

# **“Facebook’s about to Know, Karen”: Mobilising Social Media to Sanction Public Conduct**

## ***Abstract***

This paper explores the social action of sanctioning an interlocutor’s conduct in public spaces through social media. Using membership categorisation analysis (Hester and Eglin 1997), we examine how, in offline face-to-face disputes filmed by one party, interactants deploy the name ‘Karen’ to sanction someone and threaten the transposition of the recording onto social media to impose accountability to the public at large. Our findings show how sanctioning through categorising an individual as a ‘Karen’ is interactionally achieved through framing conduct as entitled or otherwise problematic, distinguishing *in-situ* production of ‘Karen’ from a delivery that is perceptually unavailable to an interlocutor. We explore how social media functions as a resource to shape the ongoing encounter by orienting to the camera, and thus the online audience, as an external authority.

## ***Keywords***

membership categorisation analysis, sanctioning, transgression, degradation ceremonies, accountability, dispute, Karen

## **1. Introduction**

Sanctioning someone for their behaviour is a fundamental part of social interaction. Whether that be for an interactional infraction, such as interrupting a speaker, for something said or not said, or even for breaking a law. Any sanctioning brings to the fore the moral and social order, that is “any set of moral norms that regulates the way in which persons pursue objectives” (Goffman 1963: 8). Scrutinising *sanctioning* as a social action (Enfield and Sidnell 2017) therefore reveals what behaviour is treated as transgressive, how individuals seek to hold others accountable for such behaviour, and how in this process interlocutors build their relationship with each other. Taken together this shows how individuals produce the moral and social order as a way of doing culture-in-action (Hester and Eglin 1997). Our interest lies in how behaviour is worked up as sanctionable and the interactional work that is undertaken for others to see that behaviour in the same way.

The present study explores the intersection of the social action of *sanctioning* with social media, focusing on the affordances of social media as a resource to be used in offline interaction to sanction, or bolster a sanction, of someone’s behaviour. We examine recorded, face-to-face disputative encounters where an individual is sanctioned for their behaviour and where social media is invoked as a resource to do so. Prior work on disputative encounters (for example, Joyce and Walz 2022; Joyce and Sterphone 2022; Haugh and Sinkeviciute 2018; Reynolds 2015) has highlighted the rich opportunities for observing morality, entitlement, knowledge and accountability as they are produced as social actions *in situ*. Indeed, a central focus of research on disputative interactions lies in how behaviour is formulated as transgressive (Ran and Huang 2019) and more generally in considering morality (Robles and Castor 2019).

Many of these studies focus on how interlocutors evaluate and call out certain (often discriminatory) acts as well as how behaviour is policed in and through interaction. Such policing reveals individuals’ understanding of the moral and social norms of their culture, institution or relationship, and examining these encounters brings to view the ‘background expectancies’ (Garfinkel 1967) of everyday social life. The policing of behaviour is often rooted in discriminatory beliefs and assumptions, for example, accusing a non-White resident of “defacing private property” when they are in fact making changes to their own property, with the racist assumption being that the non-White resident could not be living in a wealthy neighbourhood. So, how can people push back against such prejudice by individuals who, by the very nature of them policing behaviour, have taken a highly entitled point of view?

One answer to that question is to develop a new vocabulary to precisely target such a transgression. An example is labelling someone a ‘Karen’. In English-speaking contexts, it can be used to describe a White woman who is being antagonistic, racist and is policing the behaviour of others, displaying entitlement, privilege and White supremacy (Negra and Leyda 2021). The label originated on social media in the 2010s (Know Your Meme 2022) and follows the tradition of certain negative features being associated with names. Previous examples include ‘Chad’ stereotypically describing an entitled man, and ‘Becky’ as a ‘basic’ (i.e. mainstream) young White woman. Recent work has examined how new labels are developed to target certain conduct; for example, “mansplaining” targeting a previously difficult-to-target form of sexism (Joyce et al. 2021). Developing and using these new terms allows for acts to be called out and understood as transgressive. In their analysis of ‘Becky’ and ‘Karen’ memes on Twitter, Williams (2020: 11) argues that uses of the label ‘Karen’ “call attention to, and reject, White women’s surveillance and regulation of Black bodies in public spaces”. Indeed, this ability to call out behaviour which has hitherto been difficult to target (cf. Joyce et al. 2021) lies at the heart of the label and, as Williams (2020) notes, restores agency to Black communities.

The present paper builds on this work and investigates the *in-situ* use of ‘Karen’ in social interaction, specifically how interlocutors employ the label ‘Karen’ and its inextricable ties to social media in the service of their interactional goal. We show (1) how ‘Karen’ is used to sanction problematic conduct and hold the perpetrator to account, thereby (2) distinguishing its *in-situ* production towards an interactant in a conflictual manner from a delivery that is not perceptually available to them. We also show (3) how filming the encounter allows speakers to use social media as a resource and mobilise it as an external authority, akin to the police or a manager, to hold their interlocutor to account.

In what follows we give a brief background on accountability and public sanctioning, introduce our analytic approach to understanding the phenomenon, and illustrate the working of ‘Karen’ through a first data extract. Following a description of our data and method, we analyse and discuss how ‘Karen’ achieves the social action of sanctioning problematic behaviour in two different *in-situ* compositions – perceptually available to the perpetrator and *in absentia* – and how the invocation of social media as a resource further supports the use of ‘Karen’.

## **2. Accountability, sanctioning and degrading in social interaction**

*Accountability* in social interaction involves interlocutors adhering to some omnirelevant social and moral ‘rules’ that govern their conduct, and thus people have a moral responsibility to adhere to, manage and account for breaches of these rules (Robinson 2016). Goffman discussed this in terms of ‘fitting in’ ([1959]1990) and how individuals use various strategies such as impression management ([1959]1990: 132) and face-work (1967) to present themselves in particular ways as to be perceived as socially acceptable by others. Early work in ethnomethodology on accountability emphasised the importance of shared understanding and expectation to maintain social order. For example, Garfinkel’s classic ‘breaching experiment’ (1967) had students ‘break’ the rules or social norms (such as challenging everything a co-interlocutor says) to demonstrate the unspoken ‘background expectancies’ that we hold about how interaction and everyday life ought to transpire. Accountability, then, is often studied when it rises to the surface and the background expectancies become visible. Fundamental to this ethnomethodological approach is the understanding that morality is not located in people’s minds, but “constituted through the understandings and orientations parties display, or can be taken to display, to one another in an interactional setting” (Turowetz and Maynard 2010: 504).

Building on these studies, later empirical work from Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorisation Analysis has scrutinised what various interactional practices tell us about the prevailing culture, social norms and relationship between interlocutors through, for example, how turns at talk are taken (Schegloff 1968), how repair and correction is attempted (Robinson 2006), how ‘blamings’ are sequentially organised (Pomerantz 1978), and how individuals attend to the potential consequence(s) of their social action through mitigation (Heritage 1990) or stance-taking (Kärkkäinen 2007). For instance, membership categories have been shown to achieve morally delicate social actions such as complaints by carefully managing self and other relations through racial categorisations (Whitehead 2013). Contemporary research has described the use of moral categorisation in the practice of shaming, exploring how behaviour is negatively evaluated in an effort to modify it, such as in parent-child encounters (Potter and Hepburn 2020) and in addressing sexual offending (Mullins and Kirkwood 2019).

The present research builds on this literature, exploring how individuals sanction others with reference to some ‘background’ social or moral expectancy. To understand the process whereby sanctions are imposed, achieved or contested, we examine encounters drawing on the notion of ‘degradation ceremonies’. Garfinkel (1956) coined this term to describe the process whereby an individual’s identity is lowered relative to others. This

process results in the target being shamed, humiliated, or otherwise exposed for their actions. For a ceremony to occur there ought to be a degrader, a target and an audience (see Therese and Martin 2010); however, these need not be simultaneously present, such as is the case of Goffman's (1963) study of stigma where people degraded in private must manage the knowledge of their stigma lest they become publicly discredited. Moreover, while these can be institutional rituals, such as a prosecutor portraying the character of the accused, our data features degradation ceremonies in public spaces where individuals are shamed for some ostensibly transgressive conduct. The conditions of a successful degradation ceremony are such that the audience of the ceremony are the witnesses to the degradation – whether that be co-present interlocutor(s) (such as a 'judge' in Garfinkel's courtroom example) or non-present interlocutor(s) (such as viewers of online videos).

Mobilising certain interactional resources, such as the act of filming, topicalising social media and inviting online public shaming, has recently been referred to as "call-out/cancel culture" and appears to, as Garcés-Conejos Blitvich describes, "reflect[s] both an increase in moralizing in the public sphere and more fundamental shift in the underlying *moral order of interaction itself*" (2022a: 73). Our research examines not the online public shaming itself, but rather the practices through which such shaming is set up *in situ*. Sequentially incorporating mobile-device related media has been described in terms of its import for action (Robles et al. 2023), its import for contributing to solidarity and friendship (Sierra 2021), and its recontextualisation onto social media and the characterisation of the transgression (Haugh 2022). Our analysis brings together this work on how morality is achieved through public sanctioning, practices for shaming, and degradation ceremonies to track the usage of 'Karen' and how it invites others to make sense of the target in the same way.

### **3. 'Karen' as a membership category**

We use an analytic approach called Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) to examine how speakers (known as 'members') categorise themselves and their co-interlocutors. MCA is an ethnomethodological approach developed by Eglin and Hester (1992) building on Harvey Sacks' work (see Francis and Hester 2017 for a detailed history). MCA explores the reasoning practice of members and how interlocutors organise themselves, others and objects in and through interaction. In essence, MCA reveals how people assemble the 'who-we-are' and 'what-we're-doing' (Butler et al. 2009) in social interaction. MCA is also uniquely flexible allowing it to be applied to different datasets, such as face-to-face encounters (Joyce

and Walz 2022), newspaper clippings (Gibson and Roca-Cuberes 2019), tweets (Housley et al. 2017), blogs (Walz and Fitzgerald 2020), or combined with other methods (Sterphone 2022).

The organising concept of MCA are *categories* which can be characterised as recognisable descriptions of a person, object, or event, such as ‘father’, ‘daughter’, ‘police officer’ or ‘vegetarian’. The descriptions are culturally associated with “rights, entitlements, obligations, knowledge, attributes and competencies” (Hester and Eglin 1997: 5). For example, drawing on the well-known example of ‘The baby cried. The mommy picked it up’ (Sacks 1995), picking up a crying baby is ‘category-bound’ because picking up a crying baby is something that a parent expectedly does, and because ‘being caring’ is a quality that parents accountably have. Thus, we recognise the mother to be the mother of this particular baby and we interpret the action of picking up in this sense. Categories are assembled into *membership categorisation devices* (Sacks 1995), which are collection of categories including their rules of application, *in situ* – in a particular environment for a particular purpose – such as into the device ‘family’, to stay with the above example. In sum, MCA shines a light on how members configure their relationship and make sense of the world.

One such way to configure relationships in social encounters involves the category ‘Karen’. When used categorially, the term serves to target a person who is exhibiting some form of entitlement. This can be illustrated through Extract 1, an encounter taking place between a couple (CAM and WOM) and a woman, whom we will call Isabella (ISA), in a dog park, a fenced off area within a park. The recording starts in the middle of an ongoing dispute about who can use the dog park.

### Extract 1 KAR18\_Dog park

**ISA** - Isabella

**CAM** - Camera Operator

**WOM** - Woman with the Camera Operator

01 **ISA:** ↑-eight of a sma:ll dog is twenty b- twenty-two pounds or  
02 [under]  
03 **WOM:** [can y]ou please leave us alone you came back and are  
04 harassing us when we as[ked you] to leave=  
05 **ISA:** [no I'm-]  
06 **WOM:** =and now you're coming back [to: ] yell over wh[at]  
07 **ISA:** [okay] [it] will  
08 be. reported=  
09 **WOM:** =leave us al<sup>o</sup>:ne  
10 **ISA:** I. (would) gladly if you just- ((turns to camera)) °oh

11            report it° yes (.) your do:g is not a small dog your do:g 12  
 is a medium sized dog and your dog attacked (.) ran over 13            my  
dog >when you came in< (.) ((walking away))  
 14    **WOM:** °Jesus°  
 15            (1.0)  
 16    **CAM:** bye Karen (1.2) oh yeah >that's right< <Isabella> you're 17  
 not Karen but you act like one  
 18            (1.8)  
 19    **ISA:** ((exits gate and attempts to shut it)) well I don't know 20  
 your name (unintelligible speech)  
 21    **CAM:** ER I TOLD YOU IT LAST TIME, (.) YOU SHOULD LEARN TO CLOSE 22  
 THE ↑GATE IF YOU'RE GONNA LEAVE THE DOG PARK

As the recording starts, Isabella is in the process of explaining what counts as a small dog, which presumably is a criterion for using the dog park. In interjacent overlap, the woman instead provides a formulation of Isabella's prior conduct "you came back and are harassing us" (lines 3-4). This portrays the conduct as sanctionable for Isabella's persistence on pursuing the dispute, in contrast to the woman's self-positioning of the couple as not being the party seeking this conflict. Pursuing her initial line of argument, Isabella points out that the illegitimate use of the dog park "will be reported" (lines 7-8), which acts as a potential threat of mobilising an authority to hold the couple to account. The woman's repeated "leave us alone" (line 9) positions the couple as not the ones to blame for the dispute. Isabella's concession that she would do so "gladly" (line 10) counters this implicit positioning of her as the unreasonable or trouble-seeking party and justifies her persistence by locating some fault or omission in the couple's conduct "if you just-" (line 10), before abandoning this line of argument and instead orienting to the camera and positioning herself in front of it as if she was in fact reporting to it, describing her version of events prior to the filming and hence what the issue at hand is (lines 11-13). Note how this contrasts with the formulation of prior events by the woman (lines 3-4) – both parties' take on the situation is now 'on record' for the camera, so to speak, and thus available to a non-present potential future audience of the recording.

The camera operator's response "bye Karen" (line 16) is a mock closing of the encounter that allows him to neatly package his criticism of her conduct in one word. His turn plays with the ambiguity of 'Karen' – whilst commonly a name, when used as a category it calls out a person's conduct as in some form entitled, such as Isabella's policing of who can or cannot use the dog park. This ambiguity is evident in the man's immediate mock self-repair to Isabella's real name and the clarification "you're not Karen but you act like one" (lines 16-17). He portrays her conduct as recognisable as that of a certain type of person – a 'Karen': according to him, not only has she behaved in a problematic fashion in this

encounter, but she is the kind of person who would regularly do such things. Yet Isabella does not orient to this implied criticism; instead, she treats ‘Karen’ as a name by pointing out that she does not know his name (lines 19-20), which in turn is treated as sanctionable “I told you it last time” (line 21). Like in later examples, the use of ‘Karen’ responds to an apparent invocation of authority which the target (i.e. ‘Karen’) does not have sufficient authority to do. In this example, Isabella is claiming authority to police what dogs can use the park, and the entitlement to claim authority in an otherwise mundane situation is challenged by the couple calling Isabella out as a ‘Karen’. This is a low-stakes challenging of that authority claim compared to, for example, a police-citizen encounter. The use of ‘Karen’, at its core, strikes at an abuse of privilege (whether gained from gender, race, class, or other characteristics) in situations for which it is not warranted.

To summarise, the name ‘Karen’ can be mobilised as a category to sanction a person’s conduct and call out some unwarranted display of entitlement. By positioning an interlocutor as ‘the sort of person who does this sort of thing’, it magnifies their culpability by treating the transgression as not incidental, but as arising from their personal nature. Our analysis explores different ways in which this is interactionally achieved in a collection of recorded encounters to which we now turn.

#### **4. Data and method**

This research explores recordings of social interactions that feature categorisations of interlocutors as ‘Karen’, as outlined above. These are face-to-face exchanges in public spaces – including chance encounters, but also service transactions in institutional settings. They often have a disputative character and are usually recorded on a mobile phone by one of the interlocutors and subsequently shared on social media. The categorisation of one party as a ‘Karen’ can occur either *in situ* during the interaction, or *post factum* afterwards on social media through video titles, captions, descriptions or hashtags. Recordings were identified through searches on social media sites such as TikTok, YouTube and X (formerly Twitter). They were collected and transcribed according to Jefferson’s (1984) conventions. The research has received ethical approval from Ulster University. The collection and analysis of opportunistic videos is best described by Jones and Raymond (2012) and Whitehead et al. (2018). Our collection comprises 21 recordings of encounters featuring categorisations of ‘Karen’. In all collected cases, the language used is a variety of English.

We use Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA; Hester and Eglin 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002). As outlined above, this approach provides the tools to empirically study

social interaction and its sequential and categorial organisation. In ethnomethodological fashion, the data was analysed without a particular research question in mind, but with the general aim to explore how categorisations of an interlocutor as a ‘Karen’ are produced and what social action they accomplish, taking into account the sequence leading up to them as well as how such categorisations maintain or challenge the moral order and thereby produce culture-in-action (Hester and Eglin 1997).

The present study focuses on a sub-set of the collection by exploring instances where ‘Karen’ is used during the encounter itself (as opposed to on social media), and where there is a noticeable orientation by at least one party to the act of recording and/or a potential future transposition to social media. A closer analysis brought to light that *in-situ* categorisations are produced in two different contexts: they are either (1) uttered in a way as to expectably be perceptually available to the targeted interlocutor – whether directly addressed to them or said about them with the ostensible aim to be heard by a co-present party. Alternatively, (2) categorisations as ‘Karen’ are made in a way to be perceptually unavailable to the individual they categorise, such as when the person is out of earshot. Whilst there may of course be ambiguity around whether an interlocutor was in fact within earshot or not, and even if they were, whether they perceived the categorisation, this is not for the researchers to decide. Rather, this distinction is a members’ issue in that categorisations are built for one or the other context based on their turn-design and sequential position. As such, they are also designed to accomplish a similar goal in different ways, as the analysis shows.

## **5. Analysis**

Having introduced the category ‘Karen’ as well as pointed to some its common features, the following analytic sections consider instances where interactants show some orientation to the encounter being recorded and where ‘Karen’ is used *in situ*. We begin with a focus on instances where the categorisation is available to the target, before moving on the instances where the categorisation is made in a way to be available for the online audience, yet unavailable to the targeted party.

### *5.1 In-situ categorisation available and conflictual to the interlocutor*

Categorising an interlocutor as a ‘Karen’ can serve to hold them to account for problematic conduct or an attitude they are exhibiting. In the extracts below, this is paired with an orientation to the filming of the ‘Karen’ either by the camera operator or by the person

accused of being a Karen, in an effort to police behaviour and exert social control through the threat of judgement by a potential future social media audience.

Extract 2 is taken from a dispute between two road users in a street: a woman driving a car and a man who is filming their dispute and, at the time of recording, is on foot. The contentious issue is whether the man had cut the woman off – ‘cutting off’ typically referring to a driver abruptly driving their car in front of another, causing the other party to take evasive action. The recording starts at line 1 when the dispute is already under way.

### Extract 2 KAR20\_Racist Karen

**DRI** – Driver

**CAM** – Camera Operator

01 **DRI:** -THE SECOND CLASS CITIZENSHIP IN THIS  
02 FUCKING [(COUNTRY]  
03 **CAM:** [re:ally↑]I don't think so >I didn't do  
04 a:nything to you<  
05 **DRI:** YE:AH [YOU DID (inaudible) ]  
06 **CAM:** [>and you followed me a:ll the way ↑he:re<]  
07 **DRI:** OH [GO TIKTOK VIRAL ] go tiktok viral=  
08 **CAM:** [all the way↑ ]  
09 **DRI:** =[I don't care I'm not on so ]cial media  
10 **CAM:** [Ple.hh- you're a Karen dude-] absolute Karen (0.6)  
11 >I did ↓nothing to you:<  
12 **DRI:** uh- [suck it up dude, suck it with YOUR] TINY DICK AND=  
13 **CAM:** [no= no one= no one cut you o:ff↑= ]  
14 **DRI:** =YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE FUCKED [WITH ME]  
15 **CAM:** [>no one ] cut you off↑  
16 [you're throwing ↑rac- you're throwing ↑racial slurs]=  
17 **DRI:** [YOU FUCKI- huh- yea:h you did ]  
18 **CAM:** =at ↑me<  
19 **CAM:** >I don't even >know who you are↑<<

The recording starts with a struggle over who is at fault regarding a prior ‘unhappy incident’, for which a responsible party needs to be identified (Pomerantz 1978). The camera operator asserts his innocence “I didn’t do anything to you” (lines 3-4), which is rejected in line 5, before making a counter-accusation through the repeated emphasis on the driver having followed him ‘all the way’ (lines 6 and 8) to the site where the dispute unfolds. This positions the camera operator as innocent and the driver as the party unreasonably seeking and – quite literally – pursuing an argument.

The driver then attends to the encounter being recorded and threatens what may happen to the recording: “go tiktok viral” (line 7). Interestingly, this can be heard as the camera operator going viral, presumably if he chose to upload his recording, when what may

be expectable is for herself to receive potentially negative social media attention.

Nevertheless, the accused driver attends to having their conduct made public on social media as a likely outcome of the filming and as a threat, evinced by her assurance that this does not work on her, “I don’t care”, followed by an account “I’m not on social media” (line 9). The very act of filming the encounter is thus seeable by the target of the recording as a means of involving future social media viewers as witnesses to and judges of the altercation – although the driver here dismisses this as inconsequential to her.

The driver’s orientation to the filming is taken up by the camera operator, who now calls her “a Karen” (line 10) – the indefinite article makes it evident that ‘Karen’ is used as a category here – thus positioning her as a type of person displaying problematic conduct as is routinely filmed and shared on social media. This is strengthened by the upgrade to “absolute Karen” – an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986; Norrick 2004) signalling that there is a gradable understanding of what a Karen is, and that the driver fits the category fully by clearly displaying the category predicates. The camera operator thus maximises his challenge of her conduct, whilst contrasting it to his own, which he again portrays as that of an innocent party “I did nothing to you” (line 11), now in an upgraded formulation of the original delivery (lines 3-4).

Following the camera operator’s repeated claim of innocence, a struggle ensues over the relevant issue at hand. The driver orients to the camera operator being a man and insults him “with your tiny dick” (line 12), which is hearable as suggesting that she is being treated poorly based on being a woman. In contrast, the camera operator raises a different categorial issue, namely that of her “throwing racial slurs” (line 16) at him. Either conduct – be it sexism or racism – would be highly problematic and sanctionable. Blame allocation here is a members’ issue, and categorising the driver as ‘a Karen’ serves this purpose by handily packaging the driver’s problematic conduct as a categorial matter recognisable to a future online audience. Note also the similarities to Extract 1, as the person recording the encounter has ensured that their version of events is captured on record and made available to potential non-present viewers of the clip by stating what offense the other party has committed before the recording started, which capitalises on the act of filming as a means of sanctioning the other party.

Extract 3 is an encounter at a checkout between a customer who is buying some alcoholic drinks (CUS), the server who operates the till (SER) and a bystander who is filming the encounter (CAM). Before the extract examined here, there has been some discussion around who is next to be served, the customer or another bystander, who does not get

involved (13 lines omitted). We focus on the moments when the actual service encounter between the customer and the till operator unfolds and is commented on by the camera operator.

### Extract 3: KAR16\_Buying alcohol ID

**CUS** - Customer

**SER** - Server

**CAM** - Camera Operator

14 **SER:** ma'am >I need your ID.< (.)  
15 **CUS:** (well) I'll put my phone number in (1.0)  
16 **SER:** <I just need your I:D>  
17 [and then you can put your phone number]  
18 **CUS:** [I can put my phone [number in please]]  
19 **CAM:** [everybody gets I]D'd  
20 [mine gets scanned] every time I'm here  
21 **CUS:** [my phone number- ]  
22 (3.0)  
23 **CUS:** I can put my phone number in right now >for ya<  
24 **CAM:** I'm a [lot younger than you]  
25 **SER:** [(ring it out) >make ]up your mind<=  
26 **CUS:** =<I will> definitely <do ↑it> (.) and I don't know or  
27 care if you know who I am ↑either (.) >I don't give a  
28 ((edited bleep to disguise (fuck)))<  
29 **CAM:** facebook's about to know (4.0) Karen  
30 **CUS:** have a great ↑day  
31 (5.0)  
32 **SER:** °you need to- follow the prompts there°  
33 **CUS:** perfe[ct]  
34 **CAM:** [↑w]hat's your name=  
35 **SER:** =there's nothing in here <for you> to ring out (.)  
36 **CUS:** I have American (Express) Platinum I bet that's eh  
37 [ e-enough]  
38 **SER:** [you have n]o product in there because you have given me no  
39 ID  
40 (1.3)  
41 **CAM:** Karen [what's your last name]  
42 **CUS:** [what's it matter I ha]ve a ((edited bleep for  
43 (fucking)) American Express card that's platinum (1.8)  
44 ↑>take ↑tha:t<=  
45 **SER:** =ma'am (.) <there is no product rung in without an  
46 ID>=  
47 **CUS:** =you wan- you would have it I-  
48 **SER:** do you wanna give me an ID=  
49 **CUS:** =d'you know what >give me a manager< (.) [right now]  
50 **SER:** [ma'am I a]m the  
51 man[ager]  
52 **CAM:** [she ]is the manag[er ]  
53 **CUS:** [<I:]don't> believe it  
54 **CAM:** I'm here everyday I have to show my ID everyday (.)  
55 °just show it°  
56 **CUS:** who [the ]hell are you  
57 **SER:** [you-]  
58 **CAM:** I'm not Karen  
59 (1.0)  
60 **SER:** ma'am-



thereby orienting to the ambiguity of ‘Karen’ being a name as well as a category that we have seen in Extract 1. However, both turns are arguably designed as much for the sake of the recording as for the customer: the camera operator does not speak up, approach or undertake any other action likely to attract the customer’s attention, who is engaged in a different interactional project and does not respond to the camera operator’s turns.

Now let us explore an instance when the customer does orient to the camera operator, occasioning the third categorisation of her as a ‘Karen’. Similar to his prior turn in lines 20-21, the camera operator normalises the act of providing ID by pointing out that he has to do so in each transaction despite being a daily customer (line 53). At this point, the customer turns around to him, for the first time acknowledging – and challenging – his involvement with “who the hell are you” (line 55). This provides an opportunity for him to sanction her conduct, which he does by responding that he is “not Karen” (line 57), implying in turn that she is. Yet although the customer keeps her gaze on him until he has finished his turn, she does not respond, instead turning back and pursuing her transaction with the server. This is an instance where an *in-situ* categorisation of an interlocutor as a ‘Karen’ is perceptually available to its target, whilst not occasioning a response. Nevertheless, the category is available to the online audience and invites them to side with the camera operator’s judgement of the behaviour as sanctionable.

The camera operator is not alone in his orientation to a non-present authority that may impose judgement; indeed, both the server and the customer at different points in the interaction invoke an authority to progress their interactional project. When the customer’s attempt to pay for her items is repeatedly met by the server with a request for ID, she demands her to “give me a manager right now” (line 48). This positions the server as the problematic party to the interaction, who may yield in the face of authority. However, this is unsuccessful, as the server points out that she embodies this authority herself: “ma’am I am the manager” (lines 49-50). The server, in turn, after repeatedly failing to elicit ID from the customer, presents an alternative “or I will call the police” (line 61), now invoking an authority to give weight to her request. Although this is not immediately successful, after emphasising one more time that a purchase cannot be made without ID (lines 66-68), the server finally obtains the customer’s ID.

In summary, in Extract 3 the categorisation of a party displaying problematic behaviour as a ‘Karen’ is produced *in situ* and with a reasonable likelihood of being available to the categorised person, despite not occasioning a response. More prominently, however, ‘Karen’ achieves the branding of the recorded conduct as transgressive and sanctionable, and

producing the categorisation *in situ* to the camera invites a future online audience to affiliate with this stance and pass judgement on its target.

## 5.2 Categorisation *in absentia*

Some encounters in our collection feature the category ‘Karen’ being deployed *in situ*, yet the use of the category is designed not to be heard by the ostensible target, but to be available to a non-present audience on social media. This phenomenon occurs when the target of the categorisation is seemingly out of earshot, which we here refer to as a categorisation *in absentia*. We take this to mean that whilst still technically there, they are absent from the ‘interaction space’ – be it too far away, separated by a physical divide such as outside of a car, or on hold during a phone call. The following three extracts illustrate that this is consequential for how ‘Karen’ achieves the social action of sanctioning.

Extract 4 is taken from a video shared online in the summer of 2020 during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement following the death of George Floyd. Two passers-by, Lisa (LIS) and Robert (ROB), approach the Camera Operator (CAM), who is in the process of applying a chalk BLM message to the wall of his property in an expensive and elite neighbourhood in San Francisco. The couple confront him and threaten to call the police regarding the BLM message, which they later do. CAM recorded their encounter, which was originally shared via his personal social media before going ‘viral’. Lisa and Robert are both White and the Camera Operator is Filipino, as transpired from subsequent media coverage of the incident. We show how the encounter unfolds after the couple have suggested that whilst ‘free to express [his] opinions’, CAM is ‘defacing private property’ (21 lines omitted).

### Extract 4: KAR10\_Private Property

**LIS** - Lisa

**ROB** - Robert

**CAM** - Camera Operator

22   **LIS:** it's private property  
23   **CAM:** but >it's er< if I did live here and it was my property  
24           this would be absolutely fi:ne=  
25   **ROB:** =totally  
26   **LIS:** if (you/it [lived here]            )  
27   **CAM:**           [an you don't kno:w] if I live here or  
28           [if this is my property]  
29   **LIS:** [ actually we actually] do know that's why we're asking  
30   **CAM:** [oh really] because you live here right? °you said  
31           [so°]  
32   **LIS:** [ no] because we know the person who [does] live here  
33   **CAM:** OHh: [okay            ]  
34   **LIS:**           [°that's why°]

35 CAM: [then I- I suggest you call them or:]  
36 LIS: [(XXX) ] we're not disagreeing  
37 with you  
38 CAM: or call the police (0.9) [or,]  
39 LIS: [we ] don't wanna call the police  
40 CAM: [because you're accusing me]  
41 LIS: [(we just want you to) ]  
42 CAM: of a crime (.) °correct°  
43 LIS: what I'm asking you is why [are you ]  
44 CAM: [and I'm not ans]wering you<  
45 LIS: [okay that's fair]  
46 ROB: [(XXX) ]  
47 LIS: ↑that's fair↑  
48 CAM: >so your choices are to call the cops if you believe I'm<  
49 (calling/committing) a crime >and I would more than be happy  
50 to talk to em<  
51 LIS: okay thank you  
52 CAM: what's your name again  
53 LIS: I'm Lisa  
54 CAM: >Lisa what's your last name<  
55 LIS: what is your name  
56 CAM: what's your name (.) [I asked first Lisa ]  
57 LIS: [I'm not committing a crime] s:ir.  
58 CAM: what's your name sir  
59 ROB: I'm (Robert)  
60 CAM: what's your last name sir  
61 LIS: what is your first name sir  
62 CAM: >I- I'm not answering I'm not talking to you you're talking  
to  
63 me I'm asking you the questions<  
64 LIS: well we're not doing anything illegal?  
65 CAM: neither am I.  
66 LIS: [you are actually]  
67 ROB: [actually you a:e] [(because it's private property)  
68 CAM: [ really oh ]okay  
69 well then (.) call the cops  
70 LIS: we will do  
71 CAM: Lisa and Robert?  
72 LIS: >yeah<.  
73 CAM: I'll be right here  
74 LIS: okay thank you [(°so much°)]  
75 CAM: [↑bye↑ ]  
76 (.) ((LIS and ROB are walking away, LIS on the phone))  
77 CAM: and that (.) people is why (.) >Black lives matter< (.)  
78 LIS: (XXX)  
79 (.)  
80 CAM: that's Karen and she's calling the cops (.) and this is  
81 gonna be really funny (.) because she knows the people who  
82 live here (.) person'lly.

In their interaction with the camera operator, Lisa and Robert are overtly respectful, showing willingness to offer their names and demonstrate that they are reasonable (see, for example, “that’s fair” in lines 45 and 47). However, the issue with this conduct is not visible at the surface level. Despite their polite and ostensibly co-operative behaviour, Lisa and Robert display entitlement by interrogating the camera operator and by accusing him of ‘defacing’ private property. This formulation of events orients to the act of writing a BLM message on a

wall as problematic and illegal conduct. Furthermore, when the camera operator resists answering the questions put to him, Lisa and Robert orient to this resistance as unwillingness to answer due to his wrongdoing. However, these resistant responses exploit the epistemic imbalance and deliberately mislead Lisa and Robert, thus baiting them to reveal the underlying racist assumptions being made. By demonstrating this epistemic imbalance, the camera operator makes their problematic attitude even more visible.

Towards the end of the encounter, the camera operator encourages Lisa and Robert to “call the cops”, an action typically done by a ‘Karen’ and something he initially suggests at line 38, and later at 69. This puts an end to the encounter as the camera operator suggests that the regulation of his behaviour should fall to the police, not Lisa and Robert as citizens. As Lisa and Robert walk away, the camera operator begins to speak directly to a future online audience, whereas the prior talk was a conversation between the camera operator and the couple. This audience-oriented talk begins at line 77, as the camera operator summarises and comments on his interaction with Lisa and Robert. At line 80, he categorises Lisa as a ‘Karen’, despite knowing her real name that she has given during their encounter. This categorisation is produced *in absentia* – at a point when Lisa is out of earshot and thus designedly for an online audience. This then invites that audience to make sense of Lisa’s actions as being bound to that category – namely that being a ‘Karen’ accounts for Lisa’s entitled and racist behaviour. This is strengthened by the sequential positioning of the categorisation after the camera operator’s emphasis that “Black lives matter” – implying that the problematic conduct ought to be viewed, and most likely judged as racist, in the context of a social movement receiving large social media attention.

Extract 5 is a recording of someone taking a call over speaker phone so the viewers of the recording can hear both sides of the phone conversation. The call-taker (and recorder) appears to be working as a receptionist for a car repair shop and is talking to a client about booking a repair. The call begins with the call-taker putting the client on hold and speaking directly to the camera. Following this, the call-taker resumes her transaction with the client.

### **Extract 5: KAR15\_Phone Appointment**

**CAL** - Call-taker  
**CLI** - Client

01     **CAL:** >N-n- no< no, †I understand >I’m gonna place you< on a:  
02             brief hold ma’am >gimme< o::ne second (.) ((puts client  
03             on hold to speak to camera))  
04     **CAL:** °I have the biggest fucking Karen on the phone †ever,

05 and I would just like you all to experience this with  
06 me°  
07 (1.2)  
08 **CAL:** (.hhh) So as I was saying, because you missed your  
09 appointment yesterday, we sent a reminder text, we sent  
10 a reminder email (.hh) uhmm >I actually remember  
11 speaking to you few days ago< regarding your  
12 appointment, <we can't get you in> (.) today or  
13 tomorrow (.hh)uhh- just because you missed your  
14 appointment yesterday (.hh) but again like I said, I'd be  
15 more than happy to schedule you from= t- two weeks from  
16 today  
17 (1.4)  
18 **CLI:** You're not understanding, I don't wanna come in  
19 two weeks, I wanna come in today. ((CAL looks directly  
20 at the camera with a broad smile))  
21 **CAL:** I understand, but=(0.4) <because you missed your  
22 appointment>, we don't have room today, nor do we have  
23 room next week (.hh) so, I'm tryna help you out here and  
24 put you in for two weeks, .hh ummm and that's the best  
25 that I can do for you  
26 **CLI:** >No, but I need my car fixed so you're gonna have to  
27 make space for me to come in today<  
28 (2.3)  
29 **CAL:** pt Uh, >do you want me to give< you: another  
30 number for another dealership or= or what?

From lines 1 to 3, the call-taker notifies the client that she is about to be placed on hold. With the client on hold, the call-taker talks specifically to the audience of this recording and categorises the client as a 'Karen'. In this instance, she does so by calling her "the biggest fucking Karen ... ever". This extreme case formulation (see Pomerantz 1986; Norrick 2004) not only legitimises the call-taker's claims (Pomerantz 1986), but it is also an attempt to justify the surreptitious recording of a client's call and the subsequent sharing on social media, as the client's behaviour is so entitled that she is quantifiably "the biggest fucking Karen ... ever". This categorisation is produced *in absentia* with the targeted party on hold, which serves to frame the behaviour the audience is about to hear as being attributable to the 'Karen' categorisation.

At line 8, when the call-taker resumes the conversation with the client on loudspeaker, the call-taker summarises the situation and explains why she cannot book the client in any sooner, and offers to book her in for an appointment in two weeks. Whilst plausibly built as a summary from the client's perspective, at the same time this serves to inform viewers of the recording of what had occurred in the interaction prior to it being recorded, as well as portraying the call-taker's company as the blameless party in having taken all necessary steps to remind the client of their appointment. At lines 18-19, the customer rejects the call-taker's offer and instead states "I wanna come in today". The client claims an epistemic issue, namely that the call-taker does not understand, which is met with a correction by the call-

taker to confirm that she does indeed understand, as well as a repetition of the reason for not being able to schedule an appointment sooner. The client rejects that offer by way of a demand to have her car fixed today (lines 26-27). In response to the client's problematic insistence on special treatment, the call-taker looks directly at the camera and smiles (lines 19-20), as through her entitled behaviour the client inadvertently confirms the call-taker's prior categorisation of her as a 'Karen'. Whilst the categorisation *in absentia* is thus unavailable to the client, it serves to sanction her conduct once the recording has been shared on social media, and it invites online viewers to agree. Noticeably here, the initial conduct occasioning the categorisation occurs before the recording starts. But due to the client's persistence in her pursuing her goal – and perhaps aided by her unawareness of being recorded – some of the problematic behaviour is nevertheless captured in the audio for a future online audience to witness and sanction.

In Extract 6, the camera operator is not directly interacting with the ostensible Karen but is instead recording the observed encounter from their vehicle. The interaction unfolds between a customer and member of staff when the customer is expressing dissatisfaction with the service she is receiving.

#### **Extract 6: KAR06\_I'm gonna submit this to Karens gone wild**

**CUS** - Customer

**MoS** - Member of Staff

**CAM** - Camera Operator

01 **CUS:** I DON'T WANT YOU TO FORGET THAT I'M ↑HERE ((*shakes head*  
02 *and puts arms out*)) IT'S BEEN AN HOUR AND A ↑HA~LE FOR  
03 [GOODNESS SAKE ]  
04 **MoS:** [>I won't forget it<]  
05 (2.9)  
06 **CAM:** °I'm going to submit this to Karens go(huh)ne  
07 wild ((*laughs*))  
08 **CUS:** you call ↑this good service  
09 **CAM:** .hhh  
10 **MoS:** ma'am if you stand outside [(unintelligible)]  
11 **CUS:** [excuse me:↑ ]

In this extract, the interlocutor labelled 'Karen' by the camera operator is displaying dissatisfaction with the service she is receiving at a store. She is standing outside the store during what appears to be the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, based on the apparent social distancing measures and the year of recording (2020). The safety measures necessitate that customers collect purchases outside rather than entering the store. As the recording begins, the customer is shouting with a notably raised voice at the staff member. In making this

assertion (line 1), she issues a complaint (“IT’S BEEN AN HOUR AND A ↑HA~LF”). The camera operator comments that she is going to submit the recording she is making to “Karens gone wild”. This is a phrase regularly used on social media platforms to describe compilation videos of short clips of ‘Karens’, that is of people (usually White women) acting entitled or antagonistic. By invoking ‘Karens gone wild’ the camera operator categorises the target’s behaviour as that of a ‘Karen’ with it being suitable for submission, and indeed, like in prior extracts, this invites the audience of the recording to reach a consensus and see the behaviour in the same way. Whilst in the prior extracts the categorisation of an individual as a ‘Karen’ comes as a result of a direct interaction with them, in this instance, the camera operator does not appear to engage with the interlocutors and instead identifies the entitled behaviour of the customer in her interaction with others. Again, then, the categorisation *in absentia* does not serve to call out the individual directly for their problematic conduct, but instead it orients to social media as a site where such behaviour will be and is regularly sanctioned, making the encounter viewable as one of many that follow such a pattern, as the plural ‘Karens’ suggests.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

Social media abounds with opportunistic recordings of individuals in public spaces being antagonistic, acting entitled, or being discriminatory. Our analysis has focused on offline encounters featuring categorisations of such individuals as a ‘Karen’ *in situ* as captured in the recording. We have shown how ‘Karen’ frames the problematic conduct as not incidental but tied to an individual by virtue of the type of person they are – namely one that regularly behaves in a problematic way, i.e. displays the category predicates, and that can be seen as part of a wider societal pattern and meme with a large social media presence. The target ‘Karen’ is attributed responsibility for falsely claiming authority in a given situation – packaging their transgression within the category ‘Karen’ invites others (usually on social media) to see them as responsible for the disagreement. This firstly achieves sanctioning in the here and now (Enfield and Sidnell 2017). Secondly, with the invocation of a future audience through filming the encounter and with reference to ‘Karen’ as a social media meme, it compounds that sanction to further degrade the target’s status (Garfinkel 1956). Describing an individual as a ‘Karen’ is a clever interactional move by the categoriser because it means that the more the individual engages in the dispute and/or shows entitlement, the more recognisable they are as an incumbent in the category ‘Karen’, as illustrated in Extract 5.

Our analysis has shown that categorising an interlocutor as a ‘Karen’ achieves the social action of sanctioning their conduct not only by calling it out, but also by making the matter a problem tied to the person by virtue of their character. Our exploration has revealed that sanctioning is achieved through *in-situ* categorisations in two different interactional environments. On the one hand, interlocutors deploy ‘Karen’ to sanction a co-interlocutor in a conflictual manner to their face as part of the ongoing encounter, as in Extracts 1 to 3. On the other hand, Extracts 4 to 6 illustrate instances where ‘Karen’ is delivered *in absentia* to be perceptually unavailable to the categorised person, but where sanctioning of the problematic conduct is still achieved through the recording and uploading of the encounter for a future audience to reach consensus on and negatively judge the ostensible ‘Karen’. This shows that the categorisation does more than shape the ongoing interaction: it also makes the interaction visible as part of a larger discourse on what is judged as inappropriate and sanctionable behaviour in a particular society, thus contributing to negotiations of the moral order and the creation of culture-in-action (Hester and Eglin 1997).

Furthermore, all extracts presented here involve some orientation to the act of filming and/or transposition onto social media by at least one party, often in conjunction with one or both parties ensuring that their version of events occurring prior to the filming is nevertheless captured on camera (Extracts 1, 2 and 5). The analysis has shown how the act of filming such encounters affords interlocutors the opportunity to mobilise a future audience as an external, albeit at present absent, authority to pass judgement and publicly shame them for their conduct. And indeed, parties to the encounter may orient to this threat of having online judgement passed on them – even if to call the threat out as ineffective (Extract 2) – which is evidence that the possibility of sanctioning through social media is a members’ concern. Thus, whilst the encounters analysed in this study take place offline, they are inextricably bound to social media not only because they form part of the online ‘Karen’ meme, but also because such memes in turn are used to accomplish social actions in the offline encounter (Williams 2020).

Throughout our analysis we have not directly tied the use of ‘Karen’ to macro-social issues like other authors (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2022b), instead focusing on the use of ‘Karen’ *in situ*. That notwithstanding, ‘Karen’ as a category is inextricably connected to issues of power abuse, gender and race. In Extract 1 we discussed how ‘Karen’ strikes at a low-stake abuse of power. At the same time, through the use of a single category, ‘Karen’, a speaker can dismiss their target’s argument and invite others to see the target’s behaviour (and arguably, their argument) as without merit. It is therefore relevant that ‘Karen’, as is the

case in our data, polices spaces within which (usually White) women are claiming some entitlement and in some cases display White surveillance and racism (Williams 2020). This can have potentially dangerous outcomes for the parties to the encounter, such as if a White woman calls the police on a Black man (see Williams 2020). It is the transgression, entitlement and policing of others' behaviour which occasions the category, and the category in turn calls out and thus checks and sanctions this very conduct. Whilst beyond the scope of this paper, the macro-social implications of 'Karen' could be further explored in future work.

We have argued that the creation of new vocabularies such as 'Karen' is one way of calling out injustices by making them recognisable as a larger societal pattern, and in this paper we have shown how *in-situ* uses of 'Karen' achieve sanctioning through a mobilisation of social media in two constellations: when perceptually available to the target, and *in absentia* produced for an online audience. This shows that these new vocabularies achieve sanctioning even if produced in a way that is not perceptually available to the targeted party. Thus, not only do 'Karen' encounters often feature an orientation to calling the police, a manager or some other external authority to resolve an issue at hand, but they also mobilise social media as a resource for accomplishing the social action of sanctioning.

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