

A Sociolinguistic Study of the Types of Swear-Words used Karen's Diner's Servers in the Instagram Reels

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the types of swear-words and the social factors influencing their use by Karen's Diner's servers, utilizing Battistella (2005) categorization of swear-word types and Holmes (2013) theory of social factors. This study used a descriptive qualitative method to analyze Karen's Diner's servers' utterances, collected from the company's Instagram Reels posted between June 2023 and May 2024. Six swear-words were identified, with fuck and fucking being the most frequently used. The findings of this study shows that obscenity is the most frequently used type with no cases of profanity. Analysis of the social factors revealed that most swear-words uttered were used in personal topics and served affective functions, implying that the swearing was intended to express emotion dominant sub-variables and entertain customers. In conclusion, the use of swear-words by Karen's Diner's servers supports the restaurant marketing strategy, where taboo language is utilized to entertain and interact with customers.

Keywords: Instagram Reels, Karen's Diner, social factors, sociolinguistics, swear-words

INTRODUCTION

People need to communicate with one another in order to function in various settings in society, including business. Business marketing typically employs formal language in order to foster a positive image and build trust with customers (Kogabayeva, 2023). However, there are some businesses that deviate from typical business marketing strategies by utilizing informal language, for example, by using swear-words.

One of the most notable businesses that deviates from the typical business marketing strategies is the Australian restaurant chain Karen's Diner, which has a reputation for using profanity and rudeness as part of its brand identity, for example, "You fuckin' idiot!", "Fuck off", and "It's shit". Unlike traditional businesses that prioritize polite customer service, Karen's Diner utilizes profanity and rudeness as its marketing strategy. The usage of swear-words in marketing is unusual (Ravanda & Purnamasari, 2023) and raises some interesting research questions, which are: (1) What are the types and frequency of the swear-words used by Karen's Diner's servers when talking to their customers in Instagram Reels? (2) What sociolinguistic factors prompted the servers to use swear-words in their Instagram Reels?

First, most businesses try to use formal language, but Karen's Diner does the opposite by making rudeness and the use of swear-words as part of its entertainment. Second, they seem to choose specific swear-words that fit with the "Karen" character, suggesting there might be particular reasons behind their word choices. Third, while they encourage staff to be rude, they still have rules against certain offensive language that contains racism or sexism. The allowing

of some swear-words but not others make Karen's Diner an ideal case for studying how swear-words work in their marketing strategy and what purpose they serve.

In analyzing Karen's Diner's servers use of swear-words, the writer utilizes Battistella (2005) typology and Holmes (2013) social factors theory that impacted the use of swear-words by Karen's Diner's servers.

METHODS

The writer utilizes a qualitative approach for this research. The source of the data was Karen's Diner's reels that contained swear-words, which could be accessed from a platform called Instagram. However, the data that was analyzed for this study were utterances uttered by Karen's Diner's servers that contained swear-words. The writer watched the 63 reels there that are posted between June 2023 to May 2024. The writer then downloaded the reels that contained swear-words uttered by Karen's Diner's servers, which totaled to 11 reels. The writer utilized the subtitle feature provided by Instagram to make sure of the utterance's accuracy. In some instances where the subtitles displayed incorrect phrases, the writer played it at a reduced speed for further clarity. The writer typed the swear-words uttered in each video in a two-digit numbering system. The first digit indicates the position of the reel among those selected from the 63 reels uploaded between June 2023 and May 2024 that contained swear-words uttered by Karen's Diner's servers, and the second digit refers to the position of the utterance that contained swear-words in that specific reel. For example, 1.1 refers to the first reel that contained swear-words and the first utterance in that reel that contained swear-words.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the writer presents the results as well as the interpretation of the analysis. This chapter contains three sections, namely 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. The first section is about the swear-words and swear-word types that are used by Karen's Diner's servers when talking to their customers in its Instagram Reels. Sec is about the social factors that affect the swear-words used by Karen's Diner's servers when interacting with their customers in its Instagram Reels. Lastly, section 4.3 is the writer's interpretation about the findings.

Table 1. Swear-words used by Karen's Diner's Servers when Interacting with their Customers in its Instagram

Shit	Fucking	Dickhead	Fuck	Bitch	Shitty
8	9	1	11	3	1

Table 2. Swear-word Types used by Karen's Diner's Servers when Interacting with their Customers in its Instagram

Epithets	Profanity	Vulgarity	Obscenity
4	-	10	19

Table 3. The Social Factors affecting Karen’s Diner’s Servers use of Swear-words when Interacting with their Customers

Social Factors			
Topic		Functions	
Personal	Impersonal	Informative	Affective
21	8	4	25

Swear-words used by Karen’s Diner’s Servers

Based on the data analyzed by the writer, Karen’s Diner’s servers uttered swear-words 33 times when interacting with their customers in the company’s Instagram Reels uploaded between June 2023 and May 2024. They use six different swear-words, which are *shit*, *fucking*, *dickhead*, *fuck*, *bitch*, and *shitty*.

Furthermore, the three most commonly used swear-words are fuck, fucking, and shit, which were uttered eleven, nine, and eight times, respectively. The other three swear-words, *bitch*, *dickhead*, and *shitty* are only uttered three, one, and one time, respectively.

Types of Swear-words used by Karen’s Diner’s Servers

Based on the findings, the writer found that Karen’s Diner’s servers used three out of four types of swear-words when interacting with their customers, namely epithets, vulgarity, and obscenity.

The first swear-word type that Karen’s Diner’s servers utilized in their conversations with their customers in Instagram Reels is epithets. Epithets are a variety of slurs that typically refer to someone’s color, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Epithets can also refer to a person’s looks, their disabilities, or other traits. The following are examples of epithets uttered by Karen’s Diner’s servers when interacting with their customers. The following are examples of epithets uttered by Karen’s Diner’s servers:

- (1) Are you fucking colorblind?
- (2.1)

Although the above utterance includes the word *fucking*, which is categorized as obscenity. This utterance is considered as epithets due to the fact that the whole sentence is, in essence, used by the waitress to ask the customer if he is blind—a disability—in a humorous way.

(2) BITCH

(6.1)

The utterance above is also considered as an epithet. This is due to the fact that the word bitch that the server utilize is used to insult the customer's trait.

The second swear-word type that Karen's Diner's servers utilized in their conversations with their customers in Instagram Reels is vulgarity. Vulgarity refers to words or expressions that crudely describe sex-differentiating anatomy or sexual and excretory activities. The following are examples of obscenity uttered by Karen's Diner's servers when interacting with their customers.

(1) Have a shit time

(1.1)

The utterance above is categorized as vulgarity. This is due to the fact that by saying the utterance above, the waitress is, in a humorous way, wishing the customers to have a bad time, a shit time. Furthermore, the word shit still considered appropriate for casual settings.

(2) Is that how shit you are?

(2.3)

The utterance above is categorized also as vulgarity. This is due to the fact that by saying the utterance above, the waitress is, in a humorous way, asking if the customer, who is a rapper, is a bad artist that he had to use another artist as his profile picture on a music streaming service called SoundCloud. Furthermore, the word shit still considered appropriate for casual settings.

The last swear-word type that Karen's Diner's servers utilized in their conversations with their customers in Instagram Reels is obscenity. Obscenity refers to words or expressions that harshly describe sex-differentiating anatomy or sexual and excretory activities. The following are examples of obscenity uttered by Karen's Diner's servers when interacting with their customers.

(1) Just shut the fuck up and eat your food

(3.1)

The utterance above is categorized as obscenity. By saying the utterance above, the waitress is, in a humorous way, indirectly telling her customer to be quiet and eat her food. Furthermore, the phrase shut the fuck up contained the word fuck, which has a sexual etymological origin, therefore, this is considered as obscenity.

(2) that's all you have to fucking say

(7.1)

The utterance above is also categorized as obscenity. By saying the utterance above, the waiter is, in a humorous way, expressing his anger and annoyance by confronting one of the customers. Furthermore, the word *fucking* in this utterance has a sexual etymological origin, therefore, this is considered as obscenity.

Out of the 29 utterances, the topic for 21 of them are personal with 8 of them being impersonal. For the second variable in the table, 4 out of the 29 utterances function as informative and 25 function as affective.

The following are examples of utterances with personal topics.

- (1) It's shit
(5.1)

The utterance above is considered personal. This is due to the fact that by saying the utterance above, the waitress targets the customer. Furthermore, by ripping the drawing while uttering the above utterance, the waitress affects the customer's emotion and personal effort that was put into it.

- (2) BITCH
(6.1)

The utterance above is also considered personal. This is due to the fact that by saying the utterance above, the waitress targets the customer character. Furthermore, by uttering the above utterance, the waitress may affect the customer's emotion.

The following are examples of utterances with impersonal topics.

- (1) Have a shit time
(1.1)

The utterance above is considered impersonal. This is due to the fact that the utterance above is directed towards the general customers, rather than one individual. Furthermore, the above utterance does not address an individual's character or behavior.

- (2) I better not get a fucking call over in five minutes
(7.2)

The utterance above is also considered impersonal. This is due to the fact that the utterance above is directed towards the general customers, rather than one individual. Furthermore, the above utterance does not address an individual's character or behavior.

The following are examples of utterances which function as informative.

- (1) Shit, I'm not here to hang out with you
(4.2)

The utterance above functions as informative. This is due to the fact that the waitress is conveying a directive utterance to the customers. Furthermore, the main purpose of this utterance is to alert the customers about his expectation of getting called by them.

- (2) Clearly we're gonna have a fucking shit time
(8.1)

The utterance above also functions as informative. This is due to the fact that it is a statement of opinion of what the waitress expects the experience to be. Furthermore, the main function of this utterance is to share one's opinion about what is about to come.

The following are examples of utterances which function as affective.

- (1) Go tell your story while you have a shit time
(8.4)

The utterance above functions as affective. Although it has a directive tone, the whole utterance reflects the Karen persona. Furthermore, in this context, the waitress acts like she does not care about the customer's emotion and humorously wishing her to have a bad experience.

- (2) Is that what you want, Maggie little bitch?
(9.1)

The utterance above also functions as affective. This is due to the fact that the utterance is primarily used to express the waitress attitude and emotion toward the customer, Maggie. Furthermore, the phrase "Maggie little bitch" is a personal insult, which reinforces the intent to affect the listener's-customer's-emotionally.

Based on the findings, no profanity was found in the data, suggesting that religious-based swear-words are restricted or avoided at Karen's Diner. This absence highlights that, despite the restaurant's offensive and confrontational style, it still maintains certain boundaries. By excluding it, Karen's Diner draws a line between playful and intentional rudeness with potentially harmful offense, allowing the restaurant to remain using taboo language as their marketing strategy without risking potential backlash.

These findings show that swearing at Karen's Diner is highly modified and intentional to follow Karen's character. The dominance of personal and affective utterances supports the idea that their act of swearing is neither spontaneous nor aggressive, but instead serves as a tool to entertain and build its brand identity. As a result, Karen's Diner's customers do not react negatively towards the swear-words uttered by the servers. Furthermore, the types of swear-words used by the servers reinforce Karen's Diner's branding strategy of entertaining through rudeness, creating a controlled environment in which taboo and offensive language becomes part of the humor and entertainment.

CONCLUSION

The findings showed that Karen's Diner's servers utilized swear-words are categorized as obscenity, some are categorized as vulgarity, several instances are categorized as epithets, and no instances of profanity. Additionally, most swear-words are used in personal rather than impersonal topics. Furthermore, the majority of the utterances served affective functions rather than informative. These findings indicate that swearing at Karen's Diner is highly expressive, which means that the swear-words are usually directed in an exaggerated manner to the customers and are mostly utilized to trigger emotions, such as shock or even laughter.

Moreover, Karen's Diner's customers do not react negatively towards the swear-words uttered by the servers because the uttered swear-words are personal and affective, which imply that the swearing is not spontaneous or aggressive, but rather serves as a tool to entertain them. These swear-words reinforce Karen's Diner's branding strategy of entertaining through rudeness, thus creating a controlled environment in which taboo and offensive language becomes part of the humor and entertainment.

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