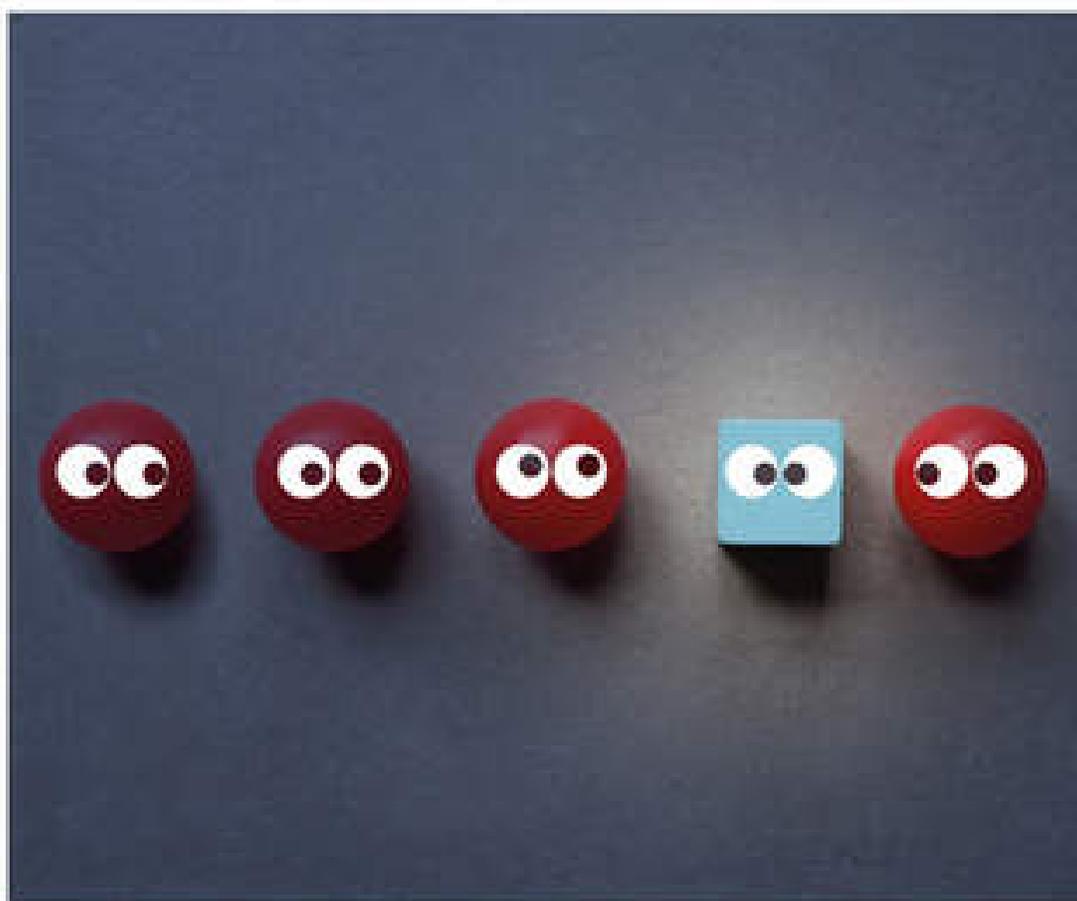




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VIRTUAL SEXUAL IDENTITIES

Embodied aspirations, tensions, and lessons from the Bumble dating app

Treena Orchard

With images of bright yellow beehives and promises of empowering connectivity, the Bumble dating app is a dominant cultural site through which sexuality, dating, and gendered power relations flow. Since its inception in 2014, friends and lifestyle influencers alike have touted this platform as the place to find good-looking, professional guys. Although using a dating app was foreign to me, it was abundantly clear that I needed some new strategies. The homespun approach of using Facebook to reconnect with old flames had its limits and so did my online dating encounters, which included a failed hook-up with a workout fiend and a marriage proposal that went something like: “Hi, will you be my wife?” I decided to take the digital plunge. After selecting a few semi-sexy selfies, finalising my written profile, and reassuring myself that this is what I wanted to do, I pressed the yellow ‘create’ button and began my journey into the Bumble hive.

I was intrigued by Bumble’s feminist claims and promises of empowering women. Described by CEO Whitney Wolfe Herd as ‘100 percent feminist’, the platform seeks to challenge outdated heteronormative dating rules that assign active roles to men and passive roles to women.¹ On the app, female users make the first move and men must wait to be initially contacted, which is designed to help women take greater control over their dating destinies and free men of the expectation to ask women out. Bumble’s unique design has generated significant social and media buzz and the app has over one hundred million users.² However, given the paucity of research on Bumble it is unclear how closely the app’s fem-forward attributes align with women’s lived experiences. I joined to meet men and have sex, which seemed attainable given the initial charge of sensual fun I experienced in the first few days of using the app. But things soon dimmed as Bumble was revealed to be a rather sexless place where meeting in-person is a distant aim for many male users. The app seemed to impede my ability to make the physical contact I desired, which made me reconsider my dating strategies and second guess myself in the process. The key question dominating my thoughts was: does Bumble empower women?

In this chapter I seek to answer this question using an auto-ethnographic, socio-material approach that interrogates both people and objects within the broader socio-sexual and commercial landscape that informs Bumble culture. Following the work of digital ethnographers Roser Beneito-Montagut and Fuentes & Sorum, in understanding how the design and use of digital objects shape everyday consumption practices I acknowledge the flow between on- and offline spaces and embodied realities.³ This analysis also considers

how corporate forces shape what cultural economists call ‘devicification’, a process whereby human behaviours are increasingly mediated by devices.⁴ My insights illuminate how Bumble is restructuring dating practices and digital subjectivity, along with the socio-sexual challenges of navigating this everyday technology that seems designed to foster consumer dependency over genuine romantic success.

Methodology

As a tech luddite and dating app virgin, I had no idea what to expect when I began using Bumble beyond the standard tropes about being ghosted and assaulted with dick pics. My novice status made me an ideal person to document Bumble culture and how women, and to a certain degree men, navigate the platform’s twists and turns. Everything was new and worth recording, which I began doing as soon as I joined Bumble in August of 2017. I made notes in a fresh Moleskin book set aside for the task, but as the matches and preliminary themes began to add up I shifted to a Word document for ease of writing. What I was experiencing was fascinating and by the end of my first month I had recorded 40,000 words. When I deleted the app in January of 2018 the word count had reached 65, 000 and a memoir about this transformative experience is on the horizon. My notes contain detailed ethnographic observations of Bumble culture and user dynamics alongside humorous, vulnerable self-reflections as a sex-positive woman seeking intimacy and sexual pleasure.

In conjunction with cultural and personal insights, I also recorded the total matches Bumble created for me (2, 371); the number of opening conversations I sent to the matches I was attracted to (113); the number of conversations my matches responded to (67 or a 60% response rate), and the number of matches whom I met in-person (10 or a 9% success rate). These statistics tell an important part of the story and refute the dominant narratives of Bumble being an efficient, successful dating platform.

During this experience I routinely felt torn between my identities as a woman trying to date and an ethnographer recording these complex events. I often longed for a space just to ‘be’ with my feelings without needing to interpret what they meant. The joint occupation of living and documenting my dating life had other negative impacts, including becoming overly attached to the app and my phone itself. This dependency evolved rather seamlessly over the five months and in many ways it was encouraged by Bumble via messages from “HQ” about getting out there and being a “busy bee” to make my romantic dreams come true. However, this obsessive behaviour is also linked with the socially approved ubiquitous use of smartphones in our global society and FOMO or “the fear of missing out”, which streamed through my mind as I tried to understand the hive and optimize my chances at dating success.⁵

Bumble inverts the dating script

The preference for digital versus embodied pleasure permeates Bumble culture. I was aghast when my matches would gleefully text for hours, send and request spicy photos, and then vanish when I mentioned meeting. This happened over and over and over. Did they not want to have sex? Perhaps it was the frequency of their dating app usage, which has been demonstrated by communication studies scholars to positively reinforce sexting as a normative behaviour.⁶ The potential for rejection may have also explained their fear of the in-person connection. It was not uncommon for some of my matches to show up more than a few pounds heavier than the chiseled six-packs displayed in their profile pics, a deceptive practice called ‘catfishing’.⁷

This new digital landscape seemed dominated by games of desire versus the fleshly follow through I wanted, but the reasons why were not clear in the early days of my Bumble journey:

Ten days in and it feels like a lot of nothing. Do they just want to talk or are they inept at making ‘real’ moves? No one has said ‘let’s meet’---yet in their profiles, it’s what most say they want. This is true of older and younger. Does TECH-ness and the normalisation of texting replace the in-person? Are they afraid? Don’t they want to have sex? Have they been poorly socialised—all of them? I tend to connect with non-locals who live at least an hour away and I wonder, if I was around the corner would they suggest an in-person—or do so quicker?

Fieldnotes August 2017

Over time I understood that their anxiety about meeting in person was linked with the dating hierarchies that structure the Bumble hive. These hierarchies differ substantially from those that permeated dating life before apps, when in-person encounters were typically the most common way to initially connect with someone, whether at a bar, work, or in other social spaces.⁸ In the pre-app dating landscape things often unfolded via the baseball metaphors of first through third base. First base was the initial meeting, which might involve sex and be called a ‘one-night stand’. Second base was a repeat of first base and could involve heavy petting, *such* an odd term, or full-blown sex. Third base was a heavier version of second base and sex was probably in the cards.

On Bumble, the sexual scripts needed to interpret the dating environment and locate oneself within the mystic universe of sex are being radically transformed. Now, the opening conversation on the app constitutes first base and sometimes that is as far as it goes. Second base is when users transition from communicating on the app, which is slow and clunky, to regular texting or platforms like Snapchat. This stage typically involves sexting and sending racy photos, which can be fun but also boring because the guys seemed to all say the same things. When I encouraged them to use their imagination they usually laughed and returned to a series of standard narratives that featured me playing the role of a trusty service provider:

Many of them keep asking me questions and tell me how horny they are. I’m pretty sure I’m little more than a phone sex operator. I don’t really care about your hard cock and no I don’t feel like telling you what I’m going to do with it because I’m not going to do anything with it. It’s not in my hand, it’s in yours! Saying you wish I could finish you off? Yea sounds great. I’ll step in with an orifice and help you out. But that’s not what they want or need, it seems; real bodies, I mean. They want me to type it all out...desire by proxy. Is it even desire? It’s just about using me to get off.

Fieldnotes January 2017

Most of my Bumble interactions did not make it to third base and the rarity of in-person interactions made them particularly laden with meanings and expectations. Among them is the idea that sex will ensue upon meeting: hook-up culture at its finest.⁹ This ranked high on their priority list and mine but did not always pan out as I had hoped. As mentioned, several matches fell short of their sexy, fit profile pictures, which presented me with multiple dilemmas: ‘Do I or don’t I?’; ‘If I don’t, is that mean?’; ‘If I do, what if they want something more?’; ‘Is it weird that I feel compelled to have sex because they’re here, at my door?’; ‘Is this sex work without the pay?’.

Except for one date that ended terribly, I slept with the remaining men I met in person because I was uncertain when I would have the opportunity again. My encounters varied in terms of quality and were hot 40% of the time, forgettable 40% of the time, and 20% fell into the ‘community service’ category. In these latter instances, I sensed that my matches needed some sexual healing and although these encounters could feel rather perfunctory, I managed to get something out of them:

There are two pictures in the room, both on the wall next to ‘my’ side of the bed. One is a copy of a drawing of the British Parliament buildings and I find my eyes going repeatedly to Big Ben during the two hours or so I’m in the room with him (‘Look kids, it’s Big Ben!’). We kiss and it’s OK, but I am not really turned on. This is not my first European Vacation and I focus not on my own pleasure, but on the powerful feelings I am emitting and receiving as a desired woman. He strips down and waits with eager groans, squirming while I slowly get undressed. I’m not in a hurry. I can’t help but notice a few disappointing things – size does matter and so does body hair...SO MUCH body hair. I did not feel forced, nor do I regret it because sex isn’t always great, sacred or deeply meaningful. It is what it is, and I don’t mind having these funny times. That’s life.

Fieldnotes January 2017

When the hive falls short

Dating apps have transformed how we find one other in terms of sex and intimacy, and they are often considered not just the best way to date but the only way to date, as Ashley Fetters former writer for *The Atlantic* observes.¹⁰ Yet our lived experiences tell us that they often produce unsatisfactory encounters that remain exclusively in the digital realm, which is frustrating for those of us who want to tumble- and Bumble- between the sheets. Many users have come to accept this ‘new normal’ and either step away from the platform or try a new one to cope with the disappointing experiences they generate, which the Senior Culture Reporter at *Mashable* calls “swiping ennui”.¹¹

Anthropologist Helen Fisher, chief scientific adviser at Match.com since 2005, sheds pragmatic light on this incongruity between what we desire and the sub-par means with which to realize those desires. She argues that the real problem is that we have no clue what we are doing on dating apps:

This is new technology and nobody has ever told us how to use it. We shouldn’t even be thinking of these tools as ‘dating apps.’ They’re not dating sites, they’re introducing sites. The only thing they can do is if you require a certain type of person, they give you that person. That’s all any app can ever do.¹²

Bumble seems to be cognisant of some of the problematic outcomes associated with its product and responded by launching the ‘Snooze’ feature. This function allows users to take a break from dating without losing matches and is described as: ‘encouraging you to go offline so you come back to our community a healthier, more balanced person — whenever you’re ready’.¹³ Welcome to the Bumble California, where you can check out any time you like but you can never leave! This discourse pathologizes users for their dating failures through wellness speak which, as marketing scholars Hakala and Mueller contend, is a powerful aspect of lifestyle marketing construction that relies on neoliberal notions of responsible, self-governing users who control their consumption experiences.¹⁴ Although user

decisions and preferences impact dating outcomes, it is undeniable that the app's design contributes to some of the unsatisfactory aspects of the Bumble journey.

Many nights on Bumble were boring because I was out of matches and the men I connected with were not interested in further conversations. These dead ends could be mitigated by selecting more 'maybe' men, extending the geographical range I was willing to travel, and adjusting the ages of the people I was interested in. Rebranding myself to generate more matches was a common strategy I employed, and it was encouraged by the app itself. I regularly received encouraging texts from "HQ" about the need to "get buzzy" and "see who's out there", which reinforced the notion that romantic victory was dependent upon my productivity and as simple as switching up my profile and staying the course. This messaging corresponds with computing studies that show how techniques like reminders are regularly used in the digital marketplace because they lead to the repetition of new user behavior and create product dependency, such that on-going app use is required to achieve lasting or desired changes.¹⁵

However, the approach that yielded the most attention from male prospects was not a witty opening line or refreshed bio; it was using sexualized photos. Indeed, this strategy was so successful that I included a tasteful but sexually alluring photo with all of my opening conversations. Although this generated much interest, it was accompanied by the assumption that I was only after sex versus my goal of having a few casual relationships. But even this sex-forward approach did not generate the cache of bodies I was hoping for and I was left few options but to refresh my profile yet again:

I have tweaked my photos and profile at least seven or eight times in the first two weeks. I'm searching for a body shot, which I don't have many of. Wait, maybe I need a 'travel' shot or someone else in the photo—my cat? A more current one? A face shot? Sunglasses? For the profile, I took out the long-winded bit about caring and wanting to discover new places and added FIT and FUN and music tastes ('Cambodian hip hop, G & R, Beastie Boys' – I'm cool, I swear!). I also added animals and a kitty emoticon (they often mention and feature photos of animals). I also added nature and a basketball emoticon. She got game. I recently took out the specific cities I had mentioned as favourites (Bombay, St. Petersburg, NYC, Florence) and replaced them with 'well-travelled'. I did this to have space to include 'Proud auntie-heart emoticon'. And I also added a photo of me and my nephews.

Fieldnotes September 2017

Bumble has libido issues

When I reflect on the low points in my Bumble experience, the company's failed promises of empowerment, which are consistently featured in marketing and social media campaigns, loom large. The app does not provide any real technical advantage for women to be empowered, and starting initial conversations means little more than increased dating labour, often for inadequate returns. Women have been starting discussions with men in romantic settings for centuries, so how is this suddenly empowering? The lack of a social narrative targeted at men to help make them more comfortable with the shift in dating practices that Bumble promotes is another flaw in Bumble's hive which, as Canadian communications researchers argue, contributes to gendered inequities on the platform.¹⁶ This resonates with my observations that many men resent waiting to be asked out, as reflected in degrading comments they made about women's opening lines that they often included in their written profiles.

It is significant that some male users sacrificed the space allotted to presenting themselves to prospective dates for an opportunity to jeer at women's dating practices. The following statements were observed in several profiles: 'What do I have to do to get your attention?' or 'HELLO out there'. However, the most problematic was: 'Don't ask me how I'm doing', which was paired with the violent imagery of gun and head-blown-open emojis. Some men also stated that women on Bumble 'act like men', an outrageous comment often made in conjunction with a negative assessment of the app's feminist label. Cyber-misogyny is pervasive in online settings and some women have responded by setting up websites and Instagram accounts, most famously *Bye Felipe*, that feature reprehensible comments by men on dating apps as a form of public shaming or what digital scholar Frances Shaw calls 'feminist discursive activism'.¹⁷ Defending myself as a sex-positive feminist was never something I bargained for as part of my dating journey, but it happened repeatedly over the five months I was on Bumble. This fact, alongside the poor romantic returns, culminated in an experience that sometimes felt like lonely record-keeping versus the erotic fun I longed for:

'Sounds like fun' a friend said. It is, but it can also feel very vacant and frustrating. There's only so much a bunch of words strung across a screen can mean at the end of the day. There are many moments when you're stalled, and you sit there staring at the matches and conversations you've made but don't want to continue – or they don't. But you don't delete those circle faces or exchanges you've had, do you? Interesting. Keep them to fill out the record. Emptiness is symbolic of much. Sometimes you find yourself in a dead zone when there are no more people to choose from. Not much to do but wait, return to the app every now and then, or a lot, and drive yourself crazy, feeling like an unattractive loser and regretting some of the ones you swiped left on, those ones that could have been a 'maybe'.

Fieldnotes September 2017

Women in patriarchal societies are subjected to sexual discourses that encourage female liberation and the pursuit of female pleasure in a world that is increasingly framed as ours for the taking, especially in the post-#MeToo era. Yet what often happens in 'real' life among heterosexual women, as sex therapist Joanne Bagshaw details in *The Feminist Handbook*, is that the men with whom we seek pleasure do not measure up for reasons that are intimately linked with our failure as a global society to support equity across socio-economic, sexual, racial, embodied, and gendered spectrums.¹⁸ It was poignant to feel this in the self-blame I heaped upon myself for my dating woes and to see it in the aggressive behaviours of men who were deeply uncomfortable with inverting traditional dating scripts that privilege male control. Such is the direct, enduring grip that patriarchal culture has on our bodies and such is the power we assign to the technologies that are framed as easy and helpful even though this is not always true.¹⁹

Another element of my Bumble experience that registered low on the libido scale was the homogeneous sexual dialogue that circulated in the hive. Many of the men's sexual scripts were virtually identical tales of all the things they would do to me and all the things that I would then do to them. The generic acts they described lacked individuality and any sense of the fun or indeterminate nature of having sex. The genericizing of sexuality was also reflected in my female students' stories about their Bumble encounters, which were the same as my own. I was puzzled by the similarities considering the vastly different generations we come from; I am a Gen Xr and they are Zs. This homogenization stems primarily from our uptake of the same platform, which strikes me as a critical issue given the importance of sexual diversity for

reproduction and the survival of our species.²⁰ If each of us has the same kind of intimate life and sexual experiences, that is all we will seek and be prepared for- what a dreadful destiny.

The Bumble paradox

In her article about the relationship between culture and subjectivity in neoliberal times, feminist sociologist Rosalind Gill contends that we know very little about how the cultural ‘gets inside’ and reshapes our relationships to ourselves and others.²¹ A primary aim of this chapter has been to pull back the Bumble cloak to expose the constituent processes through which the platform is impacting dating practices, sexuality, and digital dependency; what sexuality scholar Evangelos Tziallas calls the ‘logistical and emotional circuitry’ of dating apps.²² My analysis reveals that Bumble is a paradoxical place that is marketed as empowering but fails in this regard for three key reasons. The first of which is the simplistic messaging about feminism and dating equity that excludes consideration of male experiences as well as our post-#MeToo era, where sexual dynamics and gender relations are deeply contested. An app cannot achieve dating equity when widespread equity does not yet exist in society- a basic but important point.

The second feature of the app that contradicts its empowerment branding is the fact that beyond the initial conversation, women have no control over the fate of an encounter. This is because men’s actions represent the pollination power in the hive and it is only when, or if, they respond that a match can actually flourish. If they do not reply the match disappears and women cannot ask them out again unless they surface again on the wheel of dating fortune, which can happen if both users remain on Bumble. Yet, many men do not respond to women’s opening lines, a full 40% in my case, or they do so aggressively because they are uncomfortable with adopting more passive dating roles and they may be anti-feminist. The neoliberal Bumble discourse about rational, free-choosing women who will be empowered through this app belies the near impossibility of this task in light of the platform’s design, which can foster divisiveness between users. This narrative also eschews the inequitable nexus of power relations that inform Bumble’s sexual culture, which aligns with sociologist Kenneth Hanson’s study about gendered ambiguity on dating apps and how men viewed them as games whereas women saw them as more serious and, in some instances, dangerous.²³

The third tenet of the Bumble paradox involves the discrepancy between corporate images of quick, easy connections and the tremendous labour required of users to navigate the app, often for staggeringly low romantic returns. I joined the hive to meet many men in the flesh and have sex with their physical bodies, which proved a herculean feat. From 2,371 matches I met ten guys, which represents just 9% of the total dating pool and is pittance compared to my pre-app romantic success rate of around 90%. Although some of the guys I met were precisely what I was looking for, most of my dates were not terribly charming or attractive and yet I slept with all but one of them. I did this because in the sexually precarious Bumble hive, meeting men is hard and I had no guarantee when the next in-person date would materialize. Far from empowering sexual conquests, many of the men were symbolic wins, so many notches in my notebook where they were encoded with value that had little to do with their prowess and more to do with what they represented to me- evidence of my sexual labours and embodied capital.

I close this section with the final entry in my Bumble jottings, which captures my malaise about the declining value of my romantic desires and labours in the Bumble economy:

For many months now, I’ve been peering into a wishing well, dropping handfuls of pennies shiny and blackened into its depths. Leaning into it and waiting for the quiet

sound of their eventual drop to the bottom. Other coins litter my dating waters, making strange patterns upon the once clear but empty sea floor. I have heard the pennies drop and felt them collect along the lining of my heart, my loins, and my brain. These items of sexual currency no longer hold much value for me, learning what I have about the market of the dating app---not a place to find real connection or even reliable sex. It's time to walk away from this empty money, these rather furtive exchanges. I began the documentation of this experience in this notebook and here is where I leave the story.

Fieldnotes January 2018

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored some of the key sexual and digital tensions of our current social moment, where dating apps are ubiquitous but often poorly designed, where feminism is under fire and being remade in exciting ways, and where many of us want to connect but struggle to do so. Using auto-ethnographic insights and socio-material analysis, I examined how the sexual and gendered power relations streaming through Bumble reflect and reproduce the incongruent flow between virtual socialization and in-person interactions.²⁴ As a digital platform Bumble naturally encourages virtual interfacing between users, however, the subliminal meanings encoded in the “HQ” texts about app activity and the “Snooze” function reinforces a neoliberal model of digital subjectivity governed by productivity and responsibility to the exclusion of product liability with respect to any dating challenges encountered, some of which seem bred into the design of the platform itself. This complex web of digital engineering, product discourse, and user experiences that are shaped by structural forces but framed as the product of individual actions exemplifies “algorithmic governance” , a term media scholars use to examine the institutional and/or corporate steering effects of algorithmic-selection apps that increasingly pervade all domains of everyday life.²⁵

The Bumble paradox revealed how the app’s design can undermine opportunities for physical intimacy and reproduce gendered divides between users who seek pleasure and romance. Narratives of female empowerment, in particular, fall flat in this environment that ignores how men will respond to women asking them out while also granting male users the ultimate control over the fate of matches. In addition, Bumble’s feminist label often exacerbated gendered socio-sexual strife on the platform, as reflected in misogynous comments about women acting “like men.” Although it seems bizarre that such things are permitted on an app that promotes dating equity, this design strategy reflects what cultural economists call the “double-sided market”. Referring to markets where the same product (e. g. newspaper) is sold to two types of consumer (e. g. reader and advertiser) at different prices, the principles at work are relationality and opposition.²⁶ To be a successful newspaper press, for instance, a company must tap into *both* consumer groups and exploit the knowledge gained from readers to guide the marketing strategy. With Bumble, the company shows a feminist, empowering public-facing image in corporate advertising and social media but its users encounter a more didactic, paternalistic discourse that encourages individual productivity and pathologizes users who experience challenges while inside the hive. The tension between emancipation and manipulation is what drives the technology itself and although this is a common business strategy, it feels somewhat cruel when it comes to affairs of the heart and loins.

Using Bumble was nothing like my dating exploits of yore and it opened my eyes to the everyday constraints that women experience when seeking to perform autonomous, agential subjectivities amid a sea of masculinities and social structures that are buckling under the

weight of cultural change. Encountering multiple forms of digital vulnerability while eking out pathways to intimacy and sex on the Bumble battlefield was not fun, but it was deeply instructive. Since my sojourn inside the hive in 2017-2018, several changes have been made to the app, including the “Private Detector” feature that detects unwanted dick pics and a new unmatched system that makes it more difficult for a bad actor or harasser to use the unmatched feature in order to avoid having their conversation reported to Bumble’s safety team.²⁷ With the Covid-19 pandemic that began in March of 2020, Bumble has added voice call and video chat functions so users can stay connected, albeit virtually, during this unprecedented time of socially distanced *everything*, including dating.²⁸

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