

The Whining Karen meme on X: a semiotic analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a semiotic analysis of the specific "Karen" meme of whining on social media platform X, utilizing Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory. This meme typically depicts a stereotype of a forceful, entitled, and confrontational individual, and it is often linked to middle-aged white women, expanded to encompass various individuals. The findings reveal a consistent pattern of meaning play, revolving around the utilization of the term "Karen" in conjunction with the descriptor "whining." "Karen" is used as a stereotypical reference, often employed to mock individuals perceived as entitled, overly critical, or complaining. It is used to dismiss or undermine the credibility of the opposing viewpoint, implying that the concerns expressed are unwarranted or exaggerated. Overall, the pattern across these conversations highlights the use of Karen memes as a means of ridiculing or dismissing opposing viewpoints perceived as complaining or entitled. This use adds a derisive and somewhat sarcastic tone to the responses, suggesting that the concerns are frivolous or exaggerated. This highlights the complex interplay of language, stereotype, and meaning in internet memes. The results underscore the adaptability and depth of Saussure's theory in deciphering the intricacies of online discourse, particularly within the realm of meme culture.

Keywords: memes, semiotic, X post, stereotype, meaning, text.

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Introduction

Richard Dawkins (1976) first introduced the term "meme" in his book *The Selfish Gene*. According to Meriam Webster, a meme is an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online, especially through social media. This description underscores the modern interpretation of the term. Memes commonly appear in the form of images, videos, or text paired with captions, crafting content that is amusing or captivating. The swift spread of these elements is largely facilitated by social media platforms, contributing to their broad popularity. Also, a meme is an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture. This definition is in line with the initial concept presented by Richard Dawkins. It expands the range of memes beyond internet-related humor, covering any cultural aspect transmitted and imitated within a society. This may involve linguistic patterns, fashion preferences, behavioral idiosyncrasies, or any

collectively embraced idea that gains popularity and circulates among individuals. Huntington (2013), observed that internet memes function as a type of representational discourse, challenging prevailing media messages to generate fresh significance. He emphasized that memes heavily depend on intertextuality, involving the 'parodying, mimicking, and recycling' of elements from visual media culture. Ding (2015), then, conducted a study about internet memes as forms of persuasive discourse within various contexts such as entertainment, the propagation of stereotypes, and online activism. Ding aimed to uncover the persuasive mechanisms employed by Internet memes in conveying messages related to entertainment, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and engagement in online activism. He likely explored how memes leverage visual and textual elements to influence audience perceptions and behaviors within the realms of humor, cultural representation, and social advocacy.

As memes evolved, they took on a transformed digital form within the realm of internet culture. Digital memes play a key role in conveying and debating societal issues through diverse messaging formats, facilitated by online platforms. These messages often incorporate a blend of humor along with serious political and social concerns. Memes are intricate sets of ideas, and their tangible expressions are conveyed through meme vehicles, such as images, texts, artifacts, or rituals (Shifman, 2014). Wiggins & Bowers (2014) characterize memes as messages that undergo remixing and iteration, rapidly disseminated by participants in a digital, participatory culture. These messages serve the purpose of sustaining and advancing ongoing conversations within the digital realm. The term "remixed" suggests that memes often involve the recombination or modification of existing content, while "iterated" implies their repeated creation and sharing within the digital landscape. The authors highlight the dynamic and collaborative nature of meme creation, positioning them as integral components of contemporary online discourse.

One prevalent internet meme is the "Karen" meme, which has gained popularity in recent years. This meme refers to a specific type of middle-class white woman exhibiting behaviors rooted in privilege (BBC News, 2020). Described by The Guardian (2020) as a middle-aged white woman with an asymmetrical bob who demands to speak to the manager, the "Karen" meme characterizes someone as entitled and ignorant. The meme is commonly applied to individuals displaying problematic behavior, and people aggressively use it to call out those who fit the "Karen" stereotype. While initially associated mainly with women, particularly white women, the meme's usage has expanded to label anyone displaying problematic behavior in various contexts.

For this study, social media X had been chosen as it is recognized by Nate Williams (2023) as a valuable source for real-time information and news, boasting a global user base in the millions. X is centered around brief and immediate updates, primarily in microblog-style posts with a limited number of characters. Users can attach photos, videos, GIFs, or polls to share thoughts, and news, and

participate in public conversations. The "Karen" meme has gained widespread popularity across various social media platforms, with one prominent platform where users frequently employ this meme being X. Formerly recognized as Twitter, X was established in 2006 by Evan Williams, Biz Stone, and Noah Glass. However, in October 2022, as reported by Forbes (2023), Elon Musk assumed control of the company following the completion of a \$44 billion acquisition of Twitter. Since then, X has undergone gradual transformations.

Analysis of literary work and other literature subject texts using semiotic theory has been done in plenty of previous studies such as Saptiadi, Agustina, & Trisnawati (2023) that discussed characters of *The Blue Umbrella*; Afidah, Agustina, & Trisnawati (2022) who talked on dissecting color on the body of each god character in *Lore Olympus*; Haris, Agustina, & Trisnawati (2021) on focusing and explaining of the animal characters in *Zootopia*. The previous studies showed that semiotic study is beyond excellence to be studied. Other related study on meme has also been conducted by Neneng Zubaidah and Irena Ardelia entitled *A Discourse Analysis of Meme* (2018). This study analyzed the relationship between pictures and text in the memes with the meaning and the social function of five memes randomly from the Google picture using the keyword "best memes". The next one is a study on meme *Semiotic Analysis of Four Popular "Memes" in Memecenter.com* by Kadek Agus Mahendra Putra, Sang Ayu Isnu Maharani, and I Made Netra (2017) employing Saussure's semiotic theory (1983) for analysis, along with Pierce's theory (1885) to examine the meme's function, and Dell Hymes' theory to contextualize the meme's description within the situation. Likewise employing Saussure's theory, this study diverges in its focus, examining memes sourced from Memecenter.com.

Based on the previous studies above, there are relatively minimal studies that examine the semiotic analysis of internet memes, such as the whining "Karen" meme. For this reason, the present study examines Saussure's semiotic theory as a theoretical framework for understanding the structure and function of signs, enabling a deeper analysis of the whining "Karen" meme on X. This study

employs Saussure's semiotic theory to understand how signs operate in communication. This current study focuses on attributing meaning to signs and explores how the *whining* "Karen" meme, one of the three most used "Karen" memes in X, serves as a communicative tool within the digital discourse on X. This research underscores the diverse range of "Karen" memes, each carrying unique signifiers that carries implications meanings.

Method

This study is a qualitative study considering the aim of this study to find out the conceptualization of the whining "Karen" meme on X. This study focused on five posts where individuals referred to others as whining "Karen" associated with the term. The data were limited to posts published between August 1 to September 1, 2023.

Source of Data

The data sourced from the social media platform X focuses on five posts where individuals refer to others as whining "Karen" associated with the term. The data collections

Data Analysis

The collected data was systematically scrutinized and ultimately synthesized to draw conclusive insights. The analytical process centered on discerning the meaning attributed to the whining "Karen" meme within the posts, employing Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework the theory of sign, signifiers, and signified (1983). Saussure introduced the concept of the dyadic sign model, which he referred to as sign, signifier, and signified. He

Results & Discussion

The data of this study were obtained based on study methods and other tools in this study to answer the formulation of the problem regarding the definition of the "Karen" memes on X. The data were in the form of five posts that mentioned the whining "Karen" meme on X with the time span between August 1 to September 1, 2023. The meme posts were then analyzed with Ferdinand De Saussure's semiotics of sign, signifier, and signified.

Data 1

This study marks the inaugural installment of a trilogy of studies delving into the "Karen" meme phenomenon on X. Each subsequent study within this trilogy centered on the "Karen" meme with different signifiers, thus shaping varied interpretations of the meme. This study elucidates the nuanced layers of meaning inherent in the "Karen" meme, offering comprehensive insights into its cultural significance and communicative power.

were limited to posts published between August 1 to September 1, 2023. From the selected time span, 321 posts of whining "Karen" have been found. In order to compress the data, five less ambiguous posts and the best representation of the whining "Karen" were chosen to be analyzed. The study opted for a documentation approach, capturing screenshots of the relevant X posts to compile the necessary data. In order to address the study inquiries, an in-depth analysis of the collected data, comprising several posts that employed the term whining "Karen" to address others, was conducted.

categorized the form of the sign, whether in written or spoken language, as the signifier. Saussure contended that the connection between the signifier (the physical form of the sign) and the signified (representation of the concept or idea) is determined by societal norms. This study involves examining the sign ("Karen" meme post), the signifier (whining), and the signified (the conceptualization of the whining "Karen" meme as presented in the posts).



Figure 1. Whining "Karen" datum 1

There are 2 parties who posted their thoughts on the figure 1. The first one is Pegs and his post was replied to by Cheryl. Here is the conversation:

Dinesh: Woke Megan Rapinoe's World Cup Career Ends With Humiliating Penalty Kick Miss - 'Good Riddance'.

Cheryl: Ok Karen stop whining. Jealous that a women can be a better soccer player than you.

Their conversation is about Megan Rapinoe. Dinesh posted an article by the DC Enquirer about Megan Rapinoe's penalty kick miss. It can be seen that he agreed with the article. The article on DC Enquirer reports on Megan Rapinoe's exit from the World Cup following a crucial penalty kick miss. It criticizes Rapinoe for her performance, citing her advocacy for equal pay and her stance on transgenderism in women's sports. The article includes negative comments from various sources, accusing Rapinoe of being "anti-American" and a "cancer on the sport". Various quotes of X posts in the article express dissatisfaction with Rapinoe's performance, describing her as a "cancer on the sport" and a "traitor to her country." The overall the article is critical of Rapinoe's actions and concludes with the notion that Rapinoe represents an anti-American, woke ideology that has infiltrated sports and the Democratic Party. It can be said that Dinesh complained about Megan Rapinoe's World Cup career ending with a humiliating penalty kick miss, expressing satisfaction with her departure. Cheryl responds by calling him a Karen and suggesting that he is envious of women excelling in soccer. They talked about Megan Rapinoe in their conversation. According to Britannica (2024), American

football (soccer) player and social activist who was one of the sport's leading wingers. She played a crucial role in securing two Women's World Cup victories (2015 and 2019) and earned a gold medal at the 2012 London Olympics, as well as a bronze at the 2020 Tokyo Games, while representing the U.S. Women's National Team (USWNT). Rapinoe was honored as the Women's Player of the Year by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in 2019. In 2019, Rapinoe received FIFA's Women's Player of the Year award and was honored with the Ballon d'Or as the top female player globally. After made more than 200 appearances with the U.S. women's national soccer team, Megan Rapinoe concluded her playing career in September 2023 (BBC News, 2023). She marked her farewell by contributing to her team's 2-0 triumph over South Africa at Soldier Field in Chicago.

Therefore, from the conversation, the sign is the X post that used "Karen" which is Cheryl's post and the signifier is the "whining" word that followed "Karen" meme and signified about Cheryl dismisses Dinesh by addressing him as "Karen," following his opinion of using the term "woke" thought that Megan Rapinoe's career was influenced by a social justice agenda and characterizes Rapinoe's World Cup career as ending on a negative note with a humiliating penalty kick miss, expressing satisfaction with her departure by saying "Good Riddance". Based on Cheryl's post it can be conducted that "Karen" is a term often used to mock someone perceived as entitled or complaining. She accuses Dinesh of whining, implying that he is complaining unnecessarily. Cheryl suggests that Dinesh might be jealous of women excelling in soccer, specifically targeting the idea that a woman could outperform him in soccer.

Data 2

There are 2 parties who posted their thoughts on the figure 2. The first one is CTV News Vancouver and got replied from Jason. Here is the conversation:

CTV News: A woman who lives in Langley, B.C., has been beset by a barrage of Amazon packages she didn't order. And she can't get the bogus deliveries to stop.

Jason: Stop whining, Karen, keep the packages that have things you can use/want....and sell the rest on Ebay, or wherever!

DUH! 🙄



Figure 2. Whining "Karen" datum 2

The conversation begins with a news report from CTV News Vancouver, highlighting a woman in Langley, B.C., who is receiving unwanted Amazon packages and struggling to stop them. The CTV News (2023) article reports on Anca Nitu, a resident of Langley, British Columbia, who is facing a distressing situation of receiving over 50 unexpected Amazon deliveries since June 2023. These deliveries, consisting mainly of shoes, are the unintended consequence of individuals attempting to return items bought from Amazon sellers. Despite Nitu's efforts to halt the deliveries and her requests to UPS not to leave the packages, the situation persists. Notably, she has been charged over \$300 in customs fees by UPS for these unsolicited deliveries. Nitu has sought assistance from both Amazon and UPS following their procedures, but the problem persists, adversely affecting her mental well-being, and leading to anxiety and panic attacks.

The post from CTV News Vancouver got replied by Jason, he showed a dismissive

Data 3

There are 2 parties who posted their thoughts on the figure 3. The first one is WCVB TV Boston (2023) and replied by Mustard. Here is the conversation:

WCVB TV: *Woman says her Kia has been stolen 4 times in 1 year*

Mustard: *Instead of #whining, maybe #Karen should just buy a different #car or not park in a #CrimeRidden #democrat neighborhood. #Hyundai has a fix that adds a software immobilize*

and somewhat mocking response. Jason starts his response with the phrase "Stop whining, Karen," using the term "Karen" as a colloquial way to mock or dismiss someone perceived as complaining or entitled. Jason suggests the woman keep the packages that contain items she can use or want. Additionally, he advises her to sell the remaining items on platforms like eBay. He used of "DUH!" adds a sarcastic tone, implying that this solution is obvious and simple. Jason's response seems to downplay the woman's concerns and implies that she should find a practical solution by keeping what she can use and selling the rest. The use of the term "Karen" and the dismissive tone might be seen as unsympathetic to the woman's situation as described in the news report.

Therefore, from the conversation, the sign is the X post that used "Karen" which is Jason's post and the signifier is the "whining" word that followed "Karen" meme and signified about Jason dismissive post and mocking term of "whining Karen" directed towards the woman facing the issue of receiving unwanted Amazon packages. The term "Karen" is used in popular culture and internet slang to stereotype someone, typically a woman, as complaining, entitled, or difficult. Jason is essentially telling the woman to stop complaining or expressing dissatisfaction, as implied by the term "whining." The use of "Karen" in this context adds a condescending tone to Jason's response, suggesting that he views the woman's concerns as unwarranted or exaggerated. It's a way of dismissing her distress and framing her as someone who is complaining unnecessarily.

The news article reports on a Minnesota woman, Mary, who is facing significant distress as her Kia Sportage has been stolen four times in the past year. Despite taking precautions such as installing a security camera, an engine immobilizer, and using a club, her vehicle continues to be a target for theft. The article highlights that Kia and Hyundai vehicles have become common targets due to a widely shared security flaw on social media. Despite the release of updated security software, the frequency of thefts persists. WCVB TV reports a

woman's claim that her Kia has been stolen four times in one year. Mustard responds with a dismissive and somewhat mocking tone, referring to the woman as "#Karen" and suggesting that she should stop complaining and either buy a different car or avoid parking in what he describes as a "#CrimeRidden #democrat neighborhood." Mustard introduces a political aspect by mentioning a "#CrimeRidden #democrat neighborhood." This adds a divisive element to the conversation, suggesting that the neighborhood's political affiliation might be related to the reported car thefts. It may be seen as an attempt to politicize the issue rather than focusing on the problem at hand. Mustard also recommends a potential solution, mentioning that Hyundai has a fix involving a software immobilizer. Mustard proposes a practical solution by suggesting that the woman consider buying a different car or taking precautions like not parking in the described neighborhood.

Therefore, from the conversation, the sign is the X post that used "Karen" which is Mustard's post and the signifier is "whining" word that followed "Karen" meme and signified about Mustard's response. From Mustard's post, it can be explained that

Data 4



Figure 4. Whining "Karen" datum 4

There are 2 parties who posted their thoughts on figure 4. The first one is Megan and her post got replied by Knightkore. Here is the conversation:

Megan: Oh for heavens, I don't care which candidate you support, one grown man does not "betray" another by choosing to run for an election. The office of the presidency is not an ex-girlfriend. No one has a claim on it but the American people.



Figure 3. Whining "Karen" datum 3

whining "Karen" is a pejorative slang often used to mock someone perceived as complaining or entitled. This implies that he views her concerns as unwarranted or exaggerated. Following to this whining "Karen", Mustard suggests that instead of complaining or expressing dissatisfaction (whining), the woman should consider buying a different car or avoid parking in what he describes as a "#CrimeRidden #democrat neighborhood." He also brings up Hyundai as a potential solution, mentioning a fix involving a software immobilizer.

Knightkore: Says the one whining. Middle name is Karen right?

In the conversation, Megan shares her perspective on the notion that a candidate running for an election should not be considered an act of betrayal. She emphasizes the democratic nature of the presidency, clarifying that it is not comparable to a personal relationship where betrayal might occur. Megan articulates a viewpoint emphasizing the democratic process and the idea that running for office is not a betrayal but rather a part of the political system. She distinguishes between political decisions and personal relationships, asserting that the presidency ultimately belongs to the American people. Meanwhile, Knightkore responded by characterizing Megan's statement as "whining." By using the term "whining" and introducing the stereotype of "Karen," he attempts to undermine the credibility of Megan's argument without directly engaging with the substance of her viewpoint. Knightkore viewed Megan's

perspective as complaining or expressing dissatisfaction.

Therefore, from the conversation, the sign is the X post that used "Karen" which is Knightkore's post and the signifier is "whining" word that followed "Karen" meme and signified about Knightkore dismissed Megan by addressing him as "Karen". Hence, whining "Karen" suggests that the middle name "Karen"

Data 5



Figure 5. whining "Karen" datum 5

There are 2 parties who posted their thoughts on the figure 5. The first one is Joey and his post got replied to by Philly. Here is the conversation:

- Joey: *There is no more loathsome human being in history than the inventor of the paper straw. May he or she suffer a generational curse.*
- Philly: *Buy reusable ones Karen... the planet is more important than your whining.*

In this conversation, Joey expresses strong disapproval of the inventor of the paper straw, labeling them as the "most loathsome human being in history." Joey adds a wish for a generational curse upon this individual. Philly responds by suggesting an alternative, encouraging Joey to buy reusable straws and making a broader statement about prioritizing the planet over individual complaints, referring to Joey as "Karen." The context revolves around a discussion or commentary on the use of paper straws, with Joey expressing frustration or disdain for the inventor of paper straws due to their perceived inconvenience. Philly counters this viewpoint by advocating for the use of reusable straws, implying that environmental concerns should take precedence over

is a stereotypical reference, often used online to mock someone perceived as entitled or complaining. The use of "Karen" adds a derisive and somewhat sarcastic tone to his response. The use of the term "Karen" used to mock individuals perceived as entitled or complaining.

individual preferences. The broader context may involve a debate on sustainability, environmental choices, or personal preferences regarding everyday items like straws.

Philly responds to Joey's complaint, suggesting a practical solution by advising to "buy reusable ones." Philly emphasizes the importance of the planet and implies that using reusable straws is a more environmentally-friendly choice. Philly also uses the term "Karen" in a context where someone might be resistant to change or expressing dissatisfaction, perhaps insinuating that Joey's complaint is unfounded or overly negative. The tone of Joey's statement suggests frustration or annoyance with the perceived inconvenience or lesser quality associated with paper straws. In summary, the conversation centers around the environmental implications of using paper straws, with Joey expressing frustration and Philly advocating for more environmentally friendly alternatives while employing a dismissive reference to "Karen". The context centers around a common debate or complaint related to the use of paper straws, likely tied to concerns about environmental impact and convenience. Joey's strong negative reaction and Philly's response indicate a difference in opinion on the matter, with Philly advocating for a more sustainable choice.

Therefore, from the conversation, the sign is the X post that used "Karen" which is Philly's post and the signifier is "whining" word that followed "Karen" meme and signified about Philly dismissed Joey by addressing him as "whining Karen". Philly's response introduces a colloquial term often likely used to stereotype online to mock someone, in this context Joey, as someone complaining or being overly critical and perceived as entitled. This could be interpreted

as a way of suggesting that Joey's complaint about paper straws is unwarranted, and that considering the planet's well-being is more important. The use of the term "Karen" adds a

Conclusion

The analysis of these meme instances reveals a consistent pattern of meaning play, revolves around the utilization of the term "Karen" in conjunction with the descriptor "whining." The term "Karen" is used as a stereotypical reference, often employed online to mock individuals perceived as entitled, overly critical, or complaining. In each instance, the individuals engaging in the conversation utilize the term "Karen" to dismiss or undermine the credibility of the opposing viewpoint, implying that the concerns expressed are unwarranted or exaggerated. Overall, the pattern observed across these conversations highlights the use of the "Karen" meme as a means of ridiculing or dismissing opposing viewpoints perceived as complaining or entitled. This usage adds a derisive and somewhat sarcastic tone to the responses, suggesting that the concerns expressed are frivolous or exaggerated, and highlighting the complex interplay of language, stereotype, and meaning in internet memes.

The application of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory in this study involves analyzing signs and their role in communication, specifically focusing on how the whining "Karen" meme functions within the digital landscape of the social media platform X. The analysis of the "Karen" meme involves examining signs ("Karen" meme post), the signifier (whining), and the signified (whining "Karen is someone being overly complaining, an unwarranted or exaggerated complaint) in the communication process. The signifier

touch of humor or sarcasm to the conversation, suggesting that the complaint may be perceived as unwarranted or exaggerated.

"whining Karen" serves as a linguistic marker, invoking a stereotype and implying a particular interpretation of the individual's behavior or attitude. This process of signification and interpretation is central to the study of memes and their role in shaping online interactions and cultural dynamics. The semiotic analysis adds depth to the understanding of how language, in the form of memes, contributes to shaping online discourse and interactions.

The study leverages Saussure's concepts to unravel the layers of meaning associated with the meme and its impact on digital communication processes. By applying Saussure's semiotic theory, the study gains insights into how the "Karen" meme functions as a sign in online communication. It helps unravel the meaning attributed to the meme and its role in expressing disagreement, sarcasm, or dismissal. In conclusion, the study sheds light on the dynamic role of memes, particularly the "Karen" meme, in online communication, emphasizing their influence on societal discussions, expressions of dissent, and the creation of online cultural phenomena. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interactive potential of digital memes and their impact on shaping communication processes in the digital age and provides insights into the dynamics of online communication, where memes like "Karen" become effective tools for expressing and dismissing certain attitudes, behaviors, or viewpoints.

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