

BUMBLE: SWIPE RIGHT FOR YOUR PRINCE CHARMING NEW LITERACY PRACTICE

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Abstract

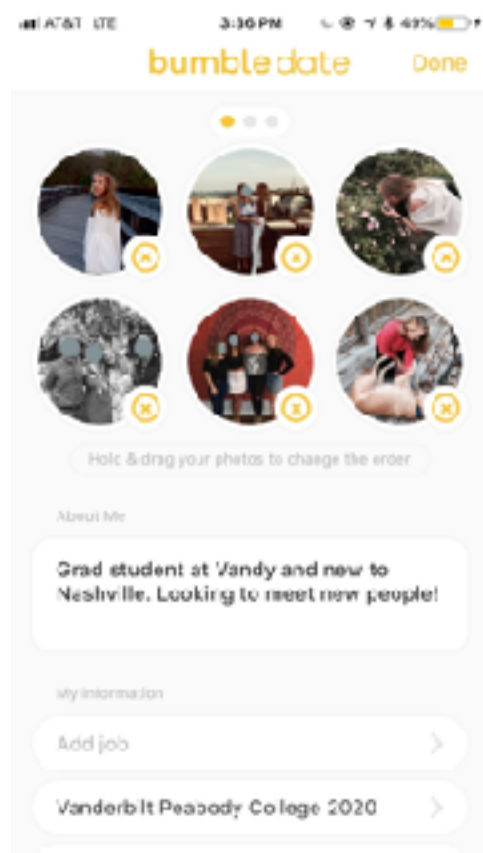
With the prevalence of online dating at an all-time high, the phrases "swipe right" or "swipe left" have become indicative of something much more than their intended purpose. In the following piece, I analyze my own experience with Bumble as a part of a "new literacy practice" with the original intent to present my research as an assignment for class. This experiment quickly morphed into an investigation of my self-perception and of the power and agency, or lack thereof, in the application.

Keywords: Bumble, new literacy practice, self-perception

Introduction

“So how did you meet this boy?” my mother says to me over the phone. I can hear the grin spreading across her face. We’ve had this conversation several times since I have become “an adult”, but this time my answer is different. It is not “oh, we met in my General Chemistry lecture” or “he bought me a drink at this bar in town.” Instead I say, “We met on this dating app called Bumble. Have you heard of it?”

My mother is the dean of students of a small women’s college, so she is familiar with the application, but she seemed surprised at the thought of her own daughter using something like this. She has a relatively negative view of Bumble, and so had I until I was a painfully single 22-year-old living alone in a new and mostly unfamiliar city. I downloaded the app my first week in Nashville somewhat begrudgingly. The hookup culture in my generation is alive and well and I was skeptical of the quality of people I was about to come into contact with.



It has been almost two months since I started using the app and can say that it has been a very hit-or-miss experience. I “matched” with several people but only went on three real-world dates. I will mention a few others who I never agreed to meet but have since seen while at bars with friends on the weekend. For humor and anonymity’s sake I have given the significant dates and interactions code names: the Engineer, the Coach, and the Doctor.

Bumble: The Application

The app itself is incredibly easy to navigate. After downloading the free version from the application store on my iPhone, the app guided me through a step-by-step process to create a profile, much like that of Facebook or Instagram. These profiles are intended to attract potential matches and include pictures of myself, details about education or employment, age, and any interesting fact I would like to provide. I uploaded six pictures and meticulously chose the ones I found to be most flattering. I sent the finished version to my best friend to make sure these were the best options.

Almost instantly, I began to become sort of self-conscious. I was closely analyzing my pictures, staring at the angle of my nose in this picture or my squinty eyes in that picture. My profile included a picture from my study abroad experience in Oxford, a picture with my dog, two with my family, my profile picture from Facebook, and, admittedly, a mirror-selfie. These were the pictures I chose initially, but the app provides the option to change and update your profile at any point in time. I entered my date of birth so that “22” appeared on my profile and wrote “Sweet Briar c/o 2018, Vanderbilt c/o 2020,” in my bio. I did not have any interesting tag lines or jokes, so I left the rest blank. After I finished my profile, I set the gender, age, and distance preferences for my match selection. I selected male, 22-32 years old, and a radius of up to 50 miles. When I had finished my profile and match details, I began swiping.

The matchmaking process, like the profile creation, was very simple: swipe right if he is cute, swipe left if he is not. Within the first 24-hours of having the app I received very few matches because my information was still being placed into the system along with hundreds, if not thousands of other women in the area. The swiping was mindless and shallow. I swiped right for strange bio information a handful of times, but the app is centered on physical attraction, that instant connection based solely on a person's appearance. There is a strange feature on the app that allows a user to reverse a swipe left in the event that she had really intended to swipe right. If I swiped too quickly in the wrong direction on a good-looking guy, I had the option to shake my phone and bring him back into view. Most profiles, like mine, were somewhat plain, including a few pictures and personal details. Others, however, gave new meaning to the phrase “A picture's worth a thousand words.” Red flags on Bumble: men who only wore hats and sunglasses, men pictured with several small children (who looked similar in appearance), men employed at “unemployed,” and men whose pictures appeared to be from high school or early in undergrad.

As specific as the app seems to be, I had to become a sort of investigator in the process and look as closely at every element as possible. Things really began to get interesting and somewhat comical (and sometimes unsettling) in the profile bios. A few of my favorites included: “Here for a good time, not a long time,” “A Freudian slip is when you say one thing when you're thinking of a mother,” “You can catch flies with honey, but you can catch more honeys bein' fly,” “Not gay, but still proud,” and “Adventurous couple looking for a third ;) Don't be shy!” I got a great laugh out of most of them and sent screenshots to group chats with friends from home but sadly, swiped left on all of the above. After a few days, however, I began to accrue some matches that I was willing to meet in the real world.

Matchmaker, Matchmaker

I have half-jokingly called Bumble the feminist version of Tinder but there is some truth in this thought. Bumble requires the woman to message first, giving the man a 24-hour period to respond beginning at the time of the first message. When that time period runs out, the match disappears without explanation, leaving me to wonder why he might not have responded. I like to be original in most areas of life, so I began most of my conversations with a dad joke. Here are a few of my favorite dad jokes and opening lines: “What do you call a pony with a cough?” the answer “a little hoarse” and another “How does a penguin build its house?” “Igloos it together...” *Buh-dum-tiss* (insert cringing emoji). Most, but not all, responded.

Another noteworthy feature of the app is the ability to report a certain user for a variety of reasons. For example, in one very, very short interaction my match responded to my message saying, “I think I downloaded the wrong app. I thought this was the one with little boys.” Sure, it was possible the creep was kidding but I reported him faster than he could swipe right. Despite this one interaction, I have never felt unsafe using the app, particularly because I was given the option to disclose as much or as little information as I wanted.

After about a week or so I had been successfully messaging back and forth with a guy I have decided to call “the Engineer.” He went to work in the city as an engineer. We had talked about everything and nothing and eventually he asked if I wanted to grab coffee. We met for coffee on a Sunday and, fortunately, he looked exactly like his pictures. I felt like I was pulling the weight of the conversation and actually had some trouble understanding what he was saying because he was nervous and spoke quickly. We talked for about an hour about our dogs, our hobbies, our families, etc. I fibbed and said I had a lot of work to get done, we exchanged actual phone numbers and we went our separate ways. I went home and continued to swipe. A few hours later he texted to thank me for taking the time to meet him and hoped we could get drinks later in the week.

Fast forward to Thursday. We went to get drinks and the conversation was really and truly like pulling teeth. I started to talk about the tennis match playing on the flat screens overhead while he continued to buy me drinks and respond with “Oh, really?” or “No way.” After a mostly awkward hour I said I was sure he needed to get some rest before work tomorrow, we hugged, and I went home with low expectations for our future together. Unsurprisingly, I have not heard from him since. That is the strange thing about the app, it hopes for connection but allows for people to walk in and out of each other’s lives with some regularity.

“The Coach” was someone whose story is a little more complicated and a lot more interesting. Our interaction was much the same as it was with the Engineer, but we exchanged numbers through the app relatively quickly. I found out early on that he had just been passing through Nashville on his way to a college basketball tournament. This is when I realized that the app picks up anyone in the area, not just the permanent residents. After a few hours of messaging his location changed to Florida, where he currently and permanently resides. We spoke on the phone several times and I was somewhat disheartened to find out that he only appeared tall in his pictures because his ex-girlfriend was 5’1”. We got along famously, and he expressed that his ex (whom he mentioned one too many times) was not quite his intellectual equal. He eventually confessed that he would be “sort of” in the area that weekend.

He was going to visit his dad about a 3-hour drive from Nashville and said he would love to come into town and grab dinner. In fact, he had already made reservations. I was at once taken aback and impressed. Few people had been so bold and confident. So, he got to his dad’s, rented a car to drive to the city, and called me when he got to my apartment. It was close to 8 o’clock so I could not make out much of his appearance other than the flowers he held in his hands. I hardly looked at him out of sheer nervousness but as we walked into the light of my apartment, I realized that he only looked vaguely like his pictures. I spent most of the night masking my confusion and disappointment. We had a great dinner, interrupted by a phone call from my mother. “Let me speak to this boy.” Coach took the phone with too much confidence and a hint of arrogance and spoke to her with ease. He drew a \$100 bill from his wallet to pay for dinner (a ploy to impress me, not a real indication of his income) and we went back to my apartment.

By the end of the night and after a few mixed drinks, my excellent acting skills began to fade, and Coach could tell that I just was not that into him. His intellect was there but physically he looked nothing like I had imagined. He had warned me that his hair had prematurely greyed, but his pictures depicted some light salt and pepper. This was full on silver. He had admitted to being sort of out of shape compared to his Bumble pictures, but he brought the phrase “dad bod” to life (a term meaning a male physique



that is relatively slim but not lean or toned). I am trying to avoid being cruel, but I felt I had been catfished. The rest of our night flat-lined; he slept on the couch and left early the next morning. When he returned to Louisville, I received a series of somewhat expected and extremely disillusioned text messages. “You’re not as European as you make yourself out to be,” he wrote. I responded in lengthy, novel-like and enraged texts, all while thinking to myself, “What gave him the right to have any expectations? What had I led him to believe?”

We didn’t speak until my phone rang a few days later. I had forgotten that I had changed his ringtone to something more distinct and knew it was Coach before I read the screen. He had called to apologize; I was surprised he could not intuit my eye roll through the phone. It has been almost a month since this strange phone call and somehow the strangeness has not ended. Coach calls me every few days and we talk anywhere from 15 minutes to 2 hours. I have compared our relationship to that of Theodore and Samantha (Joaquin Phoenix and Scarlett Johanson) in the film “Her.” It is so incredibly 21st century. Sure, we had seen each other in person but our friendship has resorted to nothing more than the sounds of each other’s voices. He has a truly objective opinion of my life and my experiences and his crassness and brutal honesty is somewhat refreshing. He has no reason to sugarcoat things or be anything short of authentic.

With Coach, I experienced this authenticity from the get-go. For others, the app allowed for a sort of façade of their true selves. I mentioned previously that it is up to the user to choose the pictures displayed on their profile; the app has no way of detecting if these are from 5 months ago or 5 years ago. I had stopped responding to one guy when I found him on Facebook (thanks to my expert-level stalking) and could not decide if his Bumble and Facebook pictures were even the same person.

Bumble makes it almost too simple to disconnect with or “ghost” someone. Each profile has a “settings” option. When I selected settings, and then, “unmatch,” the app asked me what the problem was, (it provides options like “report user,” “made me uncomfortable,” etc.) I chose “just not interested,” and he was gone. This term, “ghosting,” as defined by Dictionary.com, refers to “the practice of ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly and without explanation withdrawing from all communication.” My roommate has been clued in on this whole experience and is often the second opinion I need to stop responding to a guy or to eventually decide he probably is not worth my time. Before we left to go to Midtown one night, I said to her “Do you ever worry you’ll see one of your matches in public?” Bumble has an odd way of making a room full of strangers appear vaguely familiar.

That same night I found myself staring at a guy from across the bar. He looked at me, I looked away, he looked at me again. “Holy shit, that’s the guy I matched with on

Bumble.” “Which one?” my roommate said, and we both laughed. “Remember that guy I found on Facebook? THAT’S him!” His profile had read “32 years old” but his pictures must have been from undergrad. He wore a ball-cap, cargo shorts, flip flops, and held a Natty Light in his hand (which had appeared to have been a staple in his diet for the last 10 years). He had fully embraced the “dad-bod.” He appeared to be on a date with someone else, so my roommate and I opted to make a swift exit.

The Silver Lining

But it is not all bad. In response to a bio that read, “Just a bee looking for his honey,” I responded, “Honey, I’m home!” We had been messaging back and forth over the course of all of the dates I mentioned above, but he had never asked me out. He had alluded to the fact that we should “hang out sometime” but I finally decided to give him my phone number and waited to see if he would take the bait. We got drinks on a Tuesday and I spent the same weekend with him. We seemed to skip that awkward, uncomfortable, nervousness that I had experienced on every first date I had ever been on.

I read somewhere that you know you have met “the one” when it feels as though you have known each other for years, when you wonder “where have you been all my life?” I am sitting in his apartment now as I write this, and I still could not say what it is that makes him better than all the rest. He lives in town and works as a Physical Therapist. He asked me a few days ago “Do you think we’d have met if not for Bumble?” The odds are slim to none, but the answer is, I am not sure. A few weeks ago, I visited the settings of my own profile and selected “delete profile” at the bottom of the screen. The options include things like “dissatisfied” or “not getting enough matches.” I selected “I’ve found a match.”

Final Thoughts and Connections

William Kist and Kristine Pytash, in their piece “I Love to Flip the Pages,” discuss the concept of “digital natives” vs. “digital immigrants” (Kist & Pytash, 2015). My mother and father would be considered digital immigrants, “older people...[who] aren’t as adept at using new media” (Kist & Pytash, 2015). My mother can hardly navigate a PowerPoint presentation and my father deserted his beloved typewriter only a few years ago. But I would argue that these terms do not necessarily apply to all forms of media. My dad has been using an online dating platform called “Zoosk” that is not unlike

Bumble. The principles are the same and it aims to create lasting connections between people who may not have crossed paths in the real world. Zoosk, like Bumble, even has its own app. He was able to create his own profile, add personal details, and accrue matches with no help from me or any other “digital native” (I only found out he had been using it this past summer).

Though Bumble appears to be somewhat superficial and simplistic in form, it actually has more to do with self-discovery and identity – who I decide to project into the dating world. Hull and Greeno, in their article “Identity and Agency in Nonschool and School Worlds,” mention the concept of “contexts of identity.” “This concept calls for an understanding of the relationships of participation between an individual and other people in communities of practice and with concepts, methods, and information of subject-matter domains” (Hull & Greeno, 2006). Bumble is one example of this sort of “community of practice” or “figured world.” These contexts “provide opportunities for participants to begin to enact new identities, to take on and to adapt sanctioned ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, and believing” (Hull & Greeno, 2006). With each match, I was given a blank slate. It was an opportunity to redefine myself for better or for worse. I struggle with the thought that on my wedding day I’ll be filmed saying, “The Doctor and I met on a dating app.” We will not have a romantic story about dancing under the stars or sipping wine across from the Seine, but these online dating practices are becoming more normalized with each passing day. Maybe those sappy love stories are overrated, anyway.

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