

MICROPOLITICS OF DIGITAL INTIMACY: NON-ELECTORAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AMONG BUMBLE USERS IN PLATFORM SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

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Existing political communication studies have predominantly focused on electoral processes and formal political institutions, leaving the political dimensions of digital intimate relationships underexplored. In the context of digital intimate relationships, this research examines user interactions on the dating app Bumble as a platform for non-electoral politics. It argues that power operates through everyday communicative practices facilitated by digital platforms, extending political communication analysis beyond electoral-centered approaches. Rather than being purely private spaces detached from power dynamics, digital intimate relationships have become social arenas where visibility, recognition, and vulnerability are continuously negotiated. Using an interpretive qualitative approach, this study combines interface walkthroughs, platform policy document analysis, and in-depth interviews with six active Bumble users in urban settings. Guided by the analytical frameworks of platform governance and politics-as-practice, the study examines intimate digital relationships as social practices shaped by both platform design and users' subjective experiences. The findings show that mechanisms such as swiping, algorithmic matching, time-limited conversations, and the "women make the first move" feature function not only as technical tools but also as forms of relational governance that produce unequal patterns of visibility, recognition, and vulnerability. Practices such as self-presentation, self-disclosure, and ghosting illustrate how users negotiate identity, risk, and emotion within power structures embedded in platform architectures and interactional norms. The findings suggest that power in digital intimate relationships operates through micropolitical processes that regulate responsiveness, attention, and behavioral norms rather than through overt forms of domination. By integrating platform governance and politics-as-practice perspectives, this study extends political communication scholarship by demonstrating that everyday communicative practices within digital intimacy constitute an important site of political analysis.

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1. Introduction

Political communication studies in Indonesia have so far focused primarily on electoral events—campaigns, voter persuasion, party strategies, and the role of the media in elections. This focus is understandable because elections are indeed the main arena for the articulation

of formal political interests. However, an overly centralized reading of electoral moments risks ignoring the practices of power that operate in everyday life, especially when public communication is increasingly mediated by digital platforms and takes place in seemingly personal spaces. Today, social media no longer functions merely as an additional medium for public communication but has become the main arena for social practices that shape the way individuals interact and communicate politically (Heningtyas & Muhammad Thoyib Amali, 2024). In fact, a number of contemporary political communication studies have begun to highlight that the digital realm has now become a new social arena that expands political practices beyond the classic electoral domain, including in the context of contemporary Indonesian political communication (Hidayat et al., 2025).

Several studies on civic participation and engagement show that politics is not solely manifested in formal actions tied to state institutions, elections, or public policy. Politics also functions as a daily practice that regulates access, recognition, and the distribution of attention in social life, including in spaces of interaction that on the surface appear to be "private" (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). From this perspective, politics does not always appear as open conflict or ideological debate but rather is subtly present through patterns of relationships, ways of communicating, and mechanisms of social assessment that shape who is considered worthy of being heard, recognized, or even excluded.

Politics, however, frequently occurs not via explicit ideological speech but by more sophisticated interpersonal dynamics, communication styles, and systems of social assessment that decide who is thought worthy of consideration and voice. In certain contexts, as demonstrated by studies of resentment in the Hungarian political landscape, emotions can be strategically mobilized by political actors to build support and simultaneously eliminate opponents through identity tactics and scapegoating (Kiss, 2021). This example indicates that politics is frequently handled via emotions and connections rather than just through logical arguments or formal institutions.

In this kind of horizon, politics works subtly through norms, habits, and the ways individuals assess, choose, and end relationships, even when these actions are never intended as "political practices" by those who carry them out. Precisely because they take place in everyday life and are packaged as personal interactions, these relationships become a highly effective space for the exercise of power, as it is accepted as something normal and natural and is rarely questioned critically.

The development of the internet and social media has further strengthened the position of digital space as a social infrastructure that mediates community relations, values, and conflicts. APJII data shows that internet penetration in Indonesia in 2024 reached 79.5% with more than 221 million users, while Data Reportal recorded a high number of social media user identities in early 2025 (*Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association 2024, 2025*). In this context, digital space can no longer be positioned merely as an additional medium of communication but has become the main arena for contemporary social practices. Studies of platforms show that this change is not only about a shift in medium but also touches on how relationships, identities, and affections are formed and then managed through the process of datafication and the mechanisms of the platform itself (van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, 2018).

The platform governance perspective places interface design, algorithms, content moderation, and community policies as forms of private regulation that operate without direct state legal mechanisms but are effective in directing user behavior (Helberger et al.,

2018). In this context, power does not always appear as explicit prohibitions but is embedded in seemingly natural and intuitive usage flows so that it is often not recognized as a form of social regulation.

As the digital space transforms and blurs the boundaries between public and private, online dating apps are growing in popularity as digital meeting places, especially among young urbanites. The emergence of online dating apps (ODAs) signals a major shift in how social relationships are formed and negotiated. On the one hand, these platforms offer vast opportunities for connection; on the other hand, they also expose users, especially teenagers, to increased risks of victimization, including online harassment and sexual exploitation (Kaakinen et al., 2021). Therefore, the presence of dating apps indicates a shift in how people seek partners as well as a broader shift in how social relationships are formed in the digital ecosystem.

Online dating is often seen as a place to build romantic relationships privately, as if it were separate from broader socio-political dynamics. However, a number of studies show that interactions within it are never completely "outside" the socio-political realm, because platforms help determine the rules of the game through matching algorithms, temporal design, and community policies that regulate visibility, preferences, and user behavior (Gillespie, 2018; Hobbs et al., 2017). In contexts such as India, for example, users of geosocial networking apps face unique challenges in balancing visibility and privacy amid social stigma attached to certain identities (Pinch et al., 2022).

These supposedly personal and intimate connections are really defined by a set of technical logic that determines who may meet each other, how they are introduced, and the bounds within which interactions can take place. This digital meeting space becomes an arena where personal choices are always framed within a broader structure, so that romantic relationships are never completely free from the influence of platform design and regulation.

Bumble was chosen as a case study in this research because it promotes a "women make the first move" design, which is often promoted as a symbol of women's empowerment in digital relationships. Through this feature, Bumble openly separates itself from many other dating apps by putting women in a position of power to begin conversations. At the narrative level, this design looks to provide a reversal of typical gender relations patterns, which have historically put males as the major players in establishing relationships.

However, a lot of critical studies remind us that this form of design is never totally free from the dimension of control. Conversation time limits, for example, encourage the formation of temporal discipline and certain affective work, which in practice often places a greater emotional burden on female users (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Duffy & Sawey, 2022; Thompson, 2025). In this context, the initial control given to women does not necessarily eliminate relational pressure but rather shifts some of that burden to a more subtle realm.

This is where the ambiguity of empowerment arises: on the one hand, women gain space to set the initial rhythm of the relationship; on the other hand, they also face new expectations to actively manage interactions within the temporal boundaries set by the platform. This seemingly progressive design shows how empowerment and control can coexist in the architecture of digital platforms. Thus, the "women make the first move" feature not only shapes technical communication patterns but also reproduces and reshapes gender relations through mechanisms that work subtly in users' everyday experiences.

Bumble, however, is not only a medium for love encounters but also a venue where power connections, gender norms, and control mechanisms function via the design of

features and the rhythm of interactions. Digital intimate relationships may no longer be considered solely as an issue of feelings and individual decisions but rather as social practices produced by the convergence of technology, norms, and the subjective experiences of users.

In the framework of Indonesian political communication studies, the spread of political meaning into the sphere of personal digital interactions has received comparatively little serious study. Most studies still concentrate their study on areas that are openly identified as "political," such as elections, campaigns, public policy, or discourse wars in mainstream social media. However, in platform society, power no longer works only through formal institutions and visible ideological narratives but also through the regulation of everyday social relations that take place in spaces that appear personal and private.

By putting online dating apps as the site of research, this study seeks to change this perspective: from politics as an unusual occurrence to politics as a practice that infiltrates the regular rhythm of digital interactions. This shift in perspective is important not only to broaden the object of study in political communication but also to show how affective relationships, personal choices, and intimate interactions can become a medium in which power relations are negotiated subtly but repeatedly.

Through this method, this paper not only adds to the debate on digital political communication but also offers up a place for discussion across political studies, platform studies, and affect studies, which have frequently run parallel without any substantial interaction.

Although a number of studies have linked dating apps to broader power relations—for example, in relation to user trust in algorithms, partner preferences, and emotional experiences (Chen & Mou, 2025),—political communication studies still rarely interpret digital intimate relationships as a non-electoral political arena. This is where the gap in this research resides. This study is founded on the notion that politics as practice may be present in daily behaviors that govern notice, attention, and relational boundaries.

In the dating app world, swiping mechanisms, visibility rankings, and algorithmic uncertainty decide who is viewed and who is excluded, while behaviors such as ghosting might operate as informal symbolic punishments that have emotional implications (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to examine how user communication on the Bumble app can be read as a non-electoral political communication practice through three interrelated focuses, namely: how platform design works as relationship governance, how users negotiate identity and gender politics through self-presentation and disclosure, and how interaction discipline is formed through temporality, symbolic sanctions, and trust in algorithms.

Despite growing scholarship on dating applications, most studies focus on algorithmic trust, partner selection, emotional experiences, self-presentation, and platform governance. These studies generally remain within the domains of digital sociology, interpersonal communication, and media studies.

Within political communication scholarship, digital intimate relationships are rarely examined as sites of non-electoral political communication. Most studies continue to focus on elections, campaigns, public policy, or political discourse on social media. Consequently, the political dimensions of everyday digital intimacy remain underexplored, particularly in the Indonesian context.

Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to how platform features, interactional norms, and algorithmic mechanisms shape visibility, recognition, relational boundaries, and

forms of power within intimate digital interactions. This study offers a novel contribution by conceptualizing Bumble not merely as a dating platform but as a micropolitical arena where power operates through everyday communicative practices.

Unlike previous studies that primarily analyze dating applications from sociological, psychological, or technological perspectives, this research integrates political communication, platform governance, and politics-as-practice perspectives. It examines how platform design functions as relationship governance, how users negotiate identity and gender politics through self-presentation and disclosure, and how interactional discipline emerges through temporality, symbolic sanctions, and trust in algorithms.

By positioning digital intimate relationships as sites of non-electoral political communication, this study expands the analytical boundaries of political communication research beyond formal political institutions and electoral processes. This study aims to examine how user communication on the Bumble application operates as a form of non-electoral political communication. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Analyze how platform governance structures relational interactions on Bumble.
2. Examine how users negotiate identity, gender, and recognition through digital communication practices.
3. Explore how algorithmic power and platform norms shape intimacy, interaction, and power relations within digital relationships.

2. Method

This research employs an interpretative qualitative technique to explore the communication behaviors of Bumble users as a social experience impacted by the design and regulation of digital platforms. The study involved 6 active Bumble users 3 women and 3 men, aged between 20 and 35 years, residing in urban areas. Informants were recruited through purposive sampling, using social media networks and personal referrals, and were selected based on their experience using Bumble's key features, including swiping, matching, messaging, and profile management, as well as their willingness to reflect on their communication and relationship experiences. The study participants were comprised of active Bumble users dwelling in metropolitan locations. Informants were picked purposively based on particular characteristics, notably having experience utilizing the key functions of the application—including swiping, matching, talking, and profile management—as well as a desire to reflect on their communication and relationship experiences. The main data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews designed to explore users' subjective experiences, particularly regarding how they understand platform rules, devise strategies for building intimacy, and manage risk, uncertainty, and emotional exhaustion in digital relationships. This interview data was then extended via interface walkthroughs and examination of Bumble's community policy papers and security features so that user experiences could be clearly connected to the platform's design and technological logic. In the style of qualitative research, data analysis was done using a theme approach, which is an orderly way of organizing, labeling, and analyzing data. This stage is vital for integrating the emergent topics with the political framework as a practice and platform governance.

Data analysis followed a thematic coding process. Interview transcripts were first read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated from meaningful segments of text related to users' experiences of platform use, identity

negotiation, intimacy, visibility, and power relations. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, which were subsequently refined into themes through an iterative process of comparison and interpretation. The resulting themes were analyzed using the theoretical lenses of platform governance and politics-as-practice to understand how power operates within digitally mediated intimate relationships. This stage was essential for connecting emergent themes with broader discussions of platform governance and political communication as practice. The incorporation of big data concerns in this research adds a layer of complexity, given that data not only works as a scientific tool but also as a contentious object of study, which also affects political involvement and governance dynamics (Mattoni, A., & Pavan, 2018).

Thematic exploration is enhanced by using analytical frameworks, such as framework analysis, which aid in identifying and interpreting significant trends across instances. This, in turn, facilitates a more thorough comprehension of the political landscape under examination (Goldsmith, 2021). Overall, this analytical approach adds to a sophisticated understanding of qualitative data in the context of platform politics and governance practices. The interviews found that user experiences were often inconsistent and fraught with emotional uncertainty. A lot of informants showed confusion in expressing their motivations for continuing or discontinuing relationships, particularly when confronted with discussion time constraints and algorithmic ambiguity. These findings suggest that digital interactions are not solely influenced by intellectual factors, but also by intellectual factors, intuition, emotional fatigue, and distress. The validity of the results was enhanced by the use of source triangulation, which included interviews, interface analysis, and policy documents, as well as the anonymization of informants and the elimination of sensitive identifying information, thereby maintaining ethical concerns. Through a mix of these data-gathering and analytic methodologies, this project intends not only to map communication patterns but also to analyze the political meanings at work in intimate digital interactions.

3. Results and Discussion

Findings regarding user communication on Bumble show that interactions never take place in a neutral, value-free space but are always framed within the technical architecture of the application, which actively shapes the possibilities and limits of relationships. Swiping mechanisms, algorithmic matching, and conversation time limits do not function merely as technical devices but operate as a set of implicit rules that guide how users view, evaluate, select, and maintain or end relationships. In this context, Bumble's features cannot be understood merely as communication tools but as structures that mediate and shape users' relational experiences (Anggraini et al., 2024; Bivens & Hoque, 2018).

The practice of swiping on dating apps, for example, does not stop at the mechanical selection of "like" or "dislike." It has evolved into a form of social assessment that takes place very quickly, as the user's identity is condensed into photos, biographical snippets, and signals of lifestyle that are read in a matter of seconds. A number of informants described this experience as "judging while being judged": they felt they were choosing, but at the same time realized that they were also in the same position of being selected. This perception was reflected in participants' accounts of how they evaluated potential matches. For instance, P6 (MK, Male) explained that initial attraction was strongly influenced by visual impressions and profile descriptions, stating, *"By photo doang physically ya pasti visual physically interesting itu juga description yang menarik"* (P6). To improve his chances of interaction, he deliberately

designed his profile to stimulate conversation, explaining that *"Jadi dari foto itu udah gue susun kayak gitu terus gue udah kasih keterangan yang ada yang bilang gue kayak Jack Sparrow, jadi buat ngobrol"* (P6). These accounts illustrate how visibility and self-presentation become strategic resources within Bumble's matching environment. In such situations, the initiation of relationships shifts from conversation to visibility calculations—who appears and who sinks—reinforced by algorithm-based matching that is not entirely transparent (David & Cambre, 2016; LeFebvre, 2018; Thomas et al., 2024). As a result, users often experience a paradox: the choices feel abundant, but the direction of the relationship remains limited by the design of the application, the rhythm of match feedback, and uncertainty about how the system works (Pronk & Denissen, 2020; Rochat et al., 2019; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018).

Time limits on conversations increasingly reflect technical designs that shape the rhythm and intensity of relationships. In this situation, responding late is not just a technical error; it is an error in interpersonal relationships that has emotional and symbolic implications. Bumble's design, which positions women as the ones who must initiate conversations, aims to challenge traditional gender dynamics but also indirectly reinforces certain power configurations by optimizing the user experience primarily for cisgender heterosexual women while reproducing expectations of aggressive masculinity in male users (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Young & Roberts, 2023). This kind of governance shows that platform design is never socially neutral but always produces certain forms of relationships that influence the quality of relationships formed through the application (Zytka, 2018).

Within the framework of platform governance, power is not always present as explicit prohibitions or easily recognizable written rules but rather embedded in seemingly natural and intuitive usage flows (Gillespie, 2018; Helberger et al., 2018). When users feel comfortable using certain features, that is precisely when power works most effectively: directing without forcing, limiting without prohibiting, and shaping preferences without direct instruction. Some informants noticed changes in profile visibility along with the intensity of use or profile content updates, although the exact mechanism was never fully understood. This uncertainty actually strengthens users' dependence on platform logic and shows how algorithmic power works as soft power (Beer, 2017; Bucher, 2018), namely power that is not present through direct coercion but rather through the framing of possibilities, preferences, and the orientation of user actions.

In a situation where the mechanisms of ranking, matching, and visibility are never fully transparent, users find themselves in an asymmetrical relationship with the system that regulates them. They do not know exactly how the algorithm works but continue to adjust their behavior as if they understand the logic: updating their profiles, changing photos, managing activity times, and even modifying the way they communicate in order to remain "readable" by the system. This is where algorithmic power does not rule through explicit instructions but rather through implicit expectations that slowly shape users' habits and actions.

Algorithmic power is seen as a component of the dynamics of interactions that are considered normal rather than as external pressure. Users' desire to stay connected and acknowledged in the digital world is the source of this dependence rather than coercion. Therefore, algorithms influence how users identify themselves, evaluate their value, and position themselves within the network of connections mediated by the platform in addition to controlling the distribution of attention and relational opportunities. This problem is also

reflected in the discussion of shadow banning, when users negotiate moderation strategies that are not quite clear, regulating themselves according to imagined standards rather than explicit guidelines (Kaakinen et al., 2021). The role of consumers in this governance structure is not entirely passive. To increase their chances of connecting, they employ a variety of self-presentation techniques, including the photos they choose, the biographies they write, and the amount of time they spend using the app. These methods show how visibility has evolved into a process of social selection as well as a contested symbolic resource. According to (Bucher, 2018) and (Cotter, 2019), these methods show how visibility has evolved into a contentious symbolic resource and a social selection process where users not only compete based on their own preferences but also adjust to the algorithmic logic of visibility. However, since users attempt to express identities that are seen as "safe" and "acceptable," such as professional identities, metropolitan lifestyles, or universally accepted hobbies, this approach also reflects normative pressure. Therefore, power functions in two ways: via the technical design of the platform and through the users' own replication of norms (Bucher, 2018).

In the context of digital interactions, self-presentation encompasses not only how an individual wants to be seen by others but also how they position themselves—consciously or instinctively—in a relational landscape that is full of symbolic meaning. Identity does not exist in settings like dating apps as something neutral or innate, but rather as the result of a number of communication decisions: which photos to choose, what stories to create, and which aspects of oneself to highlight or conceal. Participants actively managed their self-presentation according to their relational goals. P5 (JEY, Female) explained that she preferred beginning conversations with light and non-threatening topics rather than immediately discussing romantic expectations, stating, "*Kadang gue nanya, lo di Bumble udah berapa lama? Tapi gue gak nanya, lo nyari apa gitu? Enggak*" (P5). However, once a degree of comfort had been established, she became more direct about her intentions: "*Kalau udah ngobrol yang menurut gue udah ini, biasanya gue straight forward kayak, lo open buat meet up gak?*" (P5). This finding suggests that identity and relational intentions are negotiated progressively through communication rather than disclosed immediately. In this procedure, people assert a certain social status in front of other users in addition to sharing personal information.

Users are negotiating their place in the symbolic hierarchy of digital interactions by displaying certain identities, such as those of young professionals, active lifestyle enthusiasts, or socially attractive people. These arguments are often made by minor but significant presence techniques, verbal decisions, and visual cues rather than direct expression. As a result, dating apps not only mediate romantic relationships but also turn into a setting where social recognition, prestige, and worth are often created and contested. Relationships in this setting are formed not only on the basis of personal attraction but also on the basis of symbolic congruence between one's self-representation and the increasing demands of society. Because identity, power, and recognition are intertwined in encounters that seem private but are really micropolitical, the practice of self-presentation cannot be seen as only an individual expression but rather as a component of a larger social dynamic.

Additionally, the results show that self-disclosure is often gradual and cautious rather than complete and spontaneous. Because they consider the risks of rejection, harassment, and data exploitation, informants delay disclosing personal information such as location, occupation, or family details. The pace of self-disclosure varied considerably among participants. P1 (FTH, Female) reported feeling more comfortable sharing personal experiences in casual relationships than in serious ones, explaining, "*Aku malah lebih*

gampang tuh sama yang casual aja gitu daripada yang serius. Soalnya kalau yang casual aku bisa kayak ceritain hal lucu yang pernah aku alami” (P1). By contrast, P3 (IZ, Female) explained that she required approximately three to four months and several face-to-face meetings before feeling comfortable revealing more personal information. Concerns about trust and the possibility of being ghosted contributed to her cautious approach. Similarly, P4 (DTA, Male) noted that meaningful self-disclosure usually emerged only after at least two in-person meetings, emphasizing the importance of direct interaction in building trust. These contrasting experiences demonstrate that self-disclosure is shaped by individual perceptions of risk, trust, and relationship expectations. A recurring pattern is the tension between the need to protect one's own safety and the desire to establish connection. According to (Bivens & Hoque, 2018) and (Gillespie, 2018), the practice of withholding or revealing information can be understood as a strategy for managing recognition and social evaluation in digital environments.

In this setting, safety measures are no longer seen as a collection of technological processes but rather as reflective practices that are continually negotiated by people in their everyday digital contacts. Users depend on intuition, experience, and situational interpretation of encounters to choose whether to continue, restrict, or discontinue a connection. Intimate connections mediated by platforms may be regarded not just as interpersonal communication practices but also as part of a socio-political infrastructure that runs invisibly inside digital society. Infrastructure here is not restricted to technological gadgets but also refers to a relational system that governs the circulation of compassion, attention, and social acknowledgment. Dating apps such as Bumble, therefore, not only bring people together but also form patterns of social connectivity that decide who receives exposure, who is excluded, and what sorts of relationships are regarded as acceptable and sustainable. In this framework, digital intimate connections operate similarly to fragmented micro public spaces, where social values, norms, and expectations are formed and replicated by users' everyday actions. Choices that look personal—such as liking, ignoring, answering immediately, or postponing a response—actually contribute to the construction of a larger symbolic order. This order is not regulated by state legislation or formal political norms but by technical design and platform logic that methodically guides the flow of contact.

By understanding intimate digital interactions as socio-political infrastructure, this essay positions personal communication in a more important position in the study of political communication. Politics is no longer exclusively present in the arena of formal representation but also in the management of emotive interactions that occur regularly in daily life. This is when control operates not via direct coercion, but by the normalization of specific interpersonal patterns that are increasingly accepted as the "natural way" of creating intimacy. In addition, the breadth of possible emotive experiences of users is determined by this relational architecture. The way a person views herself, assesses others, and recognizes relationship chances cannot be isolated from how the platform manages visibility, preferences, and the rhythm of engagement. Therefore, digital intimacy is the outcome of structural configurations that frame the subjective experiences of users in addition to personal choices. This approach also transforms the idea of power in the digital context from what was initially viewed as the control of one actor over another to the management of the conditions of possibility of the connection itself. Power no longer belongs exclusively with those who talk or command but with those who define how connections may take place. It is at this time that digital intimate connections emerge as a micropolitical field that functions

via a modest social infrastructure, but one that is extremely determinative of the direction and quality of users' relational life.

Although the platform organizes digital connections via a strong set of technical logics, users are not wholly passive. They actively manage their available space through numerous adaptive practices: altering profiles, adjusting use cycles, deciding when to be present and when to retreat, and creating relational intuitions based on experience. Evidence of user agency can be observed in the ways participants adapted their profiles and communication styles. For example, P6 (MK, Male) described intentionally using humor and distinctive profile descriptions to attract attention and facilitate interaction. This strategy reflects how users actively negotiate platform constraints while attempting to maximize their visibility and relational opportunities. These actions indicate that user agency is present, even if it always acts within the structural limits imposed by the platform.

The agency, in any event, is vague because it functions in a situation of reliance that is not completely recognized. On the one hand, users believe they have control over their relationship choices; on the other hand, those options have been shaped by the architecture of the system that governs visibility, encounter possibilities, and interaction flows. In this arrangement, autonomy is never truly free but is constantly negotiated in an unequal relationship with an algorithmic system that works as a filter of relational reality. This dichotomy between autonomy and reliance is typical of user experiences in platform societies. Users do not merely succumb to the system but also actively “work for” the system by modifying their behavior in order to stay visible and relevant inside the logic of the platform. In this process, users indirectly recreate the governance of the ties that link them. At this stage, users might be seen not just as subjects of relationships but also as co-governors of digital relationships: agents who are both governed and active in regulating. Through daily communication habits, users help to develop the norms, rhythms, and expectations that collectively create the face of digital interactions. In other words, the regulation of intimate relationships is not exclusively established by platforms as technical institutions but also by the accumulation of users' micropractices that are repeated and normalized.

This paradigm allows for a more balanced understanding of power relations within platform society: not as one-way dominance, but as a relational configuration that is always being contested. However, this mechanism is frequently neglected in critical reflection because it functions via activities that seem intimate and mundane. This is when it becomes vital to view digital personal contact not just as a private affair, but as a political place where agency, reliance, and power are inextricably entwined. In the fluid environment of digital connections, ghosting has arisen as an informal social regulatory technique that enables people to remove themselves from difficult circumstances without open confrontation (Baldor, 2022). This approach has emerged with the nature of digital communication, which permits both presence and absence. For many informants, ghosting is not only regarded as unpleasant conduct but also as a method for keeping distance when they feel uncomfortable or no longer have the emotional ability to continue the conversation. Participants frequently associated ghosting with uncertainty and emotional self-protection. P3 (IZ, Female) acknowledged that concerns about being ghosted influenced her willingness to deepen communication and delayed her decision to disclose personal information. In contrast, P4 (DTA, Male) appeared less concerned about emotional involvement and reported becoming comfortable more quickly once face-to-face interaction had occurred. These differences suggest that ghosting is experienced and interpreted differently across users, yet it

consistently functions as a mechanism through which vulnerability and relational risk are managed. In this scenario, ghosting works as a symbolic penalty that does not need official authority but has a substantial emotional effect (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020).

It illustrates that power in digital connections does not necessarily need a formal position but may be wielded via control over presence and connectedness. Silence, in digital connections, is not only the lack of communication but also becomes a type of communication itself—a message without words that is rich in meaning.

Finally, this research discovered conflict between users' faith in algorithms and their feeling of relationship weariness. On the one hand, users lay their hopes in matching algorithms to locate compatible companions; on the other hand, they confront recurrent chats, expectations to maintain their performance, and uncertainty about the durability of partnerships. Participants also differed in the speed with which they developed relational trust. While P5 (JEY, Female) reported becoming comfortable within a few days of intensive communication, P3 (IZ, Female) preferred prolonged interaction before investing emotionally in a relationship. These contrasting experiences highlight the emotional labor involved in navigating platform-mediated intimacy, where users continuously balance hope, uncertainty, trust, and self-protection. This circumstance highlights how the attention economy and datafication promote intensive but shallow interactions, which eventually induce emotional tiredness and departure from digital connections (Chen & Mou, 2025; Couldry, N., & Mejias, 2019; Pronk & Denissen, 2020).

In a larger perspective, emotional digital connections developed via platforms such as Bumble cannot be divorced from the political economy of digital media, which sees attention and love as strategic commodities. Interactions that look personal and emotional really occur inside a system that fosters unending connectedness while at the same time allows flimsy and readily replaceable relationships. Users are confronted with a paradox: the more intense the connectedness supplied, the higher the possibility for relationship weariness experienced. This circumstance illustrates that the user's emotive experience is not only an individual psychological consequence but also the outcome of a platform design that actively supports the circulation of quick, repeated, and fragmented interactions. Relationships are no longer regarded as a lengthy and contemplative process but as a succession of events that may be adjusted, expedited, and—if considered unproductive—abandoned. In this circumstance, emotional weariness is an intrinsic feature of the platform's social connection structure, not just a side effect. Furthermore, this state has substantial political implications: when personal relationships are increasingly framed within the logic of efficiency and performativity, values such as patience, relationship sustainability, and emotional commitment have the potential to be decreased. Relationships become an arena where people are continually obliged to act, respond, and adapt, not just to establish intimacy, but also to stay relevant in a system of visibility controlled by platforms.

Thus, micropolitics in digital intimate relationships work not just at the level of user interaction but also at a higher structural level, specifically in the way technology defines the possibilities of emotion, attachment, and weariness as part of a normative social experience. Overall, these findings confirm that user communication on Bumble cannot be understood solely as a private relationship between two individuals but rather as a micropolitical arena where visibility, recognition, vulnerability, and boundaries of appropriateness are negotiated through platform design, interaction norms, and everyday communication practices. Politics, in this setting, does not show as a big ideological confrontation but functions via the

management of emotive, symbolic, and technical links that repeatedly and multilayeredly construct digital personal encounters.

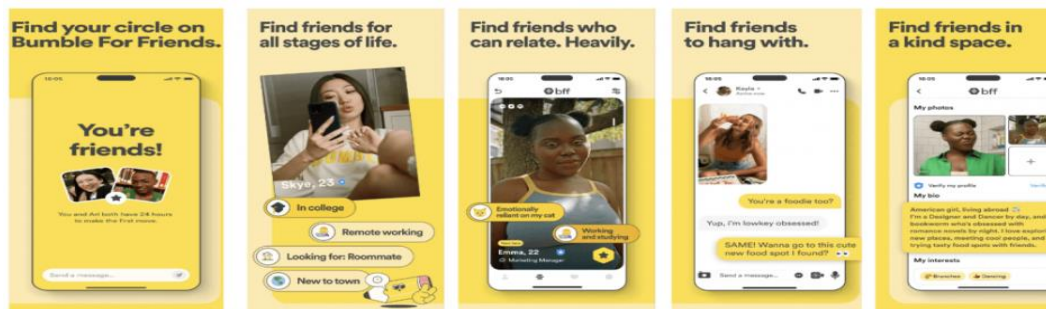


Figure 1

Bumble is a dating application that allows users to meet new people, chat, and engage in romantic dating or friendship

This research reveals that user interactions on the Bumble app cannot be viewed purely as private personal connections. Behind apparently basic practices—such as swiping, matching, or postponing responses—there is a set of processes that discreetly manage connections, dictating who appears and who is ignored, and how intimacy may be built or dissolved. In this context, the architecture of the platform and its algorithmic logic not only mediate interactions but also determine the power dynamics that regulate users' emotive experiences in their everyday digital connections. This discovery bolsters the assertion that digital intimate relationships ought to be regarded as a micropolitical domain, wherein power manifests not through overt domination or explicit prohibitions, but through the regulation of interaction patterns, allocation of attention, and the normalization of specific behaviors. Politics, therefore, is not always present in slogans, campaigns, or open conflicts as commonly understood in conventional political discourse, but works through the ways users learn to present themselves, judge others, and manage risks and expectations in a digital space that appears personal but is laden with structure.

Theoretically, this study increases the purview of political communication studies by presenting daily communication behaviors in dating apps as a viable and important object of investigation. This method emphasizes that politics does not simply function in institutional or electoral arenas but also infiltrates relational practices that occur in daily life via exchanges that appear minor but have symbolic and emotional significance. Thus, this research increases our knowledge of how power operates in platform societies via methods that are not always visible. In practical terms, the findings of this study provide an opportunity for critical reflection on the ways digital platforms shape intimate relationships and how users may become more aware of the factors that affect their communication experiences. This kind of information is really important for understanding how digital interactions work and for developing a more mindful attitude toward the logic of platforms that control exposure, recognition, and relationship restrictions. Moving forward, similar studies can be developed through cross-platform comparisons, cross-cultural contexts, or quantitative approaches to map broader patterns, thereby enriching the dialogue between political communication studies, platform studies, and research on digital intimate relationships. Furthermore, these results show that political communication studies in the digital era are no longer appropriate if they depend exclusively on discourse analysis,

institutions, or formal political players. The mechanics of human connections enabled by platforms exemplify the intricate, diffuse, and enduring characteristics of power in quotidian existence. Awareness of these processes is vital not only for the development of theory but also for the digital literacy of society so that users do not only become subjects in a connection but also agents who are reflective of the structures that frame these interactions. Thus, this study not only provides a critical analysis of the practice of intimate digital communication but also urges us to update the way we view politics in current platform society. The results of this research also have methodological implications for political communication studies and platform studies in general. To read personal communication habits as a micropolitical arena, researchers require a plan that takes into account emotional experiences, unclear relationships, and symbolic meanings that can't always be measured with numbers alone. The interpretative qualitative technique utilized in this research reveals its importance in identifying characteristics of power that function discreetly and silently and are frequently wrapped in narratives of freedom and individual choice

4. Conclusion

This research illustrates that communication practices on Bumble transcend private interpersonal exchanges, functioning as a form of non-electoral political communication within digitally mediated intimate relationships. The study's findings indicate that platform features like swiping, algorithmic matching, time-limited chats, and the "women make the first move" mechanism serve not just as technical tools but as relational governance forms that influence visibility, recognition, vulnerability, and participation. Users are constantly navigating identity, trust, self-disclosure, and emotional risk in a communicative setting shaped by platform design and algorithmic logic. Here, power does not manifest through overt domination or formal political authority but through subtle processes that regulate attention, responsiveness, and the conditions necessary for relationships to form. These findings affirm that digital intimacy represents a micropolitical space where everyday communication practices are intertwined with broader governance and power dynamics.

Theoretically, this research enriches political communication scholarship by broadening its analytical scope beyond elections, institutions, and formal political discourse to include the ordinary communicative practices of daily digital life. By integrating the perspectives of platform governance and politics-as-practice, the study emphasizes how power is embedded in the architecture of digital platforms and perpetuated through users' routine interactions. Instead of viewing intimate digital relationships as solely personal experiences, this research frames them as socially and politically significant spaces where norms, recognition, and relational boundaries are continuously negotiated. In doing so, the study provides a broader understanding of how power operates in platform society and highlights the importance of examining digital intimacy as an emerging site of political communication in contemporary networked life.

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