

“I Like That It’s My Choice a Couple Different Times”: Gender, Affordances, and User Experience on Bumble Dating

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The dating app Bumble has been lauded as the “feminist Tinder” largely because of its defining feature: Only women can initiate the conversation after a match. Using in-depth interviews with 14 users, this research explores cisgender women’s experience of Bumble, through an affordances framework. The findings show that women strategically use the various affordances of the app to not only look for matches but also to actively avoid harassment and danger. The implications of this “negotiated use” as invisible gendered digital labor, as well as the overall limitations of Bumble as a “feminist” app focused on choice, are discussed.

Keywords: online dating, Bumble, gender, affordances, user experience, dating apps, feminism

The dating app Bumble has been lauded as the “feminist Tinder” because it “allows for women to take control of the dating game” (Anwar, 2015, para. 1). The defining feature of the app is that when seeking a heterosexual relationship, the woman must start the conversation after matching with a potential date (in same-gender matches on Bumble, either party can make the first move). In contrast, on Tinder and other dating apps, anyone can make the first move after matching, but the cultural assumption is that the man should do it (Bennett, 2017)—and research shows that men tend to initiate contact on such apps (Dawn & Farvid, 2012, as cited in Farvid & Aisher, 2016).

Bumble was created by Whitney Wolfe Herd, who previously cofounded the original swiping dating app Tinder (Yashari, 2015). She left the company amid a sexual harassment lawsuit and started Bumble partially as a response to her unpleasant experiences at Tinder (O’Connor, 2017). Wolfe Herd calls Bumble “100 percent feminist” (Yashari, 2015, para. 8), not only because the app’s “women talk first” feature challenges stereotypically gendered dating norms but also because it purports to decrease gendered harassment. Harassment and abuse by men who have been ignored or rejected on dating apps after initiating a conversation is a well-documented phenomenon (Holmes, 2017). On Bumble, because a woman reaches out first, the man “doesn’t feel rejection or aggression—he feels flattered” (Yashari, 2015, para. 12). Wolfe Herd argues that women talking first thus “guides the conversation in a very different way” (Yashari, 2015, para. 15), making the interaction mutually respectful and decreasing the chance of harassment.

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This article focuses on understanding how users navigate the affordances of Bumble during their dating endeavors. The data is gathered from 14 cisgender women, using repeat in-depth interviews. The findings show that online dating on Bumble is a series of tactical choices for women, choices that simultaneously try to (1) lead toward a love match and (2) steer away from danger, so that Bumble fulfills a double function of both "matchmaker" and "protector." Female users balance trying to find a partner on Bumble with preventing threatening situations, in ways that extend far beyond the safety affordances (such as women talking first) that Bumble explicitly markets as such. The felt imperative to constantly consider safety while navigating the app to look for love creates largely invisible labor for women who use Bumble. Dating has always been a lot of work, off-line and online, for those seeking partners (Weigel, 2016); however, this study highlights the particularly gendered nature of this invisible labor related to harassment and safety in the digital context.

Dating App Studies: Harassment and Gender

Online dating provides unique affordances to users, the primary one being the ability to connect with large volumes of potential partners in the comfort of one's own home. However, online dating also brings with it increased risks for the same reason: bringing people into virtual (and later, face-to-face) contact with strangers. Research shows that people on online dating platforms balance presenting personal information to appeal to potential matches while applying rules to judge the credibility of others (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010). Gibbs, Ellison, and Lai (2011) found that increased "protective information-seeking behavior" (p. 90)—such as verifying information that others disclose online using various social media platforms—occurs when people are worried about their personal safety—worries that often stem from online harassment.

Harassment on dating apps is more prevalent for those who hold marginalized identities, such as women, LGBTQ individuals, and people of color (Lenhart, Ybarra, Zickuhr, & Prive-Feeney, 2016). This current research foregrounds gender as an analytical category, and specifically focuses on cisgender, straight, White women—the "intended users" (Bivens & Hoque, 2018, p. 448) of Bumble—and their experiences of the app. This focus stems from the fact that predominantly self-identified cisgender, straight, White women heeded the call to be part of this study, but also because Bumble operates on a heteronormative and cisnormative understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality, and gives little attention to race in its design (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; MacLeod & McArthur, 2019).

Some studies have focused on the gendered aspects of online dating as it intersects with risk, harassment, and danger (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Duguay, Burgess, & Suzor, 2018; Hess & Flores, 2018). Harassment in online dating is more common for women, with 57% of women versus 21% of men reporting feeling harassed on dating apps (Burgess, 2016). Online harassment specifically in the form of sexual advances from strangers is a gendered phenomenon: One in five women ages 18 to 29 say they have been sexually harassed online, whereas only one in 10 men encounters digital sexual harassment (Duggan, 2017). In addition, 53% of young women have received unsolicited explicit images online (Duggan, 2017).

Studies have shown that women perceive online dating as risky for various reasons, including harassment, aggression, and emotional costs (Couch, Liamputtong, & Pitts, 2012; Farvid & Aisher, 2016).

Cultural norms and scripts around masculinity and femininity guide the performance of gender identity on dating sites (Hess & Flores, 2018), and research shows that dating apps such as Tinder are rife with misogynistic discourse—such as sending unsolicited sexually explicit pictures—connected with performances of toxic masculinity (Thompson, 2016). Farvid and Aisher (2016) found that women on Tinder experienced aggression from men, particularly after rejection, when men would not take “no” for an answer. Accordingly, female Tinder users were “(always) being on the lookout for any potential signs of danger and taking measures to make sure they did not put themselves in harm’s way” (Farvid & Aisher, 2016, para. 46). Duguay and colleagues (2018) examined queer women’s experiences on Tinder and found that they, too, experience harassment in the form of unsolicited sexually explicit messages; bisexual women, in particular, often get sexually aggressive messages from men. In general, women on location-sensitive apps, like dating apps, report lower levels of trust and higher levels of negativity when interacting with others; in addition, women are much more likely to experience violent harassment on these apps than men are (Toch & Levi, 2013).

Research has found that women adopt unique strategies to avoid hostility and harassment from men on dating apps (Duguay et al., 2018; Farvid & Aisher, 2016). For instance, bisexual women switch their settings from “seeking men and women” to “seeking women” only (Duguay et al., 2018). Previous studies about online dating (but not specifically mobile dating apps) found that women use two processes for choosing a partner: filtering, picking potential partners based on their compatibility, and screening, conducting additional research (such as background checks) to verify that a potential match is safe to meet off-line (Padgett, 2007). The current study explores the unique strategies that women employ on Bumble, as no studies have been conducted on user experience of Bumble and “differences in dating app affordances and user behavior . . . justify research focused on specific apps” (Gillett, 2018, p. 212).

About Bumble

Bumble has positioned and marketed itself as a feminist app in a sociopolitical climate of “popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Popular feminism, visible in hashtag campaigns, celebrity tweets, and product marketing, is built on the neoliberal tenets of individualism, consumerism, and choice as empowerment, alongside a critique of gendered inequality in society. Despite its visibility in media and popular culture and the attention it brings to gender disparity, popular feminism has been critiqued by scholars because it “often eclipses a feminist critique of *structure*, as well as obscures the *labor* involved in producing oneself according to the parameters of popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4, emphasis added).

Because it is tied up with market logic, individual consumption, and choice, “the popular feminism that is most visible is that which is white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 13). Both Bivens and Hoque (2018) and MacLeod and McArthur (2019) examined Bumble’s interface and found that the app operates under the assumption of gender, sex, and sexuality as a “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990), the idea that bodies identified as female at birth perform feminine gender identity and are attracted to bodies designated as male at birth that perform masculinity. Static binary logics (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) permeate Bumble’s design, and, as such, the app is “optimized for straight cisgender women” (Bivens & Hoque, 2018, p. 445). Further, the app promotes the focus on gender as the primary axis of identity (and oppression/inequality), with little attention paid to intersecting characteristics,

such as race and sexuality (MacLeod & McArthur, 2019). In addition, Bivens and Hoque (2018) argue that Whitney Wolfe Herd as a figurehead for the company and her "own intersectional identity position—White, straight, upper-class, cisgender—informs how she relates to potential users and how she imagines the changes she wants Bumble to create in the world" (p. 447). Thus, the intended user of Bumble is a White, straight, cisgender woman. This study explores Bumble as a manifestation of "popular feminism," paying attention to the labor of (White, heterosexual, cisgender) female users during navigation of the app's features and functionalities, as well as to the app's limitations in addressing structural inequalities.

Social Media Affordances

Features and functionalities of apps (such as the "women talk first" feature on Bumble) provide affordances or opportunities for interaction between the physical properties of an object and the actions of a social agent (Gibson, 1979). Affordances of social media, such as dating apps, are "the perceived range of possible actions linked to [the] features of the platform" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 3). Nagy and Neff (2015) purport that the concept of affordances is not simply objective, suggesting the notion of "imagined affordances": Users interact with technologies based on their imaginations around what that technology is for and how it should be used. Social media affordances, then, include the material features of a particular platform, users' perceptions of a platform, as well as practices that emerge out of interactions with the platform infrastructure.

Shaw (2017), building on Hall's (1973/2007) classic reading positions (audiences' dominant, negotiated, and oppositional "readings" of media content), discusses affordances in new media studies. Similar to how meaning arises through interaction between a text and its audience, so does an affordance actualize through the interaction between a user and a technology. Shaw suggests the term "using positions" when thinking about affordances: dominant/hegemonic use (technology used as intended), negotiated use (used correctly, but not exactly as intended), and oppositional use (unexpected use of technology); "what counts as a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional use is intrinsically linked to who has the power to define how technologies *should* be used" (Shaw, 2017, p. 8, emphasis in original). Creators of dating apps define how the technology should be used, through design and functionality choices (such as the placement of buttons in the interface), as well as through marketing and branding. However, users can interact with the technology in unexpected ways. David and Cambre (2016) showed how Tinder users use the app's affordances in creative ways to bypass its limitations, for instance, linking to other social media platforms in their dating profiles to showcase more pictures. This current study builds on the research examining user behavior on dating apps and the studies exploring Bumble's interface by employing an affordances framework and interviews to understand the "using positions" of Bumble users.

Method

I recruited the interview participants predominantly using social media promotion through my Facebook and Twitter accounts in October 2017. I also attended a Bumble Bizz (a new Bumble service connecting business contacts) launch party in October 2017, where I recruited two participants who used Bumble for dating purposes. There were 14 participants in total, all self-identifying as cisgender women, predominantly White ($n = 11$), majority heterosexual ($n = 13$, one identified as bisexual), between the ages

of 26 and 42 years, and almost all based in the U.S. ($n = 12$, the remaining two lived in New Zealand, where I have personal ties). The makeup of the sample—majority heterosexual and White, all cisgender women—creates a significant limitation for this research, as the experiences and perspectives of people of color and LGBTQ individuals are largely absent. LGBTQ individuals and people of color face different (and often amplified) online harassment, but academic research rarely highlights their experiences (Hackworth, 2018). Future research should explore the experiences of marginalized users of dating apps, including people of color, as well as people with more diverse gender identities and sexualities.

I conducted one-on-one, in-person initial interviews with all the participants in late 2017 and early 2018. These interviews took place in coffee shops and lasted between 45 minutes and 120 minutes each. Two interviews with participants from New Zealand took place over Skype. I recorded each interview with the participants' consent and have used pseudonyms and left out identifying features in the analysis. I then conducted follow-up one-on-one interviews with three participants and one follow-up group interview of nine participants in later 2018. The interviews took between 45 minutes and three hours. During the second round of interviews, I asked follow-up questions that expanded on and clarified the initial conversations. I decided to use a mixture of individual interviews and group interviews for the convenience of my participants (in terms of their schedules and privacy preferences).

The interviews were unstructured (Brennen, 2013), using a short list of "open-ended process reflection questions" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 679) to start each interview. The interactions were more like conversations to get at the participants' experiences and reflections in their own words. I asked some set questions (e.g., Why did you choose Bumble for dating? Take me through how you set up your account? What do you look for in matches?), but in varying orders for each participant, depending on the natural flow of conversation. I added more questions specifically tailored to each participant based on their answers to the initial set of questions, letting our discussions develop organically. I transcribed the interviews and interpreted my data inductively, drawing on a grounded theory framework broadly (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), but specifically using the constant comparative process—moving between the interview data and literature—to analyze my findings (Charmaz, 2006).

Negotiating Bumble as a Series of Harm-Prevention Tools

The intended use of Bumble is for men and women to connect romantically. My findings, however, show that, in addition to looking for matches, women use the app in often subversive ways to avoid negative interactions with men—illustrating a "negotiated use" (Shaw, 2017) of a communication technology. Women use the affordances of Bumble in strategic ways to minimize harassment and other risks during the entire process of using the app, including sign-up, swiping, and chatting. These calculated tactics for harm prevention when using Bumble add a tremendous amount of labor (time and energy) to a woman's dating process, and, in tandem with Bumble's design focus on individual choice over structural change, trouble the notion of Bumble as a "feminist" app.

Signing Up: Authentication and Information Management Through Facebook Login

When setting up a profile on Bumble, my interviewees considered what information they were providing, trying to carefully balance self-disclosure to present as attractive and genuine while limiting personal information. Bumble automatically uses information from Facebook—such as college, job title, age, photographs¹—to auto-populate a new user's profile. Bumble states that it uses Facebook data to verify that its users are real people and not bots; so, the expectation (dominant use) is that users will (a) have a real Facebook profile and (b) will not change the information provided from Facebook, to maintain this verification system. Indeed, users of online dating find that the connection to Facebook (often required in the sign-up process of other dating apps, too) provides a sense of authenticity around users and promotes a culture of trust (David & Cambre, 2016; Duguay, 2017).

Using Facebook information to auto-populate Bumble profiles is "helpful," as one of my participants, Aidan, noted, because users do not have to "start from scratch." However, my interviewees displayed much "negotiated use" (Shaw, 2017) of this feature, manually changing their auto-populated profile information in line with privacy concerns. For instance, Edie, who redownloaded Bumble during our interview, walked me through the process as she decided to change her information that had been pulled from Facebook: "It's put up random photos from Facebook, that's fine. I'm just going to take down my specific job, because why do you need to tell people where I work?" So, there was a distinction made between what information was fine to leave up (photos, for the most part) and what was a privacy or safety violation.

Sharing where one worked was seen as particularly unsafe by multiple interviewees, because this information was linked to the user's physical location. Sharing one's work location was reserved for much later on in the dating process, usually after a few successful dates. As Lily explained,

I'm still quite reserved about things that I tell people when I'm chatting to them, like I'll tell them what my role is and a brief summary of what that actually means, but I won't tell them where I work.

When asked why, she answered: "Because I don't want them to come and find me if I decide that I don't like them." This fear, that men could try find them in person when they did not want to be found, and linking this to personal safety concerns, was prevalent throughout the interviews. When pressed further on why she limits sharing personal information on Bumble, Lily explained:

[You can be] stalked, harassed, catfished. You're quite vulnerable . . . all our information is collected online, but that's by some anonymous corporation or government that you can't do anything about. But when it's an individual you've got to be quite careful about that. I don't know what their capabilities are and I don't know what they would actually use that information for.

¹ In late 2018, Bumble added the ability for users to sign up using just a phone number, citing privacy concerns around Facebook's data collection policies. However, at the point of this data collection, signing up was only possible through Facebook.

So, there was a perceived difference of control regarding privacy. Most women were resigned to the fact that Facebook and other social media platforms collect their private data, including their location. As reluctantly accepting as these women were of such data-collection practices, they felt that they could (and should) control information given out to potential dates much more closely.

Bumble allows users to link other social media accounts, such as Instagram and Spotify, to their dating profile. Users can also put social media handles, such as Twitter or Snapchat handles, in their blurbs. The women I spoke with restricted their linking of other apps, to limit the amount of personal information about themselves that they shared, echoing previous studies on user behavior on Tinder (Farvid & Aisher, 2016). Aidan, for instance, said that she found it “weird” when men had Snapchat on their profiles because “it’s a little too personal.” She went on to say that she ignored a lot of requests by dates to be connected on Snapchat, because “I don’t want them to be involved in my snaps and see what I’m doing.” For Aidan, Snapchat was only for her “closer friends” to “make them feel more connected” to her.

By strategically curating and limiting the amount of information that they put in their profiles, my participants were trying to present enough to ensure some good matches, but at the same time, trying to maintain their privacy, in case things went wrong. Conversely, women wanted men to put as much information into their profiles as possible, so that they could effectively use that information to further vet their matches, as is discussed below.

Weeding Out Harassers on Bumble

Men are three times more likely to swipe right (“like”) than women are on online apps (Tyson, Perta, Haddadi, & Seto, 2016)—women are far more selective in who they choose to connect with. Indeed, the women I spoke with mentioned how anecdotally all their male friends are “very liberal with their swipes” and “basically swipe right on every profile.” This leads to many matches for women, even if they selectively swipe (almost all swipe rights for women are a match). Tyson and associates (2016) argue that because women are highly selective and men far less discerning, a “feedback loop” is created in online dating “whereby men are driven to be less selective in the hope of attaining a match, whilst women are increasingly driven to be more selective, safe in the knowledge that any profiles they like will probably result in a match” (p. 1). My findings show, however, that women are selective not only because they are sure of their romantic prospects but also because they have to incessantly monitor dating interactions to maintain their comfort and safety. Being selective in swiping is a way of avoiding men who could potentially be harmful. Ultimately, this is a negotiated use of Bumble: Swiping is in part based on safety concerns, rather than on compatibility.

Research shows that profiles are a key aspect of online dating for self-presentation (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs et al., 2011) and that online dating users screen others’ profiles for deal breakers, such as minimum height (Zytka, Grandhi, & Jones, 2014). My interviewees indeed looked for compatibility and disqualified potential dates based on deal breakers such as height, smoking habits, and attractiveness. However, they also had a plethora of rules for how to screen profiles specifically for aggressively masculine performances (Hess & Flores, 2018), to avoid men that would harass or be “fuckboys” (men who are disrespectful and sexually aggressive). Blake stated that she could weed out “95% of harassers” through careful screening:

I feel as though it's very limited where there are harassing messages from people if you're good about reading their profiles and looking at their pictures and understanding who they are from their profile [and not matching with them].

Certain types of pictures or words were thought to be an indication of a man's personality and his proclivity toward harassment or unwanted sexual advances. Vanessa explained how she "learned how to avoid the guys who would harass you" in online dating through looking out for the following:

If the pictures show his body a lot, they're more likely to be "fuckboys." They're more good-looking, they appear to be more successful, but [if there is a lot of body] they're also fuckboys. And in the profile, if there is very little information about them. Little to none.

Women were particularly careful to not swipe on men who had nothing written in their profile, because it showed that these men "don't really care," are "lazy" or "boring," "might be there just to hook up," but also because these men "would harass you." Pictures were also used as a vetting tool. Most women swiped left on men who only had pictures with sunglasses on, mirror selfies, guns in their pictures, or obscured or blurry pictures. One woman even came across a man who had a swastika tattoo on his face (she swiped left)! Women felt that these visual signs were indicators of possible future problems. For instance, sunglasses were deemed to be untrustworthy because you "could not see the person's eyes." Thus, both pictures and text were used to decide whether a man had potential to be a good match (a pull function), but also whether the interaction could turn sour—that is, actively aggressive or sexually uncomfortable—not simply "not compatible" (Zytka et al., 2014).

Screening potentially harmful matches is not a dating practice unique to Bumble (Farvid & Aisher, 2016; Padgett, 2007); however, Bumble tries actively, as part of its social justice mission, to incorporate such screening practices into its very design. For instance, since this data was collected, Bumble has banned photos with guns on the app (Cooney, 2018). However, if women are using visual cues such as guns to avoid possibly risky men, then such a move by the app in fact backfires in terms of safety. Further, there are also racialized implications to such screening practices. Research shows that Black bodies, particularly Black male bodies, tend to be perceived as more threatening and harmful, both consciously and unconsciously, than White bodies are (Wilson, Hugenberg, & Rule, 2017). Thus, especially as the intended user of Bumble is a White woman, the practice of screening profiles based predominantly on appearance has the potential to propagate racial discrimination.

Even though women presented limited information about themselves in their profiles, they preferred men to provide as much information as possible. Women then used the information that men disclosed—such as linked Instagram accounts, names, colleges, and jobs—to "stalk" them on other social media and learn more about them, in line with previous findings about online dating and protective information-seeking behavior (Farvid & Aisher, 2016; Gibbs et al., 2011; Padgett, 2007). As Edie summed up, "I do always try to find out about them, just because, I don't know, it does feel safer." The times that this additional information-seeking occurred in the online dating process varied. Some women did additional checking after matching with someone, but before actually writing to them; others checked only after agreeing to meet on a date. One woman, Diana, did a whole round of vetting research before even swiping:

So, like [I go on] Facebook if they have an open profile, or LinkedIn, to find out what they do for a job if it's not on there. Just Google and just try and find out. And I've found out, like, really interesting stuff before, really good reasons not to swipe, that you would want to know before.

She said she took this "risk averse approach" because she wanted to "avoid having to deal with that further down the line and it causing me chaos in my life of any kind, then I'd rather do that up front." Thus, women were not only driven by an attraction approach to dating, trying to sift through profiles for compatible matches; they were actively at the same time trying to avoid bad situations, whether it be sexually aggressive situations or matching with someone who might cause "chaos" in the future.

"Changing the Dynamic": Women Talking First

The "women-first" design is the main affordance that differentiates Bumble from other dating apps and is the feature that makes Bumble ostensibly "feminist." Bumble states in its FAQs that the "women talking first" feature is supposed to stop initial harassing/spamming messages that women get on other apps. This feature is also meant to "to counter the age-old and often outdated 'guys always have to make the first move' idea!" Thus, Bumble is supposed to be feminist both because it stops harassment and flips gendered norms—and these two ideals are seen as related. As Wolfe Herd has said in interviews, women talking first subverts gender role expectations and supposedly "guides the conversation in a different way" (Yashari, 2015, para. 15), which in turn limits harassment. Indeed, one of my interviewees, Trudy, agreed that the "women talking first" feature "definitely does change the dynamic" in terms of dating interactions going forward.

The women I interviewed said that they had to get used to making the first move, but ultimately this feature was seen as empowering. Trudy, who never messaged men first on Tinder, realized that "once you accept that you just have to message first," it can be "liberating. . . . It's easy to just shoot out five messages, and be like, 'I'm kinda witty, I'm clever here,' and let's just see if anyone bites." Some women stated that it helped them gain confidence in approaching men. Vanessa described her experiences after being on Bumble for a few months:

At least, for me, it gave me the confidence of talking to a guy first. It doesn't make me think "Oh, I have to play hard to get" anymore. If I'm interested in somebody, I can just go talk to him.

In this sense, the app flipped cultural gender norms of women being wooed and men being the pursuers.

A frequent theme in the interviews was how the "talking first" feature gave welcome additional control and choice to women in the dating process. The fact that the man could not write first was seen as beneficial. It gave the woman the chance to examine the man's profile in more detail or think about the potential match for a bit and choose to not contact him at all. Kathryn explained:

I liked the fact that it's my kind of choice if I want to reach out to someone, even after the initial swipe right. So, the first swipe [is] if I find someone attractive, and then you wait to see if it's a match, but then even if it is a match, I get, like, a second chance to decide if I want to reach out.

Women chose to use Bumble specifically because of this additional perceived control in the relationship. As Kathryn summed up, "I like the fact that it's . . . my choice and it's my choice a couple different times. . . . It gives me an extra step of control over the men that I would be interacting with." Edie, too, said that she liked the "extra layer of control." This extra layer of control, or "extra filter" (Sadie), was often discussed in the sense of producing a "safer" experience for women. The "women talking first" feature and the choice it affords thus created the perception of a safer, more feminist dating experience, highlighting how popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) informs the imagined affordances of Bumble.

The "talking first" feature was especially useful in providing an additional barrier to the harassment that women routinely experience on online dating platforms (Thompson, 2016). The women interviewed had all experienced various degrees of harassment on other dating apps, ranging from repeated requests for meeting up, to sexual innuendo, to verbal abuse, to rude emoji, to dick pics (pictures of male genitalia). The fact that this was a very common occurrence, basically an accepted side effect of dating for women, was widely acknowledged by my participants. For instance, Margie got a slew of messages that she perceived as harassing and detailed them as such: "Just things like, 'Girl, what does that mouth do?' Things like that. Dick pics, comments, the typical things that women deal with on Tinder and social media."

My interviewees thought that Bumble lowered the percentage of initial harassing messages that they received. For instance, Rachel told me that she had gotten many dick pics on online dating apps. When prompted to think about which dating app she received these through, she said, "I think it was Tinder, just because it was unsolicited. So, it was just . . . there was no stopping anybody that wanted to do that. And then, with Bumble, I guess, I'm kind of a line of defense for myself." This idea, that women talking first provided an additional, almost physical, "line of defense" or "barrier" to harassment was echoed throughout the interviews.

My interviewees also felt that starting the conversation off "right" led to less harassment on the app. Kathryn explained that when women have to start a conversation, the conversations are "more mellow." She went on to say: "It's much rarer to get something like 'You wanna come spend the weekend in my bed.' That's much rarer in my conversations on Bumble than it ever was on Tinder." First messages, even if not sexual or inappropriate in nature to begin with, were seen as gateways to harassment: When a woman did not answer this first message, the man could perceive this as unfair rejection. Aidan recalled an instance on another dating app when she did not respond to a man's first message "and he kept sending messages, like, 'You're being so shallow, I'm a really great guy, I can't believe girls' . . . blah blah blah." Carrie, too, had a similar experience, when a man messaged her "the middle finger emoji several times because I hadn't answered."

Kathryn explained how women talking first worked to minimize rejection-related harassment from men as a "two-step verification" of interest: "So the first step is you both swipe and the second step would

be me messaging, which means that I'm interested in potentially meeting you." By showing men interest twice, "they are maybe a little less intense, because they know that obviously you swiped and now you're saying something." Zee similarly noted that "usually" men are expected to make the first move, so they feel "the pressure of what to say"; but if the woman has to talk first "he's like, okay, the first round is fine. All I have to do is respond. Because obviously she's slightly interested." Zee said that "the tone" of the ensuing conversation changed compared with conversations started by men. Thus, Bumble's "women talk first" feature was indeed seen to work in part because it placated men and made them feel more secure in the interaction.

The notion that women have to talk first certainly saved men from feeling rejected (and from possibly getting aggressive). However, aside from problematically placing men's feelings front and center in this "feminist" app, this feature transferred the burden of rejection onto women, who were also affected negatively when men they reached out to did not respond. Rachel explained how the idea behind the "women talk first" feature was good in theory, but not in practice: "I liked the idea of being empowered, but it turns out the guy . . . can still choose to ignore you." Thus, instead of feeling empowered, female users can feel more emotionally vulnerable when using Bumble over other apps, a finding echoed in popular media (Diamond, 2015).

Harassment Experiences on Bumble

Though initial harassing messages on Bumble are eliminated by the app's design, harassment not surprisingly still exists, in the form of replies to women's conversation starters. As Kathryn noted, "A guy who is going to be that aggressive is going to do it anyways [whether on the first message or not]." My interviewees explained that their first messages sent to matches were designed to attract interest, but also to judge values and serve as another way to expose and weed out potentially harmful or creepy men. For instance, Kathryn used a topical line that she sent out to all her matches on any given day. On Columbus Day, she sent the first message: "Columbus: hero or villain?" One man responded that Columbus was a hero because he founded America and Kathryn responded with an alternative way of viewing the actions of Columbus. The man responded with a wall of text ranting at her stupidity and calling her a "libtard," pushing her agenda on him. She went on to block and report him. This nasty "turn" in the conversation made Kathryn feel "very uncomfortable."

Harassing messages received on Bumble were almost always sexual and/or sexist in nature, and not surprisingly, women of color received both racist and sexist messages. For instance, Vanessa, who is Vietnamese, had an incident on Bumble where a man responded to her initial message asking about his travels with, "You're hot for an Asian girl." She unmatched him because "What does that mean, that Asian people are ugly?" She also repeatedly received responding messages "saying hi to me in some weird languages. I'm not Chinese! Why do you assume I'm from this country?" Vanessa's experiences highlight how race and gender intersect to produce unique, intersecting experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991) for women of color in online dating.

Blocking and Reporting

To sever a connection between two matches, Bumble provides the option of unmatching or blocking/reporting. All of these options are presented in the same drop-down menu on the platform; however, blocking and reporting is listed first, visually encouraging women to consider blocking and reporting before unmatching. Unmatching simply gets rid of the match, whereas blocking and reporting can potentially get the user banned from accessing Bumble as a whole. My interviewees used the unmatching function predominantly to "clear" their matches of the connections where conversations had fizzled out.

Interestingly, however, going against what the platform encouraged with the prominent placement of the "block/report" option, most of the women I interviewed chose to also unmatch rather than block or report those who sent harassing or sexually explicit messages. For instance, despite getting multiple unsolicited dick pics from various men, Rachel explained, "I've never been harassed to the point where I've been, like, 'I need to block.' Usually, I unmatch you, and you get the message." Similarly, Zee viewed repeated requests for "coming over to cuddle" as "pretty harmless" so she chose to unmatch. Thus, many women saw harassment as par for the course in online dating and did not see their harassment as serious enough to warrant blocking or reporting. Duguay et al. (2018) found that queer women using Tinder often chose not to block or report aggressive users, but the researchers chalked that up to Tinder's "report" button being very obscure, thus discouraging use of this feature. However, on Bumble, the report option is the first option on the menu. Choosing not to block or report could be due to the longer process involved in those two options compared with unmatching. Both blocking and reporting require typing in an explanation for why you are choosing this action rather than simply making the problem disappear with no further elaboration, as unmatching does. This illustrates what previous research has found (e.g., Cirucci, 2014), that certain design features of technologies (for instance, requiring additional typing) discourage certain user behaviors. So, the placing of the "block/report" menu option first encouraged this action in some ways, but the additional labor of having to write out an explanation discouraged it.

My interviewees spoke about the affordances of Bumble in general in a positive light, particularly the affordance of connectivity—that is, making available large amounts of potential matches in a convenient way. As Carrie noted, "You can sit in your room and meet 30 people in a way that you never could have before." However, my participants were also aware that these same affordances could be materialized in "oppositional" ways. In fact, some women pointed out that Bumble and other dating apps, simply through their very existence, "provided a whole new medium [for] harassment" that had not existed before, by connecting together large volumes of strangers. This highlights how digital technologies can be simultaneously tools for "popular feminism" and "popular misogyny" (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Gendered Labor on Bumble

Online dating overall is a labor-intensive process; as Diana told me, "You have to have your peacock feathers out on the dating apps, like, I need to show off, I need to attract a mate . . . I need to do all this work to attract a mate." Bumble users spend an average of 62 minutes on the app daily (Yashari, 2015), but these statistics broken down by gender are not released by the company. However, given the additional vetting that women feel compelled to do as they move through the app, women arguably partake in more

labor during online dating than men do. Further, because the harm prevention mindset is so rationalized and normalized, this additional labor is largely invisible.

On signing up, women set up their profile in a way that limits personal information and change the auto-populated profile from Facebook, such as taking down their job details. This negotiated use—deciding how much to disclose to balance being attractive and being safe—takes energy. Vetting all men by carefully looking through all their pictures and reading their profile before swiping also takes additional time and effort. The act of swiping and matching with almost all “swipe rights” then creates decision fatigue. The women I interviewed matched with a large volume of men, despite being selective, in line with previous findings (Holmes, 2017). Having a lot of matches was seen as a chore. Vanessa said how she had “so many” matches that she had to stop online dating because “I don’t have the time to do this.” Zee similarly said of her decision to stop Bumble, “It’s a little too much, to continue to swipe and balance all of that.” The next step of the process, “stalking” matches on Google and other social media to find out more information, was also hugely labor intensive.

Further, some women noted how the feature to talk first, touted as the most feminist affordance of Bumble, in fact “added pressure” because they “don’t know what to say.” Instead of feeling empowered and in control, some women were annoyed that now they had to take time to come up with pithy conversation starters while men could just sit back and let women do all the work. Margie explained:

Guys like Bumble because they don’t have to put in . . . they don’t feel like they have to put in more work. All the guys I know like Bumble because it’s easy. They just have to match, and the girls have to make the first move.

Thus, through the “talking first” feature, Bumble took the pressure off men, but put it on women, along with the labor that goes into deciding what to write to start the conversation.

Internalized gender norms and stereotypes played out here, with my participants feeling that women need to say more than just “hey” (which was the perception of how male users coped with having to initiate messages on other apps). So, women felt compelled to take a lot of time to “craft my first line so that it’s really grabbing and enticing.” To be “less boring than ‘hey,’” women would often mention something in a man’s profile or picture and ask a question to get the conversation started. Despite not explicitly referring to this as “work,” women shared various strategies to help them minimize the labor of initiating these conversations. Aidan, for instance, explained:

I just copied. I’ll write it out, I’ll copy it. I’ll make sure I have the right name in there and just kind of . . . so I think that day I matched with four or three different guys, so it’s basically just the same line, only because it’s just easier that way.

Lily did a similar “bulk approach” of copying and pasting messages to all her matches. Kathryn sent all her matches “the opening line of the week,” which she brainstormed with friends weekly. This was a line relevant to current events to start the conversation. For example, the week of a solar eclipse, they used “Damn, boy, are you a solar eclipse, because I’m trying to get your number before you disappear” (referring

to the 24-hour period before an unanswered match disappears on Bumble). Sadie used the wave or smile emojis "just to kinda bookmark them" before time ran out, as a "kind of, like, saying, 'Hi, I'm interested'" and hoping that the man would then write back something more substantial to start the conversation. A few women also used GIFs as an interesting "shortcut" first message.

In terms of blocking and reporting, the app "isn't reading through every one of your conversations, so it's really up to you to step it up and tap on that 'report' button when you see something uncool" (Jalili, 2017). Therefore, Bumble provides the tools, but women still have to do the actual work of managing their harassers. This is similar to broader culture when women are told to be careful to not get raped instead of men being told not to rape—the onus to end the uncomfortable situation is still on the victim. However, Toch and Levi (2013) argue that "users assume that other users are aware of [blocking and reporting] . . . and take the cooling effect of these features on the whole community" (p. 546). It is difficult to ascertain how much harassment is prevented on Bumble by simply having the mechanism of blocking and reporting, alongside the company taking these reports seriously, as an "imagined affordance" (Nagy & Neff, 2015) of safety on the app.

Feeling overwhelmed by matches often led to decision fatigue, which led to women stopping their use of Bumble and even stopping online dating altogether, to have "just a little bit of a break." Women reported feeling burned out from the work of dating. Diana said that she would "overload" herself and "get exhausted." Aidan conceded that Bumble "wasn't as bad as other dating apps, but it did get to be a psychological drain a little bit." Edie stopped Bumble completely because "the stress that online dating was kinda making for me wasn't worth the process." However, despite all this additional work, women were resigned to using online dating to eventually find a match—Edie wondered, "Then again, where am I going to meet someone?"—but they wished they did not have to use it to find someone to love. As Margie put it, "I miss the days, I wasn't even alive when this was, but, like, you met someone at a bar and that's how connections were built."

Conclusion

The interviews in this study show that women are drawn to Bumble because of its female-friendly reputation and because of the feelings of control and empowerment that Bumble provides, particularly in the "women talk first" feature. However, despite these draws, women still engage with Bumble with a "harm prevention" mindset throughout their use of the app, using all the features of the app (not just the ones designated as such) to maintain control and steer away from possibly difficult or harmful situations, similar to how female users use Tinder (Farvid & Aisher, 2016). To effectively use Bumble, then, women must constantly balance opportunity with risk. This naturalized need to use various strategies to stay safe adds tremendous amounts of additional, invisible labor to women's navigation of Bumble—and, by extension, to women's uses of online dating in general.

Bumble exemplifies popular feminism: Women indeed have more control over their interactions with men on the app, and, through initiating conversations, they subvert normative ideas about gender roles in dating, challenging the cultural status quo of how relationships should work. They also have a set of features, a toolset (whether explicitly stated as such or not), to minimize the gendered risks inherent in

online dating. However, Bumble is embedded in a neoliberal system, where it is still up to individuals themselves to use these tools. Bumble provides minimal impetus to change the underlying structures steeped in sexism, misogyny, and gendered norms, a societal system in which women endure harassment and even simply discomfort as a side effect of interactions with others. Instead, the onus is on individual women to protect themselves and minimize risk in an online dating context, thus limiting Bumble's feminist potential. As Banet-Weiser (2015) aptly points out, there are limits to negotiated uses of a technology: "Superficial technological adjustments . . . don't change the social infrastructure of online spaces, where women simply do not feel safe on the Internet" (para. 16).

Overall, this analysis shows how Bumble, in its embodiment of popular feminism through choice and control logic, obscures the need to address structural issues around inequality. It also highlights how the affordances of the online environment really sit alongside real-life experiences for women. Digital tools only minimally change the fundamental experience of women's everyday life—for instance, in the experiences of sexual harassment and discomfort during dating endeavors—and sometimes even exacerbate them.

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