



Gender, Power, and Social Dynamics in the Digital Age: The Rise of Female Authority in Online Interactions

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Abstract: Objective: This study examines how women manage and negotiate power on Bumble, a dating app where women initiate conversations. The objective is to understand whether this feature truly empowers women or if traditional gender norms and societal expectations still limit their control in online interactions. **Method:** This study adopts a qualitative interpretive paradigm. In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 women who had used Bumble for at least three years and had met at least one male partner offline. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling. **Findings:** While initiating conversations on Bumble gives women initial control, traditional gender norms often resurface, limiting long-term empowerment. Men frequently reclaim power in offline settings, and societal expectations, along with online harassment, complicate women's digital experiences, making it harder for them to maintain control. These factors show how women's empowerment is constrained despite the platform's design. **Conclusion/Recommendations:** Bumble's design offers tools for women's empowerment, but these are limited by broader societal norms. Gender inequality and harassment persist in digital interactions. This study recommends that Bumble and similar platforms implement strategies to reduce harassment and support sustainable empowerment.

Keywords: Bumble, Dating application, Female authority, gender, social dynamic

الجنس والسلطة والديناميات الاجتماعية في العصر الرقمي: صعود سلطة المرأة في التفاعلات عبر الإنترنت

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المخلص: الهدف: تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية إدارة النساء للسلطة والتفاوض بشأنها على تطبيق Bumble، وهو تطبيق مواعدة تبادل فيه النساء بدء المحادثات. الهدف هو فهم ما إذا كانت هذه الميزة تمكن النساء حقًا أم أن المعايير الجنسانية التقليدية والتوقعات المجتمعية لا تزال تحد من سيطرتهن على التفاعلات عبر الإنترنت. **الطريقة:** تتبنى هذه الدراسة نموذجًا تفسيريًا نوعيًا. أجريت مقابلات معمقة مع 11 امرأة استخدمن تطبيق Bumble لمدة ثلاث سنوات على الأقل والتقين بشريك واحد على الأقل خارج الإنترنت. تم اختيار المشاركات باستخدام العينات المقصودة والعينات المتتالية. **النتائج:** في حين أن بدء المحادثات على Bumble يمنح النساء السيطرة الأولية، غالبًا ما تظهر المعايير الجنسانية التقليدية مرة أخرى، مما يحد من تمكنهن على المدى الطويل. غالبًا ما يستعيد الرجال السلطة في الأوساط غير الافتراضية، وتؤدي التوقعات المجتمعية، إلى جانب التحرش عبر الإنترنت، إلى تعقيد تجارب النساء الرقمية، مما يجعل من الصعب عليهن الحفاظ على السيطرة. توضح هذه العوامل كيف يتم تقييد تمكن النساء على الرغم من تصميم المنصة. **الاستنتاجات/التوصيات:** يوفر تصميم Bumble أدوات لتمكين المرأة، ولكن هذه الأدوات مقيدة بالمعايير الاجتماعية الأوسع نطاقًا. لا تزال عدم المساواة بين الجنسين والتحرش مستمرين في التفاعلات الرقمية. توصي هذه الدراسة بأن تقوم Bumble والمنصات المماثلة بتنفيذ استراتيجيات للحد من التحرش ودعم التمكين المستدام بشكل أفضل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بامبل، تطبيقات المواعدة، سلطة المرأة، النوع الاجتماعي، الديناميكيات الاجتماعية.

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Introduction

Digital technology has profoundly transformed human interactions, particularly in social relationships and communication. This transformation is especially evident in dating applications, where platforms like Bumble have emerged to empower women by enabling them to take control of their dating experiences. Launched in 2014, Bumble stands out by requiring women to initiate conversations after a match, challenging traditional gender norms in dating and fostering new dynamics within heterosexual relationships (Cöbek, 2021; Mađra-Sawicka *et al.*, 2020). This shift in gender power dynamics reflects broader societal changes facilitated by digital technology, which has allowed women to assert agency in spaces previously dominated by men (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021).

The design of Bumble and similar applications reflects a deliberate effort to empower women by allowing only them to initiate conversations after matching, which shifts traditional engagement dynamics and aligns with feminist principles (Broeker, 2023). This feature not only promotes female agency but also offers a potentially safer space in the digital landscape, where women often face harassment and unsolicited advances (Glass *et al.*, 2015; Roca-Cuberes *et al.*, 2023). The rise of mobile dating apps has also driven shifts in social norms and relationship expectations, as many users now seek diverse connections, from casual relationships to friendships, fostering flexibility and control in romantic lives (Hobbs *et al.*, 2017). This trend, as Bauman's concept of "liquid love" suggests, redefines intimacy within digital interactions, marked by transient connections and fluid dynamics (Bauman, 2013; Best, 2019).

The impact of these changes extends beyond individual experiences and influences societal attitudes toward gender roles and relationships.

Platforms like Bumble, which empowers women, may contribute to reevaluating gender power dynamics within the broader social context (Mađra-Sawicka *et al.*, 2020). As women increasingly take the lead in initiating conversations and setting terms of engagement, there is potential for a cultural shift that challenges traditional gender roles and promotes equality (Glass *et al.*, 2015; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019). This is particularly significant given that research indicates women often face social pressure to conform to passive roles in dating scenarios, which can limit their freedom and self-expression (Roca-Cuberes *et al.*, 2023).

Despite the growing research on dating apps and their implications for gender dynamics, most studies have focused on general aspects such as user motivations, dating experiences, or online safety. A noticeable gap exists regarding how apps like Bumble actively shift power dynamics from men to women within digital interactions (Frennert, 2021; Naicker & Mbengo, 2022; Pesando & Rotondi, 2020). Previous research highlights gender power imbalances, such as male dominance in top positions despite equal opportunities (Kharoub & Kharouf, 2020), the marginalization of women in Arab poetry (Aldakhili & Khdaif, 2020), and limited professional opportunities for women in Palestinian society (Abu-Moch, 2020). This study aims to fill the gap by analyzing how Bumble's features empower women, distinguishing it from traditional platforms that reinforce gender norms.

Moreover, this research will introduce a novel contribution by incorporating a feminist perspective into the analysis; an approach seldom applied in previous studies on dating apps. Most existing literature addresses general dynamics without delving deeply into how technological design features can be leveraged to support gender empowerment (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021; Theis *et al.*, 2018). This

study will emphasize how women use Bumble not only to gain control in dating but also to negotiate their identity and power within a digital environment that remains, in many respects, dominated by masculine norms (Mađra-Sawicka *et al.*, 2020; Wynn, 2020).

This research adds a new dimension to studying technology and gender by focusing on how women utilize innovative features in Bumble to strengthen their position in online social interactions. These features provide tools for women to control their narratives better and enable them to negotiate power in ways often impossible in traditional dating scenarios. As such, Bumble serves as a unique social laboratory where gender power dynamics can be analyzed and understood in greater depth.

More than just a dating app, Bumble offers insights into how technology can serve as a tool for female empowerment, allowing them to control their interactions in previously unimaginable ways. This paves the way for further studies on how digital technology can support gender equality across various social contexts, from professional settings to personal life. Consequently, this research will contribute to the existing literature and provide practical recommendations for developing more inclusive digital platforms.

Extending the exploration of gender dynamics on platforms like Bumble, this study examines how design features empower women in digital dating while challenging traditional norms. To address these dynamics, the following research questions (RQs) are posed:

RQ1: How does women's initiative in starting conversations on Bumble affect traditional gender dynamics and enhance female agency in digital dating?

RQ2: In what ways do women use self-identity as a tool of power within Bumble's digital environment?

RQ3: What challenges do women face in maintaining authority in digital dating spaces, despite empowerment-focused features?

Theoretical Framework

Gender Power Dynamics in Digital Spaces

Gender power dynamics in digital spaces are shaped by hegemonic masculinity, gender performativity, and feminist theories, which influence interactions and authority. R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity describes a culturally dominant form of masculinity that privileges men while subordinating women and alternative masculinities (Ging, 2017). In online environments, this is evident in behaviors that reinforce traditional gender norms, such as "virtual manhood acts," where men assert dominance at the expense of women (Fernández *et al.*, 2023). These behaviors reflect societal norms dictating acceptable masculinity expressions. Gender hierarchy is often maintained through consent rather than force, with struggles over ideas fostering counter-hegemonic movements that challenge dominant, socially-constructed beliefs (Qabaha & Hamamra, 2023).

These gender dynamics are further perpetuated by the objectification of women in digital spaces. Hegemonic masculinity fuels misogynistic discourses, with men often using social media to assert dominance through derogatory comments and the sexualization of women's bodies (Mendes *et al.*, 2018; Okech, 2021). However, digital environments also provide a platform for gender performativity, where gender is not fixed but rather shaped by societal expectations (Butler, 2020; Galpin, 2024). Online spaces offer individuals the flexibility to present identities that either conform to or challenge traditional gender roles. Women, for instance, may navigate societal expectations while asserting their

professional identities, balancing femininity with personal aspirations (Mitchell-Fox, 2023).

Digital spaces offer complex terrains where empowerment and oppression coexist, and this duality is especially relevant on platforms like Bumble, which both challenges and operates within traditional gender power structures. While Bumble's design feature—requiring women to initiate conversations—signals a shift toward female agency, it simultaneously exists within a larger digital landscape still shaped by hegemonic masculinity. Feminist movements like #MeToo exemplify how digital activism can mobilize collective resistance to gender inequalities (Mendes *et al.*, 2018), yet also highlight the persistence of online harassment and backlash, underscoring the difficulties in achieving true equality in these spaces (Duffy & Ang, 2019; Syrakvash, 2023).

By focusing on Bumble as a digital arena for negotiating identity and power, this study explores whether the platform's unique structure truly allows women to assert authority in dating interactions or if it reflects and reproduces societal pressures that limit sustained empowerment. An intersectional approach helps uncover the ways in which digital dating environments both facilitate resistance and perpetuate gendered hierarchies, providing insight into the nuanced realities of women's experiences online (Cerezo *et al.*, 2020).

Female Authority in Online Interactions

The exploration of female authority in online interactions, particularly within dating apps, reveals a complex interplay of power dynamics, societal norms, and individual agency. Digital spaces both empower and constrain women, reflecting societal attitudes toward gender. Social media has enabled women in conservative societies, like Saudi Arabia, to engage in public debates, challenging traditional power structures (Acilar

& Sæbø, 2023; Thorsen & Sreedharan, 2019). However, these interactions often face resistance from men seeking to reassert dominance, showing that digital spaces, while empowering, can also reinforce gender hierarchies.

In online dating, authority dynamics are particularly pronounced. Platforms like Bumble, where women initiate conversations, challenge traditional norms by giving women more control. This fosters agency, enabling women to navigate relationships on their terms. However, balancing societal expectations with independence creates a dual burden (Dernadeta *et al.*, 2022; Holotă & Drăgoi, 2023). Women may feel pressured to present idealized versions of themselves to attract partners, balancing authenticity with social desirability.

Transgender and gender-diverse individuals further complicate online authority dynamics. These individuals, especially adolescents, often seek relationships online while dealing with acceptance and safety concerns. Privacy settings and blocking features help manage uncomfortable interactions, highlighting the role of agency in navigating online identities (Bairoh, 2024). However, their experiences underscore the precarious nature of authority in digital spaces, where harassment and discrimination are significant risks. Misogynistic behaviors online reinforce traditional power structures, making it crucial for marginalized groups to develop strategies for asserting authority (Ros *et al.*, 2023).

The design and functionality of dating apps also impact women's authority. Kerras *et al.*, (2020) argue that platform design shapes user experiences and perpetuates gender stereotypes, limiting women's agency. Algorithms may prioritize certain profiles, reinforcing traditional notions of desirability that constrain women's authority (Van Nuenen, 2016). This highlights the importance of

examining how technology intersects with gender dynamics in online dating. The concept of "sharenting," discussed by (O'Brien *et al.*, 2023), shows how women's online identities are tied to their roles as mothers, complicating their authority in dating as they balance individual and caregiver identities.

The struggle for female authority online is also reflected in the backlash against feminist initiatives and the normalization of misogynistic behaviors. Research on anti-feminist backlash in Bangladesh demonstrates how societal pushback against women's rights manifests in online and offline spaces, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics (Ahmed *et al.*, 2024). Deng *et al.*, (2022) discuss how decentralized social platforms have altered traditional power dynamics, providing women with opportunities to challenge dominant discourses. However, these platforms' effectiveness in promoting female authority depends on resisting misogynistic behaviors that can undermine women's voices (Abu-Dabseh *et al.*, 2024). As digital spaces evolve, feminist scholars and activists must engage with these complexities and advocate for more equitable online environments.

Methodology

Materials

This research is grounded in a qualitative interpretative paradigm, well-suited to exploring the complex and nuanced meanings behind actions and social interactions within digital contexts (Bahrami *et al.*, 2016; Cresswell, 2007). By enabling an in-depth understanding of personal narratives and social dynamics, qualitative methods are essential for

capturing the different ways women navigate power and identity in digital dating spaces (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009). Moreover, as Neuman (2014) argued, qualitative research is beneficial for exploring complex and context-dependent phenomena, making it an ideal approach for analyzing gender dynamics and identity negotiation in this study.

The study utilized a purposive sampling method to select participants with substantial experience in the phenomenon under investigation—female authority in online interactions. The initial selection criteria required participants to be women who had been using the Bumble platform for at least three years and had met at least one male partner offline, ensuring they could provide in-depth accounts of their experiences. Recruitment began in Yogyakarta through a Facebook community for Bumble users, allowing the researcher to identify initial participants who met the study's criteria.

To capture diverse perspectives, the sample included participants at various life stages—students, recent graduates, job seekers, and entry-level employees—from multiple regions, such as Yogyakarta, East Java, Kalimantan, and Jakarta. Using snowball sampling, the study expanded through participant recommendations and networking, reaching a final sample of 11 participants. This approach was continued until data saturation was reached, ensuring no new themes or insights emerged, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of the qualitative findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Guest *et al.*, 2013).

Table (1): Demographic and Digital Engagement Profile of Female Informants.

Participant ID	Age	Occupation	Duration of Bumble Usage (Years)	Number of Offline Meetings	Types of Interactions	Location
P1	21	University Student	3	1	Casual dating	Yogyakarta
P2	22	University Student	3	2	Casual dating, Networking	Yogyakarta

Participant ID	Age	Occupation	Duration of Bumble Usage (Years)	Number of Offline Meetings	Types of Interactions	Location
P3	23	University Student	3	1	Networking	Yogyakarta
P4	24	Fresh Graduate/Job Seeker	3.5	2	Long-term relationship	Yogyakarta
P5	22	University Student	3	1	Casual dating	Yogyakarta
P6	25	Employed (Entry-Level)	4	3	Long-term relationship	Surabaya, East Java
P7	26	Fresh Graduate/Job Seeker	4	2	Casual dating, Networking	Malang, East Java
P8	27	Employed (Entry-Level)	4.5	3	Networking	Balikpapan, Kalimantan
P9	24	University Student	3.5	1	Casual dating	Jakarta
P10	25	Employed (Entry-Level)	4	2	Long-term relationship	Jakarta
P11	23	Fresh Graduate/Job Seeker	3	1	Casual dating, Networking	Jakarta

Source: Informant data collected during interviews (2024).

Procedure

This research used a structured qualitative methodology to develop interview questions based on relevant literature to explore participants' experiences with women's authority on Bumble. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which provides a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes in qualitative data and is often used in other qualitative research to ensure methodological rigor (Byrne, 2022; Hole, 2024). Initial familiarisation with the data involved repeated readings of the transcripts to identify important elements during the coding phase. These initial codes were then organized into initial themes, reviewed, and refined to ensure alignment with the data set and lead to final themes. This final analysis stage identified two main themes: women's authority and the negotiation of identity in digital spaces.

To ensure data validity, three team members independently conducted the initial coding to

provide diverse perspectives and minimize the potential for individual bias. The two lead authors verified each code to maintain consistency and double-check the interpretation. Where discrepancies in coding occurred, the authors discussed them anchored in the theoretical framework to ensure correctness. This process aligns with the verification strategy outlined by Morse *et al.*, (2002), which emphasizes independent coding, collaborative review, and theoretical consultation to enhance reliability in qualitative research. Additional steps, such as member checking and debriefing with peers, enhance the credibility of the research by validating interpretations and ensuring that they are accurate and unbiased.

Results

Reasons for Using Online Dating Applications

The use of dating applications by women in this study reveals a variety of motivations, reflecting unique individual needs and preferences within the digital social context.

One of the primary reasons that emerged is the convenience and accessibility offered by platforms like Bumble.

"I like it because I don't have to leave the house; I can still meet new people without the hassle. Sometimes after work, I'm too tired to go out, but I still want to meet new people," (interviewed with Informant 2).

This highlights how dating applications serve as a practical solution for those with busy schedules or who feel more comfortable initiating interactions online. Other participants, such as Informant 4, also emphasized the flexibility provided by these applications, especially for those who have limited time for socializing in person. In addition to ease of access, control and security in initiating interactions also emerged as significant reasons.

"On Bumble, I can choose who I want to talk to, so I feel safer. If someone isn't a good match, I can just stop the conversation," (interviewed with Informant 3).

This statement underscores the importance of safety and control in the online dating experience, particularly for women who wish to avoid unwanted interactions from the outset. Informant 7 added that the feature allowing women to start the conversation gives them greater power in directing the interaction, leading to increased confidence and a sense of protection. The aspect of exploration and social experimentation also surfaced as an intriguing motive for some users.

"I use Bumble more for exploration, to see how people interact in the digital world. It's fun to learn more about myself too," (interviewed with Informant 5).

Here, dating applications are viewed not only as tools for finding partners but also as a means to explore identity and social dynamics in a more liberated environment, less constrained by traditional norms. This

sentiment is echoed by Informant 8, who mentioned that interactions on dating apps provide new perspectives on how women can be more proactive in initiating relationships. The hope of finding a serious relationship is another significant driver behind the use of dating applications.

"At first, I was just playing around, but I found that there are a lot of serious people on Bumble. So now I use it to look for someone who is genuinely interested in a serious relationship," (interviewed with Informant 6).

This illustrates that while dating applications are often associated with casual relationships, there are also women who use these platforms with the intention of finding long-term partners. Informant 9 confirmed that many Bumble users display a clear intent to build deeper relationships, making the application a more serious alternative compared to other dating apps. Some participants also expressed that they prefer Bumble because it is perceived as more suitable for women who want to maintain control over their interactions.

"I like Bumble because women make the first move. This makes me feel more comfortable and allows me to control the pace of communication," (interviewed with Informant 10).

This sense of control provides psychological security for users, especially in a digital world that can sometimes feel unpredictable and risky. On the other hand, there are participants who view the use of dating applications as a way to balance their social lives with other commitments.

"Work life sometimes makes it difficult to meet new people. So, this app helps me stay social even when I'm really busy," (interviewed with Informant 11).

This statement shows that dating applications like Bumble offer a practical

solution for those who feel their lives are too hectic to pursue traditional methods of finding a partner. Overall, these reasons reflect how dating applications are used as multifunctional tools that meet diverse needs. From convenience and control to social exploration and the pursuit of serious relationships, Bumble offers a flexible platform for women to navigate the modern dating world according to their preferences and goals. This indicates that dating applications are not only a medium for finding partners but also a space where women can assert authority and control within broader social dynamics.

Perspectives on Self-Perception and Dating in the Digital Age

The perspectives of informants on online and offline dating reveal significant differences, reflecting how they perceive these experiences in terms of safety, convenience, and success. Many women feel that online dating offers more control over how they present themselves compared to offline dating. This control is crucial in shaping their self-perception and interactions within the digital space.

"I can be more selective about what I want to show, from photos to how I talk. It makes me feel more confident," (interviewed with Informant 3).

This indicates that online dating allows women to be more selective and strategic in presenting their identities, often providing a greater sense of confidence compared to the spontaneous nature of face-to-face interactions. The ability to curate one's image through selected photos and well-crafted bios gives women a level of agency that is less accessible in offline settings. They can choose how to present themselves, highlighting aspects of their personality and lifestyle that they wish to project.

Safety is another primary consideration that influences the preference for online dating.

"I feel safer online because I can get to know someone first without having to meet right away. If I don't feel comfortable, I can just stop," (interviewed with Informant 6).

This sense of safety is closely tied to the ability to control interactions before meeting in person, thereby reducing perceived risks for women. In contrast to offline dating, where spontaneity and unpredictability are more prevalent, online dating provides a buffer that allows women to feel more secure in their interactions. This controlled environment is one of the key reasons some informants feel more comfortable starting relationships online. However, some informants also recognize the limitations of online dating, particularly in terms of building deeper and more authentic relationships.

"Sometimes, everything feels more superficial online. People can lie about who they really are, so it's hard to know what's genuine," (interviewed with Informant 7).

This perception reflects concerns about the authenticity of identities in the digital world, where information can easily be manipulated or concealed. Unlike offline dating, where non-verbal cues and in-person interactions provide a fuller understanding of a person's character, online dating can sometimes lead to doubts about the genuineness of the other party. Despite these concerns, the digital environment does offer certain advantages, particularly in easing communication for those who may feel anxious in face-to-face interactions.

"I feel more comfortable chatting first before meeting. Sometimes I get nervous when meeting in person right away, so online helps me relax first," (interviewed with Informant 4).

In this context, the digital world provides a space for individuals to get to know someone without immediate pressure, allowing them to

build comfort before taking the next step. This gradual approach to relationship building can be particularly beneficial for those who experience social anxiety or nervousness in direct interactions. In terms of perceived success, informants' views vary. Some believe that online dating offers a higher success rate due to the broader range of options and the opportunity to screen potential partners before meeting in person.

"Online, I can get to know more people quickly, so I can choose who fits best. Offline, the options are more limited," (interviewed with Informant 5).

This suggests that online dating is seen as an efficient tool for filtering potential matches, allowing women to focus their efforts on those who seem most compatible. However, other informants argue that offline dating, with its emphasis on face-to-face interaction, is more authentic and better suited for assessing long-term compatibility.

"Even though online helps at first, it's really the in-person meetings that show if the relationship will work or not," (interviewed with Informant 8).

This view highlights the importance of in-person meetings as the ultimate test of a relationship's potential, where true personality and chemistry can be observed. Overall, women's self-perceptions in the digital world are strongly influenced by the fundamental differences between online and offline dating. The digital world offers control and convenience that may not be available in offline dating, but it also presents challenges in terms of authenticity and long-term relationship success. These findings highlight the complexity of women's experiences in navigating identity and social dynamics in the digital age, where both opportunities and limitations are uniquely presented.

Experiences and Responses to Online Harassment

Experiences with online harassment appear to be one of the most challenging aspects for women using dating applications. Several informants shared stories about how they had to deal with unwanted interactions, ranging from inappropriate comments to threatening messages.

"Someone once sent me an inappropriate message right after we matched. I immediately blocked and reported them," (interviewed with Informant 2).

This illustrates how online harassment can occur quickly and unexpectedly, prompting users to take immediate action to protect themselves. Many informants expressed that the features provided by the applications, such as reporting and unmatching, are extremely helpful in managing such situations.

"Fortunately, on Bumble, you can unmatch someone right away if they are inappropriate. No need to deal with it any longer," (interviewed with Informant 5).

These actions enable them to swiftly end unwanted interactions and maintain a safe and comfortable online environment. Additionally, some informants noted that they have become more selective in their interactions on dating apps as a result of these experiences.

"After experiencing harassment a few times, I became more careful about who I talk to. Sometimes I thoroughly check their profile first," (interviewed with Informant 3).

This shows how experiences with harassment can change the way they use the apps, making them more cautious and selective in choosing potential matches. These protective measures also include stricter privacy settings. Some informants mentioned that they tend to withhold too much personal information or share it slowly.

"I never share too much about myself at the beginning, just to be safer. I also usually don't give out my phone number right away," (interviewed with Informant 7).

This decision reflects a heightened awareness of the importance of maintaining privacy in the digital environment, especially when interacting with strangers. While actions like unmatching and reporting are very effective, there is also a recognition that online harassment might not be entirely avoidable.

"Sometimes, even when you're careful, there are still people who cross the line. But at least I can report it immediately and not have to deal with it anymore," (interviewed with Informant 4).

This statement shows that although preventive and responsive measures can reduce risks, online harassment remains a part of the experience that is difficult to avoid entirely. Overall, the experiences and responses to online harassment among the informants underscore the importance of security and control features on dating applications. These women not only use these features to protect themselves but also adjust how they interact on the apps as a result of these experiences. This reflects the necessary adaptation to navigate the digital world safely and shows that while online harassment is a painful reality, there are tools and strategies that can help manage it.

Discussion

Women's Initiative in Starting Conversations

The study's findings indicate that Bumble's feature, which enables women to initiate conversations, challenges traditional gender norms in significant ways. Many informants expressed a sense of empowerment when they had initial control over interactions, as this allowed them to steer the conversation according to their preferences and comfort levels. Such experiences reflect Bumble's

broader effort to alter gender power dynamics in online dating. This effort aligns with observations made by (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2021), who suggested that this feature could symbolize empowerment for women, albeit with certain limitations. The ability to initiate conversations represents more than just a reversal of roles; it embodies a shift towards greater autonomy for women in the dating sphere.

Despite these opportunities for empowerment, traditional power dynamics often resurface once the conversation begins. Several informants noted that even with initial control, traditional patterns of interaction—where men tend to dominate—still emerged. This persistence of conventional roles echoes the insights of (Broeker, 2023), who observed similar trends in other studies. The reality of these interactions suggests that while technological changes are designed to foster gender equality, entrenched social norms still exert a powerful influence. The digital tools provided by platforms like Bumble may open new avenues for agency, but they are not always enough to dismantle deeply ingrained societal expectations.

Moreover, the pressure on women to effectively initiate conversations indicates that this feature does not entirely free them from existing gender expectations. Some participants reported anxiety when starting a conversation, revealing that this feature might impose a new kind of psychological burden (Haryadi & Simangunsong, 2022). This anxiety highlights the dual-edged nature of empowerment in digital spaces—where the freedom to act also comes with the pressure to perform according to specific social standards. The challenges women face in navigating these expectations underscore the complexity of digital interactions and the need for a more nuanced understanding of empowerment.

Further research reveals that although Bumble's features are designed to empower women, the app's infrastructure and design may not fully achieve this goal. Bivens & Hoque (2018) argue that Bumble's design could inadvertently limit discussions on gender and sexuality, indicating that while the app aims to promote gender equality, there are inherent constraints in how these features are implemented and utilized by users. Although certain features are designed to enhance women's empowerment, the reality is that gender power remains deeply influenced by prevailing social norms (Tanner & Tabo, 2018). Transforming these dynamics requires not only technological tools but also a fundamental shift in the underlying social structures, which are often resistant to change.

While the feature allowing women to start conversations on Bumble offers the potential for challenging gender power dynamics, the actual outcome largely depends on how this feature is utilized and how existing social norms continue to shape digital interactions. Technology, in this context, can only partially disrupt existing power structures, as broader social interventions are necessary to achieve genuine gender equality. The success of such initiatives hinges on a combined effort of technological innovation and societal change, ensuring that platforms like Bumble can truly support equitable interactions.

Managing Self-Identity as a Tool of Power in the Digital World

Managing self-identity in the digital world is pivotal to understanding gender power dynamics in online dating. On Bumble, identity management becomes a tool of power, allowing women to shape how they wish to be perceived and interact with others. The findings from this study reveal that women utilize identity management to retain control and authority in their online interactions. Such an observation

aligns with the view that computer-mediated communication enables individuals to be more intentional in constructing and managing their identities, thereby influencing the formation of more controlled and directed relationships (Walther & Whitty, 2021).

Women on Bumble frequently use identity management as a strategic tool to navigate their interactions. They carefully select profile pictures, craft bios, and determine what personal information to share, all in an effort to shape perceptions and influence how potential partners view them. By highlighting specific traits and qualities they deem important, women aim to attract compatible matches while maintaining their boundaries. This approach provides them with greater control over their relationships, particularly in the initial stages of communication.

However, managing identity in the digital sphere also presents challenges related to authenticity and social pressure. Boyd (2015) discusses how individuals often struggle to present an authentic self while also adhering to prevailing social expectations in the digital realm. On Bumble, despite having the freedom to manage their identities, women still face pressure to conform to social norms. Some informants shared that they felt compelled to present an image that was more appealing or aligned with societal standards to garner the desired attention. Such a dynamic suggests that while identity management offers a sense of power, it can also become a psychological burden, requiring women to balance authenticity with conformity constantly (Bairoh, 2024).

Moreover, identity management on digital platforms serves as both a tool of personal power and a subtle form of social protest, where individuals use their identities to challenge established norms (Törnberg, 2018). In Bumble's context, women employ identity

management to negotiate power in relationships, often in ways that defy traditional expectations. By presenting themselves as they choose, women assert their power and reject the passive roles typically expected in the dating landscape.

Managing self-identity on Bumble is a key strategy that women use to maintain control over digital interactions. While this strategy offers avenues for empowerment, it also requires women to navigate the complexities of balancing authenticity and conformity and manage the social pressures associated with identity management in the digital world. Power in the digital world is not just about initiating conversations but also about how identities are managed and projected in broader interactions (Glass *et al.*, 2015; Holotă & Drăgoi, 2023).

Challenges in Maintaining Authority in Digital Spaces

Women's experiences with online harassment reveal significant challenges in maintaining authority in digital spaces (Chadha *et al.*, 2020; Koirala, 2020). Although platforms like Bumble are designed to give women greater control over their digital interactions, the reality is that online harassment remains a severe threat, undermining their empowerment efforts. The research found that women often have to navigate hostile environments where they not only need to protect themselves from harassment but also work to maintain their image and identity online.

Online harassment, particularly in the form of sexual harassment, has been widely documented as a phenomenon that threatens women's psychological and physical well-being. Hanson (2022) suggests that online harassment can lead to profound emotional stress for women, often forcing them to withdraw or alter their behaviour in digital spaces. In the context of Bumble, this could

mean that although women have the power to initiate conversations, the harassment they encounter can erode their confidence and, in some cases, compel them to leave the platform or reduce their participation. Women's empowerment in digital spaces is deeply intertwined with the security challenges and harassment they face, making it impossible to separate the two issues.

Moreover, women's experiences with online harassment expose gaps in user protection policies across many digital platforms. Menon (2024) argues that online harassment is frequently used as a tool to silence women and reinforce existing gender inequalities. In Bumble's case, despite features like "unmatch" or "report," some informants indicated that these actions are not always effective in addressing the harassment they encounter. The insufficient implementation and enforcement of protection policies can leave women vulnerable, even when such measures are in place (Ammari *et al.*, 2022).

Online harassment also contributes to what (Haslop *et al.*, 2021) describe as a "gendered digital divide," where women become increasingly vulnerable to harassment and marginalization on digital platforms. This dynamic exacerbates the existing challenges women face in maintaining authority online, as they must constantly navigate threats of harassment while striving to maintain their roles in online conversations and interactions. Consequently, while technology has the potential to empower women, these challenges often impede their ability to utilize digital spaces fully.

Additionally, responses to online harassment often focus on coping and withdrawal strategies, where women may choose to avoid interactions that could provoke further harassment (Barros *et al.*, 2022). In Bumble's context, although women can initiate

conversations, they may become more hesitant to do so out of fear of adverse responses or harassment that might follow. The challenges in maintaining authority in digital spaces are thus linked not only to the ability to initiate interactions but also to sustaining control and comfort throughout those interactions.

Overall, the difficulties in maintaining authority in digital spaces indicate that efforts to empower women through technology must be paired with robust protection against online harassment and other threats. More effective user protection policies and their rigorous enforcement are essential to ensuring that women feel safe and empowered online. Only then can technology genuinely serve as a tool for gender equality rather than a space that perpetuates existing inequalities.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study have practical and theoretical implications for online dating platforms like Bumble and digital feminism. Practically, it highlights the need for features that empower women to initiate interactions and protect against harassment, such as improved reporting tools and educational resources to help manage self-identity. Theoretically, it reveals the dual nature of digital empowerment, where autonomy exists alongside pressures to conform, showing that gendered power dynamics persist online. Future frameworks should address both empowerment and constraint, offering a nuanced view of how technology can challenge and reinforce traditional norms.

However, this research is subject to certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the focus on Bumble interactions may limit the generalizability of findings to other dating platforms with different features and user dynamics. Second, while offering valuable insights into women's subjective experiences, reliance on in-depth interviews may only

partially capture the diversity of user interactions in broader contexts. Additionally, this study's exploration of how women negotiate power in digital spaces could be shaped by external factors, including cultural norms, social contexts, and platform policies, which may impact women's empowerment strategies. These limitations suggest further research examining gender dynamics across various digital platforms and cultural contexts to deepen our understanding of how technology shapes—and is shaped by—gendered power relations in diverse online environments.

Conclusion

This research highlights the complexity of gender power dynamics in online dating, mainly through the Bumble application. While Bumble's feature allowing women to initiate conversations provides them with significant initial control, this study finds that traditional gender power often re-emerges in broader interactions. The control given to women does not always lead to transformative changes in relationship dynamics, as deeply ingrained social norms continue to play a vital role in shaping digital interactions. Additionally, the challenges women face, such as online harassment, show that the control provided by technology does not fully liberate women from social pressures and security risks.

Furthermore, managing self-identity on digital platforms like Bumble becomes a critical tool for women to navigate and maintain power in their interactions. However, this identity management also presents dilemmas related to authenticity and social pressure, adding psychological burdens for women. In addition, responses to online harassment indicate that the challenges in maintaining authority in digital spaces remain significant, mainly because existing user protection policies are not always effective in safeguarding women from threats and

harassment. Therefore, while technology like Bumble offers opportunities for empowerment, the outcomes largely depend on how these features are used and how the broader social context influences digital interactions.

To improve the effectiveness of dating platforms in supporting women's empowerment, stronger user protection policies and effective enforcement are necessary to address online harassment. Additionally, application developers must consider feature designs that support sustained control for women in their interactions, not just at the initiation stage. Broader social interventions are also needed to address gender norms that hinder more profound changes in gender power dynamics in digital spaces. With a more holistic approach, technology can become a more effective tool in promoting gender equality and empowering women in online dating and other digital interactions.

Ethical Statement

- **Ethical Approval:** This study was approved by the relevant ethical review board at Faculty of Communication, University of Mercubuana Yogyakarta. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and given the freedom to decide whether to participate and provide honest answers.
- **Conflict of interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this research.
- **Availability of data and materials:** Data and materials used in this study are available upon request.
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