

A Review on the Microaggressions on the Internet: A Framework to a Discrimination-Free Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed to review the justifications of online users on the frequently observed microaggressions on the internet in the time of COVID-19 and to find out whether these microaggressions are offensive or non-offensive. It was found out that the most frequently observed microaggressions on the internet are stereotypes, prejudice, oppression, and various forms of discrimination like racism, sexism, colorism, classism, and ageism. Through an online-based questionnaire, the researchers could get participants' justifications whether a situation containing microaggression was offensive or not. The researchers found out that most participants felt offended by most of the posts and tweets (researched to be microaggressive) presented by researchers because of the following reasons: (1) Name-calling someone because of their expression and traits and using it as an insult is offensive; (2) Messages convey rudeness and insensitivity; (3) Invalidation of racial reality such as experience, thoughts, and feelings. Also, some participants viewed some posts and tweets (researched to be microaggressive) presented by the researchers as non-offensive because of following reasons: (1) The post presented does not affect them; (2) The post does not show

judgment to any person; (3) They do not care about the post at all; (4) They do not understand the meaning of the post; (5) Some of the posts are considered as jokes and endearment.

Keywords: *microaggressions, microassault, microinsult, microinvalidation, discrimination, Covid-19, internet*

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforcement of a quarantine have resulted in a fast increase in the number of internet users around the world, owing to the government's insistence that people conduct their business online. According to Kemp (2021), between October 2020 and October 2021, around 400 million new users signed up for various social media platforms, resulting in an average of 1.1 million new users each day. As a result of the expansion in the worldwide internet population, discrimination has become more prevalent on all social media platforms. As cited in Croucher, Nguyen, and Rahmani (2020), bigotry, hostility, and other sorts of unpleasant attitudes toward Asian-Americans, notably Chinese-Americans have been expressed on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States, according to Mcquire (2020).

Instead of representing a new reality, discrimination on the internet is a new manner of displaying an old reality through a different media (Asceps.org, n.d.). When it comes to internet discrimination and harassment, there are two sorts that have been continuously noticed since the internet's inception: (1) direct discrimination and (2) indirect discrimination. The former refers to unfavorable and disadvantageous treatment based on sex, race, gender, color, language, religion, country, economic status, or other viewpoints such as political beliefs and fashion style. The latter refers to discrimination based on sexual orientation. The latter, on the other hand, is a subtle, invisible sort of unfair treatment that goes unnoticed. Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010) defines direct discrimination as when you are treated worse than another person or group of people because a protected characteristic is present in that person; someone believes that protected characteristic is present in the individual (known as discrimination by perception); or a person is related to someone who has that protected characteristic is present in the individual (known as discrimination by association). When compared to direct discrimination, indirect discrimination occurs when a law is in place that applies to everyone in the same way, but disadvantages a group of persons who have the same protected trait and are disadvantaged because they are a member of that group. If this occurs, the individual or group enforcing the policy will be required to provide a justifiable basis for doing so. It is possible to engage in indirect discrimination when a policy is applied in the same way for everyone but hurts a group of individuals who share a protected feature, and you suffer as a result of being a member of that group.

To raise awareness about injustice, prejudice, and stereotypes, social media has shown to be a very effective instrument. As a result, discrimination that is subtle or imperceptible has been emphasized more and is being performed more frequently on the internet. The following quote is from Matamoroz-Fernandez and Farkas (2021): "A subtle kind of prejudice can be seen in platform governance and design." For introducing filters that enable white individuals to engage in "digital blackface" (Jackson 2017) and automatically lighten the skin of non-whites, social media platforms Snapchat and Instagram have come under fire (Jerkins 2015). By tracking user activity, Facebook provided marketers with the ability to exclude people

who had what they called a "ethnic affinity" for African Americans or Hispanics (Angwin and Parris 2016). As a result of the suspension of a viral video that raised awareness of China's oppression of Uighurs (Porter, 2019), TikTok has received negative feedback. These scenarios express oppression to a certain community or group, yet the majority of netizens may not be aware of the negative message being conveyed. Microaggression is the term used to describe this small form of discrimination. According to Sue and Spanierman's (2020) research, "(The word microaggression was coined by African American psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Chester Middlebrook Pierce in his work with African Americans.)" As previously stated, microaggressions are defined as any word or action that negatively targets a minority group of people and can be either an intentional or inadvertent type of prejudice, according to Smith (2020). Microaggressions can be expressed in a variety of ways on the internet, including through a meme, video, symbol, vlog, lyrics, or any other means of disseminating ideas online, according to recent research. Microaggressions can be classified into three categories: Specifically, (1) Microassault is defined as an explicit racial derogation that is manifested primarily through a verbal or nonverbal attack with the intent to harm the victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or discriminatory actions; and (2) Microinsult is defined as communications that imply rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity: (1) The term "microinvalidation" refers to communications that are intended to exclude, reject, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experience of a person of color. Any group that has been marginalized by our culture can be the target of these microaggressions. The researchers discovered that these microaggressions that are available on the internet have a negative impact on these groups on a holistic level. In response to microaggressions, people often experience uncertainty, anger, and anxiety. They may feel helpless and frustrated. They may resort to destructive coping techniques like denial, withdrawal, and substance misuse to deal with the situation (Williams, 2019).

"A Review on the Microaggressions on the Internet: A Framework to a Discrimination-Free Cyberspace" is the first significant driving force behind the researchers' investigation into the clinically harmful consequences of microaggressions on marginalized groups. They believe that by identifying the source of the problem, which is illiteracy, they would be able to eliminate its consequences. The researcher devised a process for determining whether or not a person is digitally literate, which involved conducting interviews in which participants were asked whether or not certain situations (microaggressions) were objectionable. Finding out how well they can discern between offensive and non-offensive content would aid academics and educators in developing suitable strategies to ensure that the internet world is a safe and harmless environment for all users. To be more specific, the following objectives were addressed by this study: (1) Determine whether marginalized groups are aware of microaggressions occurring online; (2) examine the justifications provided by online users for why a particular situation identified by researchers as a microaggression is offensive or not; and (3) determine whether knowing an online user's justification for why a microaggression is offensive or non-offensive is relevant to the goal of ensuring that cyberspace is free of discrimination.

METHODOLOGY

A Descriptive Phenomenological Approach of Qualitative Research was used in this study. In analyzing the data gathered, researchers used Demographic analysis to determine whether a particular participant belongs to a marginalized or unmarginalized group; they also used the Narrative Analysis wherein the respondents' justifications to their answer were

scrutinized. Horizontalization was also used to remove the irrelevant, redundant, and invalid answers and highlight the significant justifications why the given context is offensive or not.

Sample

The researchers included people commonly marginalized by society and those who are not. The researchers selected these marginalized and unmarginalized through Social Media, specifically Facebook. Google form-based questionnaires were distributed via the messenger application for a total of 53 participants, and 29 consented (54.72% return rate). After initial screening, 21 questionnaires from consented online users were accepted as a valid response. Among the 21 participants who consented, 20 respondents are identified as marginalized, and 1 of them belongs to an unmarginalized group.

Instrument

The online interview questionnaire was used to collect data from online users. The online interview questionnaire includes 41 items divided into four sections. The first section aims to gather the demographic profile of the respondents such as Age, Gender identity, Sexual orientation, Economic status, whether they have impairments or none, religion, and whether they belong to an ethnic or indigenous group; this section also includes the agreement whether the participants will allow the researchers to use their personal information. Ten questions were used for the following three sections: Microassault, Microinsult, Microinvalidation.

Procedure

Convenience sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to gather data from users of Facebook. The researchers approached the respondents who belonged to marginalized or unmarginalized groups to participate. After the information about the study was disseminated, the researchers sent the 53 google-form-based questionnaires via the messenger app, including agreements between researchers and participants. Instructions to participants were as follows: "Put (👍) if you find the texts, scenarios, memes, and photos non-offensive, and put (👎) if you find them offensive. Justify your answer to allow the researchers to see the reasoning behind your answers. You can use any language in justifying your answer." The researchers used Demographic analysis to determine whether a particular participant belongs to a marginalized or unmarginalized group. After determining marginalized and unmarginalized participants, a Narrative Analysis was used to scrutinize the justifications of participants whether a microaggression (microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation) is offensive or not. After analyzing the justifications, irrelevant, redundant, and invalid (no justification) answers were removed through Horizontalization, and significant justifications of why the given context is offensive or not were highlighted. After the analysis steps, recommendations for educational implications were made.

RESULTS

Microassault

Offensive	
Commonly Reasons	Sample (verbatim)
- It is discriminating to make fun of someone's SOGIE like gender expressions (such as	- "Calling someone a <i>jejemon</i> based on how they dress and act is one way of stereotyping. We all have the freedom to choose on what we are going to wear and

behavior and appearances like clothing or fashion styles, and label them derogatory terms like jejemon, ugaling iskwater, and pokpok; and Sexual orientations like being gay and lesbian should not be normalized used as an insult.	<p>act.”</p> <p>- “Being called <i>“ugaling skwater” [squatter-like behavior]</i> is so offensive and it shouldn't be use these phrases to insult others. I, myself didn't use this words to anyone/strangers even I hate that person because I know what the exact feeling of.”</p> <p>- “(offensive) I think this is a inappropriate manner for me cause even their things are fake or they behave strangely that's their choice of happiness”</p> <p>- “How embarrassing to call them <i>psst 150</i>. Not all gays are like that. You're judging one person because of the doings of others.”</p>
- No genetic illness like cancer and conditions like having acne is to be made fun by anyone; people who are having these also have feelings like other people.	<p>- “Cancer isn't humorous, and it's certainly not a joke. People who are afflicted with this condition have battled and faced challenges. This meme should not be shared because it may be seen by those who are dealing with cancer.”</p> <p>- “Like who's gonna like acne's nowadays. Its very cruel to address people with this. The thought that a certain person has acne already make them feel less and its not helping. You're just making them feel worst.”</p>
- Racial Discrimination to Asian and Black people is not only offensive but also prejudicial.	<p>- “Calling BTS biot [<i>gay</i>] is not just a K-Pop thing, it shows that homophobia is still a real problem in Philippine society.</p> <p>- “you cannot call them biot [<i>gay</i>] as long as they come out. Hindi porke malinis sila tingnan malambot sila gumalaw biot na sila. Basagin natin yang ganyang pananaw, Hindi porke pasok yung tingin mo sa isang tao sa Standard ng pagiging lalaki, tatawagin mo na sila agad na Biot o Bakla!” [<i>...Not because they are looking clean and acting feminine means they are gay. Let's break that kind of mindset, Not because they fit in your standard as a man, you will call them gay</i>]</p> <p>- “Offensive meme because there is discrimination between the black and white people. Having skin problems or skin color doesn't define your Worth as a person because the true beauty and kindness can't see in physical aspect but it can only see in your heart”</p>

The table shows the most commonly used reasons why the given scenarios about microassault are offensive. (1) "It is discriminating to make fun of someone's SOGIE like gender expressions (such as behavior and appearances like clothing or fashion styles, and label them derogatory terms like jejemon, ugaling iskwater, and pokpok; and Sexual orientations like being gay and lesbian should not be normalized used as an insult." wherein these reasons appeared in the participants' answers on questionnaire numbers 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 8. Next, (2) "No genetic illness like cancer and conditions like having acne is to be made fun by anyone; people who are having these also have feelings like other people." which

appeared in their answers on questionnaire numbers 3 and 9. Lastly, (3) "Racial Discrimination to Asian and Black people is not only offensive but also prejudicial." wherein they answered it in questionnaires numbers 8 and 9.

Non-offensive	
Commonly used reasons	Sample (verbatim)
- Labels are normal and realities; it also does not harm other people and Me.	- "Non-offensive kase part ng paglaki natin ang pagiging jejemon halos lahat ng tao dumaan sa pagiging jeje nung kabataan" [...because being jejemon is a part of growing up, everyone goes through being jejemon in their youth] - "Non-offensive ito para sa akin kasi ang tingin ko ay normal lang ito" [This is non-offensive for me because I think it is normal.] - "Non-offensive kasi ang pagsabi ng psst 150 ay kadalasan na ginagawa kolang itong katuwaan kasama ang mga Beki kong mga kaibigan. [Non-offensive because I always tell psst 150 for fun with my gay friends]
- Memes are fun and made for entertainment.	- "I think this is for entertainment purposes only." - "It's okay because this is just for fun. It's looks alike though"
- The meme is not understandable and do not find to be problematic.	- "Non-offensive, for me i think ay wala naman masama sa pagkaka-ibaiba ng kulay at texture buhok. [Non-offensive, for me, there is nothing wrong with having different color and texture] - "Non-offensive gawin nila gusto nila sa buhok nila kanila nman yun" [Non-offensive do whatever they want to do with their hair it's their hair]

The table shows the most commonly used reasons why the given scenarios about microassault are non-offensive. These are (1) "Labels are normal and realities; it also does not harm other people and Me." wherein these reasons appeared in the participants' answers on questionnaire numbers 1, 4, 5, 7, and 8. (2) "Memes are fun and made for entertainment." In which this appeared so much in their answers on questionnaire number 3. Lastly, (3) "The meme is not understandable and do not find to be problematic." wherein it appeared in their answers a lot in questionnaire number 3.

Microinsult

Offensive	
Commonly used reasons	Sample (verbatim)
- It is offensive to stereotype people based on the group they belong in terms of race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and economic status.	- "hindi lahat ng makakalimutin tumatanda na. Meron din yung stress lang." [not every forgetful person is already aging. There are also because of stress] - "Beggar is someone that needs help not a thief. Never judge someone based on their physical appearance." - "Not all Asian eats bat. Stop generalizing"
- It is offensive to describe	- "There's a slight implication that Asians aren't so

someone base from their physical appearance and gender expression comparing it to a standard set by society.	<p>good-looking people.”</p> <p>- “Offensive. We are being eaten by the standards of the society that's why we don't progress as one country.”</p> <p>- “Being gay doesn't mean you have to cross-dress. Gender is fluid”</p>
- It is sexist to tell someone what to do and what is an appropriate base from their gender, sex, sexual orientation, and gender expression.	<p>- “Hindi porke hindi pasok sa societal standard ng pagiging babae si Mary is hindi na siya real girl. She can act masculine and still label herself a girl.” <i>[Not because Mary did not fit in the societal standard means she's not a real girl anymore...]</i></p> <p>- “This implies that people who don't workout and improve their muscle density, look gay.”</p>

The table shows the most commonly used reasons why the given scenarios about microinsult are offensive. (1) "It is offensive to stereotype people based on the group they belong in terms of race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and economic status." wherein these reasons appeared in the participants' answers in questionnaire numbers 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9. (2) "It is offensive to describe someone base from their physical appearance and gender expression comparing it to a standard set by society." In which this appeared in questionnaires number 1, 8, and 10. Lastly, (3) "It is sexist to tell someone what to do and what is appropriate based on their gender, sex, sexual orientation, and gender expression." which appeared in questionnaire numbers 8 and 10.

Non-offensive	
Commonly used reasons	Sample (verbatim)
- There is nothing wrong in telling the truth based on one's observation, it is a fact, and sometimes it is kind of compliment and endearment.	<p>- “It just means that james appreciates the beauty of maria. James wants to says that the beauty of maria is pang International <i>[...for international standard]</i>”</p> <p>- “Not so offensive one for me because Michael are just saying what is true based on his observation”</p> <p>- “Non-offensive totoo nman na sign of aging yun” <i>[Non-offensive because sign of aging is true]</i></p> <p>- “Yes because it's the reality”</p>
- It is okay if it was from a close friend or parents.	<p>- “not offensive because she mother is just reminding her daughter to act accordingly”</p> <p>- “If you're talking with your friends then this is not a problem.”</p>
- Giving advice and telling the truth to give realization is not offensive.	<p>- “she just giving advices for her daughter.”</p> <p>- “Real talk makes you realize something 🤔”</p>

The table shows the most commonly used reasons why the given scenarios about microinsult are non-offensive. These are (1) "There is nothing wrong in telling the truth based on one's observation, it is a fact, and sometimes it is kind of compliment and endearment." wherein these reasons appeared in questionnaire numbers 1, 2, 4, 6, and 10. (2) "It is okay if it was from a close friend or parents." In which this appeared so much in questionnaires number 8 and 10. Lastly, (3) "Giving advice and telling the truth to give realization is not offensive." wherein appeared in questionnaire numbers 8 and 10.

Microinvalidation

Offensive	
Commonly used reasons	Sample (verbatim)
- Ignorance and denial about the existence of racism and discrimination towards the marginalized group are offensive.	- "Ignorance is offensive. Blackface is cultural appropriation and people must be aware of it." - "Denying racism is of itself racist." - "it is sexist and ignorant" -
- Invalidating someone's feeling is offensive and hurtful since we do have different capacity to handle a situation, words, and jokes.	- "We do have different levels of sensitivity. Just because it doesn't hurt you, doesn't mean it shouldn't with them, too." - "Stop using your experience to invalidate other people's experiences." - "Still, invalidating how someone feels isn't going to help."

The table shows the most commonly used reasons why microinvalidation scenarios are offensive. These are (1) "Ignorance and denial about the existence of racism and discrimination towards the marginalized group are offensive." wherein these reasons appeared in their answer on questionnaire numbers 1, 5, and 9. Furthermore, (2) "Invalidating someone's feeling is offensive and hurtful since we do have different capacity to handle a situation, words, and jokes." wherein appeared in the participants' answers on questionnaire numbers 3, 4, 6, and 7.

Non-offensive	
Commonly used reasons	Sample (verbatim)
- Using someone's cultural history is not harmful.	- "All lives matter!" In order to have unity there must be a peace"
- Positivity is comforting and not offensive.	- "Motivate them and give some advice on how to handle or how to solve their problems.
- The societal issue is not familiar and does not understand the situation.	- "I dont understand it tho" - "Not offensive because it's okay to be wary about people's sexuality instead of discriminating them."

The table shows the most commonly used reasons why the given scenarios about microinvalidation are non-offensive. These are (1) "Using someone's cultural history is not harmful." wherein these reasons appeared in questionnaire numbers 1 and 4. (2) "Positivity is comforting and not offensive." wherein appeared so much in questionnaire numbers 6, 7, and 8. Lastly, (3) "The societal issue is not familiar and does not understand the situation." wherein appeared in questionnaire numbers 1, 4, and 9.

DISCUSSION

Most participants said that internet posts like memes depicting discrimination and invalidating a person's SOGIE, race, and economic status are offensive. However, some of the participants viewed some microaggressions to be unoffensive, especially labels, toxic positivity, and derogatory jokes and memes. According to United Nations (2018), while formal institutional challenges to marginalized communities are sometimes obvious, informal

barriers are often more subtle, making discrimination challenging to measure. Microaggressions have become acceptable — they are firmly rooted; thus, they can usually be done unconsciously and without the intent to offend someone (Invisible Racism, 2017).

Jejemon and gay "biot" (Bisaya) are some of the derogatory terms used by people in real life and inside the internet because they think these are just expressions that do not intentionally exist project harm. People also believe that name-calling is not offensive because they do not feel insulted. They also reason out that the context given is not problematic because they always use these labels to their friends. According to Fiske (2022), people cannot help but categorize people regarding their citizenship, gender, allegiance to a sports team, and university affiliation because of the convenience it gives people. Name-calling is typical to kids as it may be misconstrued as teasing and friendly banter (Gordon, 2021). Toxic positivity has been one of the microaggressions that online users frequently share on the internet. They believe that these positive thoughts do not aim to offend but will make people happy and avoid making negative thoughts inside their heads. Cherry (2021) said toxic positivity is the concept that people should keep a positive attitude no matter how bad or tough things are. Toxic optimism is not always meant to be harmful since it frequently occurs in circumstances where we want to help but are at a loss for words (Princing, 2021). However, Shaw (2021) said toxic optimism prevents people from experiencing completely natural emotions, leading to longer-term problems like anxiety, low self-esteem, and fatigue if left unchecked. Supported by Villines (2021), who presented some of the risks of toxic positivity, including; (1) ignoring actual harm, (2) demeaning a loss, (3) isolation and stigma, (4) communication issues, and (5) low self-esteem. They also believe that these memes are just for entertainment and enjoyment and do not spread hate or bitterness. The ever-present medium of the meme has often become the quickest way of commenting on something - anything from hilarious to political and everything in between; we speak in "meme" language, make references to memes, and communicate with our peers in the same way (Bhattacharya, 2017). Finally, these non-offensive microaggressions justifications showed that even marginalized groups were unconscious about the idea that these microaggressions affect someone, which means that internalized oppression is still a problem in the Philippines. David (2014) mentioned in his work that "Victims of microaggressions experience "attributional ambiguity," which is the absence of an explicitly identifiable source of oppression and discrimination (Sue et al., 2007). In other words, because microaggressions are perpetrated and experienced subtly and often unconsciously, the victim often questions the reality of oppression. Victims of microaggressions frequently blame themselves for being "overly sensitive" or "crazy" and dismiss the behavior of the perpetrators. Microaggressions generate equally distressing psychological consequences as clear oppression and discrimination, perhaps even more so, because of the lack of a different target to which one can direct anger (Sue, 2010)."

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The researchers frequently observe microaggression on the internet, and many people are unaware of its adverse effects. This study intended to educate every student to become digitally literate individuals and free the Cyberspace from discrimination. The researcher can achieve this objective through:

1. The University may adopt the result of the study, especially the justifications of the participants on microaggressions (microassault, microinsult, microinvalidation) to include this topic to the curriculum specifically to subjects like GEC1 (Understanding the Self) and Ethics;
2. Expose all students to symposiums, conferences, and other projects to address the findings of the study, especially the justifications of the marginalized group about microaggressions;
3. The results of the study will serve as a basis for school officers (SSC) to regulate laws and prohibitions in the university about microaggressions;
4. The result of the study would also help the instructors of the university to avoid giving microaggressive examples to their teaching process.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to find out why microaggressions are still frequently observed on the internet, especially in the time of covid-19, where all people became privileged to infinite information. The researchers found that the most frequently observed microaggressions on the internet are stereotypes, prejudice, oppression, and various forms of discrimination like racism, sexism, colorism, classism, and ageism. Through an online-based questionnaire, the researchers could get participants' justifications whether a situation containing microaggression was offensive or not. The researchers found out that most participants felt offended by most of the posts and tweets (researched to be microaggressive) presented by researchers because of the following reasons: (1) Name-calling someone because of their expression and traits and using it as an insult is offensive; (2) Messages convey rudeness and insensitivity; (3) Invalidation of racial reality such as experience, thoughts, and feelings. Also, some participants viewed some posts and tweets (researched to be microaggressive) presented by the researchers as non-offensive because of following reasons: (1) The post presented does not affect them; (2) The post does not show judgment to any person; (3) They do not care about the post at all; (4) They do not understand the meaning of the post; (5) Some of the posts are considered as jokes and endearment.

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