



Living the Algorithm: Swiping Right to the Digital Narrative of *Bumble*

Akhil Shabu

Post-Graduate in English and NET aspirant

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary world dating applications act as cultural and literary texts that structure gender, intimacy, and subjectivity through algorithmic design and interface logic. Moving beyond the idea of apps as neutral technologies, the article argues that digital platforms function as narrative systems that encode ideology, regulate behaviour, and produce meaning within everyday life. Drawing on feminist theory, cultural studies, and digital humanities, and using a qualitative close-reading methodology adapted to digital environments, the research demonstrates that Bumble's presentation of empowerment especially through its "women message first" feature operates within the framework of postfeminist discourse, where agency is not removed but restructured as responsibility, obligation, and performance. The platform transforms intimacy into a market-driven, data-oriented system in which users are active participants and regulated subjects, navigating algorithmic visibility, time constraints, and curated self-presentation. While users experience a sense of autonomy, their actions are shaped by invisible systems of ranking, filtering, and design, producing what the article identifies as digital patriarchy. Ultimately, the article argues that Bumble is not merely a dating application but a post literary cultural text that organises desire, identity, and relationships, system of scripted agency where freedom is experienced

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within carefully designed constraints.

Contemporary consumerist society is fed with sameness and repetitiveness by the capitalist regimes. The present article moves towards analysing how this structure works in practice. The focus here is not on specifics of the environment that it creates, but how people actually behave within that environment. These frameworks enable the article to go beyond the surface-level observations and interpret user behaviour.

Giving emphasis on patterns of interaction such as the initiation, timing of response and conversation flow as well as profile performance to attempt to identify recurring structures. By considering these interactions as forms of behaviour that can be read, the article shows how users negotiate, reproduce, and react to the conditions imposed by the platform. In this way, the research transcends theoretical explanation in order to be applied in a practical way, by showing how the logic of post-feminism and algorithmic control is in focus in the practice of everyday digital interaction.

Thus, changing the perspective from analysing the platform itself to the user as a performer. The emphasis falls on how users act within the structures already identified behaviour as narrative. User interactions are read as patterned performances that reveal the way this algorithmic authorship works in practice. Behaviour, in this sense becomes the site at which structure is visible.

Hence reflecting a general methodological shift away from theory and toward application. In this sense, the article acts as a bridge between conceptual understanding, on the one hand, and the practical illustration of the structures involved, on the other. The user interaction on Bumble must be understood as a structured performance, influenced by the cultural and technological forces. While the platform offers itself as enabling free choice, this sense of autonomy is largely an illusion particularly women to perform confidence and continuous self-improvement (Gill).

These forces create an environment where users feel as if they are acting of their own will, but are actually moving through a system that is subtly guiding their behaviour. What emerges, therefore, is a patterned performance of choice. Within this framework, digital interaction is understood as a readable and multimodal story where actions, such as swiping, messaging, and profile construction act as textual elements with meaning. From a literary perspective, Bumble maybe interpreted as a contemporary narrative system organising social interaction.

Users have a dual role both as authors and as characters, building their identities in the form of profiles, while at the same time acting within the limitations of the application. Temporal features, such as

time limit, are a device for introducing discipline and creating the rhythm of the interaction. Feminist theory, especially that of Rosalind Gill offers a critical lens that can be used to analyse the ways in which agency and identity are constructed in this environment. Post-feminist discourse represents users particularly women as empowered subjects, who actively select and initiate interactivity. This empowerment is accompanied by expectations and they need to manage their visibility and desirability within culturally defined limits.

Digital culture studies provide further context for understanding Bumble as part of an overall process of the marketisation of intimacy (Illouz). The platform organises relationships through systems of visibility, choice and evaluation, where users interact with pre-selected profiles and interact under conditions of uncertainty. At the core of this methodology is the knowledge that interaction is structured, patterned and open to interpretation. “Digital close reading” (Hayles) as a primary mode of analysis - a modification of traditional literary close reading to the context of platform-based interaction on Bumble. In literary studies, the activity of close reading implies prolonged attention to structure, form, and underlying ideology. When expanded to digital environments, this approach sees applications such as Bumble as composed of structured texts and meanings created by not only the language used, but by the design, how it is interacted with, its logic.

Rather than analysing people's words, digital close reading is interested in how the platform scripts behaviour (Manovich). This approach helps to extend the range of analysis to visual semiotics, and interaction design and algorithmic logic. Elements such as colour schemes, iconography and layout are read as symbolic signifiers to shape the perception of the user. Navigational features buttons, prompts and guided paths are as interpretive cues to direct behaviour. The need for women to initiate conversation is interpreted as a narrative gesture that symbolically assigns agency and constrains it in the process of following pre-set rules. Features such as opening moves are scaffolding devices guide the way dialogue is initiated (see Fig. 3).

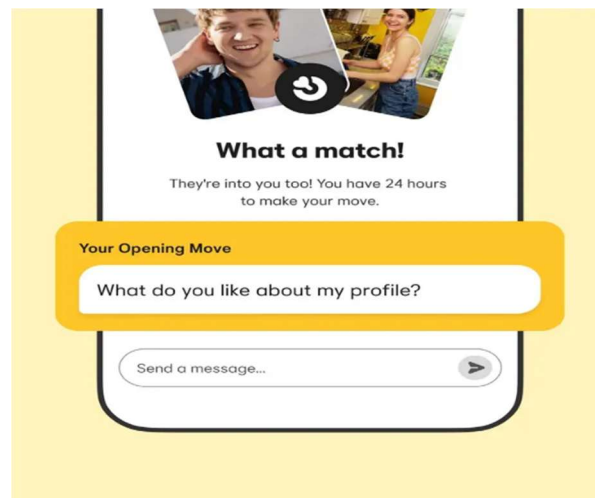


Fig.1. Bumble interface with a preset opening move. Downloaded from *Bumble*, Bumble Inc.

and thus, lowers intellectual effort and keeps the platform under control. Timing in this context can be analysed as a form of digital temporality which regulates interaction. The twenty-four-hour messaging window functions as a type of pacing device, and adds a sense of urgency and anxiety via a ticking clock mechanism.

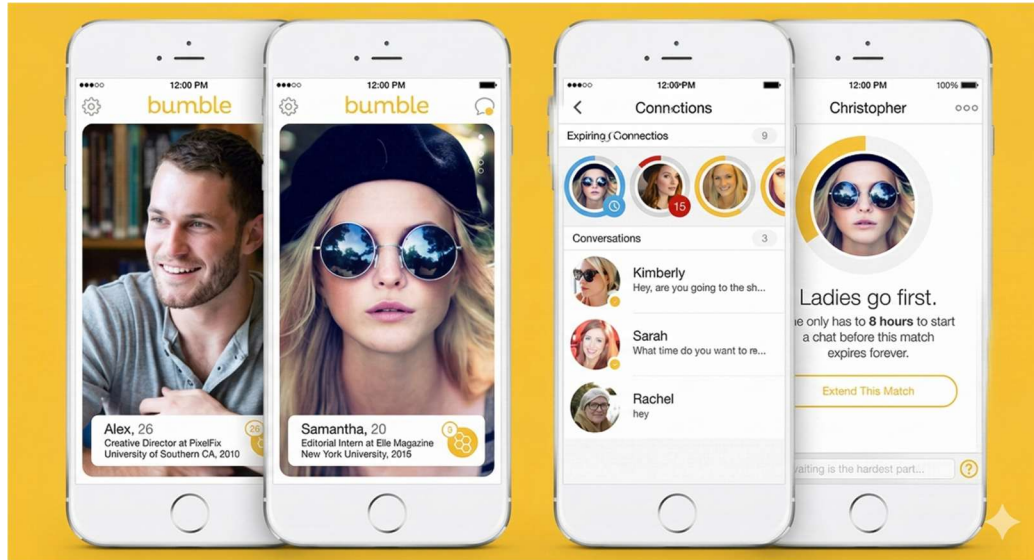


Fig. 2. Bumble match screen displaying the twenty-four-response window and first move requirement. Screenshot from *Bumble*, Bumble Inc.

This temporal structure imposes the condition of responsiveness and turns communication into the obligation, which leads users to be constantly active and attentive. To do this, users design themselves in predefined templates, picking the images and prompts that fit the expectations of the platform. Picking the images and prompts that fit the expectations of the platform (see Fig. 3).

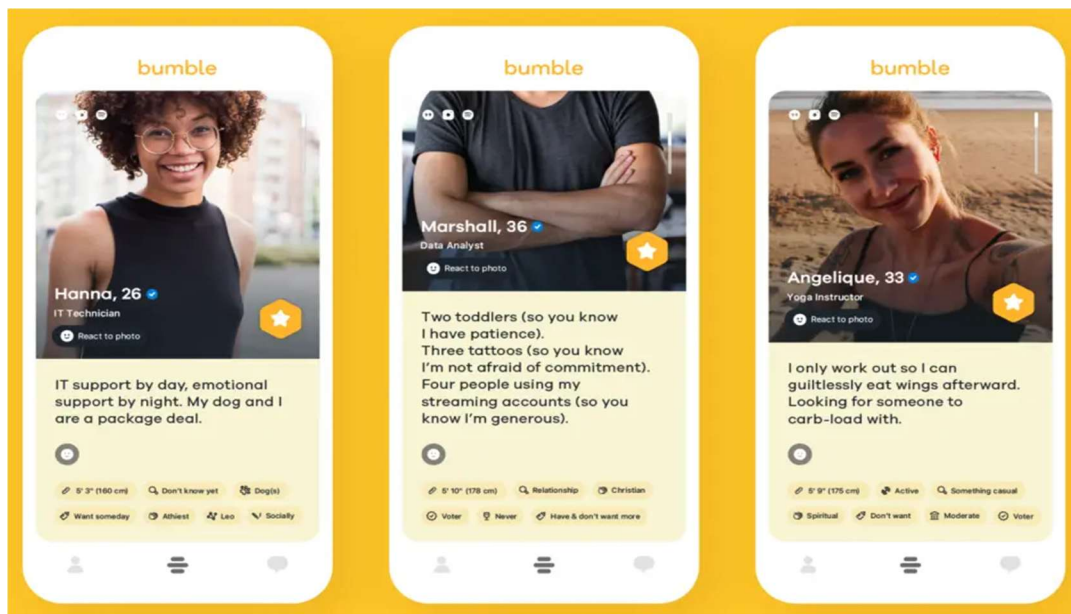


Fig. 3. Bumble profile interface illustrating curated self-presentation through images, prompts, and personal descriptors. Downloaded from *Bumble*, Bumble Inc.

The visual dominance of the interface privileges instant, image-based evaluation which prioritises a mode of interface interaction that is geared towards rapid judgment, as opposed to reflective engagement. Finally, the ritualised and anticipated behaviours when repeatedly checking notifications, swiping and revisiting matches are analysed. These patterns are a reflection of how platform scripts an "ideal user" that is continuously engaged, responsive and optimised for interaction.

The most important goal of digital close reading therefore is to expose the structure and performance of agency. It reveals the inner workings of the platform through the language of choice-within restricted limits. According to Tarleton Gillespie "What we see online is not simply what is there, but what platforms choose to show us". Interaction on the platform is therefore not "pure" social interaction between individuals. Algorithm controls which profiles are made visible, which are prioritised and which are marginalised or taken out of circulation. Interaction is thus more appropriately conceived as algorithm-shaped as opposed to interaction as purely relational. Users do not see all the possible profiles and interactions; they see only the ones that are selected and ordered by the system. This filtering process is an active process in shaping user behaviour.

The platform rewards certain actions such as completing one's profile, frequently engaging, and quick response times with more visibility. In so doing, it standardises the interaction patterns. Users become sensitive to the logic of the system. Changing the way users present themselves and how they communicate so that they are not invisible and active in the platform.

The data is already pre-selected by the system. The pool of profiles that any user can choose from is a curated set of choices that is generated by an algorithmic ranking. In addition, the algorithm also affects the continuity of interaction when profiles emerge, the frequency with which they reappear, and the duration during which matches are kept alive and kicking, the system controls the rhythm of interaction. Users are trapped in loops of checking, responding and re-engaging in a pattern of use that fits the logic of the platform's engagement. Behaviour then becomes synchronised to system demands and not personal preference alone furthermore, algorithmic filtering creates a hierarchy of interaction which is largely invisible to users. The algorithm is also involved in building value within the platform.

Finally, the opacity of the system reinforces the power. Because the criteria used for visibility and matching are not fully disclosed, users are forced to interpret results with no clear knowledge of underlying

mechanisms. This promotes adaptive behaviour, in which users try out strategies of self-presentation and interaction. The lack of transparency thus becomes a structuring force in itself that shapes the understanding of success, failure, and desirability by users within the platform. By embedding this context of the algorithms, the research shows that agency is created, structured, and performed within parameters set by the platform's hidden governing system. The data of this research is derived from the observational engagement with Bumble, with a mix of qualitative, ethnography, and interpretive thinking. The emphasis is on clearly observing the unfolding of interaction in the structured environment of the app. This observational methodology is informed by various forms of engagement. App walkthroughs enable the analysis of interface design and onboarding processes and technical affordance, and how the platform guides user behaviour from the beginning.

The main theme of analysis is initiation of contact, especially the need for women to advance the first move, offers a kind of communicative labour that develops interaction from the outset. Users often adopt certain strategic behaviours such as the use of standardised opening lines or prompts or visual cues in order to manage the pressure of initiating within a limited timeframe. Features such as guided prompts act as support devices that reduce the level of intellectual effort, while still retaining control over the way in which conversations start. Attention is also given to message patterns which tells us something about the way users navigate through interaction under conditions of uncertainty. Communication is often repetitive and strategic with users interpreting signals, humour or tone for its potential outcomes. Messaging becomes less about the momentary expression and more about the control of impressions and the evaluation of compatibility in the context of a limited informational plan. Finally, the research covers user responses, response timing, frequency of engagement, and cases of silence or failure of conversations. The twenty-four hour response window generates anxiety. At the same time, non-response and match expiration behave like patterned outcomes rather than purely individual decisions based on broader behavioural trends within the system. It offers a 'grounded' basis for an interpretation of user behaviour as a performance affected by both cultural expectations and algorithmic conditions. Heterosexual interaction on Bumble is characterized by a communicative protocol, by which women must take initiative within a specific amount of time.

While this is all presented as empowering, the initial stages of interaction are defined by gendered labour. The extent of the interaction is regulated by certain rules: "first move" rule limits initiating to women; twenty-four hour time limitation makes matches expire; and some features such as "Opening Moves" standardise the way the conversation is started (Bumble). The burden of initiation means extra communicative labour for women which can often mean pressure to come up with effective opening messages. Interaction takes place in a state of uncertainty, users rely on limited information, signals are

interpreted in a strategic manner. Traditional gender dynamics still work alongside these changes, and time constraints result in constant responsiveness.

Finally, the platform encourages a limited model of confidence and self-presentation and reinforces post-feminist expectations, rather than allowing for unrestricted autonomy. This study follows strict ethical guidelines in the analysis of interaction on Bumble. No personal identification is included in any phase of the research. No names, or recognizable information are revealed. Images and ads by Bumble are taken for pictorial examples. The analysis does not involve use or exposure of private or sensitive data. All observations are based on general interaction patterns and not specific individuals, so that no personal information is compromised. The focus is still on the structure of behaviour within the platform and not on individual users. Furthermore, the research is very strictly interpretive in nature. It does not interfere with user activity, gather personal data or do invasive research. This means that the research is respectful of user privacy regardless of the data.

Post-feminist discourse builds up women as confident and self-assured individuals who can take charge of their relationships with other people. Within this framework, confidence is not an option, it is expected. The need to start communication reinforces this expectation, making action a necessary condition for participation. Women are not simply given the opportunity to act, they have to show initiative, decision and involvement in order to not become invisible in the platform. This expectation turns initiation into an ordered performance. Users need to develop opening messages that are interesting enough to keep a conversation going, often within a limited time. The pressure to act quickly and effectively creates a layer of responsibility that goes beyond participating. Failure to initiate leads to automatic expiration of matches which shifts the burden of interaction from the system to the user.

As a result, initiation becomes less of a symbol for freedom and more of an obligation. Agency is presented as empowerment, but in limited terms that determine when and how action must take place. The user is placed in the position of an active subject; however, this activity is dictated by expectations that are embedded in the design of the platform. In this sense, the initiation on Bumble is an example of the post-feminist logic of how empowerment becomes responsibility, where the performance of confidence becomes an obligation for participation, not a freely chosen expression. On Bumble, interaction is regulated by strict time-based constraints that influence the manner in which and time at which users interact. As Judy Wajcman states “Digital technologies intensify the experience of time pressure and accelerate the pace of everyday life”. The twenty-four hour rule involves women being required to start the conversation within a constrained time, and the matched users being required to respond before the expiry period ends. If these

conditions are not met, then the match is lost and time becomes a central organising principle of interaction. Through a post-feminist lens, this time frame for action reinforces an expectation that users particularly women must be proactive, responsive and constantly engaged. Action is also not just encouraged, it is required, turning participation into a time-sensitive responsibility. The ability to respond quickly becomes part of the performance of competence and confidence. At the same time, the algorithm also enforces this timely discipline by placing deadlines directly into the interface. Notifications, count downs and expiry mechanisms are used to ensure that users are aware of passing time.

The system is not just able to interact; it controls its speed. Users adjust their behaviour accordingly, putting immediacy above reflection in order not to lose possible connections. As such time becomes a subtle, but powerful control mechanism. It helps to structure decision making, accelerate interaction and discipline user behaviour without seeming overtly restrictive. What is passively offered as opportunity is at the same time a constraint as to when and how that connection can take place. Interaction on Bumble tends to be repetitive and predictable. Early exchanges have a tendency to rely on safe and familiar forms of communication (greetings, basic questions about work or hobbies, light humour etc.) and a standardised flow of communication develops (See Fig.4)

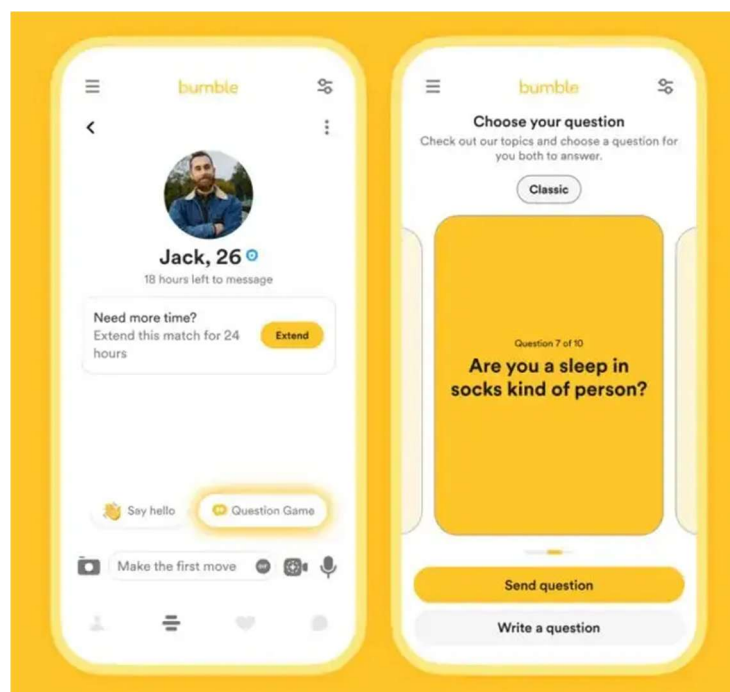


Fig. 4. Interface displaying the initial conversation. Image from *Bumble*, Bumble Inc.

These similar patterns would indicate that users are working within a communicative style that has already been established. This structured nature of conversation can be explained using the concept of

algorithmic authorship, in which the platform has an indirect role in shaping how conversations unfold. By deciding what profiles are matched and how conversation is initiated and how long it lasts helps to organise the conditions under which dialog occurs. Features like prompts, restricted profile info and time limits all provide further guidance into the direction of conversation, encouraging users to follow formats that are fast, effective and easy to understand. As a result, conversation tends to become less an open-ended exchange, more a scripted narrative. Users adjust to what is expected within the platform and chose responses that fit into common patterns. Their role is not that of unrestricted authors, but of performers working within predefined scripts which guide the way that the interaction begins, develops, and ends.

On Bumble, identity is more of a performance in which users engage as entrepreneurial brands moving through a social atmosphere of structural uncertainty. As Erving Goffman states “The self is not an organic thing... it is a dramatic effect arising from a scene that is presented”(Goffman). Curated self-presentation operates as strategic branding in which users engage in a highly managed form of self-presentation, conceptualizing themselves as branded objects of value to attract interest in a competitive marketplace, where the branded persona is treated as a dispositive, through which a public version of the self is constituted, as a promise to be fulfilled through interaction, where signalling through hobbies, photos and witty bios is used to generate an experiential impression of whether a person is worth the risk of a date, such that even a swipe right is less an act of genuine interpersonal interest and more an appreciation of a branded persona.

Consequently, identity on Bumble is created, edited and evaluated in real-time, focusing the transformation of users into compliant bodies who constantly modify their behaviours and presentations in order to perform successfully in the system, So that agency on Bumble emerges as a designed performance in which the user is simultaneously an active subject who appears to choose and an object that is displayed, measured, and ranked.

While others are repetition and behavioural patterns on platforms such as Bumble suggests how the structure of user interaction is determined by platform-induced conventions, where the structures of similar messages and predictable interactions can be found. Users tend to resort to templated message openings and familiar conversational cues and safe and repeatable formats, because they maximise response probability within a competitive attention economy. This leads to interactions that are structurally repetitive and strategically optimised rather than spontaneous, so that the overtime behaviour becomes standardised, leading to a passive style of thinking and being safe in the thought process of the user by not having to think critically and not having the feeling of taking a risk factor; leaving their comfort zone.

Scholar Rosalind Gill conceptualizes post-feminism as a cultural "sensitivity" and logic characterized by individualism, choice and empowerment. This framework is based on girl power narratives about how gender equality has been achieved and, in the process, labour-intensive digital practices like self-branding are re-constructed as forms of self-care or entrepreneurialism rather than exploitation. Application of theory to the Bumble user experience reveals that in relationships between heterosexuals, Bumble's architecture requires women to make the first move, a feature promoted as first-move privileges, but this architecture design turns out to be a technology of social control that turns a symbolic act of agency into a platform-specific requirement. The burden of maintaining conversation exposes that women bear an outsized labour as they have to initiate every single interaction in order for matches not to expire, requiring communicative labour, a process in which women must create unique and pithy openers to create meaningful dialogue and avoid the stigma of low-effort greetings such as 'hey'. Performing confidence also images how the platform polices what scholars refer to as a cult of confidence, wherein women are moved from one policed form of femininity, passivity, to another mandatory standard of assertiveness, and this need for confidence is seen not as actual emancipation, but a shifting of goal-posts that overlooks structural forms of oppression.

Under the lens of Rosalind Gill's theory, empowerment on Bumble becomes viewed as the responsibility of an individual and a personal feeling, instead of a collective structural change, and by shifting responsibility from the institution to the user, the app guarantees that if a user fails to find a connection, it is assumed he or she has failed to manage himself or herself. Consequently, user agency is bounded to the extreme, as women are encouraged to experience themselves as empowered subjects, while at the same time bearing the burden of constant self-monitoring and strict aesthetic discipline, that attest to the fact that Bumble is a technology of non-choice, where the appearance of freedom masks a system for the governance of intimate life through manufactured urgency; handing the illusion of power to the user.

The concept of sexual subjectification (Gill) as theorised by Rosalind Gill, describes a shift in the way power operates in the digital age, instead of being passive objects of an outside male gaze, women are encouraged to become active sexual subjects who take charge of their own desires but this freedom requires them to constantly monitor, evaluate and brand themselves according to narrow standards of desirability. The main concept, the subject/object paradox (Gill) indicates that on Bumble, women are placed in a paradoxical position of being both active subjects, wherein the logic of the app's design shows women as subjects who have agency, they are the ones who swipe, select, and make the first move, and evaluated objects, wherein at the same time, women are devalued as objects within a marketplace narrative, wherein their value is calculated through visual display, desirability metrics, and algorithmic ranking, making them

objects to be displayed, evaluated, and exchanged. In application, performance within structured limits is through profiles, interaction and swiping, wherein profiles are designed to be attractive, profiles aren't genuine self-expressions but constructed representations, as the interface devotes a good proportion on the screen-to photos, scripting a behaviour where visual attractiveness is the measure of value and requires users to engage in the aesthetic discipline and difficult self-branding in order to stay marketable in the app's competitive ecosystem. Interaction involves the performance of likeability, in that the first move requirement is a form of outsized labour, women not only have to make the first move, but they must perform a particular kind of confidence and likeability and in order to not be ignored women have to create pithy and enticing opening lines, where a symbol of empowerment is converted into a disciplinary requirement of producing good chat that creates engagement.

Swiping is a form of judging and being judged, where swiping is a mechanized activity where users are both judging and being judged by one another based on general thus comparable indicators such as profile pictures and short bios in which users are in a state of constant surveillance both as judges and as the judged by other users as well as by the algorithm which determines visibility based on how well they perform. It is the key argument, negotiated agency, is the idea that users actually do construct themselves as desirable subjects but only within the structural limits of the app, that this is not pure interaction but a managed performance as an individual's identity is composed, edited, and evaluated in real time in a system that substitutes explicit patriarchal commands with a 'ventriloquism of power' that speaks through the language of freedom and choice.

The shift of courtship into the digital space has turned romance into a marketized structure in which human connection is downgraded as a system of data and quantifiable results. Matches become measurable capital, where on platforms such as Bumble potential connection is no longer an organic social development but a quantified data that users must strategically control, where ready-made social capital replaces traditional networks as users are given a pre-packaged pool of quasi-strangers to tap into and browse.

Platforms control ranking systems that are invisible to all participants-which may be referred to as Beehive Score-that scores users with a measurable amount of data points such as completeness of profiles, verified status, and speed of response, and with interaction presented as a three-step-journey (Match-Chat-Date) with the promise of romance as the mantra-that this is an efficient process using a technological procedure. Attraction is reduced to data points, similar indicators that allow faster computation by algorithms, with visual dominance determining behaviour with User Interface architecture giving photographs about 90% of screen real estate, prioritising quick and first impressions.

Users engage in signalling via hobbies, witty bios, or intellectual photos to communicate a sign value that produces experiential impression on whether or not a date is worth pursuing, whilst algorithms act as invisible narrators to amplify or marginalize users based on these signals in the sense of governing desire as visibility determines the visibility of a user within the swipe right or swipe left interface. The wider market-based logic of love explains that modern intimacy is now business, where individuals have become brands and relationships are often transactions, which has been nicknamed relationshopping, (Illouz & Hobbs) where users treat dating apps as retail spaces and treat themselves and others as products to be sold, assessed, purchased, or discarded. Users are turned into entrepreneurs of the self, constantly monitoring and editing their identities as branded assets in order to operate within the culture of the app, but despite the promise of a digital fix, this reproduces structural uncertainty, requiring users to bet and guess based on limited information and playing intimacy as a strategic game of capital first move rule, operate within this marketized logic, where empowerment is commodified as a product feature that obscures the outsized labour and aesthetic discipline required to maintain visibility within the platform.

The architecture of the app functions as a designed environment in which it structures possibility. Users need to swipe to exist, to maintain visibility they need to message, and they need to be active to avoid disappearing. In this sense, the platform is a sort form of an experimental set up in which variables (visibility, response rate, desirability) are constantly measured and recalibrated. At the level of behaviour, users are forced to internalise and perform these rules.

Women, in particular, are placed in a regime of obligatory agency, in which striking up a conversation is described as empowerment but is an obligation that requires effort, timing and creativity. This results in what you have already identified as communicative labour, where interaction is strategically created. Profiles are edited, photos optimized and modes of conversation adjusted on the basis of feedback loops such as matches, replies, or silence. Behaviour thus becomes standardised and patterned, shaped less by expression of the individual, and more so by platform logics.

Bumble perpetuates this system with a discourse of empowerment, choice and self-improvement. Drawing on the framework of the work of feminist theorist Rosalind Gill, the platform draws on post-feminist sensibilities to portray the structured constraints as individual freedom. The first move is promoted as liberation, but reframes responsibility onto women while clouding the structure within which interaction occurs. Empowerment is thus privatized and internalized success or failure is seen as a reflection of personal skill, attractiveness or effort rather than the design of the platform. This produces a self-regulating subject who gladly engages in endless self-monitoring, aesthetic discipline and relational labour. This article argues,

Bumble serves as a laboratory of intimate life, where gender is not just expressed but produced, tested and optimized through algorithm and interface-driven systems. The experiment consists in the way the platform subtly manipulates the conditions of visibility, urgency, evaluation to see and influence user behaviour, while at the same time managing to maintain an illusion that the users are freely deciding how to act. This enables us to conclude that not only is digital dating a site of connection, but it is a regulated environment where identity, desire, and gender performance are systematically engineered in the context of platform capitalism.

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