

# The ‘Karen’ Fallacy: Debunking Reddit’s Stereotype of Facebook Moms

Sophie Ariella Tanujaya<sup>1,\*</sup> Reynald Setyawan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Department, Petra Christian University, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author. Email: a11180020@john.petra.ac.id

## ABSTRACT

The term “Facebook moms” refers to mothers who frequently participate in Facebook group discussions. They use Facebook as a platform because it allows them to create groups to accommodate their needs including attachments and express their opinions without the word-limit constraint. However, there is a stereotype on Reddit that all Facebook moms are *karens*. *Karens* are portrayed as middle-aged women who are often racist, entitled, and abusive. The purpose of this research is to see if there is any truth in the allegation by conducting a qualitative study on Reddit and Facebook posts. The analysis includes 120 posts made by English-speaking mothers in six different Facebook groups and 120 posts on six different subreddits. The identity theories proposed by Burke and Stets as well as and Benwell and Stokoe, along with Bell’s audience-design theory. They are used to analyze the data. The result of this study suggests that Reddit’s stereotype of Facebook moms is mainly false. In fact, facebook moms’ groups are often useful for themselves and others.

**Keywords:** Facebook Moms, Karen, Reddit, Facebook, Identity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As more social media options became available, more users began to abandon Facebook, particularly those from the younger age group. According to The Guardian [1], the number of Facebook users from the age of 13 to 17 dropped from 71% to 51% in 2015, following the emergence of Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube (Solon, 2018). However, a particular group of Facebook users shows no decline in number - Facebook moms. The number of Facebook users in the States amounts to 61% of the population, in which 81% of U.S mothers are recorded as active users [2]. ‘Facebook moms’ refers to mothers who frequently participate in Facebook group discussions. They choose Facebook as a platform because it allows them to create groups to accommodate their needs including attachments and express their opinions without the word-limit constraint.

However, there is a stereotype that Facebook moms are the embodiment of *karens*. Karen is a pejorative slang for an obnoxious, angry, entitled and often racist middle-aged white woman who uses her privilege to get her way or patronize others [3]. This stereotype originated from a subreddit in Reddit, *r/EntitledParents*, where *karens* are often described as anti-vaccination supporters, flat-earth believers, and entitled parents who often ask to speak to the manager [3].

It is important to note that there are more male Reddit users than female users. Male Reddit users make up 15% of the total users, in comparison with the 8% female users, with the remaining 77% without an account; thus, unidentifiable. Meanwhile, in terms of age demography, 42% of Reddit users are from the ages of 18 to 29. The second biggest age group, which amounts to approximately 14%, consists of people in their 30s and 40s [4].

There has been a similar study on Reddit by Emily Merritt [5] in 2012. Merritt [5] used discourse analysis while analyzing four conversations that included the trolling culture on Reddit. The study showed that trolling as an online discursive phenomenon is complex, multifaceted, and serves a purpose in online communication, and it should not be written off as without purpose [5].

The significance of this research is the investigation and identification of identity construction of Facebook moms in two sources: the secondary source (Reddit) and the primary source (Facebook) to prove the involvement of audience design in identity construction. It is interesting to see how different public phenomena which occur in the two platforms create different audience designs, which result in different identity construction.

### 1.1. Related Work

The identity theory proposed by Burke and Stets [6] will be used to analyze the data. Burke and Stets [6] defined identity as the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person. However, we should also consider another noteworthy definition of identity, proposed by Benwell and Stokoe [7] which states that identity is a public phenomenon, or more specifically a performance or construction that is interpreted by other people. This construction takes place in discourse and other social and embodied conduct, such as how we move, where we are, what we wear, how we talk, and so on. These ideas underpin a different strand of identity theory from the ‘interior’.

Identities do not always operate in isolation; rather, they interact with other identities in particular situations [6]. For example, a Facebook mom’s simple act of using her children’s photos contributes to the creation of her identity as a mother. Another example is the distinctive style of writing found in the posts. These particular manners vary, depending on the target audience. In this case, Bell’s audience-design theory comes into play. Sergeant and Tagg [8] argue that a speaker’s stylistic choices can “vary to accommodate their addresses” (p. 161).

With a specific target audience, each post is created with a definitive purpose. Posts in the subreddits *r/InsanePeopleFacebook*, *r/EntitledParents*, *r/InsaneParents*, *r/AntiVaxxers*, *r/FuckYouKaren*, and *r/ShitMomGroupsSay* are often comical to the point they appear condescending. The reason is that the posts are created to entertain a specific cluster of the audience, which are males between the ages of 18 to 29 and 30 to 49. On the other hand, the posts in *Praying Mothers’* are designed mostly to promote religious beliefs.

We also took a look at Emily Merritt’s thesis [5] to understand the troll culture in Reddit as we believe it would help us understand the birth of the ‘Karen’ stereotype in Reddit. This stereotype can be a form of trolling. According to Merritt [5], “trolling, as opposed to flaming, doesn’t consist of insulting, harmful, or offensive statements, though it may result in these. Trolling may be frustrating to its victims, and may produce feelings of contempt, anger, or humiliation, but the goal is not to set out to cause psychological damage or affliction to an individual or group” [5].

## 2. METHOD

*Karen* is often portrayed as a supporter of anti-vaccination, flat-earth theory, and other conspiracy theories. *Karen* is often described as abusive, racist, and entitled. This is where the problem with the *karen* stereotype on Reddit begins. The subreddits often generalize all Facebook moms as *karens* because there are many *karens* who are Facebook moms. Hence, the purpose of this study is to dismantle the misguided truth surrounding Facebook moms.

To achieve this objective, we analyzed posts from both Reddit and Facebook using the three aforementioned theories of identity. With Reddit, we looked at 120 posts from six subreddits: *r/InsanePeopleFacebook*, *r/EntitledParents*, *r/InsaneParents*, *r/AntiVaxxers*, *r/FuckYouKaren*, and *r/ShitMomGroupsSay*. We chose these subreddits because ‘Karen’ stories were often found in these subreddits. We also looked at posts which specifically talked about Facebook moms. With Facebook, we looked at 120 posts from six public Facebook groups: *MoM*, *NYC Moms*, *Los Angeles Moms*, *Austin Moms*, *San Diego Moms*, and *Praying Mothers’*. We chose English-speaking groups to avoid the loss of meaning in translation. We did not choose private or closed groups due to the privacy policy of not publishing group posts outside the group’s domain.

We used a qualitative approach to analyze the posts using identity theories. Each post consisted of at least one comment with interaction, either with the original poster or among commenters. The reason was to analyze the identity created through both direct and indirect communication because identity is a public phenomenon. Someone’s utterances may be interpreted differently by the readers depending on their delivery and the audience’s background knowledge. We wanted to show how these two social media platforms, through ‘audience design’, help form two different identities of Facebook moms.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Reddit’s Stereotype of Facebook Moms

Reddit, especially in *r/InsanePeopleFacebook*, *r/AntiVaxxers*, *r/FuckYouKaren*, *r/EntitledParents*, *r/InsaneParents*, and *r/ShitMomGroupsSay*, generalizes all Facebook moms as *karens*. We discover that the most common stereotypes in these six subreddits are illogical, entitled, and abusive. It is important to note that these subreddits have a common pattern in their

‘About’ section. As noted in *r/InsaneParents*’s ‘About’ section:

[...] We want to be a place where people can come and both **get support and laugh**. So this sub is a mixture of both the heartbreaking and the hilarious. [...]

Based on this description, they claim to have no malicious intent. Instead, they claim to provide support and humor for people who deal with ‘insane parents’. The other subreddits have similar claims, including being sarcastic and satirical.

### 3.1.1. Illogical

One of the most prominent features of *karens* in the eyes of these subreddits is that *karens* are illogical. More often than not, they are always presented in ways that will show their logical fallacy. Here is how a ‘Karen’ is portrayed on *r/AntiVaxxers*:

My point was that the plague disappeared **without the vaccine**.

The *karen* referred to the Black Death pandemic, which happened in Europe from 1346 – 1353, to argue that a vaccine for the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was not necessary because the plague would eventually subdue. However, there is a fallacy in her logic, as pointed out by a commenter:

YEAH BECAUSE PEOPLE DIED YOU **UNEDUCATED POTATO**.

The commenter compares *Karen*’s logic to a potato—a root vegetable. They also use personification by using the adjective ‘uneducated’ to emphasize their insult. An uneducated potato means that the ‘Karen’ is dumber than a potato, a root vegetable without intelligence in the first place. The capitalization of every letter in the comment also emphasizes the commenter’s frustration.

There is also a *karen* who uses ‘illogical’ arguments as an excuse not to wear a mask in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. Here is an excerpt in *r/EntitledParents*:

Just because **I** do not wear a mask doesn’t mean **I** am infecting you, if you are wearing a mask then why worry? **I** am the one at risk, not you!

The *karen* uses ‘I’ repeatedly, indicating that she is full of herself. According to Harvard Business Review, pronouns tell us where people focus their attention. If someone uses the pronoun ‘I,’ it’s a sign of self-focus [9]. In this case, the *karen* does not care whether she

will infect other people by not wearing a mask in public.

It is also very common to see these subreddits refer to *karen*’s lack of logic as a matter of fact. In the following example, a discussion following a post in *r/EntitledParents* showcases this behavior. By hurling insults casually as if they are obvious, the users strengthen the identity constructed within these subreddits that *karens* are illogical and that is a fact.

A : This EM has no brain cells  
 B : **Do any of them?**  
 A : Tbh you’re right

EM is an acronym of ‘Entitled Mother’, which is another name for *karens* who act entitled about something. Person B uses a rhetorical question to signify and generalize an undeniable notion that all *karens* lack of brain cells.

### 3.1.2. Entitled

Another common trope in *karens* is that they are entitled. According to Oxford’s Advanced Learner’s Dictionary [10], ‘entitled’ means to have the right to have and do something. *karens* who are Facebook moms often express their entitlement to their rights, such as not wearing a mask in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

A : **I will not shop** at Costco until you remove your mandatory mask rule!

Costco : Thank you for taking such a brave stand, A. We look forward to the documentary they will make about you someday.

B : Wow, not a very professional response Costco! Looks like **I will be getting a membership refund** myself! IT SHOULD BE A CHOICE!

Costco : We’ve chosen not to refund you.

These *karens* are trying to intimidate Costco to abolish their mandatory mask rule. They are using threats such as not going to shop there or getting a refund as if they are the only customers. This shows entitlement, where they are truly trying to enforce the ‘customer is always right’ motto through idle threats such as these.

*Karens* are often portrayed as entitled to their own children. On *r/InsaneParents*, a Reddit user creates a ‘meme’ that summarizes this behavior. According to Dictionary.com [3], a ‘meme’ is ‘a cultural item in the form of an image, video, phrase, etc., that is spread via the Internet and often altered creatively or humorously’. The meme goes like this:

Child: \*exists\*

Karen: Hippity, hoppity, my child is now my **property**.

The creator uses the word ‘property’ for two reasons. First, the word rhymes with ‘hippity’ and ‘hoppity’; hence, making it catchy. On a more disturbing level, the word ‘property’ also implies something we are entitled to. By calling her child her ‘property’, the *karen* does not acknowledge the fact that her child is a human being with his or her own rights. That is how entitled *karens* are portrayed.

### 3.1.3. Abusive

*Karens* are also often portrayed as abusive. According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary [10], ‘abusive’ refers to a behavior that involves violence. As such, these *karens* believe that violence is pivotal in disciplining their children. They may not always resort to violence from the very beginning, but once they are no longer in control of their children, they will opt to use it.

Yes, spanking is **absolutely necessary** for some kids. Physical pain is **the only thing** to make them change their behavior. It should never be done in anger and should be a last resort. I have an honor roll student with a job and a knack for being super well behaved.

The *karen* uses the expression ‘absolutely necessary’ to exaggerate the importance of violence in educating her children. She also includes ‘the only thing’ to suggest that there are no better ways to reprimand children should they do something wrong.

On Reddit, it is usual to assume that all Facebook moms are *karens* and all *karens* are abusive. Here is a comment from *r/FuckYouKaren*:

Only Karens are offended by the use of Karen to describe nosy, intrusive, rude, disgusting, racist, **ABUSIVE** people. If the shoe fits, lace that shit up and get the fuck out of my face.

The author generalizes every *karen* as ‘nosy’, ‘intrusive’, ‘rude’, ‘disgusting’, ‘racist’, and especially ‘abusive’.

## 3.2 Facebook’s Reality of Facebook Moms

*Karens* do exist. However, claiming that all Facebook Moms are Karen is a fallacy. In fact, there are many Facebook moms’ groups that are beneficial for the moms themselves, the people around them, and other mothers. We discover that these Facebook moms’

groups are used for sharing job vacancies, promoting businesses, selling products, sharing and seeking insight, joking, kinship searching, and promoting beliefs. From their posts and interactions, we notice some common traits among Facebook moms: productive, cooperative, and sociable.

### 3.2.1. Productive

One of the traits we discover is that Facebook moms are, more often than not, productive. This productivity may come from their experience as a mother, or simply from personal motivation. Here is an example from *Los Angeles Moms*:

Hi all! **I’m a birth and postpartum doula and homeschooling momma to 5**. Birth and postpartum work have slowed a bit so I’m hoping to fill some working gaps.

I’d love to **offer child care** for unexpected needs/ date nights/ just some intentional craft, play, learning time with your littles while you’re home, etc. Feel free to reach out!

This Facebook mom starts her post with her credibility, which is her job as a birth and postpartum doula. Then, she tries to relate to other Facebook moms by saying that she is a home-schooling mother to five children. After sharing her credibility and experience as a mother, she then eases her way to the actual purpose of her post, an offer. Her job as a doula and her experience as a mother allows her to create a job for herself. This post shows us how Facebook moms use their experience to remain productive.

The said productivity does not always come from their experience as mothers. It can also come from personal motivation, as seen from the *San Diego Moms* post below:

Hi amazing mamas! I’m really proud to share that I finally published my first book! It took me **2 + years to write and illustrate** but, **in the wee hours of the morning, as my babies slept, but I made it happen!**

This Facebook mom shares news about her book publication. The words in bold suggest that this Facebook mom, despite the minimal amount of time she has due to motherhood, manages to be productive.

### 3.2.2. Cooperative

In spite of Reddit’s portrayal of Facebook moms as entitled women, the reality on Facebook often proves otherwise. For one, Facebook moms are often cooperative with each other. ‘Cooperative’ means ‘doing something together or working together with

others towards a shared aim' [10]. To showcase this point, here is an excerpt from the *Austin Moms* group:

Hi Sweet Mamas, I am a local mom, teacher, and author of children's books and was hoping to **get some insight**. I have a new book releasing soon and was **wondering** if you ever read e-books (like kindle) to your kiddos or if you prefer physical books? Thanks for any insight!

The mother wants to publish her book, but she needs to know whether a physical or digital book is preferred by her target audience. Therefore, she asks for some insight into the group. Here are two of the replies:

For children, **physical books** are a **must!** My background is in early childhood education and there are a lot of programs that **don't let you use screens** for learning plus it will give the children a **chance to hold and turn the pages!**

My son's speech therapist loves **ebooks**. She uses them all the time. Especially the Sandra Boyton books that are somewhat **interactive**.

Not only does the first mother state her preferences, she also provides points to support her argument based on her background in early childhood education. On the other hand, the second mother's son has a speech therapist and finds e-books to be interactive for her child. Although the answers conflict with one another, the author can get some insight as to the pros and cons of both options.

Other than seeking insight, some mothers also request for help to 'Like' certain posts. Here is an example from *San Diego Moms*:

Hi Moms. My daughter painted a picture of a house in our neighborhood. She entered the painting in an art competition. We would appreciate it if you **Like** her picture at [link].

The mother asks the members of the group to like her daughter's painting for a competition. Here are two of the replies:

Just did. She is very **talented**. Good luck.

**Beautiful!** What talent! And she's in **2nd place** for most likes! 🍷

Not only does the daughter end up in second place for most likes, she also gets compliments from the group members. It shows how mothers can support each other to reach a certain goal.

### 3.2.3. Sociable

Although Reddit often portrays Facebook moms as abusive, in reality, there are Facebook moms who crack jokes when it comes to their children's behavior. As an example, on *NYC Moms*, a mother posts:

My house looks like I am losing a game of **Jumanji** 🤪🤪 #TeensAtHome

*Jumanji* is a famous 1995 movie that is familiar to many mothers. In the movie, the disasters that occur in the game happen in the real world too, such as elephant stampedes. However, if the players play it correctly, the disaster will stop. Likewise, if the players keep messing up, the conditions of their home will worsen. The mother cleverly uses *Jumanji* to refer to her house condition that gets messier by the day.

The Facebook group is also used to promote mothers' beliefs. On *Praying Mothers*, a mother posts a poster for a religious event called *Raising Godly Children*. The mother also includes the event's details, such as information about the speaker, host, and media in use.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our findings reveal that not all Facebook moms fall under the umbrella term of *karens*. The misconception of the stereotype emerged due to Reddit users being mainly concerned about appealing to their audience, as suggested by Bell's audience design that the *karen* stereotype is aimed at creating satirical and comical humor which meets Reddit's 'public phenomenon' agenda. The comedy relies heavily on the antagonistic features present in the 'Karen' stereotype. On Reddit, Facebook moms are portrayed as illogical, entitled, and abusive. On Facebook, Facebook moms are actually productive, cooperative, and sociable. We only took a look at 120 posts from six public Facebook moms' groups and 120 posts from six different subreddits. However, instead of seeing it only from Reddit's perspective, like what Merritt did, we used a primary source (Facebook) and a secondary source (Reddit). Our suggestion for further research is to use a more specific group of Facebook moms since our study talks about Facebook moms in general or other stereotypes on Reddit.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First and foremost, we would like to thank God Almighty for His abundant blessings in our lives. We would also like to thank our advisor, Ms. Ivonne Muliawati Harsono, S.S., M.S., for her feedback and guidance throughout the writing process. We are also grateful for our families and friends for their support. Last but not least, our word of thanks goes to the English Department of Petra Christian University as our home base.

## REFERENCES

- [1] O. Solon, *Teens Are Abandoning Facebook in Dramatic Numbers, Study Finds*. The Guardian, 2018. [E-book]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jun/01/facebook-teens-leaving-instagram-snapchat-study-user-numbers> [Accessed: July, 09 2020].
- [2] "Moms on social media 2019,." *Edison Research*, 2019. [E-book]. Available: <https://www.edisonresearch.com/moms-on-social-media-2019/> [Accessed: July, 02 2020].
- [3] "Here's how karen became the name all over the internet." Dictionary.com. n.d. [E-book] Available: <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/karen/> [Accessed: July, 02 2020].
- [4] "Reddit statistics for 2020: eye-opening usage & traffic data. *Foundation Marketing*. 2020. [E-book]. Available: <https://foundationinc.co/lab/reddit-statistics/> [Accessed: July, 7 2020].
- [5] E. Merritt, "An analysis of the discourse of internet trolling: a case study of reddit.com,." *Mount Holyoke College Institutional Digital Archive*, 2012. [E-book]. Available: <https://ida.mtholyoke.edu/xmlui/handle/10166/1058> [Accessed: September, 01 2020].
- [6] B. Benwell, E. Stokoe, *Discourse and Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, p.4, 2006.
- [7] P. Burke, J. Stets, *Identity Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- [8] J. Pennebaker, *Your Use of Pronouns Reveals Your Personality*. [E-book]. Harvard Business Review, 2011. Available: <https://hbr.org/2011/12/your-use-of-pronouns-reveals-your-personality> [Accessed: July, 10 2020].
- [9] P. Seargeant, C. Tagg, n.d. *The Language of Social Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p.161.
- [10] Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.