The Internet Architype "Karen" as an Enabler of Consumer Online Brand Defending – A Case Study on Costco Taiwan

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Research-in-Progress Paper

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Abstract

The Internet's growth enables consumers to critique brands openly, but these criticisms may be deemed unsubstantiated by others who label these consumers as "Karen," signifying them as problematic. Occasionally, consumers may voluntarily defend the brand. These critiques and defenses, part of online reviews, significantly shape the brand's eWOM. Despite the widespread use of the term "Karen" for problematic consumers, prior research did not clearly show how "Karen" triggers consumer online brand defending. Our case study on Costco Taiwan indicates that consumer actions prompting online brand defending can be categorized into three groups: (1) Disruption, (2) Critics, and (3) Abuse. Further details on these behaviors and potential responses are provided.

Keywords: Karen, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), Consumer online brand defending, Costco, Online communities

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Introduction

The growing number of online review platforms enables users to share and read about their experiences, influencing a brand's electric Word of Mouth (eWOM) and aiding others in their purchase decisions (See-To and Ho 2014). A recent local consumer review survey revealed that 76% of consumers routinely consult online reviews for local businesses (Paget 2023). Positive eWOM builds consumer trust, while negative eWOM discourages purchases (Bailey 2004; Xia and Bechwati 2008). However, disagreements in online comments are common. Conversely, problematic users who complain or act inappropriately may face criticism from others, who might also defend the brand (Au et al. 2021; Colliander and Wien 2013). These troublesome users may even be called "Karen" by fellow Internet users.

"Karen", initially a woman's name, transformed into a term for a privileged middle-aged white woman using her privilege to make unreasonable demands in public (Goldblatt 2020; Asmelash 2020). The label gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 anti-racism movement (Rosen et al. 2021). However, some feminists view it as discriminatory, perpetuating harmful stereotypes (Freeman 2020).

Brand indifference to the actions and criticisms associated with "Karen" can significantly affect the brand's eWOM. This impact can lead potential consumers and Internet users to view "Karen's" views as valid and form a negative perception of the brand (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). Interestingly, if other consumers defend the brand, it can counteract the effect of the "Karen" label. Surprisingly, authentic and positive consumer reviews can have a stronger influence on the brand's eWOM compared to brand owner efforts (Kim et al. 2019). However, there's a lack of theories focusing on eWOM behaviors in the context of online personas or Internet archetypes that represent common online consumer behaviors or stereotypes.

In this paper, we gathered data from Costco Taiwan and its related online communities to explore how "Karen" can incite consumer online brand defending behaviours. We aim to offer practical insights for brand owners to manage their online reputation and handle complaints. Therefore, our research question (RQ) is: "How does 'Karen's' commentary stimulate online brand defending behaviours among other consumers?"

Literature Review on Consumers' Online Brand Defending

Consumers' online brand defending entails consumers reacting to criticise, rebuke, or express disagreement with a brand's products/services online. These behaviours can generate positive eWOM as consumers' supportive tone on social media is often perceived as credible (Au et al. 2021; Colliander and Wien 2013). Brand defending messages appear on various platforms, such as online communities and online product/service review platforms. These websites offer spaces for consumers to review products/services, influencing brand perception, promoting interactions, enhancing brand exposure, and supporting product/service quality improvements (Filieri 2015; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis 2014). Table 1 summarises the enablers and impact of consumers' online brand defending identified by previous literature.

Among various disagreements with online complaints, some users might label unreasonable complainers as "Karen." The term "Karen" is often colloquially used to describe a white woman perceived as entitled or making unreasonable demands, although there is a debate about whether their behaviour is truly unreasonable (Nagesh 2020). This pejorative term "Karen" is also commonly used to describe white women engaged in racist behaviour (Armstrong 2021).

Aspects	Descriptions
Enablers	
Perceived Justice	After encountering a complaint about a company or brand, Internet users' views on fairness and justice in handling disputes can affect how they are likely to defend the brand (Konow 2003; Colliander and Wien 2013).
Attribution of Guilt	Internet users will consider the attribution of guilt (i.e., whether the attacker or the brand itself is more to blame or responsible) when deciding if they will defend the brand (Colliander and Wien 2013).
Expectation Discrepancy	Certain consumers critique products or services online when there is a gap between their expectations and their actual experience. However, some consumers consider such criticism as unwarranted, leading to brand defense (Au et al. 2021).
Impact	
Reduced Complainer's Credibility	When a brand receives online criticism, but other consumers defend it, bystanders may perceive the brand's actions as more justified, diminishing the credibility of the initial complainers (Colliander and Wien 2013).
Problem-solving	During consumers' online brand defense, potential issues the brand faces can be resolved, and suggestions for product and service improvement may be offered by brand defenders or other users (Au et al. 2021).
Moderation	Consumers' online brand defending may address issues raised by complainers, reducing their grievances and shifting the discussion toward problem-solving and a more positive tone (Au et al. 2021).

Table 1. Examples of Previous Descriptions Related to Consumer Online Brand Defending

Additionally, based on the theory of normative influence, individuals might modify their behaviour or opinions to gain social acceptance (Deutsch and Gerard 1955). If "Karen's" unreasonable actions go unchallenged, they may gradually influence other customers to adopt similar behaviour, potentially leading to a negative impact on the brand's eWOM. The role of consumer online brand defending has grown in significance, as it can safeguard eWOM by highlighting the inappropriateness of such complaints (Colliander and Wien 2013). To investigate how Karen's behaviour affects eWOM and related reactions, we draw from eWOM literature to establish a theoretical framework for our research (Pan and Tan 2011).

Literature Review on eWOM

eWOM pertains to consumers sharing their positive or negative opinions regarding a product, service, or brand via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Compared to traditional WOM, eWOM can be faster and more easily accessed by others online, positionally via the Internet (Huete-Alcocer 2017). Consequently, eWOM significantly influences consumers' purchase choices (Chan and Ngai 2011; Yang et al. 2015). Positive eWOM bolsters sales, whereas negative eWOM diminishes them (Bailey 2004; Xia and Bechwati 2008). Notably, negative eWOM spreads more rapidly and has a greater impact than positive eWOM (Cui et al. 2012). Table 2 summarizes the enablers and impacts of eWOM from prior research.

Consumer online brand defense is strongly linked to eWOM, especially when negative online brand comments are shared (Chang et al. 2013). Brand loyalists often engage in defensive actions to counteract the negative impact of such comments, with brand loyalty and trust being critical factors. Loyalty ignites passion in consumers, and when trust is established, consumers are more inclined to support the brand (Roy et al. 2021). Conversely, when trust is lost, consumers may resort to anti-brand behaviour (Johnson et al. 2011; Roy et al. 2021). Negative eWOM tends to spread more rapidly than positive eWOM due to higher trust in peer reviews (Au et al. 2021, Cui et al. 2012). Brands that fail to respond promptly to negative online commentary may face significant consequences, highlighting the need for proactive brand management (Van Noort and Willemsen. 2012).

References	Arguments
Enablers	
Lee and Youn (2009)	eWOM holds significant influence due to consumers' higher trust in peer reviews compared to marketers or advertisements.
Yang et al. (2015)	Key factors encouraging eWOM on online consumer platforms include reputation, belonging, and the gratification of helping others.
Moran and Muzellec (2017)	Marketers might aim to shape eWOM on social networking sites to enhance positive brand mentions, bolster brand awareness, and attract new customers, but these efforts can risk eWOM's credibility.
Impacts	
Yang et al. (2015)	Increasing social media engagement and information availability shorten consumers' purchase decision-making processes. Positive, repeated interactions with the original poster create positive eWOM.
Liu and Karahanna (2017)	Consumer-generated online reviews enhance the accuracy of product evaluations for consumers by leveraging the 'wisdom of the crowd' effect.
Li and Wu (2018)	Social media WOM increases product awareness by spreading information, directly driving demand, and enhancing quality signals.
Table 2. Previous Arguments Related to eWOM	

Research Method

We adopted a case study with netnography for our research. Case study methods are well-suited for investigating "how" research questions (Benbasat et al. 1987) and exploring processes closely tied to their contexts (Rynes and Gephart Jr 2004). Also, given consumers' online brand defending involving multiple dimensions, it has become too complicated to adopt an objective research approach (Gable 1994). Therefore, a case study approach is more appropriate for examining such phenomena (Klein and Myers 1999). Furthermore, netnography involves studying the cultures and communities that arise from online communications, which can help discover more profound insights from experiences less addressed in earlier research (Langer and Beckman 2005) and may be used with qualitative methods (Kozinets 2010). As this research observes Internet users' online activities, netnography is a suitable option.

Based on these criteria, we selected Costco Taiwan as our study target. Being a popular and highly visible company, Costco Taiwan has often become the discussion focus among Internet users. These discussions encompass not only Costco's offerings but also various norms and customer complaints. These factors made Costco Taiwan an ideal choice for our study target.

We gathered data from online discussions related to Costco Taiwan by searching for relevant keywords within (1) Facebook groups and pages related to Costco Taiwan, (2) PTT, (3) Baoliao, and (4) Dcard. We employed multiple data sources to ensure data triangulation. Concurrent data analysis and collection are employed for the flexibility of case research methods (Eisenhardt 1989). We derived a set of aggregate theoretical dimensions and second-order themes from eWOM literature to guide our data collection. The data collected was then coded using a mix of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Open coding identified and validated theoretical dimensions (e.g., enablers of consumers' online brand defending), while axial coding identified and validated second-order themes within those dimensions (e.g., perceived justice as an enabler of consumers' online brand defending). Selective coding distilled case evidence into first-order categories, which were then aligned with dimensions and themes (Pan and Tan 2011). Visual mapping and narrative strategies were also employed to make sense of the extensive data (Langley 1999; Myers and Klein 2011). Iterations between data, analysis, and theory development will continue until theoretical saturation is reached (Eisenhardt 1989).

Preliminary Findings

Despite the significant business success of Costco in Taiwan, the inappropriate conduct of some members has drawn criticism from various Internet users and, at times, garnered mainstream media attention. These customers are commonly referred to as "Karen" or "Ao Ke" ('奧客') [1]. Our findings indicate that Karen's behaviours, often triggering consumer online brand defending, can be categorised into three primary types: (1) Disruption, (2) Critics, and (3) Abuse, each with two sub-types. Table 3 summarize our classification.

Sub-type	Description
Disruption: Inappropriate disruption impacting operations, products, and others' service experience.	
Product-oriented	Damaging, hiding, relocating items, or swapping product contents.
Placement-oriented	Destroying public facilities or leaving items lying around.
Critics: Excessive, widely considered unreasonable complaints or negative reviews.	
Product-oriented	Complaining about product quality, price, or service/store policies.
Staff-oriented	Verbally insulting staff.
Abuse: Improperly exploiting or misusing benefits offered by the brand	
Perk-oriented	Excessively obtaining perks, including free items and special offers, beyond what's reasonable.
Refund-oriented	Abusing the return and refund policy.
Table 3. Categorisation of the architype Karen's Behaviour Characteristics	

Disruption

Karen's disruption may impact operations, customers' experience, and brands' reputations and can be further classified into (1) product-oriented and (2) placement-oriented. To elaborate, product-oriented disruption involves actions like damaging, tampering with, misplacing, or exchanging product contents. For instance, in a Facebook group, a user posted images and criticisms of two Costco customers who were observed selfishly swapping fruits. The criticism was agreed upon, guilt was attributed to the two customers (Colliander and Wien 2013) and echoed by others in the group.

> *"These two individuals were trying to purchase a box of peaches. They kept moving the box and exchanging peaches with their hands, accidentally dropping some in the process. I couldn't tolerate it, so I spoke out directly. I didn't expect the lady to confidently respond, saying, 'Then don't purchase it!' I immediately took photos and videos and reported the incident to the staff wearing blue vests."*

> *"These two individuals have already displayed bad behaviour, both in their language and actions, have been impolite!"*

> *"Their conduct comes from an inner emptiness. There is truth in sayings like 'birds of a feather flock together' - those with shared qualities tend to be drawn to each other."*

Sometimes, the comments on such posts can soar, and some even attract media attention. For example, this post received over 1,600 critical comments and was covered by news outlets in both Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Internet users may also criticise those who exhibit placement-oriented disruption, which involves damaging public facilities or leaving items on the ground. For instance, on Facebook, one user expressed their frustration with an experience related to the haphazard placement of shopping carts by a "Karen." These

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[1] '奧客' is a Chinese term that translates to 'problematic customer'. It is a gender-neutral word that refers to any customer who acts entitled, makes unreasonable demands, or has over-the-top expectations of service staff.

critics, however, may be challenged by other Internet users, who challenged the posters for not stopping these behaviours onsite.

> *"A middle-aged woman left her shopping cart in front of someone else's car without shame. She then turned around, went into a red Mini, and drove away! What a selfish person."*

> *"Why didn't you stop her on the spot? What's the point of posting here?"*

> *"The amount of money in one's pocket is not directly proportional to their morality, which is already a common phenomenon."*

Similarly, these behaviours can create inconvenience to customers, lead to product safety and hygiene issues, or even damage to the store.

Critics

Typically, complaints and negative reviews can result from dissatisfaction with products, services, store policies, and staff. These can harm the brand's reputation. However, customers seen as making excessive complaints may be labeled as "Karen." Our research indicates that "Karen" critics can be categorised as either (1) product-focused or (2) staff-focused. Product-oriented critics complain about product quality, price, or service/store policies. For instance, a user complained about Costco's bread, but others disagreed, stating it was fresh and preservative-free (Colliander and Wien 2013). These defending messages appeal to the crowd's wisdom, shaping widely accepted product evaluations (Liu and Karahanna, 2017) and undermining complainers' credibility.

> *"I purchased this Tomato Zucchini Bread, and within 24 hours, it turned out like this. Please be careful not to accidentally ingest it."*

> *"If it doesn't mold for 24 hours, are you listening to what you are saying?"*

> *"With the weather being so hot, isn't it normal for it to develop mold or attract worms if it's not refrigerated?"*

But such consumers' brand defense isn't assured. Unreasonable complaints can still affect behaviours, while defense and criticism are evident on social media and sometimes make the news.

Regarding staff-oriented critics, "Karen" may express dissatisfaction with staff on social media or even verbally attack them. For instance, one user complained about Costco for refusing a post-trial refund, but others criticised the complaint and defended the brand (Au et al. 2021).

> *"I bought some new cookies and found them to be excessively sweet. I returned the product, and the female staff asked me why two packs were missing. Isn't food tasting about trying a bite to see if it's okay? I replied that shouldn't my family try them too? I understand that it's perfectly fine to return products if I'm not satisfied, without feeling bad about it."*

> *"Questioning the reason to say making things difficult and also too snowflake."*

> *"This mindset is not okay; returns are not for disliking or being unaccustomed to the taste."*

Compared to other "Karen" behaviors, these posts may gain more attention but are more likely to be retracted and might be harder to be traced.

Abuse

This category encompasses Karen's abusive actions, involving excessive and improper tactics to gain unfair advantages. This includes exploiting discounts, occupying store facilities, misusing promotional activities, and taking advantage of return policies. Abusive behaviour can be subdivided into (1) perk-focused and (2) refund-focused. More specifically, perk-oriented abuse refers to excessively taking perks, such as free items, special and other courtesy, which goes beyond reasonable needs and the intent of these promotional activities. For instance, an internet user shared their observations about the occupation of store facilities, titled "Costco (Apple 3C zone) nursery area." The responses and outcomes varied due to subjective judgments and differing views on who was at fault (Colliander and Wien 2013).

"I feel quite bothered. Why is it that the display zone of mobile phones/tablets is always occupied by children everywhere?"

"Have you ever thought about it? Letting the children be quiet and allowing mothers to enjoy a peaceful shopping time could be a benevolent policy of Costco."

Regarding refund-oriented abuse, "Karen" behavior involves exploiting lenient product return policies. For example, an internet user shared her observation about an unjustified refund request on Facebook, which triggered other responses mixed with explanations on how Costco would handle them. Providing these explanations can be seen as a form of support for the brand and fellow consumers, resulting in positive eWOM (Yang et al. 2015) and a moderation of the situation (Au et al. 2021).

"This is my first time returning a product. In front of us were a mother and son, with the son appearing to be a high school student. It was their turn to process the return. The mother took a pile of chicken bones from the rotisserie chicken bag and put them on the counter. It was obvious that the counter staff was dumbfounded!"

"If you continue to make multiple returns, you may face limitations on membership privileges in the future."

"Shameful behaviour and demonstration of inadequate family education."

Like other "Karen" behaviours, these can spark intense discussions and media attention. Yielding to "Karen" may embolden more abuses (Deutsch and Gerard 1955). Nevertheless, policy-related abuse can elicit customer responses in favor of the brand and its policies.

Discussion & Concluding Remarks

Our research uncovered various behavior patterns of the "Karen" archetype that can prompt online brand defense. We categorized these behaviors into three primary types: (1) Disruption, (2) Critics, and (3) Abuse, with each type further divided into two subtypes. Additionally, we have identified the reactions that can be triggered, which may possibly include media coverage and wider public attention. Among the three types of reactions, speech about abuses and disruption may not directly target "Karen", but consumers might still defend by attributing the fault to "Karen" rather than the brand owner, as this may warn others from behaving like "Karen".

The emergence of the archetype "Karen" highlights the impact of customers making requests beyond a reasonable range. We emphasize the significance of addressing their influence on brands' eWOM. However, as our findings indicate, "Karen" also exists among individuals in Taiwan of various genders. Hence, we disagree with using the "Karen" archetype to level any racist or sexist accusations. Criticism should be grounded in actions rather than one's race and gender.

In the future, we will encompass validating and broadening our findings by gathering and analysing more data related to "Karen" and consumer online brand defending in various contexts, possibly with further literature review. This will lead to a more thorough theoretical understanding of consumer online brand defending and shed light on practical implications.

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