

Online microaggressions strongly impact disabled users

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In person, people with disabilities often experience microaggressions—comments or subtle insults based on stereotypes. New types of microaggressions play out online as well, according to new

Cornell-led research.

The study finds those constant online slights add up. Microaggressions affect [self-esteem](#) and change how people with disabilities use social media. And due to their subtlety, microaggressions can be hard for algorithms to detect, the authors warn.

"This paper brings a new perspective on how social interactions shape what equitable access means online and in the [digital world](#)," said Sharon Heung, a doctoral student in the field of information science. Heung presented the study, "Nothing Micro about It: Examining Ableist Microaggressions on Social Media," Oct. 26 at ASSETS 2022, the Association for Computing Machinery SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility.

When microaggressions occur in live settings, they are often ephemeral, with few bystanders. "When they happen on social media platforms, it's happening in front of a large audience—the scale is completely different and then they live on, for people to see forever," said co-author Aditya Vashistha, assistant professor of information science in the Cornell Ann S. Bowers College of Computing and Information Science.

Additionally, social media platforms can amplify microaggressions, potentially spreading misinformation. "We're very concerned about how it's shaping the way the broader audience thinks about disability and disabled people," said co-author Megh Marathe, assistant professor of media, information, bioethics, and [social justice](#) at Michigan State University.

Heung and co-author Mahika Phutane, a doctoral student in the field of computer science, interviewed 20 volunteers who self-identified as having various disabilities and who were active on social media platforms. The participants were asked to describe subtle discrimination

and microaggressions they had experienced and the impact they had on their lives.

Patronizing comments like, "You're so inspiring," were the most common, along with infantilizing posts, like "Oh, you live by yourself?" People also asked inappropriate questions about users' personal lives and made assumptions about what the person could do or wear based on their disability. Some users were told they were lying about their disability, or that they didn't have one, especially if the disability was invisible, such as a mental health condition.

The researchers categorized the responses into 12 types of microaggressions. Most fit in categories previously recognized in offline interactions, but two were unique to social media. The first was "ghosting" or ignored posts. The second involved platforms that were inaccessible for people with disabilities. For example, some users said they felt unwelcome when people did not add alt text to photos or used text colors they couldn't discern. One person with dwarfism said her posts were continually removed because she kept getting flagged as a minor.

After experiencing a microaggression, users had to decide how to respond. Regardless of whether they ignored the comment, reported it or tried to educate the other person, participants said it took an emotional toll. Many took breaks from social media or limited the information they shared online.

"Addressing this problem is really hard," said Phutane. "Social media is driven to promote engagement. If they educate the perpetrator, then that original post will just get more and more promoted."

The participants proposed that platforms should automatically detect and delete microaggressions, or a bot could pop up with information about

[disabilities](#).

Most [social media platforms](#) already have moderation tools—but reporting systems are sometimes flawed, lack transparency and can misidentify harassment. And microaggressions can be hard for automated systems to detect. Unlike [hate speech](#), where algorithms can search for specific words, microaggressions are more nuanced and context-dependent.

Once the scope and types of microaggressions experienced by people from marginalized groups are better understood, the researchers say tools can be developed to limit the burden of dealing with them. These issues are important to address, especially with the potential expansion of virtual reality and the metaverse.

"We need to be especially vigilant and conscious of how these real-world interactions get transferred over to online settings," said co-author Shiri Azenkot, associate professor of information science at the Jacobs Technion-Cornell Institute at Cornell Tech and Cornell Bowers CIS. "It's not just [social media](#) interactions—we're also going to see more interactions in virtual spaces."

More information: Sharon Heung et al, Nothing Micro About It: Examining Ableist Microaggressions on Social Media, *The 24th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility* (2022). [DOI: 10.1145/3517428.3544801](https://doi.org/10.1145/3517428.3544801)

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