

# JURNAL KAJIAN MEDIA

e-ISSN: 2579-9436, URL: <http://ejournal.unitomo.ac.id/index.php/ilkom/index>

Vol 5 No 2	2021	Halaman 76 - 82
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## The stage of online dating relationships in the pandemic era: case study of bumble apps user

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*Received: 02-10-2021; Revised: 26-11-2021;  
Acceptance: 05-12-2021; Published: 31-12-2021*

**Abstract** - In the pandemic era, where physical contact is limited, online dating apps become alternatives for meeting people to form a romantic relationship. One of the newest online dating apps is Bumble, known for its uniqueness where only women can initiate contact. This qualitative research would like to know the stage of online dating relationships using the six stages in DeVito's relationship model, using the constructivist paradigm and case study as a method. The research data is collected through interviews and observation. The study found that the women always initiate the contact stage due to the characteristic of the apps. The involvement would happen in other mediums such as messaging apps. It is hard to reach the stage of intimacy since the pandemic limits their chance to meet in person. And as the intimacy level is hard to achieve, when there is deterioration, the participant chooses to exit the relationship rather than repair it first.

**Keywords:** Online Dating; Bumble; Pandemic; Relationship Stages.

### INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is one of the health problems that will attract public attention in 2020. The topic has also been in the media spotlight because it is seen as a potentially dangerous situation (Susilo and Putranto 2021). The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has become a "major disaster" for Indonesia (Soekiman et al., 2021; De Leon et al., 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way humans interact with one another, including the way they meet new people and build romantic relationships. Humans have to adapt and find new ways to interact with other people. The social distancing policy has limited face-to-face interactions. Supported by the ever-evolving telecommunication technology, most activities are carried out online.

People around the world are facing social distancing by spending more time online. The use of several social media such as Facebook and Instagram increased by more than 40% during the period of February and March 2020, messaging applications such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram which rose 70% in the same period, as well as the

increasing number of viewers on live broadcast applications (Nabity-Grover, Cheung, & Thatcher, 2020).

During the pandemic, activities on online dating applications have also experienced a significant increase. In March 2020, the online dating application Tinder recorded the highest number of swipes in 1 day, which was 3 billion. In addition, the OkCupid app recorded a 700% increase in dating on its app, and on the Bumble app, video call activity increased by 70% (Fortune Editors, 2021).

This paper aimed to look further into the relationships built through the online dating app Bumble, even though this app is still relatively new and not as big as other online dating apps. The interest comes from the fact that only women can initiate contact, and puts men as passive parties waiting for the initiation of the contact. These characteristics have made Bumble known as a feminist online dating application (Bivens & Hoque, 2018). Pruchniewska (2020) said that the use of the Bumble application prioritizes women and shows the existence of gender equality in the online dating world. Women have control over the conversations or relationships in Bumble.

In addition, what is also a novelty in this article is the fact that dating activities that occur online are different from those that occur offline. This paper will try to see how a relationship that was initiated in the online dating application Bumble develops, adopting DeVito's concept of relationship development stages.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Relationship Stages***

One of the main characteristics of relationships is that they occur in stages, moving from initial contact to deeper intimacy, and sometimes to completion (DeVito, 2019). Still, according to DeVito, the six-stage model describes the stages of most relationships, namely contact, involvement, intimacy, deterioration, repair, and dissolution. The following is a further explanation of DeVito for the six stages.

In the first stage, namely, contact, there are two phases that occur, namely perceptual contact where we will see, hear, read messages, view photos or videos, read the person's profile, or maybe even smell the person. After this phase, it will then proceed to interactional contact where there will be an exchange of basic information between the two people.

In the second stage, namely involvement, there is a feeling of similarity and connectedness that develops. Here we will try to learn more about this person. We will try to see if our initial assessment of the person is right or wrong.

Next is the intimacy stage, where a commitment is made, and the relationship between the two people is declared. Both the quantity and quality of the exchange of personal information increase and the conversation about relationships deepens as well. At this stage, the relationship begins to be shared with the social networks of each person involved in the relationship.

Fourth is deterioration, where there is a weakening of the bonds between people seen in the relationship. Starting from self-dissatisfaction to the rift of interpersonal ties. The two people will pull away from each other and move further and further away from each other.

If both people in the relationship decide to repair the relationship, then they will move into the repair phase, starting from self-improvement with an effort to identify problems and

improve themselves, to interpersonal improvement where people in the relationship talk to each other. about the problems they face and find the best solution for the common good. If successful, the relationship will have the potential to be even stronger than before.

However, if there are no attempts at repair or attempts at repair are unsuccessful, the relationship may move to the final stage of dissolution, where the relationship will end.

Regarding movement between stages, DeVito explained that there are several possible movements between the six stages. These stages do not always move in a linear fashion. At each stage, there is a possibility that people in the relationship decide to leave and discontinue the relationship. Relationships also do not always move to the next stage; it could move in the opposite direction. In addition, the relationship can also last at one stage and not move to the next stage.

### ***Online Dating and Bumble Apps***

Online dating is an alternative for people to build romantic relationships by utilizing telecommunications technology. Starting from Match.com which was launched in 1995 as a global online dating service, within a decade online dating has become the second most popular industry and is moving into a tool used by modern society. 2007 was the year when smartphone-based online dating applications with location access were launched, where users were allowed to access online dating anywhere and anytime (Bonilla-Zorita & Griffiths, 2020).

According to Manu, Joni, & Purnawan (2017), there are several advantages of finding a partner through online dating applications, namely saving time, and users can search for partners according to their respective preferences. While the drawbacks are the lack of intimacy in the relationship, not fully effective in communicating, and there are difficulties for someone to get to know the person or the actual habits of the partner.

Various online dating applications have evolved over time, with different application characteristics, and different user goals. The application that is the main highlight in this article is Bumble which is claimed to be a feminist online dating application. Bumble was developed with the desire to be able to change the rules of the online dating world which have always tended to place women in a position that was prone to sexual violence. The main modification that characterizes this application is that women have full power to make their first moves, and according to the founding company, Bumble has successfully shaken up traditional gender roles in heteronormative dating (Bivens & Hoque, 2018).

### **METHOD**

This research is qualitative research, using a constructivist paradigm, as well as a case study as the method. The object of the research is how the relationships built through the Bumble application develop. The subjects of this research are seven people who are users of the Bumble application and have built relationships with people they meet on this online dating application. Participants were in the adult age group and consisted of 4 women, namely in initial WF, VA, CY, and RS, also 3 men, namely in initial HP, AG, and NW, so that the different perspectives based on gender could be seen. Research data were collected through interviews and observations. The interviews and observation happened in December 2020. The interview was then transcribed and coded to find the main findings.

## DISCUSSION

From the interviews conducted with the seven participants, several things were found related to the development of relationships that were built with the people they met through the Bumble application. In general, all participants interviewed in uniform said they tried the online dating application Bumble. After all, they felt bored because during the pandemic their activities were limited, and they wanted to meet new people through the application. Even so, there were interesting things that were found from the male participants who said that they enjoyed using Bumble because in the application it was the woman who started the conversation so that it gave an advantage for men who were shy and afraid to initiate contact with women. In contrast to what was previously found by Sari & Kusuma (2018), online dating applications in the pre-pandemic period were actually used by people who did not have time to meet new people offline due to their busy schedule of activities. This study found a shift in motivation for using online dating applications, where the pandemic made people have a lot of free time to spend and online dating applications became one way to spend that time.

Furthermore, related to the relationship stage, at the contact stage, because of the characteristics of the application, it was agreed that all participants agreed that contact would be initiated by women after they matched with other people in the Bumble application. Before the match, they will select people based on the displayed profile which is in line with DeVito's concept of perceptual contact where they will see photos, read profiles, and perceive the person based on what they see on their profile page. Next, they will have interactional contact, where women will start conversations with men who match themselves. Then there will be an exchange of basic information. All participants acknowledged that given that this information exchange was carried out with new people in cyberspace, they would be very careful with the information they provided initially. This supports the findings of Pruchniewska (2020) which says that Bumble users do not feel comfortable if they have to start a conversation by providing information about their background for reasons of personal security. Even so, slightly different from what Pruchniewska found that educational and employment information was included in personal information that was reluctant to be shared, in this study it was found that participants did not mind sharing this information.

The second stage, namely involvement, according to DeVito is the stage of testing the impressions obtained at the contact stage. The findings from the study suggest that participants feel more comfortable continuing their approach through other messaging applications such as WhatsApp. If they have gone through the contact stage that gives a good impression, participants do not hesitate to exchange their personal phone numbers and continue to personally introduce their potential partner via WhatsApp. Even so, the VA participant admitted that he had two phone numbers and gave a less personal number to people he knew from the Bumble app.

Another interesting finding from the involvement stage is that most relationships do not continue to the next stage, either in the sense of exit or in the sense of being stagnant at this stage. VA and RS participants clearly said that they had no interest in continuing their relationship to the next stage because it was too dangerous to meet new people during this pandemic. Annisarizki's findings (2018) can help explain this, that relationship development will indeed occur if the couple has met-ups or offline dating. In addition, Kim & Dindia (2011)

also stated that someone can have a better relationship if they interact face-to-face. Computer-Mediated Communication has indeed become part of our daily communication, but there are often misunderstandings in its delivery and tend to manipulate information. What Kim & Dindia said is in line with what the participants who chose to postpone the continuation of their relationship stage, namely that they wanted to make sure through face-to-face meetings that no information was manipulated by the potential partner. The seriousness of the potential partner is also another consideration because there is an assumption that relationships built from online dating applications are usually just not serious.

The third stage in the relationship is intimacy, where there is an explicit commitment expressed by the people in the relationship. Of the participants interviewed, who stated that they were ready to proceed to the commitment stage were WF, CY, HP, and NW, while AG still wanted to try to meet first before proceeding to the next stage. Even so, all participants admitted that it was difficult for them to be able to move to the next stage, namely intimacy due to the limitations of being able to interact face-to-face during this pandemic. Another finding that was also found in the intimacy stage was that participants took longer to get to the intimacy stage because their communication was mostly done online or was CMC. Kim & Dindia found various opinions about which is more effective between face-to-face communication or CMC. The findings in this study then emphasize that although the intensity of communication can be the same, the absence of face-to-face interaction in online dating during this pandemic makes participants feel it takes longer to enter the intimacy stage.

Next is the deterioration stage. When the relationship is developing, it is not uncommon for participants to feel a conflict or incompatibility in their relationship. Usually, their relationship begins to strain due to problems such as differences of opinion or because of a discrepancy with their expectations when meeting their partner. As experienced by CY participants, they feel that when they meet, their partner is cold and doesn't try to start a conversation, which is different from what they expected. NW and AG participants also experienced this stage when between themselves and their partners there were differences of opinion and point of view. Like DeVito's concept that at this stage it usually starts with personal dissatisfaction, CY experienced that after she felt that her expectations for a potential partner did not match reality, she began to feel uncomfortable with her potential partner. The estrangement continued between the two because then CY withdrew from the relationship.

After there is deterioration in the relationship, the next step is repairs. From the findings, there are participants who then choose to repair their relationship after experiencing conflict. After successfully handling the conflict, these participants felt their relationship improved because they were able to understand each other better.

The final stage is dissolution, which occurs when the strained relationship cannot be repaired and the person in the relationship decides to end it. From interviews conducted with participants, it was found that there were participants who chose to immediately end the relationship as soon as there was an estrangement. The CY participant said that he once immediately disappeared when he felt he was not compatible with his potential partner. This is in line with the findings of Pruchniewska who said that often when they met face-to-face they found incompatibility with a potential partner. When this happens, they can

immediately make an un-matching option on the Bumble application and immediately end the relationship. This is a common occurrence in the online dating world and is known as ghosting. Isaf (2020) found that many students who were in the GenZ age group used ghosting methods to end their romantic relationships. They choose to disappear without doing the break-ups in more traditional ways because online communication makes this possible. Isaf's findings show that they tend to avoid confrontation in their relationship, as evidenced by 69% of participants having ghosted at least once, and 77% saying they have experienced being ghosted.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussions conducted in this study, there are several conclusions that can be drawn from this research. Regarding the concept of DeVito's relationship stages, it was found that all six stages can occur in online dating relationships carried out on the Bumble application during this pandemic. Even so, there are some things that become the specific findings of this study.

First, Bumble claims to be a feminist online dating application where the first contact after the match can only be made by women. This unique characteristic of the Bumble application leads to the contact stage; it is women who always start the conversation. Furthermore, the involvement stage in online dating relationships that starts from the Bumble application tends to occur in other messaging applications such as WhatsApp. Most relationships that started with the Bumble application during this pandemic stopped or stayed in the involvement stage. The pandemic has made it difficult for relationships to continue to the intimacy stage because their opportunities to meet face-to-face are limited, and face-to-face meetings are still considered crucial to getting to this stage. In addition, the time it takes to get to the intimacy stage becomes longer. Deterioration may occur mainly because of dissatisfaction in one partner or differences of opinion that occur between partners. As a result of the difficulty of the relationship to get to the intimacy stage, as well as the low level of intimacy that is built, when there is separation, it is not difficult for them to end the relationship. In fact, they can instantly disappear or ghosting without doing the traditional break-up.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was conducted under the auspices of Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, where the first author when doing this research was still a student and was under the guidance of the second author. It is fully supported by Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, thus the authors gratitude the university. Also thank you to all the participants that have been interviewed in this research.

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