

This is a pre-publication version of the following article

Thompson, R. (2025). Bumble's ticking clock: Dating app temporal design as neoliberal discipline. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 66, 100897.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2025.100897>

When citing from or referring to this article please use the final publisher version.



This work was supported by funding from University of Washington's Royalty Research Fund and University of Washington Tacoma's School of Interdisciplinary Arts & Science Research Fund.

Bumble's Ticking Clock: Dating App Temporal Design as Neoliberal Discipline

Abstract

This study examines Bumble's self-positioning as a feminist dating app through a critical lens that combines theories of disciplinary technologies and governmentality with a neoliberal postfeminist framework. While Bumble markets women's empowerment through its "first-move" feature, this research investigates how the platform's 24-hour messaging requirement creates temporal constraints that potentially undermine its stated feminist goals. By analyzing how these time-based features influence user behavior and create additional forms of labor for women—communicative, relational, and postdigital—this study reveals tensions between Bumble's empowerment claims and its disciplinary mechanisms. The research combines multimodal critical discourse analysis and ethnographic approaches to examine how Bumble's marketing discourses and interface design construct and reinforce particular notions of gender empowerment while simultaneously subjecting users to new forms of control. This paper contributes to our understanding of how dating platforms serve as sites of engagement where gender, platform design, and social practices converge to normalize certain behaviors within tightly controlled temporal and interactive parameters.

1. Introduction

In this “postdigital” era, characterized by convergence of digital and physical worlds, dating platforms have become interwoven into the fabric of daily social interactions, with companies like Bumble emerging as influential intermediaries in contemporary courtship. Various dating apps have inserted themselves into the conversation, purporting to revolutionize dating, yet evidence for these transformative effects remains questionable. Since its 2014 launch, Bumble has distinguished itself through its “women first” approach, positioning the platform as a feminist alternative in digital dating. According to founder Whitney Wolfe Herd, the app's

signature feature of giving women "first move privileges" in heterosexual matches aims to "challenge the antiquated rules of dating" (Yashari, 2015). Unlike most dating apps that allow users to respond whenever they choose without timing expectations, Bumble employs a 24-hour window for initiating contact and responding to the first message after matching. This creates an artificial time constraint in an otherwise pressure-free environment. As one of the most popular dating apps in the world (Ceci, 2024), Bumble provides a rich case study for unpacking how digital media entities, in fact, mobilize disciplinary practices to govern people seeking love, sex, and intimacy—especially the women they aim to empower.

The increasing centrality of dating apps in modern society raises important questions about technology's growing influence over intimate relationships. While research has examined Bumble's design requiring women to message men first—supposedly empowering women by disrupting traditional gender norms—no studies have analyzed how these time constraints affect empowerment. This article explores Bumble's temporal design function as an overlooked mechanism that potentially undermines the platform's stated empowerment goals. Through analyzing how these time-based features influence social behavior and mediate language and intimacy, this study bridges critical gaps in digital discourse studies, gender studies, and digital intimacies scholarship.

2. Literature review

2.1 Digital dating: Social norms, gamified engagement, and market logics

Dating apps have become an important contemporary space where issues of gender, power, and normative ideologies play out. Comunello, Parisi, and Ieracitano's (2021) study of Italian users highlights the tension between traditional gender scripts and the affordances of dating platforms, underscoring how app-based interactions are deeply shaped by persistent gender norms, even as users attempt to subvert or negotiate these expectations. Similarly, Chan's (2018) analysis of women daters in China suggested that while apps can be liberating tools, they are embedded in local cultural contexts and therefore can elide structural gender inequalities that remain in play.

Research on the gamified nature of dating apps has also become central to understanding the impact of mobile-based swiping apps in the evolution of online dating practices. Studies of collective app use illuminates the dual role of dating apps as vehicles for reinforcing traditional gender norms and for gamified entertainment (Mortensen, 2015; Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2022). Their results reveal that women tend to engage in "cooperative swiping" to foster social bonding and mitigate risks associated with mobile dating whereas men frequently engage in competitive practices centered on sexual conquests. Dating apps like Tinder merge romantic pursuit with game-like mechanics, where its "swipe logic" transforms intimate partner selection into a performative, mechanized activity that blends play and pursuit through slot-machine-like

features that both encourage continuous engagement and depersonalize connection-seeking (David & Cambre, 2016; Garda & Karhulahti, 2021).

As many facets of everyday life have become mediated by algorithmic logics, the intersection of marketization and commodification of digital intimacy has become more salient. Scholars like Bandinelli (2022) suggest we are entering a post-romantic era where algorithms and corporate interests increasingly shape the landscape of human intimacy. This shift occurs against the backdrop of late capitalism and broader socioeconomic changes, where neoliberal forces have fundamentally altered the boundaries between public and private life. As Hamann (2009) observes, social life has become situated within the domain of self-governance and nearly ubiquitous digital engagement to the extent that intimate life has become subject to market forces and disciplinary technologies. Through sophisticated technological architectures and engagement strategies, dating apps have become central actors in defining contemporary courtship practices, while simultaneously serving commercial interests through the commodification of intimate connections.

Previous research has established dating apps as sociotechnical systems that mediate intimacy through market-driven mechanisms, perpetuate societal norms through algorithmic design, and employ gamification strategies to shape user behavior, yet the temporal constraints embedded in dating app design remain underexplored. This study extends upon scholarship by exploring how Bumble's time-limited opening message protocol interacts within a complex system of gamification, consumerism, and social norms.

2.2 Bumble dating: Impact of design on gender dynamics and digital intimacy

Scholarship on Bumble has focused primarily on interface design, user experiences, and the implications for gender dynamics and digital intimacy. Studies have shown that Bumble's structural design reinforces traditional gender norms, even as it attempts to challenge them. For example, Bivens and Hoque's (2018) critical analysis of Bumble's infrastructure suggest the app's reliance on rigid gender binaries both perpetuates aggressive masculinity and limits its capacity to fulfill its feminist aspirations. MacLeod and McArthur (2019) explore how Bumble's profile creation tools construct gender as a functional category, prioritizing algorithmic efficiency over authentic identity representation.

The tension between Bumble's rhetoric of empowerment and lived experiences of women users has also been explored. Research has found that while Bumble's "ladies talk first" feature challenges traditional gender dynamics in the realm of dating, it paradoxically reinforces them by increasing labor demands on the women it promises to empower (Pruchniewska, 2020; Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021). Similarly, Young and Roberts (2023) illuminate how internalized gender expectations around who opens conversations persist despite Bumble's design interventions. Overall, critiques suggest that Bumble's marketing overstates the capacity of the app to offer genuine social transformation and raises concerns that the platform perpetuates gender norms rather than disrupting them. This study aligns with critiques of Bumble's "first move" design and rhetoric of empowerment while addressing a critical gap related to the app's temporal design and dating communication and social norms.

3. Theoretical foundations

3.1 Neoliberal postfeminism

Feminism encompasses diverse movements advocating for gender equality while addressing systemic inequalities. In recent decades, neoliberal feminism has emerged as particularly relevant to digital contexts, with scholars like Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020) identifying it as promoting hyper-individualized female subjects responsible for self-management while obscuring structural barriers. "Popular feminism," as conceptualized by Banet-Weiser (2018), represents a commodified, media-friendly form that prioritizes visibility and marketability over addressing systemic inequalities, often centering white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual women's experiences.

Postfeminism operates as both a "sensibility" and a cultural logic characterized by individualism, choice, and empowerment (Gill, 2018). It relies on "girl power" narratives suggesting gender equality has been achieved despite contradictory societal structures. Deeply rooted in neoliberal ideals, postfeminism conflates personal autonomy with consumer freedom while emphasizing women's supposed agency to overcome obstacles through individual effort. This perspective reframes labor-intensive practices like digital self-branding and maintaining social media presence as forms of self-care or entrepreneurialism (Cohn, 2013), effectively masking their exploitative dimensions. By recasting these forms of labor as individual choice and empowerment, postfeminism reinforces neoliberal logics that conceal systemic inequities and devalue women's often unrecognized and unpaid contributions to society.

Using a neoliberal postfeminist framework provides a valuable lens for examining Bumble's corporate rhetoric of women's empowerment. By analyzing Bumble through this theoretical framework, I interrogate how the platform's "feminist" marketing navigates the tension between genuine gender equity and commodified empowerment.

3.2 Disciplinary technologies

As Foucault (1977, 1988) argued, society maintains order through disciplinary technologies that regulate people's time, space, and behavior and ultimately lead individuals to internalize these controls and become self-policing agents. The concept of governmentality represents his analysis of how power operates through the strategic coordination of disciplinary technologies and technologies of the self (Foucault, 2003). Rather than operating through force, governmentality functions by subtly shaping desires, behaviors, and choices, creating subjects who willingly self-regulate. It refers to the organized practices through which populations are managed to optimize their productivity, health, and welfare (Foucault et al., 1991). These practices operate through institutional procedures and discourses aimed at optimizing qualities of life according to prevailing social values.

Conceptions of governmentality have evolved as corporations increasingly assume governmental functions, particularly in digital contexts. Badouard et al. (2016) conceptualize digital governmentality through three key logics: directing behaviors via incentives, constraining

actions through technical design, and framing interactions by establishing standards. Barry (2019) highlights a shift to individualized predictive analytics, where control operates through pleasure-based gamification rather than punishment. Collier and Whitehead (2023) explain how tech companies exercise power through surveillance capitalism, gathering intimate data to shape behavior. In this evolution, the object becomes specific stakeholder groups rather than entire populations, with interventions designed to optimize the welfare and happiness of target segments for corporate benefit.

This theoretical framework illuminates how dating app developers deploy corporate governmentality—designing interfaces, algorithms, and features that structure user behavior while appearing to offer freedom and choice, effectively governing intimate relationships through technological mediation. Users are ranked and filtered based on profile data points as they experience constant surveillance from both companies collecting their data and other users evaluating their profiles. Algorithms and swiping behaviors establish what's desirable with profiles consequently prioritized or penalized. Algorithmic logic and gamification govern desire by determining what appears in users' carousels, transforming people into docile bodies who modify their self-presentation to better "perform" within the system.

Governmentality theories provide a useful lens to examine how Bumble operates as a disciplinary technology influencing modern dating practices. Such theories reveals how dating platforms participate in broader systems of social control through their sociotechnical architecture.

4. Methodology: Digital discourse analysis & postdigital intimacies

Dating apps are designed environments where textual, visual, spatial, and interactive elements work together. As users navigate these digital intimacy spaces, they leverage diverse semiotic resources while engaging with users who have diverse media ideologies (Gershon, 2010). Digital discourse analysis provides a robust framework for examining how individuals negotiate social interactions, ideologies, and digital semiotic landscapes (Blitvich & Bou-Franch, 2019; Jones et al., 2015).

My research employs multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) (Machin & Mayr, 2023), an approach grounded in critical theory, to examine how discourse and design intersect to either reproduce or challenge social norms, and to uncover power dynamics embedded in routine dating practices and platform features. MCDA builds upon traditional discourse analysis and social semiotics (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Such an approach allows me to investigate how language works alongside other semiotic resources, such as color, layout, and other symbolic representations on dating app interfaces and marketing materials that users engage with. This critical framework enables analysis of how power structures and ideologies are reproduced, communicated, and legitimized within dating app environments, potentially undermining stated empowerment goals.

This work integrates ethnographic approaches to gain deeper understanding of individual experiences within dating app cultures. Building on established methodological frameworks (Bolander, 2022; Mackenzie, 2018; Thompson, 2022; Varis, 2016), I move beyond text-centric

analysis to examine culture through specific practices, rituals, and language norms in these digital spaces. This integrated approach illuminates how temporal design features mediate behavior and power dynamics through users' own understandings of their online dating experiences. For dating app research specifically, ethnographic methods reveal crucial emic perspectives on how temporal design features mediate behavior, language, and power dynamics through users' own understandings of their online dating experiences.

To understand phenomena like online dating, it's also essential to consider both online and offline aspects of individuals' lives—such as their routines, identity projects, and communicative practices. Thus, this analysis is situated within the broader context of "postdigital" society, where digital and physical worlds increasingly converge (Lyons & Tagg, 2024), making their boundaries less distinct. Drawing on the framework of "postdigital intimacies" (Evans & Ringrose, 2021; Tagg & Thompson, forthcoming), this research examines how users negotiate communication and relationship formation across fluid online-offline boundaries.

4.1 Data

This research draws from multiple data sources collected as part of a broader research initiative examining online dating culture and digital discourse. To understand online dating practices and culture, I collected blended data from online observation and contact with users (Androutsopoulos, 2013).

For recruiting participants, I utilized in-person methods (informational cards, university flyers, community events) and digital outreach (social media platforms). To gain diversity of experiences, I implemented Snowball sampling methods, encouraging participants from marginalized populations to share my research in their social networks.

Interview data comes from 59 participants across age, gender identity, and sexual orientations. Participants aged 20-69, with a little over half in their 20s ($n=13$) and 30s ($n=22$). In terms of gender identity, 36 identified as women, 18 as men, and the remainder as gender diverse¹. Approximately half identified as heterosexual ($n=32$) while more than a third ($n=22$) identified within what Callis (2014) refers to as the "sexual borderlands" (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, heteroflexible, etc.), and the smallest group identifying as gay/lesbian ($n=5$). The makeup of participants is limited in terms of geography, class, (dis)ability, and race. Most resided in the U.S. ($n=55$), with a few from Europe ($n=3$) and Australia ($n=1$), and are assumed to represent a relatively able-bodied population as none described disability issues in relation to their online dating experiences². In terms of class, the sample was highly educated, with 91% having attended college, almost half of which included graduate level education ($n=24$). Racially, almost three-quarters identify as white ($n=42$), with a fifth representing people of color ($n=11$) and multiracial ($n=4$), and a couple preferring not to say ($n=2$). It should be noted that racial representation is complicated by the fact that many participants reported dating in different parts of the world, experiencing different degrees of marginalization or prestige depending on local contexts.

While using semi-structured questions as a foundation with all participants, I employed reflective interviewing (Roulston, 2010), which emphasizes ongoing critical reflection throughout the research process and recognizes interviews as co-constructed events. This method encourages researchers to adjust interviewing practices (and research design) in response to salient phenomena while facilitating transformative dialogue that contributes to social justice work. Building on this iterative approach, I developed "dialogic action interviews" (Thompson, 2022), which I employed with a subset of participants who were actively using Bumble and open to observation (n=9). This technique combines unstructured conversational interviewing with real-time observation of dating app practices. The process involved a graduated slowing-down of typical swiping behavior—progressing from think-aloud protocols to guided profile analysis to detailed discussions of selection criteria—to prompt metacognition about decision-making processes and encourage more mindful swiping. Interviews ranged from 60- to 150-minutes.

I collected screen-based data of Bumble's marketing and design materials from thirteen participants and through my own participant observation. This screen-based data comes from the Bumble website, Bumble's blog "The Buzz", and screenshots of user interfaces. Lastly, I conducted "walkthroughs" (Light et al. 2018) to independently observe updates to the platform interface and supplement data collection as needed.

I analyzed data through an iterative process of manual coding, supplemented by qualitative data analysis software. After creating and assigning codes and themes to data, I employed NVIVO 12's autocoding function to identify overlooked themes. The final themes and codes represent my analysis, with the software serving as a tool for data management and validation. To protect participants, pseudonyms were collaboratively created and visual data was anonymized by covering faces and identifying information. For recruiting, collecting, and sharing data, I rely on the Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (franzke et al., 2020) from the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR).

5. Analysis

Bumble discourses embody classic postfeminist assumptions by suggesting that women's empowerment is achievable through technology and individual behavioral changes. The textual and visual messages presented suggest that women can find success through taking the initiative to send the first message. Such an approach fails, however, to address the structural challenges (time constraints), ideological barriers (entrenched social norms), and media ideologies (swiping practices) that may undermine such empowerment goals. This analysis examines how three distinct but interconnected forms of labor—communicative, relational, and postdigital—emerge through Bumble's marketing and timed messaging protocols, revealing how the platform's architecture may ultimately undermine its promises of empowerment for women.

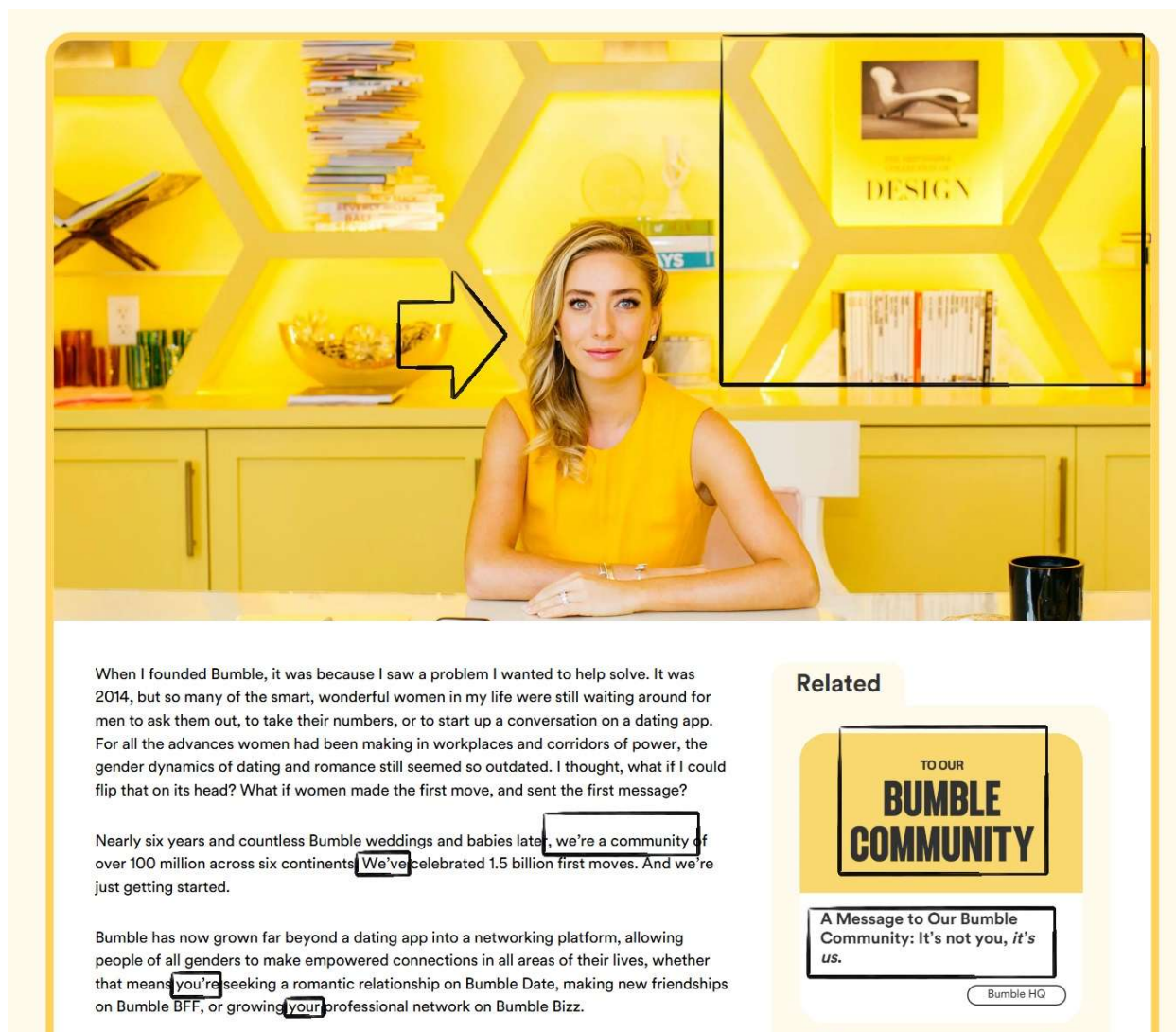
5.1 Communicative Labor

I begin with an examination of Bumble's discourse to situate how the app's digital architecture is marketed as a technological intervention to improve the dating experience, especially for women. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, the Bumble founder claims the app is the "first attempt at a feminist dating app" with a mission to encourage gender equality. Herd states that "If we can take some of the pressure off the man and put some of that encouragement in the woman's lap, I think we are taking a step in the right direction, especially in terms of really being true to feminism" (Yashari, 2015, paras. 7–8). An examination of Bumble's marketing materials provides clues to the type of feminism Herd is talking about. In her letter to users on the Bumble website (Herd, 2021), she states:

*When I founded Bumble, it was because I saw a problem I wanted to help solve. **It was 2014, but so many smart, wonderful women in my life were still waiting around for men to ask them out, take their numbers, or to start up a conversation on a dating app. For all the advances women had been making in workplaces and corridors of power, the gender dynamics of dating and romance still seemed so outdated.** I thought, what if I could flip that on its head? What if women made the first move, and sent the first message?*

Herd's rhetoric exemplifies neoliberal postfeminist discourse by suggesting that gender equality has been largely achieved, positioning dating as the final frontier of gender inequality in which Bumble's technological solution is the answer. This framing relies on simplistic power dynamics that equate message initiation with empowerment, overlooking how power is negotiated through complex interactional elements including turn-taking control, topic management, positional authority, and silence.

Bumble marketing campaigns often depict "spectacularly feminine" social actors who embody confidence and success while remaining conventionally attractive and marketable. This is exemplified in the visual presentation of Herd addressing users (Fig 1). Symbols reflective of the "industrious" bumblebee permeate the visual field; the walls and Herd's dress feature the company's signature sunny shade of yellow, while hexagonal shelves evoke honeycomb structures, representing productive labor. Herd occupies the scene like a queen bee, seated in a power pose gazing directly at the viewer, employing what I call *virtual synthetic personalization*³, to manufacture a sense of intimacy with users. Herd establishes visual connection through direct-gaze imagery while simultaneously creating linguistic bonding through strategic pronoun use. She employs inclusive "we" statements to create solidarity ("we're a community of over 100 million across six continents") while addressing the mass audience as individuals through second-person pronouns ("whether that means **you're** seeking a romantic relationship on Bumble Date, making new friendships on Bumble BFF, or growing **your** professional network on Bumble Bizz").



*Figure 1: Letter from Founder & CEO on Bumble website
(Screenshot taken by author July 1, 2024)*

Bumble's distinctive requirement for women to initiate conversations in heterosexual matches introduces a complex dimension of communicative labor. This platform-specific obligation requires women to engage in substantial cognitive work, crafting unique and engaging conversation openers that can effectively generate meaningful dialogue. This is a critical practice in this context, where dating profiles serve as vital resources for initiating meaningful conversation that leads to in-person connection. Rather than resorting to generic greetings that often fail to elicit responses, successful communicative labor involves two distinct but related forms of attention (Tagg & Thompson, forthcoming). The first is what Tannen (2007) terms "involvement," traditionally associated with displaying listenership in spoken interactions, which manifests in careful attention to profile elements. This complements what Tagg and Lyons (2022) call "careful looking" at visual content in online messaging contexts. When daters

reference specific profile elements in messages, they demonstrate this type of attention, establishing rapport through relevant topics that advance conversation beyond generic greetings.

While Bumble's architectural design aims to challenge traditional dating dynamics, its "women make the first move" feature can create tension for women who have been acculturated not to initiate communication with men in romantic contexts. This struggle is illustrated in the following interviews:

"I'm having a really hard time with Bumble because I have to make the move first. Men will express interest in me, and then I have to actually reach out to them, which I find kind of weird." (Amelia, a 45-year-old)

"I don't know what my first line should be. It's so hard. You want to have a first line that stands out, and so I was stressing over getting that first line. And so, it's part of the reason I ended up leaving Bumble." (Alligator, a 31-year-old woman)

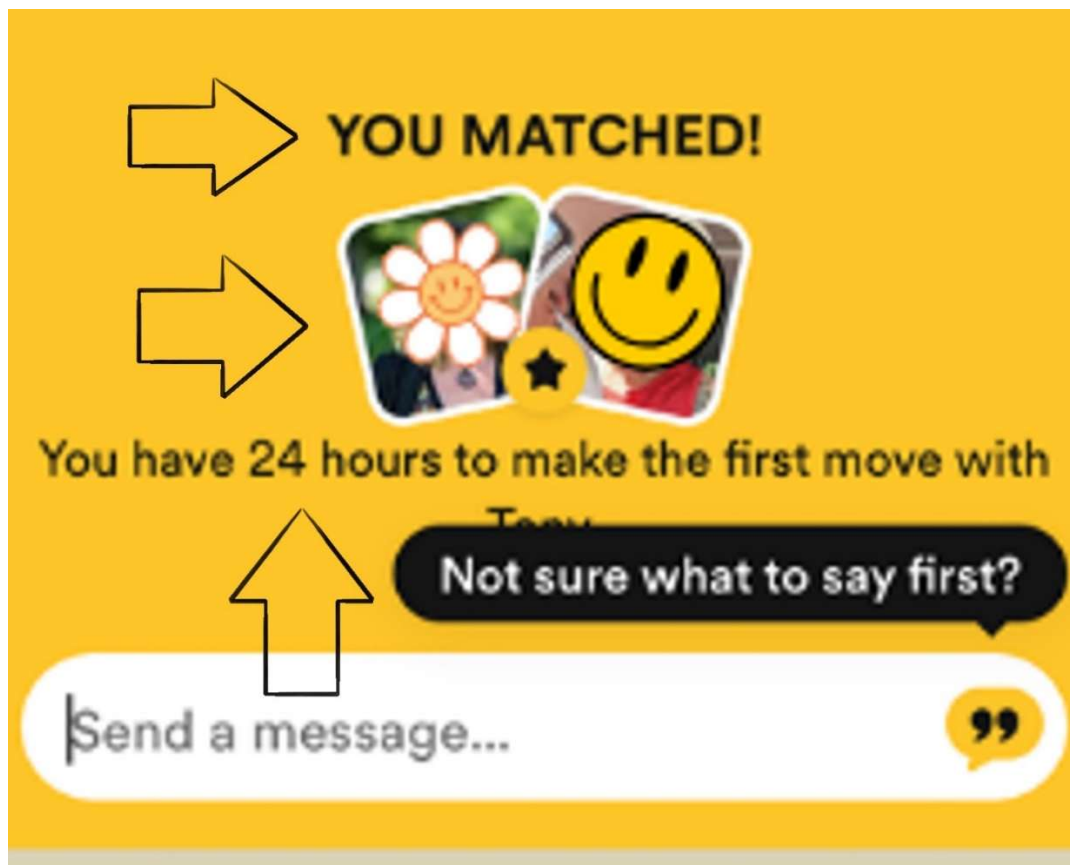
While marketed as empowering women, this mechanism subtly shifts the burden of communicative and relationship-building labor onto them, further embedding gendered expectations into digital spaces. The consequent conditional empowerment reveals how Bumble's structural attempt to rebalance dating dynamics paradoxically creates new forms of gendered communicative labor, where women must not only generate engaging content, but do so under time pressure.

Bumble's 24-hour messaging deadline introduces temporal urgency to users' communicative responsibilities, creating an intersection of cognitive demands and time pressure that many users find counterproductive to meaningful connection. Rather than facilitating engagement, this strict temporal framework often intensifies the inherent stresses of online dating for all daters. As Alexie, a 39-year-old, woman laments, ***"The whole online dating thing gets super exhausting. It's draining. So the whole thing in general, the 24-hour thing, it just compounded it."*** The arbitrary nature of the deadline's initiation—triggered by the second person's right swipe—further complicates this temporal pressure for women by removing their agency to decide when they want to communicate. This compression of communicative labor into rigid timeframes becomes particularly problematic when users accumulate multiple matches simultaneously. Teddy, a 23-year-old man, describes the challenge of the 24-hour response window for all users, saying: ***"It's a little overwhelming. You started messaging and then you have too many to respond to and not enough time."*** The automated timing mechanism transforms what might be natural conversational rhythms into deadline-driven interactions, highlighting how platform architecture can inadvertently intensify rather than ease the labor of digital dating communication.

5.2 Relational Labor

Bumble discourse creates conflicting messages that influence relational labor for women. In digital spaces, relational labor is the ongoing work of building and maintaining connections and involving continuous effort to create and sustain relationships with diverse online audiences (Baym, 2015).

When users match on Bumble, the platform delivers an alert combining semiotic resources that suggest authentic connection, while simultaneously imposing time constraints that create pressure. The signature yellow "Boom!" screen prominently announces "You matched!" while displaying interlocked, overlapping profile photos—a visual metaphor suggesting genuine connection (Fig 2). Saliently positioned in the center is a time-based directive: "You have 24 hours to make the first move with X," textually emphasizing urgency and potential loss. Through textual and visual resources, new connections are presented under strict conditions that place a burden of building the connection on women first, creating a tension that requires emotional and strategic labor to navigate.



*Figure 2: Boom! notification to a woman after matching
(Screenshot taken by author August 3, 2023)*

Despite assumptions that “matching” on a dating app implies mutual interest, women on Bumble often face silence in response to their opening messages, heightening emotional challenges as they navigate the varied intentions of other users. As Amaija, a 31-year-old woman, notes, “[I]t’s **a lot of no responses** where I think **people are just on the apps to kind of people-browse**.” The “people browsing” metaphor illustrates how users approach dating apps as retail environments, casually scanning potential partners. This commodification of intimacy reflects “relationshopping” trends in which market metaphors encourage users to view themselves and others as “products to be sold, assessed, purchased, or discarded” (Heino et al., 2010, p. 429). These neoliberal dynamics highlight the challenges of contemporary dating where user

motivations often diverge, leaving serious daters to shoulder the burden of navigating mixed signals and filtering through indifferent interactions on apps.

The psychological impact of unmatching extends beyond basic rejection, as users must reconcile their initial perception of mutual interest with consequent disengagement. Alexie, a 39-year-old woman, points to the scenario of making the first move and not receiving a response:

*“So then all of a sudden **now you're a match**, but **they would never say anything or respond to you**. When you're like, 'Hey, what's up?', **then you wouldn't hear from them**, right? Like, **what's the point? Why did you even bother?**”*

Alexie's experience exemplifies how unreciprocated opening messages intensify feelings of rejection, as users must reconcile the contradiction between the perception of mutual interest and a match's subsequent silence. As Taquito, a 43-year-old woman, observed, *“**They either delete you, or they don't respond and time out.**”* Bumble's automated unmatching through timing out creates a platform-specific emotional burden. The disconnect between the promise of a match and its swift, automated dissolution creates a unique form of dating app disappointment, where perceived opportunities for connection vanish without explanation. This pattern undermines user trust in the authenticity of matches and forces women to manage not just the work of initiating conversation but also the time pressure of potential automatic disconnection.

Paradoxically, Bumble's time parameters also provide a face-saving mechanism for managing rejection. Alexie further articulates this unexpected outcome:

*“There's something about that ticking clock or not being messaged back. [...] You think, well, **maybe it just ran out and he got busy**. You can rationalize that **the time clock ran out because it's so short.**”*

This technological mediation of rejection offers users a desensitizing buffer against emotional pain and a degree of ambiguity that differs from explicit rejection. This aligns with Bandinelli's (2022) observation that dating apps provide “an algorithmic structure to blame for the failure of love” (p. 906). On the one hand, Bumble's automated expiration accommodates user preferences for non-confrontational rejection methods (Halversen et al., 2022). On the other hand, it also creates an environment that facilitates and normalizes communication avoidance. Ultimately, this hinders development of crucial interpersonal skills gained through navigating challenging conversations.

This disconnect between expectation and reality is further complicated by gendered swiping practices that undermine the premise of meaningful mutual interest at the point of matching. Anecdotes from participants reveal that gendered differences in swiping behavior on dating apps can lead to disappointing user experiences. According to Alexie, a 39-year-old woman:

*“I heard from one of my male friends that **he would just go through the website to just add everyone**. So then **whoever will get back to him, then he could filter**. At a certain point **I felt like it kind of got depressing.**”*

This practice of “power swiping”—where users rapidly and liberally swipe right to maximize matches with minimal effort—exemplifies how men often approach dating apps as a numbers

game, in contrast to women's more selective engagement. Shaw's (2016) concept of "negotiated use" suggests that women approach dating apps as both connection tools and safety mechanisms, requiring significant time and emotional labor to screen potential matches⁴. On Bumble specifically, this dynamic creates an ironic contradiction: a platform ostensibly designed to empower women ultimately reinforces traditional relationship patterns where women shoulder disproportionate emotional and communicative labor while men benefit from simplified engagement strategies.

Unlike conventional dating applications, Bumble's time-constrained matching system requires women to manage not only the emotional weight of potential rejection when messages go unanswered, but also the stress of matches expiring due to temporal constraints that statistically affect them at higher rates since they are tasked with making the first move. This dual pressure represents a significant shift in gendered relationship labor within digital dating spaces. While men have historically shouldered the burden of rejection in traditional dating contexts due to social expectations around initiating contact, Bumble's structural requirement for women to message first redistributes and potentially amplifies these demands. This reveals how women shoulder disproportionate relational labor—carefully vetting profiles, initiating conversations, and managing emotional investments—within a neoliberal context that demands timely and perpetual engagement.

5.3 Postdigital Labor:

In today's postdigital society, individuals navigate relationships through what Madianou and Miller (2013) term 'polymedia'—the strategic use of multiple communication platforms based on their distinct capabilities and the user's relationship needs. This complexity is particularly evident in modern dating, where people manage relationships across multiple platforms (e.g., dating apps, social media, mobile messaging, and forums) while balancing various levels of intimate connection with potential partners alongside existing social bonds. On Bumble, the integration of digital and physical experiences in contemporary life reaches new intensity through what I term "app attending"—an extension of Tagg and Lyons' (2022) concept of "device attending." While device attending describes the general practice of managing digital communication through designated "downtime" response periods, Bumble's design creates a more demanding form of engagement that intensifies the melding of digital and physical experiences.

The platform's time-based messaging protocol operates through a gamified system of rewards and penalties, where the threat of lost connections serves as a motivational mechanism for sustained engagement. Bumble's Matches screen exemplifies how the platform gamifies communication through time-based messaging requirements that rely on visual and textual cues (Fig 3). This disciplinary technology is visible in the countdown mechanics, where a yellow ring around each match's profile photo functions as a timer. As time passes, Bumble's signature yellow—evoking sunshine, positivity, and opportunity—gradually transforms to grey, signaling sadness, depletion, and potential loss. This visual countdown system, combined with explicit time displays, disciplines user behavior through clear rewards (maintaining connections) and penalties (expired matches). The color yellow thus serves a dual purpose: while conveying warmth and optimality for fresh matches, it can simultaneously signal attention and urgency, potentially provoking anxiety as users watch their connection opportunities tick away.

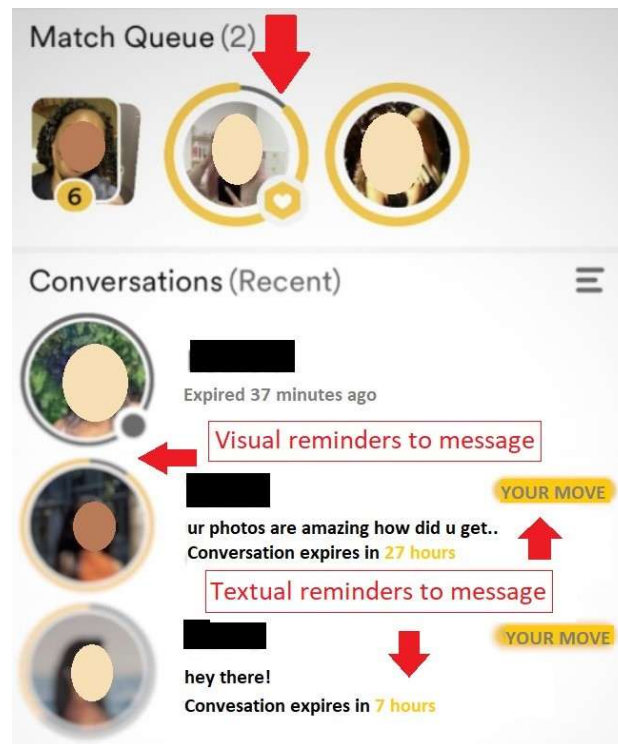


Figure 3: Bumble Match Screen tracks conversations
(adapted from screenshot shared by Croissant, November 29, 2018)

This app design communicates an implicit message that regular platform participation should take precedence over other life commitments, a perspective that many users find frustrating. As Curio, a 37-year-old woman, explains:

"The problem is, people are busy and sometimes you get a match, like, not when you're actually using the app or when you don't have time, and so it expires, and you're like, 'Well, I don't know what would have happened with that.'"

Her observation about matches occurring "when you're not actually using the app" or "don't have time" points to a fundamental disconnect between algorithmic (in)efficiency and the realities of users' daily lives. The platform's temporal constraints leverage FOMO (fear of missing out) as an engagement driver, presenting missed connections as a consequence of insufficient platform attention.

The pressure to engage is articulated by Bee, a 30-year-old woman who exclaimed in frustration during our interview: *"You have 24 hours, or this is going away. Like you missed your chance!"* This framing of potential romantic connections as time-sensitive opportunities based on a game of "chance" creates a discourse of scarcity and urgency that conflicts with personal autonomy. Moreover, the platform's gamification of potential connections through time-limited matching creates an environment of manufactured urgency, restricting users' freedom to develop relationships at their preferred pace, especially for people who may not be able (or willing) to maintain the consistent app engagement that such strict timeframes demand.

While app developers attempt to gamify digital intimacy to increase engagement, for users seeking meaningful connections, the reality is a labor-intensive process that demands steady self-discipline. This labor burden becomes especially pronounced for professional women navigating Bumble's unique temporal architecture. As articulated by Antifa, a 31-year-old, genderqueer participant:

*"I tried Bumble out and I was like no. It felt like **it required too much from me by asking for a time commitment that is not sustainable for me. You can only message someone within the 24 hours and like you need to check that every day.** ... You know, for the things to happen you need to put work into it, which I understand that legitimately. **I just felt overwhelmed and I cannot when I am working.**"*

The gendered implications of Bumble's design become evident through users' experiences with its demanding engagement requirements. In the words of K-Momma, a 53-year-old woman:

*"I felt it was a little patronizing for **somebody who has a very full and active life.** You know, like it basically says, 'Hey, **if dating is not your top priority daily, then you're going to miss out on opportunities.**' You know, **we're mature professionals.** Come on, give us a break. **We might not want to do this every day.**"*

Her critique illuminates a critical disconnect between Bumble's marketing narrative of female empowerment and its design that mandates daily app-attending, undermining the work-life balance of the demographic that Bumble caters to. Peanut, a 37-year-old woman and mid-career professional, discontinued her use of the platform after recognizing how its structure intensified rather than reduced her workload. As she explains:

*"I used Bumble for a while and **it was too much labor.** I was like, **this is fucked up that I'm recreating these conditions under which I'm taking on more emotional labor for myself. It's like I'm taking on a third shift willingly. Fuck that!**"*

Her conception of dating app engagement as a 'third shift' expands traditional feminist frameworks of emotional and relational labor, suggesting that digital dating management has become yet another obligation alongside professional and domestic responsibilities. This sentiment reveals a fundamental conflict between Bumble's design and its target demographic of working professionals.

Bumble's strict temporal constraints necessitate regimented forms of labor that transcend traditional boundaries between online and offline activities, often disallowing downtime, and where space to contemplate and craft thoughtful responses is not afforded, creating anxiety and impairing communication. While this form of postdigital labor is nominally shared across genders due to the mutual time constraints on messaging, women seeking male partners shoulder a notably heavier burden. The platform's 24-hour messaging window, which activates when men match with women rather than when women initiate interest, requires immediate attention regardless of circumstances. Not only must women make the first move of initiating conversations within the prescribed window, but they must also contend with deleted matches—either by men or the app's time-out mechanism—forcing them into greater platform engagement

just to achieve basic connection. This technological control mechanism, presented as user empowerment, exemplifies how postdigital intimacies are increasingly shaped by platform architectures that blur boundaries between digital connection and everyday life.

6. Conclusion: The Labor of Digital Dating Under Temporal Constraints

Dating apps demand significant effort from users seeking connections. People engage in multiple forms of platform-specific labor: creating appealing profiles, writing compelling messages, and balancing these tasks with daily responsibilities—all while algorithmic systems capture these interactions for corporate profit. On Bumble, these challenges intensify for women through time constraints that fundamentally shape modern dating behavior.

By examining the intersection of platform design, gender dynamics, and temporal disciplining, this research extends previous scholarship on dating apps as sociotechnical systems perpetuating social norms through algorithmic design (Chan, 2018; Mortensen, 2015). Whereas prior studies identified how Bumble's structural design paradoxically reinforces traditional gender norms (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; MacLeod & McArthur, 2019), this investigation addresses a critical gap by analyzing how temporal constraints generate additional forms of labor for women.

While Bumble markets women's empowerment through its "first-move" feature, this study reveals how its "ticking clock" design can undermine goals of empowerment. Bumble's 24-hour opening move requirement creates three distinct forms of labor for women: communicative labor (crafting unique opening messages under time pressure), relational labor (vetting profiles and managing emotional investments within tight timeframes), and postdigital labor (managing regimented app engagement with daily responsibilities). Bumble exemplifies how postfeminist discourse can simultaneously challenge and reinforce gender norms. Its approach suggests women can overcome gendered dating structures through individual initiative while the platform profits from digital interactions, reflecting postfeminism's neoliberal roots that prioritize personal empowerment over systemic change.

Dating apps like Bumble function as sophisticated examples of corporate governmentality, using disciplinary mechanisms to shape intimate interactions. This research demonstrates how Bumble's design creates a space where gender norms, technical constraints, and social practices converge to normalize specific behaviors within controlled parameters. As dating platforms continue to evolve, recognizing these power dynamics becomes essential for understanding how technology shapes modern intimacy.

In 2024, Bumble introduced "Opening Moves" in response to user feedback that "the obligation to make the first move sometimes felt like just another thing to do on top of everything else on [women's] life list" (Bumble, 2024). Instead of requiring women to initiate conversations directly, this feature allows women to continue to control the topic by setting (or creating) a conversation prompt that men can respond to. While this feature reduces the need to create unique openings for each match, the core temporal constraint remains: women must still

respond within 24 hours to prevent match expiration. While appearing responsive to user feedback, this update maintains the app's core temporal disciplinary structure.

Future research should explore whether "Opening Moves" genuinely alleviates labor demands on women users or simply reshapes the workload. Additionally, a comparative analysis of labor distribution for LGBTQ+ users warrants investigation, as Bumble's "women first" approach does not apply for same-sex matches, though all users experience the disciplining effect of the 24-hour time constraint.

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Notes

¹ For simplicity, I refer to cisgender individuals as women and men and use the term gender-diverse as an umbrella term for those whose gender identity or expression lies beyond the traditional binary (e.g. transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer).

² While I did not specifically ask participants about disabilities during intake or interviews, I noted instances where participants made ableist comments about others misrepresenting themselves by not fully disclosing disabilities in their dating profiles.

³ *Virtual synthetical personalization* is a refined version of *virtual visual synthetic personalization* (Thompson, 2012) that encompasses how corporations leverage multiple semiotic modes in digital environments rather than focusing only on the visual.

⁴ This selective approach extends to transgender and nonbinary individuals reporting similarly intensive vetting practices due to heightened safety concerns (Thompson, 2024).