversation partner's outward behaviors appear to be aligned with their inner states. Employees can signal this alignment (and thereby impact perceptions of their authenticity) by engaging in two specific types of behaviors (Pillemer, 2023): (a) *social deviations*, defined as appearing nonconforming and spontaneous and (b) *self-expressions*, that is, appearing transparent and vulnerable. As detailed in Pillemer (2023) and summarized below, these signals were derived from a wide range of research in psychology and organizational behavior examining the antecedents to perceived (in)authenticity (e.g., Bellezza et al., 2014; Berger & Barasch, 2018; Gershon & Smith, 2020; Lehman et al., 2019).

Social deviations signal authenticity by indicating to others that one is acting from one's own volition. By violating typical situational scripts and acting spontaneously, focal actors give the impression that their behaviors can be attributed to their own inner states, rather than just following the demands of onlookers and interaction partners (Pillemer, 2023). Conversely, when people appear overly governed by social scripts and rehearsed – such as posing (versus appearing candid) for a photo or retelling a story – they are seen as less authentic (Berger & Barasch, 2018; Gershon & Smith, 2020).

Self-expressions signal authenticity by expressly making inner states known to conversational partners. Drawing from social attribution theory (Heider, 1944) we suggest that, by making their inner states explicitly known, a conversation partner signals alignment between the inner self and outer expressions (Cha et al., 2019). Expressing oneself can be a powerful tool for bringing others closer by allowing conversational partners to "peel back layers" of the focal actor's inner self

(Altman & Taylor, 1973; Ensari & Miller, 2002; Greene et al., 2006). Transparency is considered a quality of authentic leadership (Gill & Caza, 2018) and experimentally increasing self-disclosure is related to increased perceptions of authenticity (Nah, 2022). Conversely, when individuals fail to self-disclose, their omissions are often detrimental to others' perceptions of them (John et al., 2016; Uysal et al., 2012).

In the present research, we use these authenticity behaviors – social deviations and self expressions – to (1) quantify authenticity as rated by third-party observers and (2) experimentally manipulate perceived partner authenticity. We hypothesize that in initial professional interactions, perceived partner authenticity (as rated by both oneself and third-party observers) will predict relationship initiation.

1.3. Perceived partner authenticity promotes relationship initiation through shared reality

We propose that perceiving one's partner as authentic contributes to relationship initiation by promoting the experience of shared reality. Hardin and Higgins (1996) theorized that to make sense of their experiences and connect with each other, people seek to establish the perception of sharing inner states (e.g., feeling, beliefs, or concerns) in common with another person (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins et al., 2021). For example, if Megan perceives that she feels the same way about a particular topic as Logan, then she would experience a shared reality with Logan specifically about that topic. People can also experience a sense of generalized shared reality about the world at large (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021) – if Megan perceives that she sees the world in the same way as Logan, she will experience a generalized shared reality with him.

Shared reality has been conceptually and empirically distinguished from related constructs (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). First, shared reality differs from constructs like perceived personality similarity or perceived demographic similarity in that it involves the perception of sharing the same *inner states* (e.g., feelings, attitudes, or opinions), as opposed to personality traits or observable characteristics (Echterhoff et al., 2009). Indeed, generalized shared reality has been found to predict important outcomes, such as social connection and the experience of having “merged minds,” over and above perceived similarity (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). Second, shared reality differs from objective agreement in that it involves the *subjective perception* of agreement (Echterhoff et al., 2009). Finally, unlike constructs like emotion similarity (where people experience the same emotion but about different things) or emotional contagion (where people unknowingly or empathically “catch” each other's emotions without knowing what the emotion was in response to), shared reality involves the perception of sharing the same inner states *about* certain topics in the world, such as events, other people, or ideas (Echterhoff et al., 2009). This latter distinction also differentiates shared reality from other interpersonal constructs like closeness, which reflect one's feelings towards one's partner as opposed to one's perception of having the same feelings as one's partner towards given topics (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). In contrast to other interpersonal constructs, shared reality is driven by the fundamental epistemic need to establish a sense of what is *real* and *true* in the world (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Echterhoff & Higgins, 2017). Indeed, generalized shared reality has been shown to predict the experience of certainty in one's perceptions of the world over and above other relationship constructs, including perceived similarity (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021).

We theorize that perceived partner authenticity promotes the experience of shared reality. Specifically, we propose that in initial conversations, which are often characterized by mutual self-disclosure and the establishment of consensus (Greene et al., 2006; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018; Kenny & Kashy, 1994; Ickes et al., 1988), perceiving that one's interaction partner is being authentic—i.e., disclosing thoughts and feelings that reflect their *real* or *true* inner states—allows one to assess whether one actually shares inner states in common with one's partner.

Perceiving that there is alignment between their interaction partner's inner states and outer expressions allows focal actors to gauge the alignment between their partner's inner states and their own inner states. In other words, we theorize that even if a conversation partner expresses agreement with one's own inner states, it should be difficult to experience a shared reality if one does not feel that the other person is expressing their authentic inner states. If Megan perceives that Logan is being inauthentic during their interactions at a professional networking event, Megan is unlikely to perceive that she and Logan see the world in the same way.

In turn, shared reality fosters the desire for relationship initiation: the perception of seeing the world in the same way has been theorized to produce an “epistemic glue,” binding partners to each other through the process of jointly satisfying epistemic needs and making sense of the world together (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018; Higgins et al., 2021). Newly acquainted dyads who experience a greater sense of generalized shared reality feel closer to each other, experience greater rapport, and a greater desire to interact again (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021), and people who experience a greater sense of generalized shared reality with a stranger experienced greater liking and desire to get along with the other person (Chu & Lowery, 2023). In established relationships, generalized shared reality predicts relational commitment, relationship satisfaction, perceived support during stressful life events, and the likelihood of reaching one's goals (Bar-Shachar & Bar-Kalifa, 2021; Elnakouri et al., 2023; Enstrom & Lydon, 2021; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021).

We theorize that even if one perceives one's interaction partner as authentic, without experiencing a sense of shared reality, perceived partner authenticity should not contribute to desired or actual relationship initiation. In other words, if upon conversing with another person, it becomes evident that one does *not* see the world in the same way, then a partner's authenticity should no longer promote relationship initiation. For example, if Megan perceives that Logan is disclosing his authentic inner states, but she feels that she and Logan do not see the world in the same way, her perception of Logan's authenticity should not contribute to her desire to initiate a relationship with Logan. Thus, perceived partner authenticity should promote desired and actual relationship initiation to the extent to which it promotes the experience of shared reality:

Hypothesis 1. *Perceived partner authenticity (as rated by oneself and by third-party observers) in an initial interaction will increase desired and actual relationship initiation.*

Hypothesis 2. *Perceived partner authenticity (as rated by oneself and by third-party observers) will have a positive indirect effect on both desired and actual relationship initiation through shared reality.*

1.4. Research overview

First, our work seeks to understand the impact of perceiving an interaction partner as authentic on desired and actual relationship initiation in initial professional encounters. As a benchmark, we compare the effects of perceived partner authenticity to known determinants of positive first impressions like perceived partner warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2007). In addition, we compare the relative effects of perceiving one's interaction partners as authentic to the focal actor's own felt authenticity. Finally, we examine generalized shared reality as a mechanism underlying the effect of perceived partner authenticity on relationship initiation and benchmark the effect of shared reality against that of perceived similarity. We test our hypotheses across six studies including experiments, dyadic interactions in real-world networking events, and real-time conversations. Further, we operationalize perceived partner authenticity using both self-report and observable behaviors.

In Study 1, we conduct a longitudinal field study to examine whether, at professional networking events, perceived partner

authenticity in an initial conversation predicts desired and actual relationship initiation four weeks later, beyond one's own felt authenticity at the event (H1). In Study 2, we conduct (1) a pilot study comparing the extent to which people desire authenticity (vs. warmth or competence) in a potential professional relationship partner, and (2) an experiment testing the causal effect of perceived partner authenticity on desired relationship initiation (H1), while experimentally controlling for warmth, competence, and likability. In Study 3, we test whether these effects replicate between pairs of new acquaintances working on a collaborative task (while controlling for likeability) and examine the mediating role of shared reality in linking perceived partner authenticity and desired relationship initiation (H1 & H2). In Study 4, we examine whether an interaction partner's observable authenticity behaviors (as rated by third-party observers) at a social networking event predict desired and actual relationship initiation beyond one's own observable authenticity behaviors, and whether shared reality mediates this effect beyond perceived similarity (H1 & H2). In Studies 5a-5b, we use an experimental causal chain method (Spencer et al., 2005) to test for causal evidence of the indirect effect of perceived partner authenticity on desired relationship initiation through shared reality (H1 & H2): first examining in Study 5a whether manipulating perceived partner authenticity affects shared reality while statistically controlling for warmth and competence, and then examining in Study 5b whether experimentally 'blocking' shared reality inhibits the effect of perceived partner authenticity on relationship initiation. Data and code for all studies can be accessed at: <https://osf.io/bgx8d/>.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we conducted a longitudinal field study in which attendees at professional networking events in several major U.S. cities completed three time-lagged surveys about their interactions with the people they met at a particular event. The first survey measured participants' felt authenticity at the event, their perception of their interaction partners' authenticity at the event, and their desire to initiate a relationship with each interaction partner. The second and third surveys (completed two and four weeks later, respectively) evaluated actual relationship initiation behavior (i.e., ongoing contact with these individuals).

2.1. Methods

Participants and Procedure. Participants were individuals who had voluntarily agreed to attend one of several professional networking events at major U.S. cities. The company that organized these events encouraged an informal and collegial atmosphere, with opportunities for people to get to know each other in a relatively relaxed environment, with the underlying goal of fostering meaningful professional connections and future relationships. Individuals who attended these events were from a range of professional backgrounds and industries. Participants were recruited directly at each event by employees and volunteer ambassadors who helped to run the networking events. Those who completed all three surveys in the appropriate time frame received free admission to future events with the networking group (valued at \$50-\$100).

Participants completed three time-lagged surveys following a single professional networking event about their connections and experience. The first survey was completed immediately (i.e., within 24 hours) after the event. Participants listed up to three individuals they met at the event and completed questions about their interactions with those individuals. Participants were given personal Qualtrics links that automatically saved their entries regarding the individuals they met, and automatically reminded them of these individuals upon opening the two follow-up surveys. The second survey was completed two weeks after the event. The final survey was completed one month following the event. A total of 363 participants completed the first survey, 195

completed the second survey, and 165 completed the final survey. Sample size for each analysis is included in the relevant tables.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Time 1 – Taken within 24 hours of event²

Perceived partner authenticity. We used four items (1 – not at all; 7 – extremely) adapted from commonly used measures of perceived authenticity (e.g., Bailey & Levy, 2022; Gershon & Smith, 2020): At the event, this person seemed “real”, “genuine” “authentic” and “true to themselves” ($\alpha = 0.97$).

Felt authenticity. The degree of authenticity participants felt during the entire networking event was measured visually with varying degrees (7 options) of increasingly overlapping circles asking participants to select the degree of overlap between their “event self” and their “actual self” (Adapted from Sedikides et al., 2017).

Perceived partner warmth. Participants indicated “How warm or cold is this person?” on a scale of (1) very cold to (7) very warm.

Perceived partner competence. Participants indicated “How impressive or unimpressive are this person's abilities?” on a scale of (1) very unimpressive to (7) very impressive.

Expected relationship initiation. We used two items (1 – not at all; 7 – extremely): “how likely is it that you will develop an ongoing ... professional relationship with this person?”, and “...personal relationship with this person?” ($\alpha_{T1} = 0.77$).

2.2.2. Times 2 and 3 – Taken two and four weeks after event

Expected relationship initiation. The same two items from Time 1 were measured at Times 2 and 3 ($\alpha_{T2} = 0.82$; $\alpha_{T3} = 0.83$).

Actual relationship initiation behavior. We measured actual relationship initiation with the binary item: “Have you been in contact with this individual since the event (yes or no)?” Responses were dummy-coded (Yes = 1, No = 0).

2.3. Results

We conducted a series of multi-level models (with a random intercept for participant) examining the impact of perceived partner authenticity (as rated by the focal participant) on expected and actual relationship initiation at Times 1, 2, and 3. We conducted linear models for expected relationship initiation and logistic models for actual relationship initiation (likelihood of being in contact two and four weeks later). We benchmarked the effects of perceived partner authenticity against one's own felt authenticity and against widely established predictors of social connection, notably perceived partner warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2007). Finally, we conducted additional robustness checks using contextual variables (see Supplemental Materials for details). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and correlations.

Perceived partner authenticity significantly predicted expected relationship initiation at Time 1 ($b = 0.38$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.54], $t = 4.37$, $p < .001$), at Time 2 ($b = 0.42$, 95% CI [0.32, 0.52], $t = 8.16$, $p < .001$) and at Time 3 ($b = 0.41$, 95% CI [0.30, 0.52], $t = 7.60$, $p < .001$). Perceived partner authenticity also predicted actual relationship initiation at Time 2 ($b = 0.40$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.59], $t = 4.12$, $p < .001$), and at Time 3 ($b = 0.32$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.51], $t = 3.25$, $p = 0.001$). Perceived partner authenticity continued to significantly predict all outcomes when controlling for participants' own felt authenticity during the event (See Table 2). The results were mixed when controlling for warmth and competence (See Table 2): When controlling for perceived partner

² This data was collected as part of a dissertation and included several exploratory measures to explore a variety of hypotheses related to professional networking. These data have not been used in any other publications. The full set of measures is available on OSF (https://osf.io/mxh9s/?view_only=147919c1498d4d0986406c2aad660640).

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations (Study 1).

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. T1.P.Partner.Auth.	5.74	1.26								
2. T1.Felt.Auth.	5.71	1.47	0.14** [0.08, 0.20]							
3. T1.Warm	5.80	1.25	0.66** [0.62, 0.69]	0.12** [0.06, 0.18]						
4. T1.Competence	5.37	1.41	0.65** [0.62, 0.69]	0.12** [0.06, 0.17]	0.56** [0.51, 0.60]					
5. T1.Expect.Init.	6.38	3.57	0.13** [0.07, 0.19]	0.05 [-0.01, 0.11]	0.09** [0.03, 0.15]	0.13** [0.08, 0.19]				
6. T2.Expect.Init.	3.60	1.72	0.32** [0.24, 0.39]	0.11* [0.02, 0.19]	0.28** [0.21, 0.36]	0.40** [0.33, 0.47]	0.29** [0.21, 0.36]			
7. T2.Actual.Init.	0.48	0.50	0.20** [0.12, 0.28]	0.10* [0.02, 0.18]	0.21** [0.13, 0.29]	0.24** [0.16, 0.31]	0.11** [0.03, 0.19]	0.49** [0.42, 0.55]		
8. T3.Expect.Init.	3.34	1.72	0.34** [0.26, 0.42]	0.08 [-0.01, 0.16]	0.29** [0.21, 0.37]	0.44** [0.36, 0.51]	0.23** [0.15, 0.32]	0.84** [0.82, 0.87]	0.45** [0.38, 0.52]	
9. T3.Actual.Init.	0.45	0.50	0.17** [0.08, 0.25]	0.15** [0.06, 0.23]	0.21** [0.12, 0.29]	0.25** [0.16, 0.33]	0.11* [0.02, 0.20]	0.50** [0.43, 0.56]	0.62** [0.57, 0.68]	0.56** [0.49, 0.61]

Note. "T1" = Time 1, "T2" = Time 2, "T3" = Time 3. "P.Partner.Auth." = Perceived Partner Authenticity, "Felt.Auth." = Felt Authenticity, "Expect.Init." = Expected Relationship Initiation, "Actual.Init." = Actual Relationship Initiation. *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. * indicates $p < 0.05$. ** indicates $p < 0.01$.

Table 2
Effect of perceived partner authenticity on expected and actual relationship initiation at times 1–3 controlling for felt authenticity, perceived partner warmth, perceived partner competence (Study 1).

	Linear Expected Initiation (T1)	Linear Expected Initiation (T2)	Linear Expected Initiation (T3)	Logistic Actual Initiation (T2)	Logistic Actual Initiation (T3)
Perc. Partner Auth.	0.38*** (0.21, 0.54)	0.42*** (0.32, 0.52)	0.41*** (0.30, 0.52)	0.40*** (0.21, 0.59)	0.32** (0.13, 0.51)
Perc. Partner Auth. Felt Authenticity	0.36*** (0.19, 0.53) 0.08 (-0.07, 0.22)	0.41*** (0.31, 0.51) 0.09 (-0.04, 0.21)	0.41*** (0.30, 0.51) 0.05 (-0.08, 0.19)	0.38*** (0.19, 0.57) 0.16 (-0.02, 0.33)	0.30** (0.10, 0.49) 0.24** (0.06, 0.42)
Perc. Partner Auth. Perc. Partner Warm.	0.39*** (0.16, 0.61) -0.01 (-0.23, 0.22)	0.30*** (0.17, 0.42) 0.20*** (0.08, 0.32)	0.27*** (0.14, 0.40) 0.23*** (0.11, 0.36)	0.18 (-0.06, 0.41) 0.36** (0.12, 0.61)	0.01 (-0.24, 0.27) 0.52*** (0.23, 0.81)
Perc. Partner Auth. Perc. Partner Comp.	0.21 (-0.01, 0.44) 0.22* (0.02, 0.41)	0.21*** (0.10, 0.32) 0.34*** (0.24, 0.44)	0.18** (0.06, 0.30) 0.39*** (0.29, 0.50)	0.19 (-0.04, 0.41) 0.33** (0.13, 0.53)	0.04 (-0.20, 0.28) 0.44*** (0.22, 0.65)
Perc. Partner Auth. Perc. Partner Warm. Perc. Partner Comp.	0.26* (0.01, 0.51) -0.06 (-0.29, 0.17) 0.22* (0.02, 0.43)	0.16* (0.04, 0.29) 0.11 (-0.01, 0.23) 0.31*** (0.21, 0.42)	0.12 (-0.01, 0.25) 0.12 (-0.01, 0.25) 0.36*** (0.25, 0.47)	0.05 (-0.20, 0.30) 0.28* (0.04, 0.53) 0.27** (0.07, 0.48)	-0.15 (-0.43, 0.13) 0.40** (0.11, 0.69) 0.36** (0.13, 0.59)
Observations	1,073	573	486	574	486

Note. "Perc." = Perceived, "Auth." = Authenticity, "Warm." = Warmth, "Comp." = Competence. For each outcome (Expected initiation at Times 1–2 and Actual initiation at Times 2–3), we conducted multilevel regression analyses (linear regression for expected initiation and logistic regression for actual initiation). In row 1, we entered perceived partner authenticity alone. In subsequent rows, we simultaneously entered perceived partner authenticity and each of our control variables: felt authenticity, perceived partner warmth, and perceived partner competence. Each cell displays the unstandardized beta coefficient, significance level (* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$), and 95% confidence intervals around the estimate.

warmth, perceived partner authenticity continued to significantly predict expected relationship initiation at all timepoints, but its effect on actual relationship initiation was no longer significant. Similarly, when controlling for perceived partner competence, perceived partner authenticity continued to significantly predict expected relationship initiation at Time 2 and 3, but its effect on expected relationship initiation at Time 1 and actual relationship initiation at Times 2 and 3 was no longer significant. When controlling for warmth and competence simultaneously, perceived partner authenticity continued to significantly predict expected relationship initiation at Time 1 and 2, but did not significantly predict expected initiation at Time 3, or actual relationship initiation at Time 2 or 3.

2.4. Summary

In Study 1, we surveyed individuals attending a professional networking event and followed their relationship initiation over 4 weeks. Perceived partner authenticity predicted expected relationship initiation measured 24 hours later, expected relationship initiation 2 and 4 weeks later, and actual relationship initiation 2 and 4 weeks later, in line with Hypothesis 1. Moreover, this effect occurred beyond participants' own felt authenticity. These results illustrate the power of perceiving a partner as authentic in predicting actual relationship initiation. Perceived partner authenticity predicted certain outcomes beyond warmth and competence, but the pattern was inconsistent—although field data is high on ecological validity, these types of data can be noisy. Thus, we next sought to explore these effects in a

controlled context.

3. Study 2

The primary goal of Study 2 was to replicate our findings from Study 1—that perceived partner authenticity predicts relationship initiation—in a controlled, experimental setting. Additionally, given the mixed effects of perceived partner authenticity on relationship initiation controlling for warmth and competence in Study 1, we sought to (1) benchmark the extent to which people desire authenticity in a potential professional relationship partner against warmth and competence an initial pilot study, and (2) directly control these variables experimentally. To test the causal relationship between perceived partner authenticity and relationship initiation, we conducted a two-cell experiment where participants were shown a user profile from a fictitious professional networking site. The content of the profile was identical between conditions (e.g., equally likable, warm, and competent) with one exception: being described as high versus low in authenticity. We then compared participants' intentions to form a relationship with the target, hypothesizing that participants would report greater desired relationship initiation with the target high (vs. low) in authenticity. This represents a conservative test of the null hypothesis, mainly that perceptions of authenticity do not have a causal effect on participants' desire to form a relationship provided a target is already described as fairly warm, competent, and likable.

3.1. Pilot study

We first conducted an online pilot study ($N = 250$) to examine whether participants desire authenticity in a potential professional relationship partner as much as they do warmth and competence, given the centrality of warmth and competence as the two primary dimensions of initial impressions (Fiske et al., 2007; Cuddy et al., 2008). Participants were told that a professional networking application was being developed which would facilitate video chat calls between users and asked how important the following six traits are when determining whether they would formally add someone new to their professional network: whether someone is authentic and genuine, whether they are warm and friendly, and whether they are competent and professional. We found that on average, participants indicated that perceived partner authenticity ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 0.83$) was significantly more important than perceived warmth ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 0.92$; mean difference = 0.49, 95% CI [0.37, 0.60], $t = 8.53$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.54$), and comparable to the importance of perceived competence ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 0.82$; mean difference = 0.06, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.18], $t = 0.95$, $p = 0.341$; Cohen's $d = 0.06$). Given that warmth has long been considered a transformational dimension of first impressions, altering participants' interpretation of other traits (Asch, 1946), we found it particularly compelling that participants desired authenticity *more* than warmth in a potential professional relationship partner. This provides initial evidence to support our theorizing that perceived partner authenticity is an equivalent or stronger driver of relationship initiation relative to the two primary drivers of first impressions.

3.2. Experiment methods

Pre-registration. We pre-registered our hypotheses, data collection, and analysis plan for this experiment on AsPredicted: https://aspredicted.org/1GJ_S36.

Participants and Procedure. 425 participants were recruited for this study from Amazon Mechanical Turk using the CloudResearch approved participant list. After applying our pre-registered exclusion criteria based on Qualtrics' bot detection tools, attention and quality checks, our final sample consisted of 338 participants (53.55% female; $M_{age} = 39.68$ [$SD = 12.10$]). All participants read the following prompt:

Imagine that a new professional networking app called "LetsConnect" just launched in your area. The purpose of LetsConnect is to help you find like-minded workers with whom you can share resources, job opportunities, and professional connections. You are going to help rate a potential user from the professional networking app based only on their intro profile and a few crowd-sourced ratings. After you read their profile, you will be asked to provide your opinion. Note that the crowd-sourced ratings will be shown with visual blue bars. The larger the blue bars, the higher the rating.

All participants were shown the same profile of a gender-neutral named target, "Jamie". This profile varied depending upon the participant's gender. Men saw a profile with a male-typed image and "he/him" pronouns. Women and other-gendered participants saw a profile with a female-typed image and "she/her" pronouns. Otherwise, Jamie's bio was identical across conditions, describing him/her as an entrepreneur in the health food space (full study stimuli is available on OSF).

Our manipulation was administered using visual bars described as "crowd-sourced ratings" of Jamie. Participants were told that these ratings come from other users on the app, representing how likable, authentic, warm, genuine, and competent Jamie was. Importantly, Jamie was described as equally likable, warm, and competent across conditions (i.e., near the midpoint of each bar). Meanwhile, participants in the *high authenticity* condition saw Jamie rated as above the midpoint on the "authentic" and "genuine" bars, and participants in the *low authenticity* condition saw Jamie as rated below the midpoint on "authentic" and "genuine" bars.

3.3. Materials

Perceived partner authenticity. As a manipulation check, participants evaluated Jamie on how authentic (s)he seemed. Participants were asked, "How well do the following adjectives describe Jamie?" (1 – Does not describe them at all; 7 – Describes them extremely well). The authenticity items were: authentic, genuine, true to themselves, and real ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Warmth and competence. In addition to the authenticity adjectives, participants evaluated Jamie on how warm and competent (s)he seemed. We collected these variables to test the robustness of the relationship between condition and expected relationship initiation.

Expected relationship initiation. Expected relationship initiation was measured using the same two items from Study 1 (1 – not at all; 7 – extremely): "How likely is it that you will develop an ongoing professional relationship with Jamie?", and "How likely is it that you will develop an ongoing personal relationship with Jamie?" (Pearson's $r = 0.74$, $p < .001$).

In addition, we measured the desire to initiate a relationship by asking participants, "Would you 'friend' Jamie on the app?" (1 – Definitely would not; 7 – Definitely would).

3.4. Results

We first confirmed our manipulation by comparing perceived partner authenticity between conditions. In line with our manipulation, participants in the *high authenticity* condition viewed Jamie as significantly more authentic ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 0.84$) than in the *low authenticity* condition ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.41$; mean difference = 1.17, 95% CI [0.92, 1.42], $t = 9.25$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.01$).

We then tested expected relationship initiation. In line with the findings for Study 1 and H1, participants in the *high authenticity* condition reported higher relationship initiation ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.26$) relative to participants in the *low authenticity* condition ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.54$; mean difference = 0.58, 95% CI [0.28, 0.88], $t = 3.79$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.41$). Similarly, participants in the *high authenticity* condition reported a stronger desire to "friend" Jamie on the professional networking app ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.59$), relative to participants in the *low authenticity* condition ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.82$; mean difference = 0.64,

95% CI [0.27, 1.00], $t = 3.43$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.37$; see Fig. 1).

Finally, we tested the robustness of these effects by accounting for perceptions of warmth and competence. In a simple regression, we used a dummy variable (where 1 = *high authenticity* condition, and 0 = *low authenticity* condition) to predict relationship initiation while controlling for participants' perceptions of Jamie's warmth and competence. The effect of condition on expected relationship initiation remained positive and significant ($b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 4.51$, $p < .001$), as did the effect of condition on expected friending behavior ($b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 3.64$, $p < .001$).

3.5. Summary

In Study 2, we experimentally replicated the effects observed in Study 1, showing causal evidence that perceptions of a potential interaction partner's authenticity predict expected relationship initiation (H1). In addition, we found that this effect persisted even when accounting for evaluative predictors like a target's warmth and competence. These results help rule out alternative explanations that perceived partner authenticity predicts the desire for relationship initiation merely due to a general positive impression (i.e., a "halo effect").

4. Study 3

Studies 1–2 suggested that one's perceptions of an interaction partner's authenticity is a potent driver of relationship initiation. In Study 3, we replicate this pattern in a situation that is common in many workplaces. New acquaintances in this study were asked to collaborate by trying to make sense of an ambiguous situation. Importantly, we address two limitations from Study 1: participants only indicated their felt authenticity across the networking event as a whole (as opposed to rating their felt authenticity during their interaction with each partner) and the measure of felt authenticity differed from the measure of perceived partner authenticity (making comparisons less straightforward). We directly addressed these limitations in Study 3 by (a) having participants rate their sense of authenticity *during* their interaction with another person and (b) using the same measure of authenticity for the

focal actor and their partner. Further, we controlled for participants' own felt authenticity and for perceived partner likeability. Finally, we examine shared reality as a mechanism underlying the link between perceived partner authenticity and interpersonal connection.

In Study 3, pairs of strangers worked together online to complete a discussion-based sensemaking task. After the discussion, each participant rated their own felt authenticity, their perception of their partner's authenticity, shared reality, likability, and desired relationship initiation. We tested whether perceived partner authenticity predicted desired relationship initiation controlling for likability (H1). Further, we tested whether shared reality mediates the link between perceived partner authenticity and desired relationship initiation (H2).

4.1. Methods

Participants and Procedure. We analyzed a sample of 232 participants recruited from Mechanical Turk (57% female; $M_{age} = 38.2$ [$SD = 11.46$]).³ Participants were paired on arrival to an online chat platform. They were instructed to work together to answer a series of questions about two ambiguous images, with the goal of figuring out what was really going on in the pictures together. The server prompted participants with a new discussion question (e.g., "What are the people in the picture talking about?") every two minutes for a total of six questions (12 min) which the participants discussed together on a text-based instant-messaging platform. After this task, participants answered interpersonal questionnaires presented in a randomized order.

4.2. Materials

Perceived partner authenticity. Participants rated their partner's authenticity with the following face valid item (1 – Not at all; 7 – Very much): "My partner was very authentic during our discussion."

Felt authenticity. Participants rated their own felt authenticity with the following face valid item (1 – Not at all; 7 – Very much): "I felt very authentic during our discussion."

Generalized Shared Reality (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). Participants rated their agreement (1 – Strongly Disagree, 7 – Strongly Agree) with eight items ($\alpha = 0.95$) from the interaction-specific SR-G measure like, "During our chat, we shared the same thoughts and feelings about things," "...we thought of things at the exact same time," "...we saw the world in the same way."

Desire for relationship initiation. Participants rated their agreement (1 – Strongly Disagree, 7 – Strongly Agree) with six items ($\alpha = 0.90$): "I would be interested in continuing our discussion," "I would like to spend more time with the other participant," "My partner and I could become friends if we interacted a lot," "I'd like a chance to interact with the other participant," "I really doubt that the other participant and I would be friends," and "I'd really prefer not to interact with the other participant in the future" (the last two reverse-coded).

Partner likeability (Control variable). Participants rated their agreement (1 - Strongly Disagree; 7 – Strongly Agree) with the item "I think the other participant is a likable person."

4.3. Results

See Table 3 for descriptive statistics and correlations. We conducted

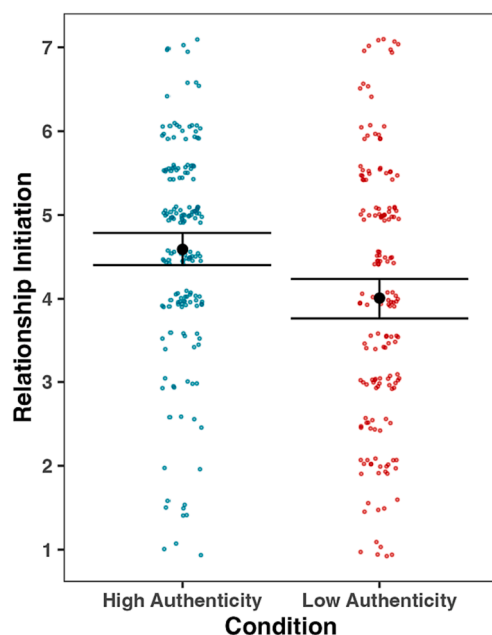


Fig. 1. Relationship initiation by condition (Study 2). Note. Fig. 1 presents a scatter-bar plot (displaying jittered raw data points) of relationship initiation by condition ($n_{high} = 171$; $n_{low} = 167$). The black center dot reflects the mean with bootstrapped 95% Confidence Intervals.

³ These data were collected to examine various research questions. See Rossignac-Milon and colleagues (2021) for sample details. Rossignac-Milon and colleagues examined the effect of shared reality on a variety of relational and epistemic variables. As part of those findings, the paper reported the main effect of shared reality on closeness and the desire to interact again, using some of the items included in this paper. However, that paper did not examine authenticity in any form. The full set of study materials is available on OSF (https://osf.io/c3hjd/?view_only=6201f325e4bb49038f24ca4730a8f2f9).

Table 3
Means, standard deviations, and correlations with 95% confidence intervals (Study 3).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Felt Authenticity	5.46	1.41				
2. Perceived Partner Authenticity	5.31	1.51	0.79** [0.73, 0.83]			
3. Shared Reality	5.05	1.36	0.55** [0.45, 0.63]	0.61** [0.53, 0.69]		
4. Relationship Initiation Desire	5.01	1.41	0.61** [0.52, 0.68]	0.68** [0.61, 0.75]	0.71** [0.64, 0.77]	
5. Perceived Partner Likeability	5.80	1.29	0.53** [0.43, 0.62]	0.63** [0.55, 0.70]	0.59** [0.50, 0.67]	0.70** [0.62, 0.76]

Note. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. ** indicates $p < 0.001$.

a series of multi-level models with a random intercept for dyad, using the *lme4* package in R (Bates et al., 2014). All variables were centered. Perceived partner authenticity significantly predicted desired relationship initiation ($b = 0.64$, 95% CI [0.55, 0.73], $t = 14.16$, $p < .001$), and shared reality ($b = 0.55$, 95% CI [0.46, 0.64], $t = 11.76$, $p < .001$). As can be seen in Table 4, the effect of perceived partner authenticity remained significant controlling for one’s own felt authenticity and controlling for how much participants thought their partner was a likable person.

Next, we conducted a mediation model to examine the role of shared reality in mediating the link between perceived partner authenticity and desired relationship initiation. The mediation analysis was conducted using the ‘mediation’ package in R (Tingley et al., 2014). As displayed in Fig. 2, perceived partner authenticity significantly predicted shared reality (a-path: $b = 0.55$, 95% CI [0.46, 0.64], $p < .001$) and the desire for relationship initiation (total effect: $b = 0.64$, 95% CI [0.53, 0.71], $p < .001$). When entering both as predictors of the desire for relationship initiation, shared reality had a strong effect (b-path: $b = 0.48$, 95% CI [0.38, 0.59], $p < .001$) and the direct effect of perceived partner authenticity lessened (direct effect: $b = 0.37$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.46], $p < .001$). The indirect effect was significant (indirect effect: $b = 0.27$, bootstrapped 95% CI [0.20, 0.35], $p < .001$), suggesting that shared reality mediated the effect of perceived partner authenticity on desired relationship initiation, accounting for 42% of the total effect.

4.4. Summary

In Study 3, we found that when engaging in a collaboration-based task with a stranger, perceived partner authenticity significantly predicted desired relationship initiation. Further, this effect was mediated by shared reality.

Table 4
Regression models comparing the effect of perceived partner authenticity, felt authenticity, and partner liking on desire for relationship initiation and shared reality (Study 3).

	Desire for Relationship Initiation	Shared Reality
Perceived Partner Authenticity	0.64*** (0.55, 0.73)	0.55*** (0.46, 0.64)
Perceived Partner Authenticity Felt Authenticity	0.51*** (0.36, 0.65) 0.18* (0.03, 0.34)	0.43*** (0.28, 0.58) 0.17* (0.01, 0.33)
Perceived Partner Authenticity Perceived Partner Likeability	0.38*** (0.28, 0.48) 0.48*** (0.37, 0.60)	0.36*** (0.25, 0.47) 0.36*** (0.23, 0.49)
Perceived Partner Authenticity Felt Authenticity Perceived Partner Likeability	0.28*** (0.14, 0.42) 0.14* (0.01, 0.28) 0.48*** (0.36, 0.59)	0.26*** (0.11, 0.42) 0.14 (-0.01, 0.29) 0.35*** (0.22, 0.48)

Note. All analyses were conducted as multilevel models. For each outcome, we conducted multilevel regression analyses (with participants nested within-dyad). In row 1, we entered perceived partner authenticity alone. In subsequent rows, we simultaneously entered perceived partner authenticity and each of our control variables: felt authenticity and partner liking. Each cell displays the unstandardized beta coefficient, significance level (* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$), and 95% confidence intervals around the estimate.

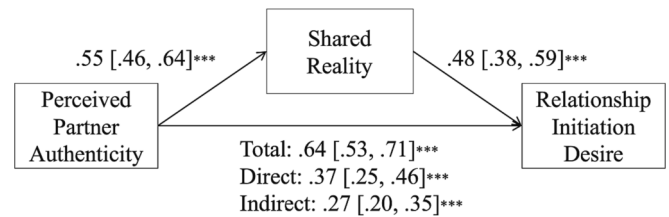


Fig. 2. Shared reality mediates link between perceived partner authenticity and desire for relationship initiation (Study 3). Note. Each path displays the results of a mediation model with Shared Reality mediating the link between Perceived Partner Authenticity and Relationship Initiation Desire. Each path displays the unstandardized beta coefficient and 95% confidence interval around the estimate. *** $p < .001$.

5. Study 4

Studies 1–3 provide converging evidence that perceived partner authenticity predicts relationship initiation, with Study 3 identifying shared reality as a mechanism underlying the effect of perceived partner authenticity on desired relationship initiation. However, Studies 1 and 3 relied on self-report measures of authenticity, which leaves open the possibility that these effects do not reflect actual, observable behaviors. Perhaps an interaction partner’s authenticity behaviors are more salient than one’s own, and so one may not be aware of the effects of one’s own authenticity behaviors. Self-report can also lead to single-source bias (Doty & Glick, 1998). Consequently, in Study 4, we sought to address these alternative explanations by examining whether the same pattern of results emerged when examining observable authenticity behaviors. More specifically, we examined authenticity behaviors as coded by

Table 5
Examples of authenticity behaviors used for observational coding (Study 4).

	Self-Expression Behavior	Social Deviation Behavior
Low	<i>Barely disclose inner thoughts and feelings if at all; exclusively superficial disclosures, small talk only.</i> e.g., "School has been really busy but good"	<i>Barely deviate from expectations on a speed-date, more calculated, if at all.</i> e.g., "What's your major?"
Medium	<i>Are transparent: demonstrate openness about values, beliefs and opinions.</i> e.g., [coming from male participant] "Don't tell anyone but I watch Gilmore Girls"	<i>Behave spontaneously, in an open, natural, and uninhibited manner; seemingly act based on sudden inner impulses or inclinations; slightly nonconformist.</i> e.g., "Latin seemed so much cooler in high school, you know... even though it's a dead language"
High	<i>Are very vulnerable: Share potentially sensitive inner states such as intimate emotions, weaknesses, and flaws.</i> e.g., "I hope I find a love that makes me feel alive."	<i>Exhibit nonconformity – fail or refuse to conform to prevailing social rules and expectations for behavior on a speed-date.</i> [e.g., M behavior]: F: How are you feeling M: Ohh, a little bit fuzzy F: Why? M: Fuzzy... Arm hair!

third-party observers in a speed-dating style networking study in which conversations were audio-recorded. Although this networking context differs slightly from the context of professional encounters, speed-dating contexts have been established as a valuable method for studying close relationships (Finkel & Eastwick, 2008) and can similarly elicit self-enhancement motives in brief interactions (Houser et al., 2008; Katz & Beach, 2000). We predicted that a partner's observable authenticity behaviors, which we operationalized as both self-expression and social norm deviation (Pillemer, 2023), would predict the focal actor's relationship initiation behavior. Further, we examined the mediating effect of shared reality while controlling for established predictors of relationship initiation in this context, perceived similarity and perceived attractiveness (Tidwell et al., 2013).

Participants and Procedure. Participants were 153 single heterosexual students from a large Northeastern university (49% female) who volunteered to take part in one of 12 speed-dating events. Attendance at each event varied between 7 and 18 total participants (with approximately even gender ratios). Participants interacted with every member of the opposite sex for 5-min and then completed a brief post-date questionnaire after each conversation.⁴ Due to recorder malfunctions, we only retained usable audio data for 193 dates, resulting in 386 total observations.

5.1. Materials

Observational Coding of Authenticity Behaviors. Three raters who did not know the hypotheses or have access to the self-reported data listened to the audio-recordings and rated each individual on each date for the following two authenticity behaviors on a scale of 1 to 7: (1) *Self-expression behaviors*: 1 (low, barely disclose inner thoughts and feelings), 4 (medium, demonstrating transparent openness about values, beliefs, and opinions), and 7 (high, being very vulnerable and sharing potentially sensitive inner states, such as intimate emotions, weaknesses, and flaws); (2) *Social deviation behaviors*: 1 (low, barely deviating from expectations on a speed-date, seem more calculated), 4 (medium, behaving spontaneously, in an open, natural, and uninhibited manner; seemingly act based on sudden inner impulses or inclinations), and 7 (high, exhibiting nonconformity, failing or refusing to conform to prevailing social rules and expectations for behavior on a speed-date). See Table 5 for examples of coding. We instructed raters to listen to the

⁴ This project was part of a larger study investigating multiple research questions. As the original study was not designed to examine the present hypotheses, we did not measure perceived partner authenticity and instead conducted behavioral coding. The full set of study materials can be found on OSF (https://osf.io/p2gkf/?view_only=3852d7e41f7b44dd98f561596e95e044). The link between SR-G and relationship initiation is reported in another paper (currently in preparation) in the context of a different research question which does not involve authenticity.

conversations (as opposed to reading transcripts) to maximize the richness of their coding. This allowed them to be able to factor in intonation and prosody, and other non-verbal auditory cues that provide nuance and subtlety (e.g., sarcastic tone) into their judgments—i.e., not just the content of *what* they say but also *how* they are saying it. Inter-rater reliability (ICC = 0.69) was calculated based on a consistency, two-way mixed effects model (Koo & Li, 2016) and items were averaged into a composite score ($\alpha = 0.70$).

5.2. Measures

Generalized Shared Reality (4 items, $\alpha = 0.87$). Participants rated their agreement (1 – Strongly Disagree; 7 – Strongly Agree) with four items from the interaction-specific SR-G questionnaire (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021).

Relationship Initiation Behavior: Selecting 'Yes' to exchanging contact information. Participants answered the Yes (coded as 1) or No (coded as 0) question, "I would like to be put in contact with this person." When both partners answered "Yes", they qualified as a "match", and both were sent the other's contact information.

Perceived Similarity (Control variable). Participants rated the item, "My interaction partner and I are very similar" (1 – Not at All to 7 – Very Much; from Tidwell et al., 2013).

Perceived Partner Attractiveness (Control variable). Participants rated their partner from (1) Unattractive to (7) Attractive.

5.3. Results

See Table 6 for descriptive statistics and correlations. We conducted multilevel models with the *lme4* R package. Following standard procedures for speed-dating analyses (Ackerman et al., 2015), we included gender as a covariate, a random intercept of event, a random slope for males nested within event, a random slope for females nested within event, and a random intercept for dyad nested within event (as recommended by David Kenny, personal communication, Nov. 12, 2019; see OSF for R code). For the binary outcome of relationship initiation, we conducted multilevel logistic regressions and for the continuous outcome of shared reality, we conducted multilevel linear regressions. All predictors were centered. Partner authenticity behaviors predicted both relationship initiation behavior ($b = 0.54$, 95% CI [0.05, 1.03], $t = 2.18$, $p = 0.029$) and shared reality ($b = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.43], $t = 3.01$, $p = 0.003$). As can be seen in Table 7, these effects persisted controlling for the focal actor's observable authenticity behaviors. Additionally, when adding perceived similarity and perceived attractiveness to the model, partner authenticity significantly predicted shared reality, and when adding shared reality, perceived similarity, and perceived attractiveness to the model, shared reality significantly predicted relationship initiation (See Table 7).

Next, we conducted a mediation model to examine the role of shared reality in mediating the link between partner authenticity behaviors and

Table 6
Means, standard deviations, and correlations with confidence intervals (Study 4).

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Partner Authenticity Behaviors	2.97	0.72					
2. Actor Authenticity Behaviors	2.97	0.72	0.25** [0.16, 0.34]				
3. Shared Reality	3.51	1.25	0.12* [0.02, 0.21]	0.01 [-0.09, 0.11]			
4. Perceived Similarity	3.24	1.38	0.03 [-0.07, 0.13]	0.02 [-0.08, 0.11]	0.73** [0.69, 0.78]		
5. Perceived Attractiveness	4.27	1.56	0.06 [-0.04, 0.16]	0.03 [-0.07, 0.13]	0.52** [0.45, 0.59]	0.47** [0.39, 0.54]	
6. Relationship Initiation Behavior	0.51	0.50	0.09 [-0.01, 0.19]	-0.01 [-0.12, 0.09]	0.50** [0.42, 0.57]	0.45** [0.37, 0.53]	0.57** [0.49, 0.63]

Note. *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. The confidence interval is a plausible range of population correlations that could have caused the sample correlation (Cumming, 2014). * indicates $p < 0.05$. ** indicates $p < 0.01$.

Table 7
Regression models comparing the effect of observer-rated partner authenticity behaviors and focal actor authenticity behaviors on relationship initiation behavior and shared reality (Study 4).

	Linear	Logistic
	Shared Reality	Relationship Initiation Behavior
Partner Auth. Signals	0.26** (0.09, 0.43)	0.54*** (0.54, 0.54)
Gender (Male)	0.36 (-0.04, 0.76)	1.35*** (1.35, 1.36)
Partner Auth. Signals	0.25** (0.08, 0.43)	0.61* (0.10, 1.13)
Self Auth. Signals	0.07 (-0.12, 0.25)	-0.21 (-0.71, 0.28)
Gender (Male)	0.35 (-0.06, 0.75)	1.41* (0.20, 2.62)
Partner Auth. Signals	0.14* (0.02, 0.25)	0.80 (-0.29, 1.89)
Self Auth. Signals	-0.05 (-0.17, 0.07)	-0.45 (-1.50, 0.61)
Shared Reality		2.02*** (1.04, 2.99)
Perceived Partner Attractiveness	0.18*** (0.12, 0.24)	2.01*** (1.30, 2.72)
Perceived Similarity	0.54*** (0.47, 0.60)	0.41 (-0.33, 1.15)
Gender (Male)	-0.03 (-0.24, 0.18)	2.22 (-0.13, 4.57)
Observations	386	376

Note. "Auth." = Authenticity. All analyses were conducted as multilevel models with participants nested within actor, partner, event, and dyad, and gender was entered as a control variable. Each cell displays the unstandardized beta coefficient, significance level (* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$), and 95% confidence interval around the estimate.

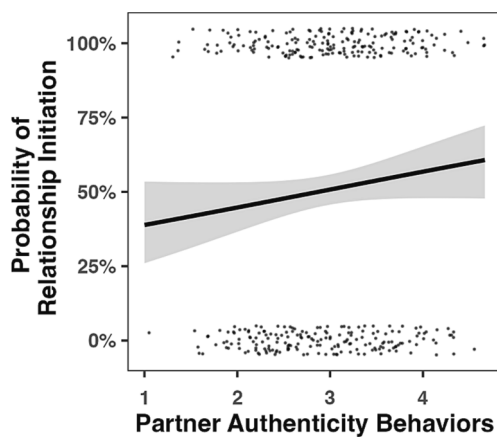


Fig. 3. Partner authenticity behaviors and probability of relationship initiation behavior (Study 4). Note. Fig. 3 presents a scatter-plot (displaying jittered raw data points) of the probability of relationship initiation by partner authenticity behaviors with a binomial regression line and 95% confidence bands.

relationship initiation behavior. Given the lack of statistical packages for conducting multilevel mediation models with complex random effect structures, we computed the unbiased estimate of the indirect effect of partner authenticity behaviors on relationship initiation behavior through shared reality using Bayesian estimation with the 'brms' R package (Bürkner, 2017), while treating the outcome variable as continuous (i.e., using a linear probability model (Aldrich & Nelson, 1984; Klaassen & Magnus, 2001)). When plotted, the effect of partner

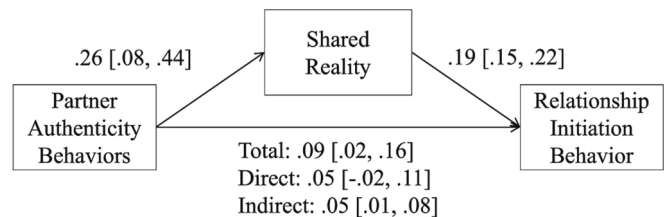


Fig. 4. Shared reality mediates link between partner authenticity behaviors and relationship initiation behavior (Study 4). Note. Each path displays the results of a Bayesian linear probabilistic mediation model with Shared Reality mediating the link between Partner Authenticity Behaviors and Relationship Initiation Behavior. Each path displays the unbiased estimate and 95% credible interval of the posterior distribution.

Table 8

Bayesian linear probabilistic mediation models displaying the effect of shared reality in mediating the link between partner authenticity behaviors and relationship initiation behavior with and without perceived similarity and attractiveness entered as parallel mediators (Study 4).

X: Partner Authenticity Behaviors Y: Relationship Initiation Behavior	Unbiased Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
Mediating Effect of Shared Reality (SR)			
<i>b</i> -path	0.186	0.150	0.222
<i>ab</i> -path	0.048	0.014	0.084
Mediating Effect of SR Controlling for Perceived Similarity			
<i>b</i> -path	0.149	0.099	0.198
<i>ab</i> -path	0.023	0.004	0.045
Mediating Effect of SR Controlling for Perceived Attractiveness			
<i>b</i> -path	0.116	0.078	0.154
<i>ab</i> -path	0.024	0.006	0.046
Mediating Effect of SR Controlling for Perceived Similarity & Attractiveness			
<i>b</i> -path	0.097	0.048	0.145
<i>ab</i> -path	0.012	0.001	0.027

Note. All analyses were conducted as multilevel Bayesian linear probabilistic mediation models with participants nested within actor, partner, event, and dyad, and gender was entered as a control variable. Each row displays the unbiased estimate and 95% credible interval of the posterior distribution.

authenticity behaviors on relationship initiation appears linear as opposed to sigmoidal (See Fig. 3), supporting the treatment of the outcome as continuous (Aldrich & Nelson, 1984).⁵

As displayed in Fig. 4, partner authenticity behaviors robustly predicted shared reality (*a*-path: $b = 0.26$, 95% CI (Credible Interval) [0.08, 0.44]) and relationship initiation (total effect: $b = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.16]). When entering partner authenticity behaviors and shared reality as predictors of relationship initiation behavior, the effect of shared reality was robust (*b*-path: $b = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.22]) and the direct effect of partner authenticity behaviors lessened (direct effect: $b = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.11]). The lower bound of the indirect effect did not cross zero (indirect effect: $b = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.08]), suggesting that shared reality mediated the effect of partner authenticity behaviors on relationship initiation. The mediating effect of shared reality remained robust when including perceived similarity and perceived attractiveness as parallel mediators (See Table 8).

5.4. Summary

In Study 4, we examined whether participants' observable authenticity behaviors produce the same pattern of results observed when assessing participants' perceptions of authenticity in Studies 1 and 3. As predicted, we found that a conversation partner's authenticity behaviors was associated with relationship initiation behavior (i.e., selecting one's interaction partner as a match) and that this effect was mediated by shared reality.

6. Study 5A

The goal of Studies 5a-5b was to experimentally replicate the findings of our prior studies, specifically the mediation model found in Studies 3 and 4 (testing Hypothesis 2). To do so, we utilized a causal chain approach which involves conducting separate experiments to causally examine separate sections of the proposed mediation model (Spencer et al., 2005; for an example of this approach, see Kelley et al., 2022). In Study 5a, we operationalized our manipulation of perceived partner authenticity using the authenticity behaviors theorized in Pillemer (2023) to demonstrate their effects on shared reality and relationship initiation. We show a direct link between these behaviors and

perceived partner authenticity, shared reality, and relationship initiation. In Study 5b, we manipulated shared reality while keeping authenticity behaviors constant and high to demonstrate that the effect of perceived partner authenticity on relationship initiation is contingent on experiencing a shared reality.

Participants in Study 5a were given a short description of an initial interaction with a potential future coworker who exhibited either high or low authenticity behaviors (i.e., self-expression and social norm deviation) while experimentally holding constant perceived warmth and competence as well as perceived similarity. We then measured shared reality and relationship initiation with this potential colleague, hypothesizing a significant indirect effect of authenticity behaviors on relationship initiation through increased shared reality. In addition, we tested whether the effect of shared reality on relationship initiation is robust when statistically controlling for perceptions of the potential colleague's warmth and competence.

6.1. Methods

Preregistration. We preregistered our hypotheses, data collection, and analysis plan for this experiment on AsPredicted: https://aspredicted.org/HD2_ZBB.

Participants and Procedure. Three hundred participants were recruited for this study from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. In total, we received 302 total responses (as Mturk can oversample). After applying our pre-registered exclusion criteria based on survey software bot detection tools and an attention check, our final sample consisted of 260 participants (45.00% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 40.68$ $SD = 11.70$). All participants were given the following cover story:

"Imagine that you work for a consulting firm that is hiring a new member for your team, with whom you would be working closely on a variety of projects. You would likely spend a lot of time outside of work together, and have the opportunity to form a close relationship should you desire to. After a series of on-site interviews, your team is gearing up to evaluate whether they will make an offer to [Target Name]."

"From your initial interactions with [Target Name], you get the sense that [pronoun] [is/are] friendly and will be good at [pronoun] job."

The name and pronouns of the target person were gender-matched to participants, such that men were presented with "Logan" with "he/him" pronouns, women were presented with "Lana" with "she/her" pronouns, and nonbinary or other-identifying individuals were presented with "Logan" and "they/them" pronouns. Manipulations were designed to experimentally hold warmth and competence constant by

⁵ We also conducted 'probit' mediation models without our random effect structure using lavaan (Rosseel, 2012), which treat the outcome variable as binary, and the results do not change appreciably with all indirect effects remaining significant (See Supplemental Materials).

noting that the target person is friendly and good at their job. The target person then either demonstrated high levels of authenticity behaviors and or low levels of authenticity behaviors, while experimentally holding perceived similarity between the participant and target constant by having the target person “agree with the participant’s opinions.” Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: *high* or *low authenticity behaviors*. Participants in the *high authenticity behaviors* condition were given the following information:

“During your conversations, [Target Name] generally expressed agreement with your opinions. In addition, [pronoun] seemed like someone who is vulnerable and willing to open up about feelings and weaknesses. Further, rather than sticking to a set script of behavior, [Target Name] seemed to act spontaneously.”

While participants in the *low authenticity behaviors* condition were given:

“During your conversations, [Target Name] generally expressed agreement with your opinions. However, [pronoun] seemed like someone who is not particularly vulnerable and is hesitant to open up about feelings and weaknesses. Further, [Target Name] seemed to stick to a set script of behavior as opposed to acting spontaneously.”

6.2. Measures

Perceived partner authenticity. As a manipulation check, participants evaluated Logan/Lana on authenticity. Thus, an additional contribution of Study 5a is to directly test the effect of an individual’s authenticity behaviors on being perceived as authentic. Participants were asked, “How well do the following adjectives describe [Target Name]?” (1 – Not well at all; 7 – Extremely well). The authenticity items were: authentic, genuine, true to themselves, and real ($\alpha = 0.97$).

Generalized Shared Reality (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). Participants responded to the following prompt, “How easily could you imagine the following in your interactions with [Target Name]? In our conversations...” (1 – Cannot imagine at all, 7 – Could easily imagine) with the same eight items ($\alpha = 0.95$) as in Study 3.

Relationship initiation. Expected relationship initiation was measured using the same two items from Studies 1–2 (1 – Not at all; 7 – Extremely):

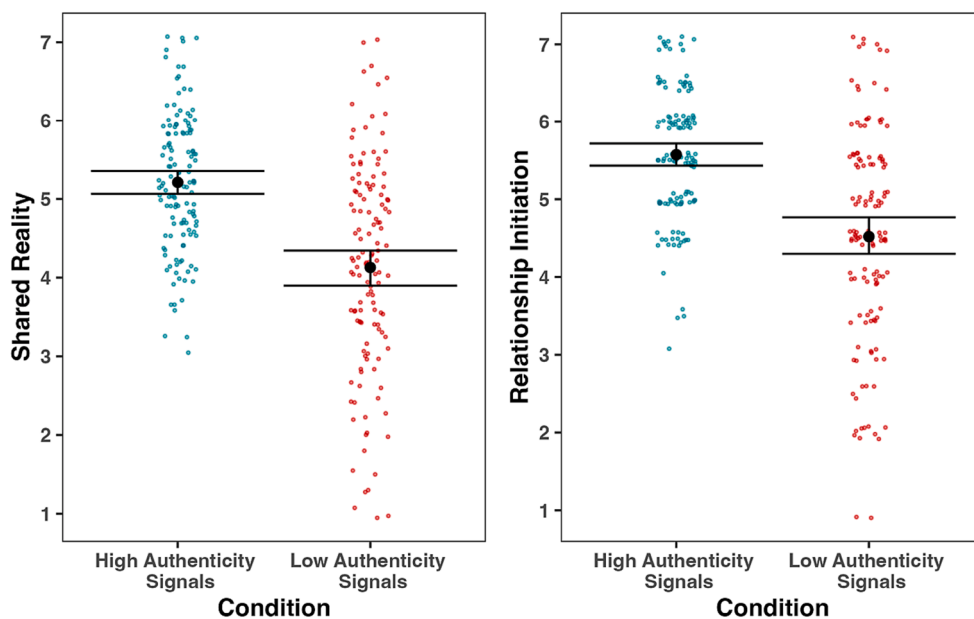


Fig. 5. Shared reality and relationship initiation by condition (Study 5a). Note. Fig. 5 presents scatter-bar plots (displaying jittered raw data points) of shared reality (left panel) and relationship initiation (right panel) by condition ($n_{high} = 131$; $n_{low} = 129$). The black center dot reflects the mean with bootstrapped 95% Confidence Intervals.

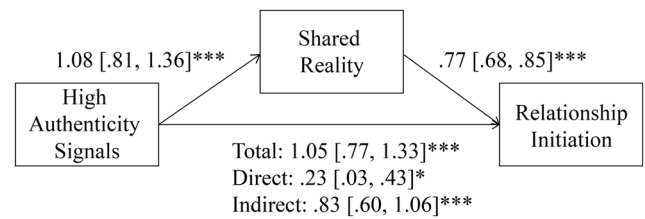


Fig. 6. Shared reality mediates link between high perceived partner authenticity (vs. low perceived partner authenticity) Condition and Relationship Initiation (Study 5a). Note. Each path displays the results of a mediation model with Shared Reality mediating the link between High Perceived Partner Authenticity (vs. Low Perceived Partner Authenticity) Condition and Relationship Initiation. Each path displays the unstandardized beta coefficient and 95% confidence interval around the estimate. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

“How likely is it that you will develop an ongoing ...professional relationship with [Target Name]?” and “...personal relationship with [Target Name]?” (Pearson’s $r = 0.63$, $p < .001$). As an additional, exploratory dependent variable, we also asked participants, “Do you recommend hiring [Target Name]?” on a 7-point scale where 1 – Definitely would not, and 7 – Definitely would ($M = 5.41$).

Warmth and competence. Participants also evaluated Logan/Lana on how warm and competent they seemed: “How warm would you say that [Target Name] is?” [1 – Not warm at all to 5 – Extremely warm] ($M = 3.47$) and “How competent would you say that [Target Name] is?” [1 – Not competent at all to 5 – Extremely competent] ($M = 3.80$).

6.3. Results

We first confirmed that our manipulation was successful by comparing perceived partner authenticity between the two conditions. In line with our manipulation, participants in the *high authenticity behaviors* condition viewed the target as significantly more authentic ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 0.89$) than in the *low authenticity behaviors* condition ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.50$; mean difference = 1.68, 95% CI [1.38, 1.98], $t = 10.96$, $p < .001$; Cohen’s $d = 1.36$).

In line with H1, participants in the *high authenticity behaviors*

condition reported higher relationship initiation ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 0.84$) relative to participants in the *low authenticity behaviors* condition ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.34$; mean difference = 1.05, 95% CI [0.77, 1.33], $t = 7.43$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.02$; see Fig. 5). Similarly, participants in the *high authenticity behaviors* condition recommended hiring the target person more strongly ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 0.97$) relative to participants in the *low authenticity behaviors* condition ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.46$; mean difference = 1.04, 95% CI [0.74, 1.34], $t = 6.74$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.84$).

In line with H2, participants in the *high authenticity behaviors* condition reported higher shared reality with the target ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.87$) than in the *low authenticity behaviors* condition ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.34$; mean difference = 1.08, 95% CI [0.81, 1.36], $t = 7.71$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.96$; see Fig. 5). Next, we examined the role of shared reality in mediating the link between authenticity and relationship initiation using the 'mediation' package in R (Tingley, et al., 2014). We first created a dummy variable where 1 = *high authenticity behaviors* condition and 0 = *low authenticity behaviors* condition. As displayed in Fig. 6, high authenticity behaviors significantly predicted shared reality (a-path: $b = 1.08$, 95% CI [0.81, 1.36], $p < .001$) and the desire for relationship initiation (total effect: $b = 1.05$, 95% CI [0.77, 1.33], $p < .001$). When entering both as predictors of the desire for relationship initiation, shared reality had a strong effect (b-path: $b = 0.77$, 95% CI [0.68, 0.85], $p < .001$) and the direct effect of authenticity behaviors lessened (direct effect: $b = 0.23$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.43], $p = 0.029$). The indirect effect was significant (indirect effect: $b = 0.83$, bootstrapped 95% CI [0.60, 1.06], $p < .001$), suggesting that shared reality mediated the effect of being in the *high* (vs. *low*) authenticity behaviors condition on relationship initiation, accounting for 79% of the total effect.

We then tested the robustness of our observed effects, adding warmth and competence as additional predictors of relationship initiation. As hypothesized, shared reality remained a positive and significant predictor of relationship initiation controlling for warmth and competence perceptions ($b = 0.51$, 95% CI [0.41, 0.61], $p < .001$). Finally, when we added participant demographics into the model, shared reality remained a positive and significant predictor of relationship initiation ($b = 0.51$, 95% CI [0.41, 0.61], $p < .001$).

6.4. Summary

In Study 5a, we found that perceived partner authenticity (operationalized as a potential colleague's authenticity behaviors) increased relationship initiation through heightened shared reality in an experimental scenario study.

7. Study 5B

In Study 5b, we modified and extended the paradigm used in Study 5a to test the causal nature of the second half of the theorized mediation: the link between shared reality and relationship initiation. To do this, we utilized a similar design to Study 5a but held authenticity constant and high (i.e., using only the high authenticity behaviors cell from Study 5a) while manipulating shared reality. This allowed us to demonstrate that the effect of authenticity on relationship initiation observed in Study 5a is contingent on shared reality. That is, we can test the hypothesis that perceived partner authenticity leads to greater relationship initiation when shared reality is high than when shared reality is low (Hypothesis 2).

7.1. Methods

Preregistration. We preregistered our hypotheses, data collection, and analysis plan for this experiment on AsPredicted: https://aspredicted.org/39B_1FS.

Participants and Procedure. Two hundred and twenty-five participants were recruited for this study from Amazon's Mechanical Turk using the CloudResearch approved participant list. After applying our

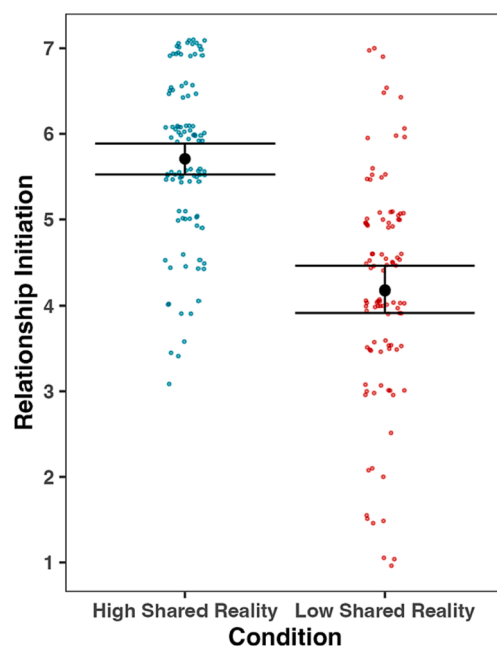


Fig. 7. Relationship initiation by condition (Study 5b). Note. Fig. 7 presents a scatter-bar plot (displaying jittered raw data points) of relationship initiation by condition ($n_{high} = 101$; $n_{low} = 100$). The black center dot reflects the mean with bootstrapped 95% Confidence Intervals.

pre-registered exclusion criteria based on the survey software's bot detection tools and an attention check, our final sample consisted of 201 participants (47.76% female; $M_{age} = 42.34$ [$SD = 13.01$]). Participants were given the same cover story as Study 5a. In addition, all participants were given the description of Lana/Logan as *highly authentic* to hold constant the effect of authenticity on relationship initiation while testing the causal nature of the link between shared reality and relationship initiation. As in Study 5a, the name and pronouns of the target person was gender-matched to participants.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: high or low shared reality. Participants in the high shared reality condition were given the following information:

"During your conversations, [Target Name] generally expressed agreement with your opinions. In addition, you felt "on the same wavelength" and got the sense that you see the world in the same way."

Participants in the low shared reality condition were given the following information:

"During your conversations, [Target Name] generally expressed agreement with your opinions. However, you did not feel "on the same wavelength" and got the sense that you see the world in different ways."

7.2. Materials

Generalized Shared Reality (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). As a manipulation check, participants responded to the same eight items as in Study 5a ($\alpha = 0.96$; $M = 4.39$).

Relationship initiation. Expected relationship initiation was measured using the same two items from Study 5a (Pearson's $r = 0.65$, $p < .001$; $M = 4.95$) as was our exploratory measure of whether they would recommend hiring the target person ($M = 5.33$).

Warmth and competence. We used the same items as in Study 5a to measure warmth ($M = 3.82$) and competence ($M = 3.81$).

7.3. Results

We first confirmed that our manipulation was successful by comparing shared reality between the two conditions. In line with our manipulation, participants in the *high shared reality* condition reported greater shared reality with the target ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 0.87$) than in the *low shared reality* condition ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.24$; mean difference = 2.06, 95% CI [1.76, 2.36], $t = 13.60$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.92$).

We then tested expected relationship initiation. Participants in the *high shared reality* condition reported higher relationship initiation ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 0.97$) relative to participants in the *low shared reality* condition ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.31$; mean difference = 1.53, 95% CI [1.21, 1.85], $t = 9.40$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.33$; see Fig. 7). Similarly, participants in the *high shared reality* condition recommended hiring the target person more ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 0.96$) than participants in the *low shared reality* condition ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.38$; mean difference = 1.30, 95% CI [0.97, 1.63], $t = 7.76$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.10$).

We then tested the robustness of the effect of shared reality on relationship initiation. We created a dummy variable where 1 = *high shared reality* condition and 0 = *low shared reality* condition and found a positive and significant effect of shared reality on relationship initiation ($b = 1.53$, 95% CI [1.21, 1.85], $p < .001$), an effect that remained significant when controlling for warmth and competence perceptions ($b = 1.16$, 95% CI [0.88, 1.44], $p < .001$), and participant demographics ($b = 1.17$, 95% CI [0.89, 1.45], $p < .001$).

7.4. Summary

Study 5b presents experimental evidence for a causal effect of perceived partner authenticity on relationship initiation through shared reality. By holding a potential relational partner's authenticity constant (and high) while manipulating shared reality, we were able to demonstrate that the effect of authenticity depends upon shared reality (i.e., we "turned off" the effect of authenticity by inducing low shared reality). These results were robust when controlling for the perceived warmth and competence of the target individual, as well as participant demographics. Considered alongside findings from Study 5a, these results provide causal evidence for the proposed mediation model: perceived partner authenticity leads to relationship initiation by increasing shared reality.

8. General discussion

In a longitudinal field study of professional networking, a naturalistic dyadic task collaboration study, an observationally coded speed-dating study, and three preregistered experiments, we observe converging evidence for the effect of perceived partner authenticity on relationship initiation through shared reality. We observed this effect across a range of situations, measures, and methods, using both desired and actual relationship initiation. In addition, we found that the relationship between perceived partner authenticity and relationship initiation remained robust when controlling for felt authenticity (Studies 1 and 3), perceived partner likeability (Study 3), and perceived partner warmth and competence perceptions (Studies 2 and 5a-5b). We observed this pattern both when operationalizing authenticity as self-report perceptions of an interaction partner's authenticity (Studies 1–3) and as observable behaviors (Studies 4 and 5a-5b). These results suggest that there are external behavioral indicators that lead others to view an individual as authentic and that this perception enhances relationship initiation. Further, we found that the experience of generalized shared reality mediates the link between perceived partner authenticity and relationship initiation (Studies 3-5b)—that is, seeing a partner as authentic fosters the sense of seeing the world in the same way, which facilitates relationship initiation.

8.1. Theoretical contributions

Our paper makes several key contributions to the literature. First, our work contributes to our understanding of how initial interactions contribute to tie development. It is widely understood that networking behaviors are critical for career advancement and success (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Fang et al., 2015), and yet individuals often shy away from actively seeking out such bonds because initial exchanges—especially in settings that encourage self-enhancement or instrumental gain—can feel uncomfortable or inauthentic (Casciaro et al., 2014; Wanberg et al., 2000). We found that perceiving a conversation partner to be authentic increases relationship initiation. These results may help explain why networking has been found to be more effective when it occurs outside of professionally instrumental contexts, where pressure to self-enhance and conform may be lower (Bergemann & Iyengar, 2017), and why discussing non-work topics has been found to be more effective in promoting relationships among potential colleagues (Martin et al., 2022). These results also suggest that authentic self-expression predicts relational wellbeing because it facilitates greater tie formation (Bailey et al., 2020).

Second, the current research contributes to our understanding of the momentary facilitators of a sense of connection in professional contexts. Much of the research on professional networking to date has emphasized its benefits (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994; Fernandez and Weinberg, 1997; Granovetter, 1973; Orpen, 1996; Seidel et al., 2000) or the factors that predispose one to network (e.g., personality traits, attitudes about networking, or employment status; Belmi & Laurin, 2016; Bensaou et al., 2014; Wanberg et al., 2000). Far less work has been done to uncover the factors that predict the formation of meaningful ties during networking events (Casciaro et al., 2015). Potential explanatory mechanisms (like perceptions of a focal speaker) have remained largely speculative to date (Kleinbaum, 2015). The present research not only identifies perceived partner authenticity as a critical contributor to relationship initiation across different contexts, but also provides evidence for shared reality as a key mechanism.

Third, we contribute to the literature on authenticity by highlighting its importance for relationship development and by benchmarking its effects relative to related constructs such as warmth and competence. Scholars of workplace authenticity have called for research investigating the effects of perceptions of others' authenticity as well as research examining the mechanisms linking authenticity to outcome variables beyond well-being (Bailey & Levy, 2022; Cha et al., 2019). More broadly, researchers have promoted an interpersonal approach to examining authenticity (Chen, 2019; Leary et al., 2015). Despite growing interest in authenticity as a psychological construct in organizational settings (Cha et al., 2019; Chen, 2019; Oc et al., 2020), this paper is one of the first to demonstrate the value of appearing authentic in the formation of new professional ties (see Liu & Perrewé, 2006, for an exception).

Fourth, we systematically explore the specific behaviors that signal authenticity to others and test their impact on relationship initiation. These findings are important because to date, little is known about antecedents to perceived partner authenticity in interpersonal interactions (See Gershon & Smith, 2020; Lehman et al., 2019 for exceptions). While prior models of authenticity have assumed a direct link between felt and perceived partner authenticity, recent research finds no correlation between self and other-rated authenticity (Bailey & Levy, 2022). This raises the question: what types of external behaviors actually lead others to be perceived as authentic? Our work advances the study of authenticity in this regard, suggesting that engaging in both self-expressions (seeming transparent and vulnerable) and social deviations (seeming non-conforming and spontaneous) signal authenticity to others (Pillemer, 2023).

Last, we contribute to the literature on shared reality both by identifying perceived partner authenticity as a causal antecedent to the experience of shared reality and by establishing the causal effect of

shared reality on professional relationship initiation. Though research has established that people are more likely to create shared realities when they *themselves* are epistemically motivated (e.g., about target they feel uncertain about; [Echterhoff & Higgins, 2017](#))—little work has examined how one’s perceptions of an *interaction partner’s* epistemic motives can shape one’s sense of shared reality with that person. Our work suggests that people may be especially likely to experience a sense of shared reality with others who appear to disclose their true thoughts and feelings (vs. those who appear to be purely relationally motivated and are simply “going along to get along”). Thus, perceiving that one’s interaction partner is motivated to disclose their true inner states (and not purely relationally motivated to connect) may contribute to one’s experience of shared reality. Further, this work provides causal evidence for the effect of generalized shared reality on relationship initiation—a link previously only tested correlationally ([Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021](#)), suggesting that shared reality fosters professional relationship initiation.

8.2. Practical implications

The present work also has practical implications for individuals seeking to form professional relationships. While prior work has shown that concerns about the “dirtiness” of networking can lead people to avoid new interactions altogether, our study suggests that perceived partner authenticity is a key important driver of relationship formation once initiation has occurred. Thus, along with recent work showing that talking about work in initial interactions can backfire ([Martin et al., 2022](#)) and that people often find their interaction partners more authentic than their interaction partners perceive themselves to be ([Bailey & Levy, 2022](#)), our research gives weight to the advice to “be yourself” in initial professional interactions. More specifically, speaking up and expressing one’s thoughts and feelings (even if it feels a little out of place) may be beneficial in these contexts. Our findings also suggest that individuals should be wary of adhering too closely to traditional impression management strategies during initial interactions, as the perception of being genuine appears to be a key driver of relationship formation.

8.3. Limitations and future directions

When interpreting our findings, some limitations should be considered. First, our work focused exclusively on authenticity during initial interactions. When meeting someone new, people may be especially attuned to their interaction partner’s behaviors. Past research has found that perceived authenticity is an important factor in established romantic relationships ([Wickham, 2013](#)), but more work is needed to examine perceived authenticity in established professional relationships. It is possible, for instance, that *feeling* authentic becomes more important than perceiving a partner as authentic when maintaining professional ties over time – which presents an important avenue for future empirical work. In addition, our studies considered the impact of perceived authenticity on relationship formation from the vantage point of one interaction partner’s perspective. Future research should take a fully dyadic approach to assess whether it is important for both partners to agree upon assessments of authenticity for relationship formation to occur.

Future research could also examine potential moderators of the effect of perceived partner authenticity on relationship initiation, such as power and status. For example, people of high status within an organization may regularly question whether subordinates are genuinely agreeing with them or agreeing with them purely to advance their careers. Thus, perceiving that one’s interaction partner is authentic may be especially important to individuals who have reason to question their interaction partner’s authenticity. Conversely, connecting our findings with the literature on Authentic Leadership ([Gardner et al., 2011](#)) may present a complex picture of leadership. That is, being seen as authentic

may be important for leaders because of their positions of power—but may backfire under certain conditions (see [Hewlin et al., 2017](#) for their discussion of “facades of conformity”). At the same time, the additional scrutiny placed on leaders as a result of their status may threaten their ability to signal authenticity successfully. Future work should consider an authenticity double-bind placed upon those in positions of power.

In addition, our work investigates the effect on authenticity on relationship initiation through the mechanism of shared reality. Future work could investigate the effects of authentic *disagreements*—when two people in an interaction genuinely do not see the world in the same way. Although our work suggests that a lack of shared reality undermines relationship initiation, it is possible that in certain cases, authentic disagreements may lead to relationship initiation through alternative mechanisms such as trust, morality, or uniqueness ([Gershon & Smith, 2020](#)). Thus, future research should consider how authenticity may prompt relationship initiation through alternative pathways.

Finally, future work should examine the impact of perceived partner authenticity—and the role of specific authenticity behaviors—in other contexts. Although our studies examined a range of work situations, including professional networking, collaborative tasks, and hiring decisions, the importance of an interaction partner’s authenticity may be heightened (or lessened) in other contexts (e.g., when meeting a new negotiation partner or when entrepreneurs meet potential investors). Given that workplaces are increasingly moving to hybrid formats that present challenges for relationships ([Fayard et al., 2021](#)), it may be particularly important to understand how to foster connections in virtual environments. Our research provides tentative evidence that authenticity behaviors are important for in-person and virtual interactions, but more work is needed examining the effects of authenticity behaviors in virtual environments. Further, the present research investigates the importance of authenticity in the context of professional relationship initiation, where expectations about future interactions make relational goals especially salient (e.g., networking events). The importance of authenticity may be moderated by the central goal of the interaction—for example, for task-oriented activities (e.g., rock climbing, creative projects), authenticity may matter less than competence.

8.4. Conclusion

Relationships are critical to organizational life, yet our understanding of precisely when and why professional connections form following initial interactions is still nascent. Moreover, approaching an initial conversation in a professional context is an unsettling prospect for many. Our results highlight the power of perceiving an interaction partner as authentic as a driver of relationship initiation. Perceiving interaction partners as authentic allows conversation partners to develop a sense of seeing the world in the same way, thereby fostering relationship initiation across time.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Maya Rossignac-Milon: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Julianna Pillemer:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Erica R. Bailey:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **C. Blaine Horton Jr.:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Sheena Iyengar:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

We have shared data/code via links in the manuscript.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2023.104306>.

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