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Microaggression Terminology in Communications on Twitter: A Corpus Linguistic Analysis

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Employers are increasingly raising awareness of "microaggressions" in the workplace. However, past research has suggested that microaggression terminology can be divisive. Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional, exchanges that are considered put-downs. This article presents a corpus-based investigation to understand how people use microaggression terminology in social and workplace contexts. We compared a novel corpus of 14,636 tweets against a Twitter reference corpus. Microaggressions were described as *experienced* and *dealt with*, while the sending of microaggressions was described using intentional verbs such as *committing* and *perpetrating*. This variation in language may create a divide between people with different experiences of microaggressions and seem incongruent to unintentional senders. The discourse regarding microaggressions in the workplace tended to be characterized by an impersonal style and nouns replacing verbs. Employers may wish to review their communications about microaggressions to ensure they do not obscure their message through extensive nominalization or density.

Keywords: microaggression, corpus linguistics, Twitter, workplace, diversity

It has been more than 50 years since "microaggressions" were first defined as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs'" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1977, p. 66). The term was little used until 2007 when it was revitalized by two seminal articles by Constantine and Sue (2007) and Sue and colleagues (2007); microaggressions were then described as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Examples of microaggressions include clutching your bag closer on seeing a young Black man approach you on the street or asking "what are you?" to enquire about someone's racial or ethnic group. Other examples of microaggressions would include a man stating "what a shame" in response to learning that a woman is gay, someone telling a person of Asian descent that they speak English well, or a manager assuming an older worker does not understand a piece of new technology

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(Smith & Griffiths, 2022). Since 2007, the term has been added to dictionaries (Italie, 2017), adopted more widely in society (Yoon, 2020), and incorporated as part of employers' diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work (Shepherd, 2019).

Other terms have originated in academia and become adopted in society and by employers, including *critical race theory* (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998), *White privilege* (Mcintosh, 1989), and *unconscious bias* (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). These terms are currently facing similar challenges: attempting to raise awareness of societal issues while being pejoratively described as "woke language" and frivolous (Oliver, 2020, p. 1) and suggested as containing embedded political values (Lilienfeld, 2017; Schulz, 2022). Political commentators have described terms and their lexicons as "inscrutable codes" and "political litmus tests" (Harmon, 2021, p. 1). Contemporary reviews have suggested a need for better operationalization of terminology (Lilienfeld, 2017) and increased use of real-world data (Smith & Griffiths, 2022; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014).

There have been critiques of the usefulness of *microaggression* as a term. One criticism is that the term has become so widely used in the public sphere that the definition is now less well understood and often misused to describe any verbal slight (di Gennaro & Brewer, 2018). Microaggression has also been appraised as an overly pejorative term (Lilienfeld, 2017) while at the same time not being strong enough as a label for racial abuse (Kendi, 2019). One of the first studies to explore people's use of the term highlighted its oxymoronic nature, as *micro* could trivialize the demeaning experiences of microaggressions. At the same time, *aggression* implies a deliberate intent to harm (Lui, Berkley, Pham, & Sanders, 2020). Despite these concerns, little research has focused on how the term is used to communicate experiences and whether the term leads to constructive dialogue, debate, or argument.

Terminology is the study of specialized words (terms) and vocabularies (terminologies) of special languages, with a view to improving "the efficiency of professional communication" (Rogers, 2008, p. 1847). Terminology is commonly misperceived as the production of technical terms. Instead, terminology is an applied field that incorporates linguistics and philosophy to explore the properties of terms and their relationships (Rogers, 2008). This study explores the use of microaggression terminology on Twitter. The following section reviews the literature concerning microaggression terminology in workplace contexts and relevant online research to date.

Use of Microaggression Terminology in Workplace Contexts

The workplace has been described as one of the more prevalent environments for people to experience microaggressions (Smith & Griffiths, 2022). Employers are increasingly introducing the term to employees (Jamieson, 2020). Despite this, little research has explored the efficacy of employers' efforts to raise awareness and mitigate microaggressions (Metinyurt, Haynes-Baratz, & Bond, 2021). In one of the few studies examining how the term was introduced in an applied environment, some participants denied that microaggressions existed, describing them as "made up" or used by "extremely sensitive individuals" (Espaillat et al., 2019, p. 147). Understanding how the term is used and perceived within a workplace context could support employers in raising awareness.

Employers face a challenge balancing the needs of marginalized and dominant group members, summarized in a model called the Inclusion for All Framework (Brannon, Carter, Murdock-Perriera, & Higginbotham, 2018). The framework posits that DEI interventions that consider the goals and motivations of dominant group members tend to be more effective (Brannon et al., 2018). DEI interventions are designed to benefit marginalized group members (Bernstein, Bulger, Salipante, & Weisinger, 2020), who can feel threatened by or pride because of DEI interventions (Brannon & Lin, 2021). However, DEI interventions can create a sense of threat for dominant group members, stemming from a fear of unfair treatment and exclusion (Dover, Kaiser, & Major, 2020), that their autonomy or freedom is being reduced (Brannon et al., 2018), or that their integrity is being questioned (Brockner & Sherman, 2019; Moss, Ennis, Zander, Bartram, & Hedley, 2018).

Brannon and colleagues (2018) suggest that employers might minimize diversity resistance by demonstrating consideration for dominant group members' goals and motivations while maintaining positive consequences for marginalized group members. It seems possible to overdo this approach, however. A focus on protecting the self-concept of employees can also yield undesired consequences. Literature in social cognitive theory suggests that reducing emotional resonance in terminology can lead to *moral disengagement*—a psychological state where unethical behaviors are seen as permissible (Bandura, 2002; Newman, Le, North-Samardzic, & Cohen, 2020). Using less emotional terminology is known as *euphemistic labeling*, the softening of pejorative descriptions of harmful conduct in a way that can reduce personal responsibility. An example of euphemistic labeling is an employee describing *borrowing* an item from the office rather than *stealing* it (Hystad, Mearns, & Eid, 2014). Researchers have suggested that people "behave much more cruelly when assaultive actions are given a sanitized label than when they are called aggression" (Bandura, 2002, p. 104). Social etiquette in workplaces is typically to downplay the severity of behavior such that it seems less reprehensible than it really is (Dang, Umphress, & Mitchell, 2017).

Exploring Microaggression Terminology Through Online Data Sets

A challenge in evaluating the use of the term microaggression in communication has been getting "real" data: data derived from natural use rather than laboratory settings (Wong et al., 2014). Online communication through social media provides an opportunity to help develop research in this area. The most detailed study to explore the use of the term microaggression in online discourse showed significant increases in monthly mentions of microaggressions between 2010 and 2018 (Eschmann, Groshek, Chanderdatt, Chang, & Whyte, 2020). After extracting 254,964 tweets from this timeframe, the researchers filtered the data set to focus on 1,038 tweets from the 933 authors deemed to be most influential. The researchers themed the tweets, suggesting that 33% were denials of microaggressions. The remaining themes were tweets that responded to microaggressions, defined microaggressions, shared the impact of microaggressions, provided support regarding microaggressions, or linked microaggressions to broader challenges of inequality (Eschmann et al., 2020). The study showed that microaggressions are being discussed in online forums and described the contexts in which microaggressions are being discussed. However, more research is needed to consider the terminology used to discuss microaggressions in society and the workplace.

A striking example of how online forums may help in the research of microaggression terminology is the term *microrape*, which originated in an academic article (Charles & Arndt, 2013) and made its way into terminology on the Internet (Luxury Banana, 2014). The term *microrape* could be problematic for sexual violence and DEI research. Adding the affix *micro* to the word *rape* may trivialize experiences of sexual abuse. Using the word *rape* in DEI research and interventions may lead to diversity resistance and be offensive to victims of rape. The term may also have been falsely conceived. It originated in Charles and Arndt's (2013) work, but the authors incorrectly referenced the article by Sue and colleagues (2007) for its use. Wikipedia moderators discussed the term's problematic etymology and debated whether it should appear on the wiki page for microaggressions ("Talk: Microaggression/Archive 1—Wikipedia," 2022). The moderators decided to remove it. *Microrape* did not appear again in academic literature, but the term could be found in online discourse. This occurrence illustrates the organic growth of terminology in this area: how it has been unstructured and influenced by various parties from inside and outside academia. Research to explore the real-world use of microaggression terminology may benefit the development and application of terms.

The present study draws from a novel corpus of 14,636 tweets to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What linguistic properties feature in how people describe their experiences of microaggressions and the actions that lead to them?

RQ2: What do people share online about their experience of microaggressions in workplaces, and what terminology do they use to describe those experiences?

Method

This study combined quantitative insights from corpus linguistic analysis (CLA) with qualitative analysis, an approach known as a corpus-assisted discourse study (Partington, 2004), which allows researchers to combine the quantitative analytical approaches of CLA with qualitative techniques drawn from discourse analysis. This analysis was done by qualitatively studying lines of texts taken from the corpus, known as concordance lines.

Building the Corpora

Randomized convenience sampling was used to collect a sample of tweets from Twitter, published by individuals and organizations, that contained the word "microaggression" or a spelling variant.

Two corpora were constructed using FireAnt Version 1.1.4 (Anthony & Hardaker, 2017): a corpus containing tweets related to microaggressions and a reference corpus containing a random selection of tweets from across Twitter. Data collection for the microaggression corpus took place for eight months, from May 25, 2019, to January 29, 2020. The search terms used contained the singular "microaggression," the plural "microaggressions," and a variety of misspellings, including "micro aggression," "micro-aggression," "micro-aggressions," "microagression," "microagressions," "microaggresion," and "microaggresions."

Data for the reference corpus were collected from a general randomized sample of Twitter data collected over a week from January 20 to January 27, 2020. Tweets containing "RT" (abbreviation for retweet), "via," or "not found" were removed from the data set to avoid duplication of tweets, which might skew the data analysis. Handles, hashtags, and URLs were removed from the data set. The final number of filtered tweets in the microaggression and reference corpora was 14,636 and 76,145, respectively. Tweets were analyzed verbatim as posted by their authors, and spelling errors within the text were not addressed.

Author Profiling

As a first step toward understanding the authors communicating in this data set, the authors' profile descriptions were extracted into a word cloud (Figure 1). From the word cloud, we see linguistic patterns that indicate a more liberal audience (Sylwester & Purver, 2015), including displays of uniqueness (such as pronouns "she/her," "they/them"), intellectual positions ("writer," "author"), and a prevalence of positive emotion words ("love," "life"). However, the authorship is not solely liberal: Conservative voices and neutral groups such as employers are present in the sample. When quoting authors in this study, we provide the date of the communication and their geographical location. The authors' location was identified based on users' information in their tweets, profile descriptions, and location data.

To mitigate the risk of data being biased by social bots, we reviewed the quotes we present using the Botometer program (see "BotOrNot"; Davis, Varol, Ferrara, Flammini, & Menczer, 2016). The program scanned key details of accounts to check for patterns consistent with social bots. This allowed us to assign a score from 1 to 5 to each quote to indicate the likeliness that it was a bot. By validating each quote used in the analysis, only one quote was removed due to the high likelihood of it being a bot (with a high score of 4.2/5).

Figure 1. Word cloud overview of profile descriptions.

Data Analysis

To select texts for analysis, we focused on keyness. Keyness is the extent to which a word appears significantly more frequently in a target corpus than in a reference corpus (Baker, 2006), calculated using log-likelihood (LL) scores (Pojanapunya & Todd, 2018).

For RQ1, we used CLA to explore keyword lexical verbs related to how people describe the sending and receiving of microaggressions. Keywords were generated by comparing the frequency of words in the Twitter corpus with the reference corpus using the software WordSmith 7.0 (Scott, 2016). To qualify as a

keyword, the words needed to feature in at least 5% of the texts and meet a minimum level of statistical significance, set at $p < .0000001$, with a minimum log ratio of 1.5 and a minimum Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) score of 2.5. The list of keywords was capped at 500.

For RQ2, we combined CLA with systemic functional linguistics (SFL; To, Lê, & Lê, 2015). SFL concerns how people use language to achieve everyday social life and establish social worlds through language (Kazemian & Hashemi, 2014). SFL examines the functions that language has evolved to serve in society (Young & Harrison, 2004), making it a well-suited form of analysis to explore how the term microaggression is used in the context of the workplace. SFL was applied to keywords related to the workplace and collocates of the keywords. Collocates are words that frequently co-occur with keywords in the corpus (Scott, 2016). SFL analysis focused on four linguistic areas: theme-rheme, lexical density (L_d), grammatical metaphor (GM), and nominalization.

Theme-rheme concerns how authors create a thematic structure in their writing. We can loosely describe "theme" as a *starting point* and "rheme" as *aboutness* (Dejica-Cartis & Cozma, 2013). Analyzing patterns of theme-rheme within the texts allowed us to explore how messages were organized. It allowed us to see how authors presented the information to readers, particularly how the communication began and the focus of the text that the author wanted to convey (To et al., 2015).

L_d is the proportion of lexical items per total words. Lexical items are usually nouns, verbs, adjectives, and some kinds of adverbs. Analyzing the L_d of texts allowed us to see how authors used lexical and grammatical items to present or explain information in the text. Generally, texts with lower L_d are more easily understood than texts with high L_d. In this study, L_d was calculated using Halliday's (1985) method. L_d is presented as a ratio, where a score of 2 would indicate an average of two lexical items per clause. Flesch reading scores were also included alongside L_d scores as a second validating measure of the readability of texts.

$$L_d = \frac{\text{The number of lexical items}}{\text{The total number of clauses}}$$

GM is the substitution of a grammatical class or structure with another (Halliday, 1994). It accounts for the ways in which meaning can be expressed (Xuan & Chen, 2019), which allowed us to explore shared meaning regarding experiences of microaggressions. This analysis looked at GM and nominalization together, as GM expands on noun use. Nominalization is the extent to which the text features nouns derived from other word classes. The term "microaggression" is an act of nominalization instead of the adjective "microaggressive." Nominalization tends to occur more frequently in formal texts such as academic writing, scientific discourse, and legal works. Looking at nominalization gave us an insight into the formality with which meaning is represented in a text, a formality that can minimize agency and causality (Fairclough, 2000).

Findings

We generated the 500 keywords that were most frequently occurring and statistically significant. A word cloud (Figure 2) presented these keywords visually, showing the four most frequent words to be microaggressions (LL = 20,232.19), racism (LL = 4,295.12), White (LL = 2,982.15), and Black (LL = 2,749.91). There were also references to other group experiences, including women (LL = 935.86), transgender (LL = 444.59) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual+ (LL = 34.10) communities, religion (LL = 49.75), and class (LL = 45.30). Our analysis focused on tweets containing the keyword microaggression. Analysis was not limited to exploring the experiences of one group although many examples presented are in the context of race.

Figure 2. Word cloud overview of keywords in the corpus by frequency.

How People Describe Experiences Using the Term Microaggression

We began by examining the keyword list for lexically salient words that described how microaggressions were received. Eight verbs were identified (Table 1).

Table 1. Lexical Keywords Describing the Experience of a Microaggression.

Verb	Log-Likelihood	Example of Use
Experience	532.54	"Scariest thing I've done so far is talk about the microaggressions I've **experienced** in the Army" (personal communication, January 16, 2020; the United Kingdom).
Deal	346.85	"Today was rough at the office **dealing** with racial microaggressions. 😵" (personal communication, January 8, 2020; the United States).
Educate	147.74	"The emotional labour of **educating** white people about race, racism, and microaggressions [*sic*] falls overwhelmingly on POC [*people of color*] in the workplace in the charity sector" (personal communication, January 14, 2020; the United Kingdom).
Face	133	"I **faced** microaggressions myself, at work" (personal communication, December 3, 2019; the United States).
Address	129.96	"While I agree that people should be more sensitive and that some microaggressions should be **addressed**, we have become too quick/judgmental in denouncing transgressors" (personal communication, October 17, 2019; the United States).
Respond	102.74	"From blatant bias to microaggressions, off-color jokes and demeaning statements, you know them when you hear them. A little prep can enable you to **respond** more effectively to hurtful and inappropriate comments that can decrease workplace trust" (personal communication, December 11, 2019; the United States).
Confront	66.65	"Microaggressions are a morale killer! You have to make sure to **confront** them in the workplace before your situation worsens" (personal communication, October 5, 2019; the United States).

The predominant use of *experience* and *deal* gives a sense that the microaggression is not shocking or surprising but chronic—experienced and dealt with regularly. While these keywords indicate that microaggression experiences are expected and mundane, there was regular co-occurrence with words that conveyed pain and frustration, as illustrated by these two examples. Lexically salient words are in bold. One: "I **experienced** the **biggest ableist microaggression of my life** last night, but I couldn't do anything about it" (personal communication, October 12, 2019; the United States). Two: "I'm sorry for the **trauma** you've **experienced** from repeated micro-aggressions [*sic*]" (personal communication, June 14, 2019; the United States). Linguistically, these pairings give a sense that authors expect to manage microaggressions, but each experience is still disorientating. *Exhausting* (LL = 242.82) and *tiring* (LL = 86.92) are regularly featured in descriptions of the experience of microaggressions.

The keyword *deal* was often used to describe the process of coping with microaggressions, as shown in the following two examples. One: "The micro-aggressions I **deal** with **daily** ad [*sic*] a Black man in the tech world is **sick**. Lord guide me through the rest of this day. Please don't allow my anger to get the best of me today. Amen" (personal communication, December 11, 2019; the United States). Two: "You've doubtless **experienced** numerous **challenges** (microaggressions, racism, etc.) that I've never had to **deal** with" (personal communication, September 5, 2019; the United Kingdom). In both these examples, *deal* co-occurs with references to frequency (*deal with daily, experienced numerous challenges).*

Alongside indications of microaggression frequency, authors also often intimated through language such as *on the receiving end* that they had little control over their experiences. The verbs *educate* (freq = 126), *face* (freq = 82), and *confront* (freq = 52; Table 1) were less frequent keywords. They contain more emotion and take a more active stance than *experience* and *deal*. The following example shows the usage of these keywords within the context of actively coping or managing the experience of microaggressions: "**When faced with** microaggressions how does one react? It is a very tricky situation to be in. She fell back on her [implicit bias] and I wasn't brave enough **to confront her** there and then" (personal communication, July 13, 2019; the United Kingdom.

Finally, the verbs *address* (freq = 259) and *respond* (freq = 147; Table 1) take a less personal stance and feature more in the communications of employers offering training or are in use by impartial commentators. In contrast to the personally framed tweets, the following example is framed with a greater sense of positivity and control (*how to handle them, great opportunity, how to address*). The example does not refer to first-person or lived experiences of microaggressions. Instead, it references a team that will be hosting a presentation on the topic: "Join [redacted] on the 4th for a presentation on unconscious bias, microaggressions, and how to handle them. This is a great opportunity to start the conversation about microaggressions and **how to address them**" (personal communication, September 27, 2019; the United States).

We identified three keywords (Table 2) related to how people send microaggressions: *Perpetrate* (LL = 90.53), *commit* (LL = 70.51), and *direct* (LL = 62.54). This was a lower quantity of verbs than found for experiencing microaggressions, with lower frequencies (*commit* freq = 128, *perpetuate* freq = 69, and *direct* freq = 57). It suggests that receiving microaggressions is more frequently described than how microaggressions are sent.

Table 2. Lexical Keywords Describing the Sending of Microaggressions.

Verb	Log-Likelihood	Example of Use
Perpetuate	90.53	"Read about microaggression and stop **perpetuating** microaggressions" (personal communication, January 25, 2020; the United States).
Commit	70.51	"English is my second language. Thanks for correcting my spelling, but this is actually a SERIOUS micro-aggression you're **committing,** and I expect an apology" (personal communication, July 15, 2019; the United States).

Direct	62.54	"I can't keep count of how often 'educated' & 'well-meaning' people have **directed** microaggressions towards me" (personal communication, August 7, 2019; the United States).

The use of the verbs in Table 2 implies intent on behalf of the sender. We can see how intent is associated through collocates of *commit* and emotive, intentional outcomes such as *suicide*, an *offense*, a *crime,* and *adultery* ("British National Corpus," n.d.). This intent is juxtaposed with how microaggressions are described in the Twitter data as *unintentional* (LL = 623.31), *implicit* (LL = 538.64), *subtle* (LL = 493.58), and *unconscious* (LL = 294.57). The academic descriptions of microaggressions and descriptions in the Twitter data suggest that senders are typically unaware of sending a microaggression (di Gennaro & Brewer, 2018). Words like *perpetrate* and *commit* may be incongruent with the senders' intentions, which may seem punitive and accusatory if used in language toward senders. The analysis in this section, exploring RQ1, indicates that certain lexical verbs are frequently used to describe experiences of microaggressions, with the properties of these verbs seemingly placing sender and receiver at odds with one another regarding their intentions and expectations.

Use of Microaggression Terminology in the Workplace

We reviewed the keywords list for words salient to organizations and extracted six relevant keywords (Table 3). These keywords can be categorized into two groups: Circumstantial words (*workplace, colleagues,* and *coworkers*) that indicate where microaggressions may be occurring and by whom, and words that indicate an employer response or responsibility (*training, HR* [human resources], and *workshop*). *Workplace* was the most frequently occurring keyword related to microaggressions in organizations and provides context to authors' experiences. The phrase *in the workplace* was often used (freq = 131), reinforcing the workplace as a recurring context in which microaggressions are experienced. We extracted 1,036 tweets containing eight keywords to answer RQ2.

Using SFL, two linguistic patterns emerged: a) how authors described first-person experiences in the workplace and b) greater L_d, nominalization, and GM in texts related to employer action. We began by analyzing the theme-rheme structures of both patterns to understand how authors connected content before reviewing nominalization and GM to see how the construction of meaning varied.

Table 3. Lexical Keywords Salient to the Workplace.

Keyword	**Log-Likelihood**	**Example of Use**
Workplace	676.58	"Abena's tweets on the microagressions [*sic*] and racism she's faced since becoming an MP are important. We should reflect on how [microaggression] operates in **workplaces** across the country, including parliament" (personal communication, January 15, 2020; the United Kingdom).
Colleagues	186.51	"A study on how male physician microaggressions against female **colleagues** are not noticed as much by male viewers" (personal communication, December 2, 2019; Canada).

Training	120.79	"There was a seminar yesterday on 'Overcoming your colleagues' microaggressions and implicit biases,' YET, I haven't seen a single seminar/ workshop/ **training** on how to unpack and dismantle biases" (personal communication, December 3, 2019; the United States)
Workshop	104.32	"Then a quick change of venue to facilitate a Theatre of the Oppressed **workshop** to address gender microaggressions at the knowledge share session!" (personal communication, November 12, 2019; the United States).
HR	99.60	"Brought up to my **HR** department a training on unconscious biases and microaggressions and how to keep them out the workplace" (personal communication, January 9, 2020; the United States).
Coworkers	82.97	"Surprisingly few microaggressions though! Although one of my dad's **coworkers** went up to my brother and said, 'you must be [my birthname], right?'" (personal communication, August 3, 2019; the United Kingdom).

Theme-Rhemes of First-Person Experiences in the Workplace

As a reminder, we can consider "theme" as a *starting point* and "rheme" as *aboutness* (Dejica-Cartis & Cozma, 2013). A common theme of workplace microaggression discourse was that of first-person experiences. There were three main rhemes that typically followed first-person experiences: (1) examples of microaggression experiences, (2) the reactions of colleagues, and (3) the reactions of people in positions of authority. The following quotes illustrate how these rhemes were built on this first-person theme (Table 4).

Table 4. Examples of Rhemes Built Off the First-Person Theme.

Rheme	**Example of Use**
Examples of microaggression experiences	"I'm striking for all those women and BAME [*Black and Minority* Ethnic] colleagues who doubt themselves, doubt their brilliance as researchers and teachers, whose experience of microaggressions pushes them out of academia" (personal communication, November 22, 2019; the United Kingdom).
	"I'm brown with a beard and people are afraid of me on the tube . . . But it shouldn't follow through in the workplace. Often it's presented more in a way of work being overly criticised or patronised at work . . . Microaggressions are the worst because it's often seen as bants [*banter*]" (personal communication, December 4, 2019; the United Kingdom).
The reactions of colleagues	"I was explaining to my white coworkers all the racist microaggressions I was experiencing at work, and their response was 'that's just the way it is, you have to deal with it'" (personal communication, June 16, 2019; the United States).
	"I wrote about one microaggression I experienced in the workplace—being told by a partner her husband had an affair with a 'Black woman' with green eyes and dreadlocks and people are sending me messages of gratitude. [I] Didn't expect that" (personal communication, December 29, 2019; the United States).

The reactions of people in positions of authority	"A week after reporting poor work ethic and micro-aggressions in the workplace. [*sic*] I was scheduled to meet with a manager, and she said 'Either you can quit, or I'll have to fire you'" (personal communication, January 6, 2020; the United States).
	"I've also been on the other end where you do voice your concerns about microaggressions in the workplace and it's never ended well for me" (personal communication, November 5, 2019; the United Kingdom).

The first and second categories presented in Table 4 refer to the context and validation of authors' experiences. Within these, authors share elements of identity salient to an experience of microaggression ("*I'm brown with a beard*," "*women*," and "*BAME colleagues*"). These theme-rhemes address the consequences of microaggressions and imply that the workplace should be free of microaggressions. The second and third categories of rhemes presented in Table 4 refer to reactions: These rhemes concern colleague support and typically negative interactions from authority figures. In rhemes concerning colleagues' reactions, there is indifference (*you have to deal with it*) and support (*messages of gratitude).* Linguistic choices in the first reaction regarding action contained little emotion ("*I was explaining*," "*their response was*"). In contrast, the second example explicitly states *I didn't expect that* regarding a supportive response. Interactions with workplace authorities are presented formally, such as *scheduled to meet with a manager.* This formality also extends to authors' actions, such as *voice your concerns about microaggressions*. The consequences were typically negative—*either you can quit, or I'll have to fire you; it's never ended well for me*–and framed within a workplace context.

Theme-Rhemes of Employer Action

The second frequent theme in workplace microaggression discourse was a third-person perspective on the state of microaggressions in the workplace. This was built into two rhemes concerning the prevalence and consequences of microaggressions in the workplace (Table 5).

Table 5. Examples of Rhemes Built Off the Third-Person Theme.

Rheme	**Examples of Use**
The prevalence of microaggressions in the workplace	"All women in STEMM [*Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and* Medicine] have experienced microaggression in their careers, from overlooking women to collaborate on projects to not listening to our ideas but responding to the same idea from a man. It's time this changed" (personal communication, December 2, 2019; Australia).
	"Women in the workplace report conclusions: Women are more likely to face discrimination—or microaggressions—such as being subjected to demeaning comments, having to provide more evidence of their competence, or being mistaken for someone more junior" (personal communication, June 11, 2019; the United Kingdom).
The consequences of microaggressions on employees	"Black employees have less access to senior leaders than their white peers and [*they*] experience more microaggressions at work than members of other minority groups. Black employees are also 30% more likely to leave their jobs

	than white employees" (personal communication, December 16, 2019; the United States),
	"Bias impacts women's day-to-day work experiences and ability to advance. Over 73% of women report experiencing microaggressions—or everyday discrimination—which is rooted in bias" (source: McKinsey & Company; personal communication, November 19, 2019; the United States).

The rhemes are built on third-person statements about groups' experiences ("*all women in STEMM have experienced*," "*Black employees have less access*") to emphasize the current state of microaggressions in the workplace and the consequences. These theme-rhemes were more likely to be authored by organizations. In rhemes related to consequences, we see examples of business rhetoric (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002) through specific phraseology ("*less access to senior leaders*," "*ability to advance*"), use of percentages ("*Black employees are also 30% more likely*," "*73% of women report*"), and citations for credibility.

Lexical Density

We selected, at random, using a random number generator, approximately 10% of the tweets about microaggressions in workplace contexts, 100 in total, and manually coded the data to analyze L_d. For comparison, we manually coded 100 randomized tweets from the broader corpus on microaggressions and 100 randomized tweets from the reference corpus. The L_d of these texts is shown in Table 6. The mean L_d was greater for tweets from the microaggression corpus than the sample of tweets from the reference corpus. L_d was highest for the sample of tweets related to microaggressions in the context of workplaces. This difference in score suggests that tweets related to microaggressions contain more lexical items per clause than typical tweets on Twitter.

In addition to the analysis of L_d, we also analyzed Flesch reading ease: a measure of reading difficulty, where higher scores indicate greater ease of reading. The Flesch score was lower for workplace microaggression discourse than the microaggression of the reference corpora. This indicates that workplace microaggressions discourse may be dense and challenging to read. If this is the case, it may inhibit employer communication about microaggressions to employees.

Table 6. Lexical Density Featuring Halliday's Method and Flesch Reading Ease Scores.

	Reference Corpus	Microaggression Corpus	Workplace Microaggression Tweets
Mean L_d	5.802	7.162	8.422
Range	0–17	0.9–23	2.6–29
Flesch reading ease	69.7	60.7	53.9

GM and Nominalization of Workplace Discourse

We explored GM and nominalization by manually searching for tweets containing workplace keywords. Discourse featuring both first-person and third-person themes was included. We found GM and nominalization commonly in discourse related to employers' interventions on microaggressions: specifically, *training*, *workshop*, and *HR*. This is significant because previous work exploring business rhetoric in communications has suggested that nominalized language like this can conceal where actual responsibility lies (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002; Fairclough, 2000). We explored nominalization and GM in two areas: discourse around the phrases *in the workplace* and *training*. The analysis looked at how meaning is encoded by exploring three key components (Simpson, 1993):

1. Process: The process of the clause as expressed by the choice of verb.
2. Participants: The actors involved in the process, typically through noun phrases.
3. Circumstances: The context of the process.

Authors use GM to bring in contextual information, particularly the participants involved and the circumstances in which a microaggression occurred. The following example shows the lexico-grammatical choices made by an author to add this information (GM is underlined, nominalization is in bold): "Even when workplaces <u>are filled with</u> **microaggressions** <u>against women</u>, men may have difficulty recognizing them" (personal communication, December 2, 2019; the United States). The author references workplaces *filled with microaggressions* and shares the target: *against women*. Instead of saying *men struggled*, the challenge was nominalized so that men *have difficulty*.

It was also common for authors to use modifiers and conventional metaphors to add detail, as shown in the following two examples. One: "They [women] <u>have been on the receiving end</u> of some **manipulative** & **unprofessional workplace behaviors** . . . And the **microaggressions** <u>appear to be a feature, rather than a bug,</u> in these academic workplaces" (personal communication, November 22, 2019; the United States). Two: "Racism, **bias**, and **microaggressions** <u>toward Black workers still run rampant</u> in workplaces across the United States" (personal communication, November 17, 2019; the United States). The use of conventional metaphor may be due to how it can help people project concrete characteristics onto abstract ideas (Steen, 2011), such as microaggressions in the absence of lived experience or context. In these examples, conventional metaphor is applied to process (*run rampant*) and the circumstances (*feature, not a bug*), allowing authors to link nominalized terms into statements about the workplace, condensing more information into a short amount of text. When describing circumstances, *running rampant* suggests frequency and a lack of control—"rampant" being described as something negative increasing without control ("Rampant," 2020). We also see GM references to the process ("*toward*," "*on the receiving end*"), the participants ("*Black workers*," "*women*"), and circumstances ("*academic workplaces*," "*workplaces across the United States*"). However, the extracts do not describe the senders of microaggressions: A frequent pattern throughout workplace examples.

The keyword *training* was the most frequent word referring to how employers intervene. In the following example, the authors link microaggression training to outcomes. The outcomes are typically nominalized, such as *advice*, *inclusivity*, and *escalations*: "The training **provides definitions** on

microaggressions and **offers advice** on how to handle **potentially offensive situations**" (personal communication, January 15, 2020; the United States). Defined human participants are absent in this example. This may be why verbs used to describe the process are phrased in a formal style as *providing definitions* (instead of defines) and *offers advice* (instead of advises). There is a lack of circumstantial information, with the author sharing only that the training may help in the context of *potentially offensive situations.*

This formal style was a common feature of the discourse, illustrated further by two examples. One: "Professors and students ought to undergo **microaggression training** in order to increase **inclusivity** and decrease stereotyping on campus" (personal communication, December 4, 2019; the United States). Two: "Provide employees with access to **training regarding microaggressions** and having **topical, hard conversations** to empower them to deal with such instances directly and reduce the **likelihood of escalation**" (personal communication, January 7, 2020; the United States). There is formal and authoritarian language in these examples: Participants *ought to undergo* microaggression training, a phrase commonly used with procedural activities, such as surgery. On the other hand, *provide employees with access to training* is written in the passive voice, emphasizing the existence of the training rather than the attendance of training. In both examples, the process is nominalized (*employees access training* rather than *employees are trained*), and benefits are framed as an increase or decrease in a nominalized outcome: *Increase inclusivity and decrease stereotyping or reduce the likelihood of escalation*.

With employers aiming to strike a balance between the goals and motivations of both dominant and underrepresented groups (Brannon et al., 2018), this extensive nominalization could obscure responsibility for change.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

This was the first study to use CLA to explore how the term *microaggression* is used in communications. In doing so, it contributed findings based on real-world data, a source that microaggression research has often lacked (Wong et al., 2014). We found a discrepancy in how the sending and receiving of microaggressions were described by those who experienced them. Authors tended to write that microaggressions are *experienced* or *dealt with*, while senders of microaggressions are described as *committing* or *perpetrating* them. Descriptions of microaggressions in the Twitter data suggest that senders typically lack intent, a view supported by academic literature (di Gennaro & Brewer, 2018). Words like *perpetrate* and *commit* may seem at odds with the senders' intentions. Variations in how receivers and senders are described may create division by emphasizing the differences between those who experience microaggressions and those who do not (Brannon et al., 2018).

We also found that communication in a workplace context often used a more formal style. This style was characterized by the third-person point of view, greater amounts of nominalization, and higher L_d. While this style was apparent in text authored by organizations, it was also adopted by individual contributors when writing about experiences in the workplace. The consequence is that the need or

responsibility for change may not readily be apparent to a reader. Employers may adopt this style to avoid liability and resistance to diversity initiatives (Brannon et al., 2018). Individuals may adopt this style because of fear of retaliation. However, using formal and impersonal communication may undermine the purpose of communicating about microaggressions. It may also seem incongruent to employees who experience microaggressions when employers comment on an emotive topic in an impersonal, nominalized style.

Theoretical Implications

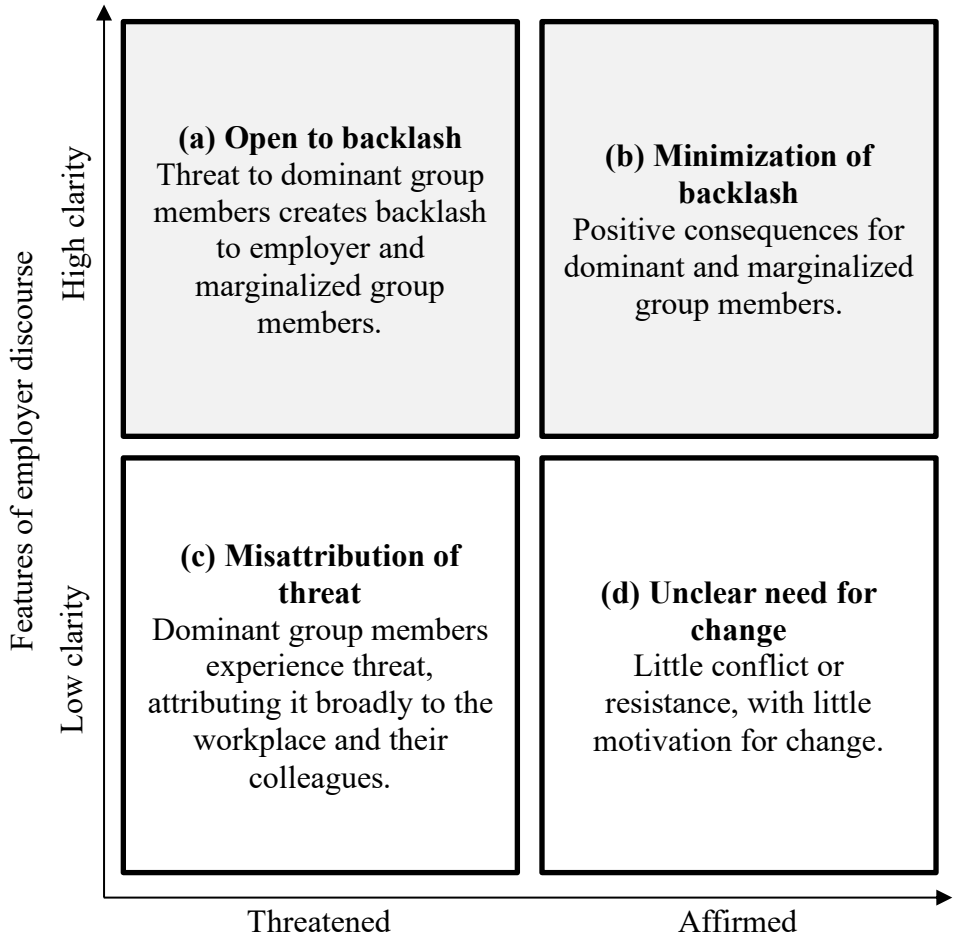
Confirming the Microaggression Oxymoron

Past research has suggested that *microaggression* is an oxymoron, as it risks trivializing experiences (micro) while implying intent and overt hostility (*aggression*; Lui et al., 2020). The present study provides evidence of a linguistic divide in descriptions of how microaggressions are sent and received, by those who experience them. The language used to describe experiences featured a sense of expectancy and coping (*experienced*, *dealt with*), while the language used to describe sending was pejorative (*committed*, *perpetrated*). The aims of inclusion, intergroup conflict, and intergroup reconciliation work are typically to increase constructive communication and shared understanding (Böhm, Rusch, & Baron, 2020). However, by minimizing the experience of microaggressions and exaggerating the intent of senders, the language explored in this study may have the opposite effect of deepening intergroup identification and conflict (Böhm et al., 2020).

Inclusion for All Framework Expansion

The Inclusion for All Framework, described in the introduction, suggests that employers should balance the goals and motivations of marginalized and dominant groups (Brannon et al., 2018). In doing so, employers can minimize unintended signals that can create resistance to DEI (Dover et al., 2020). While the first recommendation of the authors is "be mindful of cues that signal inclusion (and change those that do not)" (Brannon et al., 2018, p. 70), including "institutional messaging," it assumes the communication of messaging is explicit and clear. It is possible that to manage the groups identified by Brannon and colleagues (2018), employers are increasing density and nominalization in communications around microaggressions. These features can obscure the message employers are intending to communicate about who needs to change and how they need to change.

A lack of communication clarity might reduce the risk of employees feeling threatened. However, employees who experience threat may be uncertain about its source and attribute it elsewhere in the workplace, such as to their colleagues. In cases where employees feel affirmed, but communication is unclear, it may leave employees with little sense of a need for change. Incorporating this thinking into the Inclusion for All Framework (Figure 3) extends the guidance we can provide to employers. A revised framework posits that employers should reduce L_d and nominalization in their communications to describe the need more clearly for change while affirming dominant and marginalized group members' goals and motivations. This may seem an obvious recommendation, but without making this explicit, organizations may default to dense, nominalized communications to avoid threatening team members' goals and motivations.



Management of dominant and marginalized group members, drawn from Inclusion for All Framework (Brannon et al., 2018). Quadrants (a) and (b) are drawn from the Inclusion for All Framework.

Figure 3. Extension of the Inclusion for All Framework to incorporate features of employer discourse.

Practical Implications

Tailoring Employer Communication to Different Audiences

While Brannon and colleagues' (2018) Inclusion for All Framework emphasizes the need to manage the goals and motivations of both dominant and marginalized group members, this does not necessarily mean communicating the same messages in the same style to both groups. The present study shows the emotional discrepancy between the personal way individuals describe their experiences and the more impersonal and neutral ways organizations might engage with this topic. Furthering dialogue around microaggressions requires communication that validates people's experiences while influencing senders' behavior. These two audiences may require different communication strategies, which makes it difficult to communicate about this topic using a single term without increasing the risk of resistance.

Managing Threat Instead of Obscuring the Message

While there is a risk of resistance and backlash from employees if organizations fail to manage communications around DEI (Brannon et al., 2018; Dover et al., 2020; Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2016; Leslie, 2019), the present study suggests that there is an increase in nominalization and L_d in communications in the workplace context. This could obscure the messages organizations are trying to signal around inclusiveness. Denser communication seems unlikely to manage the threat dominant group members experience in DEI interventions. Organizations may increase clarity in communication about microaggressions by reducing nominalization and L_d. There are opportunities for more emotive and human language in communications around microaggressions and drawing from the existing research base to manage threat by being explicit on the reasons and responsibilities for change.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

It is important to note that inferences should be taken from the data with caution. CLA points to patterns in language that are then interpreted (Baker, 2006), providing a snapshot of data rather than a conclusive point. The study should not be generalized to the entire population using Twitter. It should also be stated that Twitter users are not representative of all people who work in organizations. By only including words in the English language, the data in the corpus may have been limited. This study used various spellings for microaggression to ensure a representative corpus; however, other spelling varieties or words might have strengthened the corpus. While the corpus included communications from authors worldwide, most contributions appear to be from the United States, which should be considered when interpreting these findings. We used Twitter data to explore features of communications in the workplace context. However, these are external to organizations. This research could be replicated in the future using a corpus of internal employer DEI communications about microaggressions.

This study brings many opportunities for further research. Future research will benefit from focusing on global data sets. Organizations would also benefit from research regarding how to craft language and communications to introduce this topic. Furthermore, the choices of lexical words in this study have hinted at a range of approaches and coping mechanisms that individuals employ to manage microaggressions in

the workplace and how that is affected by communications from peers and authority figures such as managers. Research should continue to explore the oxymoronic nature of the term *microaggression* and how that may shape the discourse around the term.

Conclusion

Organizations are taking an increasing interest in the topic of microaggressions. This study explored how language is used in conversations about microaggressions on Twitter to inform how organizations might introduce this topic. Authors tended to write that microaggressions are *experienced* or *dealt with*. In contrast, the sending of microaggressions was described as *committing* or *perpetrating* them. In a more detailed analysis of tweets specific to the workplace context, there were examples of theme-rheme, nominalization, and L_d that seemed to indicate a denser and more impersonal pattern of language when it comes to employer responsibility and action. There are two implications for organizations: First, tailor communications to different audiences instead of adopting a generic communication approach, and second, manage potential feelings of threat through clear communications instead of obscuring the message.

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