



THEME 02

Is the meme culture causing an increase in widespread stereotypes?

SOCIAL &
CULTURE

TECHNOLOGY

MEDIA

Some think it's funny, others deem it yet another example of the stigmatization of women. In any case, the internet meme "Karen" has become world-famous. It's the stereotype of an entitled white woman who feels aggrieved and expresses this in a slightly hysterical way by invoking her rights. The deployment of a proper name to signify a stereotype is not new: consider the widespread use of "Scrooge" to refer to an avaricious person. But the possibilities of the digital meme culture might lead to a rapid surge in the forming of such stereotypes.

Our observations

- The term internet meme generally refers to an image, short video or audio recording in which an idea (e.g. that [denying](#) climate change is idiotic), certain type of behavior (e.g. when a "[boomer](#)" expresses views considered outdated) or style trend (e.g. that of the [hipster](#)) is humorously depicted and subsequently shared so often that the message quickly spreads among a large group of people.
- It's become difficult to imagine our daily digital communication without the use of internet memes. This can partly be explained by the [visual culture](#) in which we communicate less with language and more with images, and by the fact that our attention span has shortened. A meme is a way to bring across ideas that befitting our time: they're easy to "consume", require little to no effort to read and can easily be opened on any smartphone.
- Because memes provide an effective way to spread ideas, they're increasingly used in political debate. They allow for a political message to be quickly communicated and spread. President Donald Trump, for example, is [known](#) for using memes to send a specific message.
- As we [wrote](#) before, the "Karen" meme is currently one of the most widespread and widely discussed internet memes. The American literary-cultural magazine *The Atlantic*, for instance, wrote [a critical piece about this meme](#), because in a sexist way, it ascribes certain universal behaviors exclusively to middle-aged white women. The stereotype arising from this is more negative than funny, in contrast to many other memes which are more funny than negative.

Connecting the dots

The use of a proper name to invoke a certain stereotype is not new. “Scrooge” is one of the most well-known examples of this. Ebenezer Scrooge is a character from Charles Dickens’ famous *A Christmas Carol*, who is guilty of greed, selfishness and believes the poor get what they deserve. Likewise, “Don Juan” is known to signify a man only interested in seducing as many women as he can. There are also less widely known examples used more locally, such as the Dutch “Sjonnie and Anita”, referring to a vulgar boy and girl from lower social strata who often drive around on a moped or motor scooter. A stereotype is generally negative, if only because it reduces a person to a limited set of qualities. But in internet meme culture, the point is to also highlight a funny aspect. Although most memes don’t cause any controversy because of their humorous approach, the general criticism is that they can contribute to the polarization of public debate both on and off social media. A stereotype generally effectively puts a stop to any conversation; when someone is dismissed as being a Scrooge, it becomes very difficult for that person to credibly explain why he is careful with his money other than out of sheer selfishness. One of the most recent and widespread memes is the Karen meme, which invokes a negative stereotype about middle-aged white women. This is one of the few memes that was subject to much reflection in renowned newspapers and magazines. Karen symbolizes a white middle-aged woman who unpleasantly attempts to

exercise her rights, is racist, doesn’t believe in vaccinations and resists coronavirus measures. The reason this meme has come under such scrutiny is not merely its popularity, but also the sexist way it dismisses women. And yet there are more memes like this, such as “Kyle”, an angry and aggressive white teenager who drinks Monster energy drinks and uses Axe body spray. In the past, it was more difficult for a stereotype to become as widespread as they are now. First, one had to understand the content of the stereotype, which was only possible through clarification. Scrooge, for example, is well-known because *A Christmas Carol* is a worldwide childhood classic, but the Lolita stereotype isn’t as prominent, as this derives from the similarly titled novel by Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov, which isn’t nearly as widely read as *A Christmas Carol*. Contrary to the stereotypes with proper names that predate the digital era, internet memes are much more easily distributed across the world. Moreover, and importantly, internet memes are far easier to understand as they are comprised of images, creating a recognizable type within seconds, as opposed to an entire book or essay one has to read first. In addition, the humorous aspect of memes makes them fun to look at, which also contributes to their popularity. And, in conclusion, more people have access to memes than to written text in a book or newspaper, as they are easy to open on any smartphone. The popularity of internet memes may therefore result in a rapid increase in such use of proper names worldwide.

Implications

- **With the accumulation of internet memes like “Karen”, “OK Boomer” and “Kyle”, negative stereotypes about specific groups will become more common. The humorous nature of internet memes and their potential ubiquity on social media make it difficult to shed a certain stereotype once it’s been expressed.**
- **As a communication tool, the use of a meme like “Karen” or “Kyle” is very similar to a fallacy. In general, a fallacy refers to an argument that is incorrect, but seems plausible. There are different types of **fallacies**, of which “ad hominem” (attacking the person making an argument, rather than the argument itself) and “slippery slope” (the argument that a small step will or must lead to a certain chain of events, with each link in the chain erroneously accepted as a given) are arguably the most well-known types. Deploying the stereotype of “Karen”, for example, is similar to the use of ad hominem: the argument made by the woman in question is immediately disqualified because she is a Karen, regardless of whether her argument is sound. If the internet meme culture does lead to an increase of this type of communication tool, this could hamper and stall public debate, as there will be more tolerance for unsound but seemingly plausible reasoning.**