

The Bumble Fumble Case

JMC 3453: Public Relations and Society

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May 4, 2025

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Abstract

Bumble is a dating website founded in 2014 by Whitney Wolfe to empower women to take the first step. Nonetheless, it has grown to allow all sexes to make connections via dating and networking. In April 2024, Bumble dropped an update that was accompanied by a problematic billboard campaign belittling sexually inactive women and making fun of people choosing celibacy. The ads were promptly criticized on social media, where the users accused Bumble of discouraging celibacy as a way of life, and the brand lost face. Bumble took remedial measures by apologizing, pulling the ads, donating to women's charities, and providing billboard space to those charities to broadcast commercials of their own choice. Applying the case to utilitarianism demonstrates that the campaign went awry by causing harm and alienating customers, and that Bumble's remedial actions aimed to minimize harm and advance social good to the highest degree.

Keywords: Bumble, Celibacy, Billboard Campaign

Introduction

Organization Background:

Bumble prides itself on being a dating app and a place to connect with new friends and even professionally with multiple businesses. However, Bumble is primarily used as a dating app, which was started back in 2014. Female Founder, Whitney Wolfe, saw an opportunity to empower women in charge of making the first move. She saw her close friends and family constantly waiting for the men on dating apps to swipe first, message, or make the first move in general, and this is why she wanted to flip the narrative and give women the power. Since then, the app has expanded to allow all genders to make connections through dating and networking opportunities.

Here is a brief description of how the app works: “On Bumble, women set the tone by making the first move or setting an Opening Move for matches to reply to. Shifting old-fashioned power dynamics and encouraging equality from the start” (Bumble, n.d.).

Bumble does face some competitors in today’s dating app landscape. Some of their biggest competitors include Tinder, Hinge, OkCupid, Match, and Raya. Each of these competitors challenges Bumble’s marketing within the industry, making it difficult to set them apart and imposing a challenge for the brand.

Case Background:

The Bumble Fumble case in April of 2024, first, calls for important background on the dating app industry landscape & Bumble’s competitive position. The dating app industry is astonishingly large and has only continued to grow in recent years. In 2022, the dating app industry alone was projected to be worth \$7.9 billion, and this is projected to grow at a rate of

7.9% throughout 2023-2030 (Grand View Research, 2020). Bumble plays a massive role in the United States dating app market. As of April 2025, Bumble currently holds a 24% share of the U.S. dating app market (Writer, 2025).

The attitude towards dating apps, especially from the start, has been struck by the issue of cultural norms. Specifically speaking, it was much more common and assumed that the male would reach out to the female in a heterosexual dating app scenario. Bumble wanted to take this and give women the chance to be bold and make the first move. They used this to empower women and challenge typical societal gender roles (Tanner, 2018).

Description of the Case:

Bumble recently faced backlash over an anti-celibacy ad campaign that shamed women for not being sexually active and mocked people for choosing celibacy instead of dating. That shifted public perception of the app and its brand. In April 2024, the company introduced an update to re-engage users who had grown frustrated with the dating scene. Alongside the update, Bumble launched a series of billboards that sparked controversy. The most notable ones read, “You know full well a vow of celibacy is not the answer” and “Thou shalt not give up on dating and become a nun” (Weatherbed, 2024).

The ads were immediately criticized on social media, with many accusing Bumble of dismissing the validity of celibacy as a personal choice. Users felt alienated, leading to a loss of trust in the brand. In response, Bumble admitted its misstep, explaining that the campaign was intended to resonate with individuals frustrated by modern dating but ultimately had the opposite effect. Bumble announced that it is removing the ads and will be making donations to the National Domestic Violence Hotline and other organizations that support women. Additionally,

the company will offer the billboard spaces to these organizations, allowing them to display “an ad of their choice” for the remainder of the reserved time.

Timeline of Case:

- **April 2024:** Bumble launches an update to re-engage users and reveals its controversial billboard campaign.
- **April 2024:** Following this, social media backlash starts, with users condemning the campaign for shaming personal choices.
- **May 2024:** Major news outlets, including The Verge, report on the controversy and its impact on Bumble’s brand perception.
- **May 2024:** Bumble apologizes, stating that the campaign was meant to resonate with dating frustrations but had the opposite effect.
- **May 2024:** The company announced that it would remove the ads and donate to the National Domestic Violence Hotline and other organizations supporting women.
- **May 2024:** Bumble offers these organizations billboard spaces, allowing them to display messages of their choice for the remainder of the reserved time.

Analysis:

Bumble’s Communication Strategy

The campaign’s initial goal was to incite some humor into the dating world and inspire people to take action and download the app. They chose to address some current frustrations

within modern dating culture (Sherman, 2024). Bumble used various communication channels, such as billboards, commercials, and social media platforms, to get the ad across to as many people as possible. This ended with a backfire, as the messages were not well-received and stirred controversy about their key messaging strategy.

In response to the crisis, Bumble initially apologized for the situation, with a post on social media just one month after the advertisements went up. Their response strategy was quick and thoughtful, with many strategies to combat the mistake. Bumble stated that the campaign was meant to resonate with dating frustrations, but recognized it had the opposite effect on their users and apologized for these misunderstood advertisements. Additionally, Bumble took many measures to reform their reputation and advocacy for women by donating to the National Domestic Hotline and other organizations that support women after removing the advertisements. With the additional time they had left with the billboards, they offered the spaces to these same organizations, allowing them to display an ad of their choice for the remainder of the reserved time.

Stakeholder Responses to Bumble's Anti-Celibacy Campaign — Internal

Employees:

No specific details or interactions between Bumble employees were made public regarding what they had to say about the controversy; however, this greatly affected Bumble employees shortly after. Because of the financial impact, Bumble was forced to lay off around 350 of its employees (Richardson, 2024).

Corporate leaders and Shareholders:

Bumble's shares dropped immensely, causing distress within the company. After a 45% drop in shares, shareholders of Bumble lost value by almost half, and the company took a big financial hit, forcing layoffs and other economic losses.

External — Users:

The campaign faced backlash from the app users. A large group of users felt targeted and shamed for personal decisions regarding celibacy. Users even went to platforms such as TikTok to discuss their issue with the ad. Many users thought that the ad was implying that somehow women owe sex to men (Bellamy, 2024).

Future Customers and General Public:

Media publications like Fast Company reported mixed reactions to Bumble's apology. Some people appreciated the company's honesty, while others decried the campaign as out of touch with contemporary discourses on celibacy and agency (Snelling, 2024). The campaign was able to elicit broader conversations regarding the way the dating industry responds to user interaction. Critics argued that the tone-deafness of the campaign can erode trust and loyalty with users, allowing competitors who place more value and respect on users an opportunity to pick up the pace (Quiroz-Gutierrez, 2024).

The Impact on Stakeholders:

The ad campaign received significant criticism from users who felt it mocked personal choices, such as celibacy. Many women, in particular, expressed that the ads were dismissive of their autonomy and choices (Encinas, 2024). This led to a wave of negative sentiment on social media platforms, with some users deleting the app in protest (Encinas, 2024). Bumble responded by removing the ads and issuing a public apology, stating that the campaign did not align with the company's values.

The internal fallout from the campaign likely affected employee morale, especially among those who value inclusivity and respect for individual differences. Marketing and creative teams faced criticism for the ad's lack of cultural sensitivity, possibly leading to internal reviews, increased pressure, and potential restructuring.

The controversy risked damaging Bumble's reputation and brand equity, potentially influencing user engagement and retention. Negative press can also have negative financial implications and lead to a loss of investor trust, especially when the brand is positioned as socially responsible.

Influencers and brand collaborators may have distanced themselves from the app to protect their reputations. Advocacy organizations questioned Bumble's alignment with values like respect and choice. Still, the company's decision to donate to causes like the National Domestic Violence Hotline and offer billboard space to supportive organizations may help rebuild those relationships.

Advice:

To avoid this type of controversy, Bumble should have applied an ethical principle with duty-based ethics. If they had adapted Prima Facie duties, the scandal could have been avoided altogether. Prima Facie duties, the idea that a duty that is binding or obligatory, unless it is overridden or trumped by another duty or duties, could have guided them to hold the duty of fidelity or beneficence above all other duties, like self-improvement, to better serve their users. If they had adopted these duties more in their work and advertisements, Bumble would have put promoting good and preventing harm for their users above gaining more attention, thus preventing the scandal.

Implications:**Impacts on Long-term Strategy**

Bumble's long-term strategy and competitive positioning were significantly impacted in their goals for maintaining reputation and their status as a well-known dating app. *Bumble* had previously promoted the empowerment of women through their app feature that puts women in charge of starting conversations. The brand's anti-celibacy ads did the opposite and led users to question their core values of fostering a respectful and less predatory dating environment.

The brand's failure of the ad campaign was highlighted by many users as insensitive and misaligned with their core values. *Bumble* will have to now consider how future campaigns could better align with their intended audience.

Bumble's stance on the empowerment of women had previously set them apart from competitors like Tinder and Hinge. This misstep may have allowed for their competitors to capitalize by emphasizing their own commitment to user choice and empowerment. The incident also made *Bumble* appear less distinct in its messaging.

Additionally, the brand's lack of closely following its originally stated values could have led to a decline in user trust. Users may have become more skeptical of the app's values, potentially leading them to alternative platforms.

Impacts on the Business, CCO, and Enterprise

Bumble's business was greatly harmed by the billboard debate, especially in terms of operations and reputation. Managing the brand's public apology and maintaining open lines of contact with the media and users were key responsibilities of the Chief Communications Officer (CCO). This involved admitting the error, explaining the campaign's purpose, and laying out the necessary steps to correct it.

From a reputational standpoint, the advertisement undermined user confidence. It ran against *Bumble's* basic principles of inclusivity and empowerment, particularly for women, who make up a significant portion of the user base. Brand loyalty was damaged by the criticism on social media and in news channels, which heavily impacted both current and potential customers. The CCO was responsible for diminishing user trust and brand loyalty damage. By clearly explaining the campaign's intended purpose and outlining steps for correction, they aimed to reassure users that the company understood their misstep and was committed to correcting their core values.

Although the precise financial impact is still unknown, the negative public image may have led to fewer app downloads, a decline in user engagement, and a loss of advertising partnerships or investor trust. With a diminished reputation, especially among the female community, *Bumble's* financial success was negatively impacted. A bad reputation, especially among their main customers, women, means a decline in users and income. A strong communication strategy could have minimized the negative impact of these problems. While the CCO is not directly responsible for the financial statements, their effectiveness in managing the reputational crisis directly impacts the finances of the company.

Operationally, *Bumble* had to quickly modify its marketing plan, take down the advertisements, and shift financial and logistical resources to minimize the harm. This included giving money to charities and giving them access to premium advertising space, which was both socially conscious and an unforeseen cost that took time away from planned marketing initiatives. The CCO plays a key role in communicating the operational changes the company is making to address the issue.

How does the case impact and/or the communication industry as a whole

The *Bumble Fumble* case is an important example of how brands communicate ethically and responsibly in today's digital world. The backlash against *Bumble's* campaign, which seemed to mock celibacy, shows that society is increasingly respecting individual choices in personal relationships and lifestyles. This change reflects larger cultural movements that value consent, personal boundaries, and diverse expressions of sexuality. *Bumble*, a platform that promotes female empowerment, made a mistake that highlights how much consumers expect from brands.

When companies claim to support social values, customers want to see a real connection between their marketing messages and their core beliefs.

The quick criticism on social media demonstrates how online communities can hold companies accountable. This shift has changed the power dynamic between businesses and their customers. Other dating platforms are likely reconsidering how they market themselves, especially regarding sensitive topics like sexual choices. This reflection could lead to more thoughtful industry standards for inclusive communication, hinting at positive change in the industry. For the communication industry as a whole, this case highlights the need for diverse viewpoints in creative teams and more thorough ethical reviews for campaigns that involve personal identities and choices.

Management Recommendations Based on Ethical Principles: *Bumble* removed the ads and apologized, but they could have managed the situation better by following these ethical principles:

1. Respect for Autonomy

Recommendation: Use diverse focus groups to test campaigns about personal choices. This would help address concerns before the ads launch and show respect for user autonomy.

Ethical Basis: People have the right to make personal choices without outside control. Campaigns should not undermine or trivialize personal decisions, especially those related to intimate matters.

2. Non-Maleficence

Recommendation: Create an ethical review board with external stakeholders to evaluate campaigns for potential harm before they launch.

Ethical Basis: The principle of non-maleficence (“do no harm”) is crucial for marketing campaigns, especially those focused on sensitive personal relationships.

3. Transparency and Accountability

Recommendation: In addition to removing the ads, *Bumble* should conduct and share a transparent internal investigation into how the campaign was approved. They should also involve a diverse review board in sensitive campaigns to ensure accountability.

Ethical Basis: Corporate transparency fosters trust and demonstrates a genuine commitment to learning from mistakes, rather than just managing public relations.

4. Justice and Inclusivity

Recommendation: Provide extensive inclusivity training for all creative and marketing teams, focusing on recognizing unconscious biases regarding personal choices.

Ethical Basis: The principle of justice requires the fair treatment of all individuals, acknowledging their diverse perspectives and experiences.

5. Beneficence

Recommendation: Beyond simply donating, *Bumble* should create ongoing partnerships with organizations that support healthy relationship choices and individual autonomy.

Ethical Basis: Beneficence means taking actions that benefit others, rather than just addressing problems, to create real social value.

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