

# Nothing Micro About It: Examining Ableist Microaggressions on Social Media

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## ABSTRACT

Ableist microaggressions are subtle forms of discrimination that disabled people experience daily, perpetuating inequalities and maintaining their ongoing marginalization. Despite the importance of understanding such harms, little work has been done to examine how disabled people are discriminated against online. We address this gap by investigating how disabled people experience ableist microaggressions on social media and how they respond to and cope with these experiences. By conducting interviews with 20 participants with various disabilities, we uncover 12 archetypes of ableist microaggressions on social media, reveal participants' coping mechanisms, and describe the long-term impact on their wellbeing and social media use. Lastly, we present design recommendations, re-evaluating how social media platforms can mitigate and prevent these harmful experiences.

## KEYWORDS

microaggressions, ableism, social media, disability

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Disabled people<sup>1</sup> routinely experience different forms of discrimination, despite increased awareness about disability and legislation to protect disabled people [1]. One form of discrimination is ableist

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<sup>1</sup>We use the term disabled people, since identity-first language is preferred by disability rights groups, the disability justice movement, and mimics the language our participants used. We recognize that being a disabled person is a part of one's identity and experiences, and that a person is disabled by society, technology, and the built environment.

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microaggressions which are defined as subtle remarks or insults that are fueled by negative stereotypes of disability [50]. These “micro” forms of discrimination perpetuate inequalities, ableism, and stereotypes against disabled people while maintaining their ongoing marginalization [50].

Several scholars have examined disabled people's experiences with ableist microaggressions in everyday settings and documented the harms emerging from such experiences. For example, Keller and Galgay examined different types of microaggressions disabled people encountered in-person and presented a framework to interpret such microaggressive experiences [29]. Xiong developed scales to measure different types of microaggressive behaviors [56]. Such microaggressive experiences cause negative health outcomes (e.g., a greater likelihood of depression and anxiety) and affect academic performance (e.g., reduced academic self concept and lower grade satisfaction) [28, 32, 35]. While these research advances provide the necessary foundation to study ableist microaggressions towards disabled people, all the work focuses on microaggressive behaviors in *offline* settings.

In recent years, social media has witnessed an unprecedented growth in users worldwide. An increasing number of social interactions occur through social media for both disabled and non-disabled people alike. With more disabled people turning to social media as a means to socialize with others remotely and form online communities, it's important to understand feelings of exclusion and discrimination that occur on these platforms [3, 11–13, 25, 36, 48]. To date, little is known about the types of microaggressions disabled people experience on social media, and how these experiences differ across online and offline settings. To fill this critical gap, we sought to answer two research questions:

- RQ1: How do disabled people experience microaggressions on social media?
- RQ2: How do disabled people respond to and cope with microaggressions?

To answer these questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants who had a variety of disabilities. During the interviews, we asked them about a time when they experienced subtle forms of discrimination and felt excluded on social media, probing around their perception of what had happened and how they responded. We gained insight on how these platforms mediate such interactions between the disabled person and the perpetrators as well as how these microaggressive experiences affected the disabled person's social media use.

Our findings revealed 12 microaggression archetypes that disabled people experience on social media. Participants reported routinely receiving ableist posts, messages, and comments that made them feel patronized and infantilized. Participants had to endure invasive, personal questions regarding their disability, relationships, and intimacy. They also felt excluded when people on social media ignored their posts or accessibility needs and when users and platforms censored content posted by them. While some microaggressive experiences bore similarity to those happening in offline settings (e.g., denial of disability identity), we uncovered new forms of microaggressive experiences that are unique to social media (e.g., being ignored or ghosted). Participants described microaggressions as harmful experiences that hampered their self-esteem and confidence, left a lasting impact, and forced them to change the way they use social media. They responded to and coped with microaggressive behaviors in different ways. While some participants responded to microaggressions to educate the perpetrator or retaliate, many used platform features to report the offending comment and block the perpetrator.

Drawing on these findings, we discuss how microaggressions manifest differently on social media and present design recommendations on how social media platforms could mediate and prevent these harmful experiences. We make several contributions to the accessibility community and the conversation around online inclusion:

- We provide a comprehensive understanding of various types of microaggressive behaviors disabled people experience on social media, their coping mechanisms and response strategies, and the resulting impact on their wellbeing, self-worth, and social media use.
- We explicate the differences in ableist microaggressions in online and offline settings.
- We discuss design recommendations to reimagine social media that is more inclusive and welcoming.

## 2 RELATED WORK

The term microaggressions was originally coined by Chester Pierce, a psychiatrist who studied these “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges” towards African Americans [42, 50]. Since then, microaggressions have been re-defined as “brief slights and insults targeting persons of oppressed identities” [4, 50]. The use of the term has expanded to other marginalized populations, including the disability community. Similar to other structural forms of oppression (e.g., racism and sexism), microaggressions experienced by disabled people stem from structural ableism; hence the term ableist microaggressions.

To date, scholarship on ableist microaggressions has primarily focused on their occurrences in offline and in-person settings. Keller and Galgay [29] were the first to systematize the types of microaggressions uniquely experienced by disabled people. Based on focus groups with twelve disabled people, they developed a framework to categorize ableist microaggressions into ten distinct patterns. They found microaggressions about “denial of personal identity” when people ignored all aspects of a disabled person’s identity other than disability. Disabled people also encountered “denial of disability experience” when microaggressions minimized or denied

their disability itself or experiences related to their disability. Microaggressions also consisted of “denial of privacy” experiences when people solicited private information relating to a person’s disability or “desexualization” when disabled people were assumed to be uninterested in or incapable of sex. Disabled people also encountered “helplessness” when non-disabled people insisted on helping them even when no help was necessary or tried to rescue them from their disability. Disabled people were often a target of “patronization” when people lauded their unremarkable everyday actions as achievements, “infantilization” when people treated them as immature and dependent, and “second-class citizen” when they were treated as inferior or more burdensome than non-disabled people. Keller and Galgay also found a “spread effect” when people made assumptions due to their disability (e.g., assuming that a blind person’s sense of taste or smell are more powerful than those of sighted people).

The foundational work by Keller and Galgay has been expanded upon by numerous scholars who have examined ableist microaggressions in offline contexts. For example, Bell [5] conducted an interview study with people who identified as having visible disabilities, confirming Keller and Galgay’s patterns of ableist microaggressions and developing new insights on the impact of microaggressions for visibly disabled people. Bell found that microaggressions place disabled people in a “disability double bind,” which causes an internal conflict between a disabled person asserting their identity as a capable person worthy of equal treatment, while also having to request accommodations for access purposes. Bell further described five strategies that visibly disabled people use when responding to microaggressions and noted that the ten patterns proposed in Keller and Galgay’s framework are not mutually exclusive; a single microaggression can embody more than one pattern.

Olkin et al. [40] conducted a mixed-methods study with disabled women and found two new types of ableist microaggressions in addition to confirming the patterns identified by Keller and Galgay. They found that disabled women encountered microaggressions when their health-related symptoms were not believed by medical practitioners or when they were told they looked too healthy or attractive to be disabled. Xiong [56] developed a prototype scale to measure ableist microaggressions. The 93 items in this scale combine Keller and Galgay’s patterns with microaggressions not specific to a disability context. The scale has been reviewed by disabled experts, although it remains to be validated [56]. While these research advances provide the necessary foundation to study ableist microaggressions towards disabled people, all the work discussed thus far focuses on microaggressive behaviors in *offline* settings.

A growing body of HCI research has examined online harassment and discrimination targeted towards various marginalized communities [7, 27, 31, 37]. For example, scholars have studied harassment experienced by Black people [22, 38, 55], Asian people [23], women [39, 51, 54], LGBTQIA+ people [8, 21, 22, 51], and Muslims [15, 30]. Although studies of online hate speech and disability disclosure have uncovered some instances of ableism [6, 7, 16, 37, 38], scholars have yet to examine the specific kinds of discrimination disabled people experience online. We extend the scholarship on (1) online harassment and (2) ableist microaggressions by examining new forms of microaggressions that disabled people encounter on social media.

### 3 METHODS

To examine ableist microaggressions on social media, we conducted interviews with 20 disabled people.

#### 3.1 Participant Recruitment

We recruited participants through various sampling methods, including convenience sampling (recruiting those we knew), snowball sampling (referrals from recruited participants), and stratified sampling (recruiting for a diverse balance of gender and disability)[2, 45]. Participants were screened through a Qualtrics survey to ensure they fit our criteria to include those who self-identify as having a permanent or long-term disability, have a visible disability profile (disability disclosed online), and use social media on a regular basis (multiple times per week or everyday). We required participants to disclose their disability because we sought to understand disability-specific microaggressions. This disclosure could occur via participants' posts, bios, and/or photos.

#### 3.2 Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants via Zoom. Due to access needs, three participants responded in text through the chat feature and one participant used a combination of voice and text. All interviews were conducted in English, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Participants received Amazon gift cards in recognition of their time and expertise.

Each interview began with introductions, a review of the consent form, and reiteration that the participant could take a break or skip questions at any time. Questions were open-ended to empower participants to share their experiences. The interview included questions about social media use, microaggression experiences, and avenues for improvement of social media platforms. We asked participants to share what platforms they use, what content they post that reveal aspects of their identities to help contextualize their experiences with microaggressions (e.g., how much does your profile reveal about yourself and your disability identity?). We then asked participants to tell us about a time when they were treated differently on social media, when they felt unwelcome on social media, and when they experienced subtle discrimination or microaggressions on social media. We intentionally did not use the term microaggression earlier in the interview in case participants were unfamiliar with the term. From there we asked follow-up questions to better understand what happened (e.g., when did this happen?) and how it affected their social media use (e.g., did this change the types of content you shared?). Finally, we asked participants to reflect on how microaggressions might be unique to people with disabilities (e.g., do you think people with disabilities are more or less likely to experience microaggressions on social media?) and how the platform and other users could help during microaggressive experiences. We conducted interviews until theoretical saturation was reached.

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

Our data consisted of approximately 17 hours of audio recordings and detailed notes collected during the interviews. After transcribing the interviews, we used thematic analysis [9] to conduct open

coding to discover new categories of microaggressions and deductive coding to draw from existing in-person, ableist microaggressions [29, 52]. The three coders first coded two interviews together, discussing discrepancies in codes and creating a preliminary codebook. The coders then coded the rest of the interviews separately, communicating when new codes arise by annotating the codebook. Throughout the analysis, we held multiple discussions to iteratively refine the codes and reconcile disagreements through peer-debriefing [17] to ensure that our themes comprehensively represent the data. In the end, we had 182 codes (e.g., response = no response) and 16 themes (e.g., "responding is pointless").

#### 3.4 Participant Demographics

Table 1 presents details about participant demographics and social media use. This information uses participants' own words. We recruited 20 participants (11 male, 7 female, 1 gender non-conforming, and 1 preferred not to disclose) with varying long-term disabilities (e.g., blind or visually impaired, deaf and hard of hearing, and neurodivergent). Participant ages ranged from 19 to 35 years (mean = 26.7). The majority (n=17) of our participants were from the United States, while three participants resided in India, Ireland, and the UK.

#### 3.5 Positionality

Given the sensitive nature of discussing online discrimination and microaggressions, we believe it is crucial to reflect on our stance. Our team consists of authors with a rich experience of working with disabled people and authors who have experienced ableist microaggressions. Although we present individual accounts of microaggressions, we take a disability studies perspective in striving for structural changes that mitigate and ideally dismantle ableism [34]. Our goal is to bring forward the voices of disabled people in how they are excluded online; and intervene in conversations on online governance and content moderation.

## 4 FINDINGS

We present the different forms of microaggressions that the disabled participants experienced on social media (Section 4.1). We then share the aftermath of these experiences, discussing ways in which disabled people responded to (Section 4.2.1) and coped with these microaggressions (Section 4.2.2). Finally, we describe participants' views on the long-term impact of microaggressions and ways to help prevent and mitigate the harm (Section 4.2.3).

### 4.1 Types of Ableist Microaggressions

Although two participants could only recall experiences of overt discrimination, the majority of our participants described microaggression-related experiences in detail. Participants often referred to these experiences as "*backhanded comments*" (P11) or somebody "*hid[ing] the fact that they're trying to discriminate [against] me*" (P16). Some added that microaggressions were "*usually unintentional*" and, due to their subtlety, these experiences could lead to "*overanalyzing*" the event (P3). We present our findings in the form of 12 archetypes that closely mirror the actual

**Table 1: Participant Demographics and Social Media (SM) Use.**

P	Gen.	Age	Disability*	Ethnicity*	SM Use	SM Platforms	Disability Disclosure*
P1	F	19	Several Physical Disabilities	Caucasian	Daily	Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, dating apps	via public profile (Influencer)
P2	M	29	100% Vision Impairment	Indian		LinkedIn, WhatsApp	via posts
P3	M	22	Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy	Indian-American	Bi-weekly	Facebook, Instagram	via personal chats on Messenger
P4	X	21	Neurodivergent, "Cocktail of disabilities"	Caucasian	Daily	Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Snapchat, Discord, League of Legends chat	via smaller groups ie. discord servers, via description
P5	F	22	Blind, Fiber Myalgia, PTSD, Lupus, Autism	Caucasian	Daily	Facebook, Messenger, Reddit	via posts, groups, and service animal
P6	M	30	Mild Vision Issues, Speech-related	African American		Facebook	via posts of hobbies that indirectly revealed disability
P7	M	26	Visually Impaired	Black American	Daily	Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Snapchat	via photos
P8	F	30	Depression (since childhood)	Caucasian	Daily	Facebook	via public posts, writing articles
P9	M	25	Speech Disability	Black	Daily	Facebook, Twitter, Reddit	via personal profile
P10	M	32	Speech-related Disability, Attention Deficit	African American	Daily	Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Telegram, Instagram	via public profile, bio ("disability is not inability")
P11	M	21	Cerebral Palsy, Wheelchair User	Caucasian			
P12	F	26	Autism	Black American	Daily	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp	via posts, stories
P13	M	35	Epilepsy	African American	Daily	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Dating apps, WhatsApp	via personal chats
P14	M	35	Leg Problem, User of Manual Wheelchair, Standing Stick	White	Daily	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok	via public pictures, posts
P15	M	35	Hard of Hearing and Other Physical Impairments	Black	Weekly	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok	via private status, photos for friends
P16	M	25	Visually Impaired (low vision)	Black American	Daily	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp	via posts, pictures for friends
P17	F	32	Epilepsy, Autism (since childhood)	Black American	Daily	Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn	via bio description, writing articles
P18	F	24	Autism	Black	Daily	Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp	via pictures, posts
P19	X	21	Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, Endometriosis, Neurological Disorder, Chronic Pain	White	Daily	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Youtube	via public description, bio, content
P20	F	23	Wheelchair user	Pakistani & Irish	Daily	Twitter, Instagram	via bio ("wheelchair user")

\*are self-identified and self-dictated by participants

manifestation of a microaggression. These archetypes were intentionally chosen to preserve the visceral impact, nuance, and emotional intensity that accompany instances of microaggressions.

**4.1.1 Patronization and Infantilization.** Participants shared several instances of microaggressions where they felt patronized and infantilized.

**You're so inspirational.** Patronizing comments were the most common microaggression that our participants experienced. More specifically, this manifested in comments where other users exaggerated the participant's routine activities as inspirational or even sometimes "glorified" a disabled person for living a normal life. According to P2, "[people] keep posting 'oh, this is so cool' and 'you're so inspiring' just because you might have done something very normal." P11 expressed the same sentiment saying the most frequent microaggression is "oh my God you're doing this thing independently like that's amazing [and] I can't believe you're functioning as a human person... phrased in 1000 different ways." P1 also received comments like "you're so inspirational" and explained why this particular microaggression was upsetting:

*"I hate that so much. I'm not inspirational for going to class and expressing to my friends how much I don't want to be in class. That's not inspirational, that is what every other college student does."*

Other instances of patronization were more subtle. P20 received patronizing comments on two occasions. In one instance, when she posted about a night out, she received comments like, "you seem so happy being out" and "that's great for you," while non-disabled people received "usual comments like emojis" (P20). On another occasion, P20 posted about going on a hike, people commented, "you look so happy." "People don't expect me to be able to hike because I use a wheelchair," P20 explained.

P20 connected her online experience with face-to-face patronization. Her friends patted her head and said "good girl, good boy." While she did not think they had ill-intent, P20 thought this behavior was inappropriate, stating that she's not a "dog" and no one likes to be "touched without permission."

Some participants expressed discomfort when others glorified disabled people. For example, P20 found videos that glorified asking a disabled person to prom, characterizing it as a "heroic thing."

Similarly, P2 saw this on a professional networking site, where someone commended himself for changing the life of a disabled person:

*"I think about six months back there was some random post on linkedin... and this person was a stockbroker and he said I gave an internship to someone with a disability and he [the intern] made a profit... and now he [the intern] also has a girlfriend or something like that. I got really pissed... where did the disability thing and the girlfriend come into play." (P2)*

**Where's your mom?** Several participants expressed another type of microaggression where people infantilized a disabled person, treating them like a child, perceiving them as "naive," and often discounting their opinions and life experiences. For example, when P1 posted videos about her daily life on TikTok, she experienced "a lot of infantilization" like "oh where's your mom?" and "oh you live by yourself?" She felt that people believed that she was incapable of being independent and needed assistance in doing daily chores. While she understood that this might be because of ableism or people's limited understanding of disabilities, she felt frustrated when people commented that "grocery shopping and doing laundry is cute"(P1).

**4.1.2 Disability as Inability.** Several participants experienced microaggressions when people made assumptions about what a disabled person can and cannot do. In extreme cases, some microaggressions questioned disabled people's ability to contribute to society and their very existence.

**Can someone like you do that/wear that?** While some microaggressions glorified disability, others directly assumed a lack of ability. P16 recalled "rude comments" from people making assumptions about his disability, such as "oh sorry, you can't do this because you're visually impaired." Others shared ableist microaggressions that shamed them in participating in social media challenges. P12 explained,

*"I made a dance video on a popular song and posted it on my WhatsApp [status]... someone on my friend list said I don't have to follow all the challenges and make dance videos when I can't move my body according to the beats."*

These ableist assumptions carried over to what a disabled person can do with their professional and career goals. For instance, P13 partook in a Whatsapp group to talk about business ideas. After P13 shared a proposal someone asked "can someone like you do that?" On the other hand, when a disabled person was perceived as successful, perpetrators invalidated their success by attributing their achievement to charity. As a TikTok influencer and performing artist, P1 explained how people second-guess her success in acting:

*"People think that when I get hired for a job in the entertainment industry it's simply out of pity...I get a lot of people who genuinely think that everything is handed to me because I'm disabled... people are like 'wow I bet the government paid [for you getting the work]', which is funny because the government doesn't pay for anything."*

Beyond comments about ability, a few participants shared instances when people commented on how disabled people should look and dress. For example, P18 described how her disabled friend, who has a physical disability with "one side of her hand is shorter than the other," received a comment on Instagram about her wardrobe. The perpetrator asked her to "wear something [with] more covering because of her body and the hand" (P18).

In a more severe case, P13 shared thoughts about the COVID-19 pandemic on Facebook, and a "friend" on the platform expressed surprise that P13 had not died due to his disability. "Even you survived this?" the perpetrator asked.

**I would kill myself if I was disabled.** Some participants experienced extreme microaggressions with eugenic undertones. P1 received a comment saying "wow you're so brave, I would kill myself if I was disabled." Such microaggressions were also instances of patronization. Others recalled microaggressions that indicated severe stigmatization of a disabled person. P17 received comments from family members on Facebook referring to her as a "mistake," and P14 received a comment from a stranger on Facebook saying, "you are disturbing me with your disability." Recalling an in-person encounter, P1 shared that "old white women" tried "to pray the disability out of [her]."

**4.1.3 Denial of Disability Identity and Experience.** Participants experienced a range of microaggressions where others accused them of faking their disability or questioned their disability experience.

**You're lying about your disability.** While some microaggressions stemmed from assumptions about disability, one type of microaggression involved questioning whether participants were disabled in the first place and doubting the degree of their disability. P1 shared instances when "being disabled comes into question" with accusations of faking the need for a wheelchair. Similarly, P5 recalled being accused of faking her disability due to lack of awareness of assistive technology for people with visual impairments:

*"Somebody will [comment] 'how are you on Facebook, or how are you on reddit if you have vision issues' suggesting that you're lying about having vision issues, because you wouldn't be on social media if you [have] vision issues. Like literally it makes absolutely no sense. This one actually happened today."*

Such microaggressions were alike in both offline and online settings. For example, P5 described how she struggled with medical professionals who did not believe her when she described aspects of her disability. P5 experienced a severe migraine episode for several days where she became completely dehydrated. As she was wheeled onto an ambulance, the EMTs were "actively denying" the possibility of her having light sensitive migraines because she is legally blind. Similarly, P19 recalled an instance that they described as "medical gaslighting." Health professionals assumed the pain was "in [their] head," leading to misdiagnosis of endometriosis which "nearly killed" them.

**That's not a disability.** Although not as extreme as accusing a person of faking a disability, participants recalled microaggressions when aspects of their disability experiences were invalidated. Perpetrators had their own assumptions of what "counts" as a disability experience. For instance, P4 had an invisible physical disability and

recognized that the hidden nature of their disability caused “invalidation from both non-disabled and disabled people.” On Tumblr, they experienced microaggressions from the disability community along the lines of “oh well that’s not what we meant by disability.” P4 fretted that disclosing their disability “invited ableism” and not disclosing it resulted in invalidation.

Some participants felt invalidated when they were compared to people who have other forms of disability. For example, P19 shared that people often commented that she is not disabled because she is “not in a wheelchair.” P8 described a similar situation when others invalidated her mental-health disability. P8 was diagnosed with depression at a young age and used Facebook to write about her experiences. She recalled an incident where a Facebook friend accused her of lying:

*“There was a time that I wrote about myself being pregnant and being depressed... There’s some people [who] actually think that depression is... someone’s personality, they don’t believe that depression is actually a disability, so I was trying to tell everybody how I was doing and how I was taking care of myself. A [Facebook] friend was like I should stop lying... stop saying things that are not real... I should stop doing what I’m doing because people would not appreciate what I’m doing.” (P8)*

While some participants received invalidating comments from people, P5 felt invalidated when her posts were removed by the platform as a result of other users flagging her posts. She shared that at least five of her posts that disclosed her disability were reported and taken down on Reddit. For example, one post described an outing with her service dog and another was about her preference in canes that were being given by her local government agency. Given the lack of visibility on why the post is reported, she felt frustrated that not only was her disability experience invalidated, but also entirely removed from the platform. Like P5, P1’s posts were reported on TikTok by “trolls” who wanted to cause the platform to lock her account without any reason. P1 felt that these experiences are frequent for disabled activists who “have had their whole accounts removed and completely erased because [they] talked about issues that people are uncomfortable with.”

**You’re abusing your service dog.** All participants who used a service dog were accused of animal mistreatment. For instance, after posting a video of her and her service dog, P1 had a person accuse them of “abusing her dog and say[ing] [her dog] doesn’t like to work” (P1). As a service dog handler, P11 echoed a similar misconception: disabled people “force” dogs to work. In addition, P5 has been accused of faking the need for a service dog. She was denied access to a service dog-related Facebook group because the administrators thought she was too young to have one.

**4.1.4 Invasion of Privacy and Denial of Meaningful Relationships.** Participants recalled experiencing microaggressions in the form of invasive, personal questions regarding their disability and their sexual activity. In addition participants received questions about their romantic relationship, indicating an assumption that a disabled person cannot form meaningful, intimate relationships.

**What happened to you?** Many participants reported being asked personal questions which they “didn’t feel comfortable answering” (P3). For example, someone on Reddit asked P5, “if you’re blind, how do you know when you’re on your menstrual cycle”. Some of these invasive questions relate to participants’ disabilities, for example, about “how [they are] functioning in a wheelchair” (P18) and “what happened to your eyes and why are you [wearing] blocky glasses” (P16). P3 emphasized that these questions stem from a “place of curiosity, but at the same time it’s not always good to be curious about things like that... There are boundaries people have.” P11 called this “the line between being curious [and] being offensive.”

**Can you have sex?** Another type of microaggression participants shared was being asked inappropriate and crude questions about their sexual health and activity. P11 described instances of being asked personal questions about sex both in-person and on social media:

*“Random strangers inquire about my sexual function.. they see a person in a wheelchair, and they think.. if their reproductive system works properly and it’s weird but it’s happened several times. Sometimes in the rare instances where I have had conversations with strangers on social media in DMs which isn’t something I do a lot but I’ve done it a few times... People have questions about things that it just makes me stop and think for a second... you can ask me any question in the world and why is that the first thing you want to know about me.”*

P1 also recalled experiences of being asked about her sexual activities. Even in public places like a grocery store, she was asked: “can you have sex?” Participants believed that the perpetrators objectified disabled people and took liberties, often crossing lines. P1 recalled how she was asked such questions before she turned 18 and her immediate thoughts were “why are you asking a 16 year old girl these questions?”

**Are you sure your husband loves you?** Participants described instances when the perpetrators assumed that disabled people are incapable of forming intimate relationships. P8 explained that when she got married, she received comments on Facebook that ranged from disbelief to accusations of her lying about being married. She described how insensitively some people reacted, including comments like “You got married really? Are you sure your husband loves you? Are you sure you are not lying?” Similarly, P1 recounted how her disabled friend, who is a social media influencer, received harsh comments from people when she announced her relationship with a non-disabled person. P1 detailed that the trolls did not view it as a “normal human relationship,” and commented that her friend “must be paying” the boyfriend to be in the relationship.

**4.1.5 Being Ignored and Excluded Online.** Participants felt a target of microaggressions when people on social media purposely ignored or “ghosted” them, making them feel unwelcome. Participants also shared experiences of feeling excluded due to the inaccessibility of social media, social media challenges, and online content in general.

**Being ignored.** Although the majority of microaggressions were specific actions, this type of microaggression was the lack of action or inactivity on social media. P3 labeled being ghosted or “left on read” (when the perpetrator sees the message and does not respond) as a microaggression. During this time, his friends kept making

excuses not to talk or hang out with him. P3 eventually concluded that his friends didn't want to be friends anymore because *"they think I'm different [from] other people...It's not direct [aggression] but more of a subtle thing."* Instead of being ghosted, P10 experienced a similar microaggression where he felt ignored when people did not comment on his Facebook post:

*"I posted a recording of myself talking about ways that the disabled can be considered in society but... I didn't get anyone who could support me in the comment section so I felt so bad that people with disabilities can be easily ignored on Facebook. I expected some comments about that so that I know people care about the disabled. I don't [usually] delete my posts but I had to since... no one cared."*

**Exclusion via inaccessibility & moderation** A few participants experienced microaggressions when the perpetrators purposely shared inaccessible content with them. P5 described how her roommate changed the text color to orange in a group chat on Facebook messenger, fully knowing that the color would make the chat inaccessible to P5. Another participant, P14, found the behavior to be microaggressive when people tagged him in social media challenges (e.g., dancing challenges) that he cannot do because of his disability.

Many participants mentioned that inaccessibility of social media content was a source of feeling unwelcome and excluded. For instance, P2 felt unwelcome on social media when people in his WhatsApp groups posted pictures without captions and alt text and then engaged in conversations about them. Similarly, P1 found it frustrating when content creators on TikTok and YouTube uploaded videos without closed captions. P1 also expressed resentment on exclusionary, content moderation systems that are ill-equipped to meet the needs of disabled people. She described how TikTok flagged her videos and banned her from live streaming believing her to be *"underaged because of [her] dwarfism."* Participants also reported experiencing microaggressions when there was a delay addressing issues they experienced online. For example, while P1 recognized that she was blocked as a measure for minor safety, she found it frustrating that her appeal remained unaddressed for over a year.

## 4.2 The Aftermath of Microaggressions

Having described the different types of microaggressions disabled people experience online, we now dive deeper into the aftermath of experiencing a microaggression, sharing how participants reacted, responded, and coped on the social media platform. We then share participants' perceptions of the long-term impact and ideas of what social media can do to mitigate these experiences.

**4.2.1 Responding to Microaggressions.** There was a wide spectrum of reactions to microaggressions. Some participants claimed *"social media is not meant for the disabled"* (P14) and some *"want[ed] to delete [their] whole online existence"* (P19). Others felt lonely at first (P3) and some were *"speechless"* (P5) and *"so upset to the point they didn't even know what to do"* (P8). However, with time, the way participants reacted to microaggressions also changed. For example, P14 described how initially microaggressions on social media would make him depressed and heartbroken, but later he

would *"calm himself down, leave social media for a week, and move on with life."* P9 referred to microaggressions as *"norms,"* while other participants expressed they are *"used to it already"* (P12) and *"unfortunately no longer surprised"* (P1).

**Whether to Respond Or Ignore.** Regardless of their emotional reaction, participants decided whether to respond to or ignore the microaggression based on the identity of the perpetrator. P2 explained how if a patronizing microaggression came from a friend, he *"would sit them down and speak to them"* (P2). However if the perpetrator was *"really old or from a previous generation,"* he would not put effort into changing their mindset because *"he might not be able to change them."* Similarly, P11 called out that he might be more likely to respond to children or *"younger people"* who are just being *"curious."* Nonetheless, responding to microaggressions exerted an emotional toll and one *"might not be in the mood"* to handle it (P2). P20 elaborated on the trade-offs:

*"Some people will report those comments. I always try to have an open conversation with them, because the reason I am on social media is to try and educate people. So it would be remiss if I just deleted them, but then I am getting to the point where I am like how much of my physical energy is this costing?"*

Similar to P20, P1 appreciated her social media followers who replied to ableist comments for her. Another participant recalled being the one to defend and respond on behalf of a disabled friend. P18 stated that she defended her disabled friends by engaging with people who were the perpetrators of microaggressions. She replied to a comment about clothes her friend should not wear and defended her friend by commenting: *"she's disabled and that doesn't change who she is so I will be glad if you people don't throw shit on disabled people [because] we can actually be who we want to be."* (P18)

Some participants saw a microaggression incident as an opportunity to educate the perpetrator. P8 described how she *"was so pissed that [she] had to just respond."* Instead of expressing her anger, she described her mental disability to the perpetrator and outlined the lived experiences of people with such disabilities, in the hopes of *"proving"* to him that *"this exists."* Similarly, P1 described a mantra she told to those who asked her invasive questions: *"if you aren't going to say it to a non-disabled person, don't say it to a disabled person; it's pretty simple."* P19 described how they felt responsible not only to educate the perpetrator but also their followers:

*"If I think that it's a learning opportunity [and] a common misconception I will screenshot it and block out the name and post it on my story. I like to explain why this isn't okay and why it's damaging. But I try not to do that because... even if you block out the name, people can stalk your videos... so I'm not sure, because I don't want to send hate back. But I don't want to let that opinion exist."*

Although participants recognized the benefit of responding as a means of education and advocacy, some wondered if it was worth the effort. P1, a disability activist on social media, questioned the effectiveness of educating about disability on social media and felt that *"people are so caught up in their [own] mindsets... there is no point in talking to them."* Other participants decided that responding

is pointless because they cannot change the perpetrator's views or their own disability (P18). Therefore, some participants felt there was nothing more to do *"but to accept it and move on."*(P14)

Some participants decided not to respond to microaggressions because they felt that doing so would add more fuel to the fire. P8 viewed the microaggressions as a *"test"* of their resilience; *"social media bullies who are looking for her to get mad."* P18 would *"feel more weak"* responding to the perpetrator, failing the test. Similarly, P1 viewed the perpetrators as people who are bored and found it most effective to not *"give them attention."*

A few participants responded with humor; P11 described how he *"dish[es] it right back to them"* and P5 *"often snapped back with a sarcastic comment."* For instance, on a local Facebook group, P5 warned others of a road where she *"almost sprained her ankle"* because of her *"vision issues."* She described her response to the patronizing comment:

*"Somebody comments well you should have just driven to your appointment then... I replied: if I can't manage to step off a curb correctly because of my depth perception I don't think you want to trust me on a road."*

**4.2.2 Coping with Microaggressions.** Participants described several coping strategies to reduce the risks and harms of microaggressions. While some turned to distracting or distancing themselves from the microaggression by engaging in a hobby or finding refuge in entertainment, several participants shared other ways they coped with microaggressions, which involved the use of certain social media features and changes in social media behaviors.

**Deleting, Blocking, and Reporting.** Rather than replying to the perpetrator, some participants responded by taking action on the platform either by deleting and reporting offensive comments, and blocking the offenders. Five of our participants had deleted comments or posts. Not only did they delete the comment to *"let it go"* but also as a means to forget and recover.

Several participants opted to report the posts and comments containing microaggressions. P9 described an incident where he had posted a quote on Facebook and the perpetrator responded that he is *"not supposed to post that kind of stuff"* because of his disability. P9 decided to not respond because he was not in the *"best mood"* and did not want to infringe on the perpetrator's *"freedom of speech."* Because the perpetrator was a Facebook friend and someone he knew from college, P9 was also reluctant to block him. Instead P9 took a *"screenshot of the message and sent it directly to Facebook."* P9 elaborated:

*"It was a friend of mine that I do not want to lose. I don't want it to look like I blocked [him]... but there's a need to actually cope with that kind of stuff... to stop it from recurring..I'm not that kind of aggressive human being [that usually] blocks or deletes... because you can't just block everybody."*

Like P9, other participants also felt that blocking and unfriending people they cared about could burn bridges and *"make enemies"* (P7).

A few participants decided to block the perpetrator to *"prevent"* the microaggression from happening again. P14 explained that, *"when it happened to me I just [had] to get the guy blocked and leave*

*social media for a week."* Some participants found blocking people and deleting comments to be a better recourse than reporting. For example, P4 expressed frustration with the *"current reporting systems and algorithms"* and believed that microaggressions go unchecked because *"there are no repercussions for the [perpetrators'] actions."* Not only are the current processes and underlying algorithms inadequate to counteract microaggressions, they often amplify undesirable behaviors instead of curbing them. P4 reported and blocked perpetrators on Twitter rather than responding to prevent other users from seeing the original post:

*"If [they] take the time to quote tweets and [the tweets] get more popular then the algorithm will support [their] posts and then people can see the original post... [They are] putting that message to a bunch of people who haven't necessarily consented to reading that [and]... what if [they] boost this person's post to someone who actually agrees with it."*

**Changing Social Media Use.** Immediately after experiencing the microaggression, many participants took a break from social media and reflected on what they could do to avoid experiencing such negative slights and offensive behavior. For example, immediately after the microaggression, P12 did not post for several days, P15 reduced *"visits to Facebook,"* and P16 *"backed off from social media"* to spend more time with family.

Although this time-off from social media was a short-term effect, the microaggression experiences forced participants to set boundaries on how they use social media, when they use social media, and what they post. For example, P1 and P19 described that to avoid being affected by microaggressions, they stay away from social media right after they wake up or right before bedtime. P2 even deleted his social media apps every few days as a habit to protect his mental health. P4 and P6 became *"passive users"* and decided to share *"less information"* about themselves, including their disability. Similarly, P16 described how he does not post pictures of himself to avoid being a target of microaggressions:

*"I don't really post my personal pictures due to [my] disability. I sometimes post memes or funny pictures. I [do] like other people's posts, engage [with] comments, scroll through my feed, [and] watch other people's stories on instagram... If I post private pictures... on my Facebook I make it private to reduce discrimination and prevent unwanted questions on vision impairment."*

Like P16, several participants believed that they were a target of microaggressions because of their disability and opted to hide their disability identity. For example, P14 avoided posting on TikTok because *"there is no way [he] can do a video without showing [his] legs."* By becoming passive users and limiting the amount of disclosure of their disability, P14 explained that this will *"avoid all sorts of embarrassment or harassment on social media."* P1 also took specific measures in the types of content she created to avoid going viral on TikTok. Previously she had a TikTok video with 3 million views and *"90% of the comments [were] negative"* with hate, which made her consciously post content that would not go viral. She highlighted how a viral video has impacted what she posts:

*"I have realized that the videos that go viral for me are ones where I present an issue surrounding disability and*



*say this is why this is offensive... I call non-disabled people out for the things that they do to disabled people. Those are the kinds of videos that go viral and... bring me a lot of hate from non-disabled people who feel called out... if I post about my daily life, those things don't go viral. People think that having a viral video is the perfect idea... when in reality for marginalized groups, it brings a lot more hate than it does good so a lot of activists out there don't want their videos to go viral and... have left platforms."* (P1)

Although some participants explicitly said they post less frequently, a few stopped posting altogether. P8 explained how these harmful experiences have led her not to post anymore on social media even though *"she wants to post but then think[s] about what people will say."* As someone who blogs about depression, she still writes but does not share her writing on social media because she does not *"want to see bad comments."*

**4.2.3 Mitigating the Harm of Microaggressions.** Participants acknowledged that coping does not repair the harm caused by microaggressions. P18 emphasized this by saying:

*"If there is a person that wants to block the person for your own good, then go ahead but what has been said has already been said... a person can't take back the words and its effect on you."*

**Long-Term Impact.** Participants reflected on the long-term effect of microaggressions on their self-perception. P2 described how patronizing microaggressions have changed the way he interprets compliments on social media. He explained *"being patronizing because of disability in certain cases is super evident, but there are cases when it might not be."* As a result, he second-guesses the comments that say *"he's handsome."* Others more broadly shared how the microaggressions have affected their self-esteem, adding to the difficulties of having a disability. P3 explained:

*"It [microaggressions on social media] definitely affects your confidence and self-esteem. It [self-esteem] drops... You already have it pretty low because of your physical difficulties and things you have to deal with normal people don't have to deal with and on top of that, you have to deal with these issues like people not wanting to be friends with you [and] ignoring you."*

Some participants felt that they were unable to stop these microaggressions. P19, who is a disability activist, described how these microaggressions left a lasting impact on her:

*"Even though I do have the language to combat [microaggressions] now, I'm in such a state of shock whenever it happens because it brings back memories and because it's just a nasty thing to experience that I don't feel like I'm doing as good a job, as I could, of being an advocate, which is another like layer of guilt."*

In addition to shaping self-perceptions, microaggressions showed participants how mainstream society perceives disability. For example, P11 highlighted how social media in particular exposes these views since it *"gives an opportunity to see the kinds of people out there and people will say a lot through a screen [that] they won't say to your face."* P19 further explained that *"disability is*

*such a taboo topic [and] we're so dehumanized that people don't even realize that it matters whether we're here or not... They don't think we can feel pain or we're intellectually disabled."* P1 revealed what she learned about society's view on disability through microaggression experiences:

*"Being disabled is publicized unfortunately if you have a platform or not everything is publicized everybody thinks that it's public information. So your sex life, your relationships with other people, how your family [and] friends treat you people just think it's charity... especially with having my platform grow on social media, [I see] the ableism that is just so prevalent in our society."*

**Re-Imagining Social Media.** Participants shared ways in which social media platforms could prevent the microaggression from happening in the first place. Some participants suggested social media platforms to have stricter community guidelines that explicitly protect disabled people and a process of removing users if they do not abide. P15 shared that social media platforms could ask all users to watch a short video about discrimination. Other participants wanted social media platforms to take responsibility in disability awareness by educating users about disability, ableism, and disability pride month. Taking this a step further, P11 recommended that platforms educate users when the microaggression occurs.

*"I think exposure is the only way to combat microaggressions... that's starting to happen on social media more now but it wasn't until the past couple of years... you have more disabled creators on social media trying to combat those narratives but I definitely think the best way to do it is just to have proof of those things on social media being wrong. So you go to the places where the microaggressions are and prove them wrong."* (P11)

Other participants thought of ways to mitigate the harm once the microaggression has been said. For example, P16 suggested having a bot to *"automatically remove"* the microaggression on his behalf, delete *"rude words,"* or automatically *"reply to [inconsiderate] private messages."* P5 furthers this notion by proposing a bot to automatically send an *"informative video"* when people ask *"how can you be blind."*

Some participants wanted improvements to reporting and moderation on social media. P4 explained that there is a lack of transparency and accountability when reporting a post. With their personal experience reporting on Tumblr and Twitter, they were unaware if *"someone who is reported has actually been punished."* However, their experience was different in League of Legends (an online game) where the administrators promptly addressed the matter. P4 felt *"good to some extent"* that the perpetrators were *"minutely inconvenienced."* Participants recognized that the perpetrators found workarounds that prevented their comment from being removed. For example, P4 and P20 reported that the perpetrators often replaced letters with numbers or special characters in hate speech to avoid being flagged by the underlying content moderation algorithms. In addition, some participants felt frustrated when the algorithms removed hateful posts without context. For instance, on a Facebook group to talk about abuse and trauma, P5 had a post removed because it included hateful words that was a part of someone's experience rather than being directed at anyone. P5

explained how exasperating it was when Facebook kept removing the post and every time they appealed the group got more “strikes.” P1 also noted issues with the slow appeal process and wishing that there was a better way to verify age. P19 explained why ableist microaggressions are hard to automatically identify:

*“With disability, the language is so vague. You can’t really pick out a word that they use... that’s a microaggression and that’s a hate crime. Because it’s the tone. There’s no button for saying they’ve implied that it’s okay that I die. But clearly that’s not an okay thing to say, but there’s no way of reporting that kind of thing.”*

## 5 DISCUSSION

This paper has described 12 archetypes of ableist microaggressions experienced on social media, unpacked how disabled people respond to and cope with these incidents, and explained how they reimagine a more welcoming social media. We now discuss how microaggressive experiences are unique to social media and present design recommendations on how social media platforms could mediate and perhaps even prevent these harmful experiences.

### 5.1 Ableist Microaggressions on Social Media

**5.1.1 Categorizing Microaggressions.** “Being ignored” and “exclusion via inaccessibility and moderation” are the two novel types of microaggressions our study uncovered. “Being ignored” occurs when a disabled person is neglected or ghosted by others. This is a particularly interesting microaggression, because it is characterized by the lack of action, whereas prior work has generally conceptualized microaggressions as a problematic action. Thus, a pointed silence when encountering information about a person’s disability can be just as hurtful as a negative response. A more appropriate response would involve sincere engagement with and a willingness to learn about disability and ableism. “Exclusion via inaccessibility and moderation” refers to two instances: 1) when people share inaccessible content with a disabled person despite knowing about their access needs; and 2) when moderation algorithms ban disabled users or flag their content due to normative expectations around what a legitimate user looks like. Participants reported feeling frustrated by exclusionary experiences that arise from content moderation algorithms and policies, because the mechanisms intended to protect users result in making disabled people feel unwelcome and excluded on social media.

We confirm that the ableist microaggressions identified in prior work also occur on social media. Five of our archetypes map directly onto previously-identified offline microaggressions. “You’re so inspirational” corresponds to patronization, while “where’s your mom?” embodies infantilization [29]. Similarly, “you’re lying about your disability,” “that’s not a disability,” and “you’re abusing your service dog” represent specific manifestations of the denial of disability experience [29].

Five other archetypes could be categorized into multiple types of existing microaggressions. The archetype “can someone like you do that/wear that?” simultaneously makes assumptions about a disabled person and ignores other aspects of a disabled person’s identity. Hence, it embodies the spread effect and denial of personal identity patterns [29]. The archetype “I would kill myself if I was

disabled” is related to the helplessness pattern, in that it characterizes a frantic urge on the part of a nondisabled person to cure or rid another person of their disability [29]. The eugenic undertone of this archetype also questions the worth and very existence of disabled people, exemplifying second-class citizenship [29, 49]. The archetypes “what happened to you,” “can you have sex,” and “are you sure your husband loves you?” represent instances where disabled people are asked invasive and offensive questions about a person’s life that are typically considered private. These three archetypes map onto the denial of privacy pattern [29]. The apparent comfort with which nondisabled strangers inquire into a disabled person’s history or sexual activity betrays the understanding that disabled people can be treated as objects of frank curiosity. These two archetypes also embody an implicit sense of second-class citizenship for disabled people [29]. Questioning the legitimacy of intimate relationships denies the possibility that a disabled person could be a sexual being and intimate partner, and thus corresponds to the desexualization and spread effect patterns [29]. We support Bell’s assertion that the types of microaggressions are not mutually exclusive, as evidenced by the instances in which our archetypes embodied more than one type [5].

**5.1.2 Responding to Microaggressions.** Keller and Galgay wrote that “we understand least” the “strategies [disabled people] use to deal with” microaggressions [29]. Our work addresses this critical gap by examining: how disabled people cope with microaggressions and the strategies they employ to counter, take action against, and respond to microaggressions in the moment and over the longer term. We distinguish between and describe three temporally distinct responses to microaggressions – the reaction that immediately follows a microaggression, coping mechanisms that people use to move past a microaggression, and longer-term strategies that people use to respond to microaggressions and prevent them from occurring in the future.

Our findings confirm known response strategies including active self-advocacy around disability; parsing the intent behind a microaggression to determine whether it was meant to be hurtful; educating others to counter stereotypes and myths about disability; responding via humor, sarcasm, or direct communication; and ignoring microaggressions and avoiding perpetrators [5]. Additionally, we uncover response strategies unique to social media that disabled people routinely use. These include modulating the frequency and timing of social media use; being cautious about the topic and format of the content they share; blocking and reporting perpetrators or problematic content; and deleting social media content – both their own and/or the offender’s. These strategies align with recent work on understanding harassment experienced by content creators and Black women [38, 51]. We also unpack the decision-making that goes into choosing which strategy to employ, finding that context and the perceived likelihood of being able to change the perpetrator’s mind plays a key role in this decision. Finally, our participants point to the labor that goes into experiencing microaggressions. Not only does the recipient have to spend time and energy figuring out whether an action truly was a microaggression, but they must also cope with their reaction, decide how to respond, and perhaps advocate for themselves with the

perpetrator or platform, thereby opening themselves up to more microaggressions.

**5.1.3 Comparing Experiences of Online and Offline Microaggressions.** Extending the study of ableist microaggressions to social media provides us with an opportunity to begin comparing how microaggressions are experienced across online and offline contexts. In both online and offline contexts, participants found it challenging to definitively establish an incident as an ableist microaggression. Microaggressions are subtle and rarely contain slurs or curse words, relying instead on the tone and form. For instance, a seemingly harmless question or admiration make it difficult to identify the perpetrator's intent and make disabled people question their felt experience: intentional hurt versus innocent curiosity and backhanded remark versus compliment. Participants also reported that ableist microaggressions are usually unintentional. Prior work has interpreted the lack of intent to mean that the perpetrator does not mean to cause harm [29]. However, our participants said that perpetrators do intend what they say or do, but they typically have not thought through the implications of their actions.

Participants described that ableist microaggressions are more frequent online, perhaps due to the lack of consequences for actions on social media and the anonymity afforded by some platforms. Further, participants worried that the sheer scale and visibility of social media means that online microaggressions are much more likely to affect the views of observers. That is, online microaggressions are more worrisome due to their ability to shape the views of many, leading to larger-scale ramifications in terms of how these users will think about and treat disabled people in the future. Participants also noted that perpetrators may continue harassing them on other platforms. This cross-platform harassment makes it pointless to delete individual posts and comments.

However, participants reported that online microaggressions can be easier to ignore and move past than offline ones. The relatively public nature of online microaggressions means that there is a higher chance that disabled people can rely on friends, disability advocates, and allies to intervene on their behalf. Further, some participants reported that perpetrators of online microaggressions rarely have the power to actually deny disabled people a material resource. This is unlike offline microaggressions where the disabled person may rely on the perpetrator for something such as food, transportation, or medical treatment. In these cases, the perpetrator may also occupy a position of authority, granting a veneer of legitimacy to the microaggression and its underlying message.

Finally, the same type of microaggression can manifest differently in online and offline contexts. The archetype “that’s not a disability,” which corresponds to a denial of disability experience [29], typically manifests offline in the form of words or actions that invalidate a person’s disability experience. This archetype takes on a different form on social media, that of posts and users being flagged as inappropriate by other users. Participants noted that posts discussing their own disability experience or sharing disability-related content were often reported and removed on social media platforms without any explanation. Participants also reported cases of disabled activists having their accounts banned for sharing disability advocacy content. This resonates with Haimson et al. who found that transgender and Black social media users often had content

referring to systemic marginalization removed despite adhering to platform content policies [22]. We propose that scholars continue to develop this comparison between online and offline microaggressions for various minoritized groups, due to its potential to yield broader insights about marginality, intersectionality, and power dynamics in the digital world.

## 5.2 Design Recommendations

Currently, most major social media platforms incorporate moderation tools (e.g., reporting, community policies) [41] and educate their users on hate speech and harassment [14]. Therefore, it is important to consider how social media platforms might account for ableist microaggressions. We discuss difficulties in considering microaggressions within online moderation and recommend that social media designers and researchers educate users on disability and ableism.

**5.2.1 The Challenge of Microaggressions Within Online Moderation.** Prior work on social media moderation documented flaws within current online moderation systems, such as unfair and false reporting [22, 27, 46], mislabelling harassment [7], and lack of transparency in the harassment reporting process [7]. Our participants echoed current flaws in moderation, leading us to wonder how microaggressions should fit within these systems. Several participants in our study felt uncomfortable blocking or reporting perpetrators, due to the unintentional nature of microaggressions and to avoid severing personal relationships (see Section 4.2.1). Others felt that everyone was entitled to their opinion, and blocking was unnecessary. This aligns with prior work viewing online harassment with a restorative justice lens: removing perpetrators of microaggressions, or banning their profile may not serve justice to disabled people [47], or align with their preferences and beliefs. Overall current moderation tools (i.e., blocking and reporting) are designed to account for overt cases of harassment. Future work should continue to investigate preferences for handling microaggressions and more subtle forms of discrimination.

Due to their inherent subtlety and nuance, microaggressions may be difficult to detect automatically. Microaggressions are often personal, and may be offensive given prior history and type of relationship with the perpetrator. Moderators or models may not be privy to this information, and hence may be unable to classify some microaggressions.

Online moderators may lack interpersonal and social context of microaggressions. For instance, microaggressions like “what happened to you?” or “where’s your mom?” are difficult to identify as microaggressions without additional context. On the other hand a microaggression such as “I would kill myself if I was disabled” can be clearly labelled as an ableist microaggression. Since the moderator lacks interpersonal context and relationship, we recognize that they may be unable to reduce the emotional toll that microaggressive experiences can have. Our participants also shared that they relied on friends and other users to support them by responding to the perpetrator. Mahar et al. have also used an approach that recruits friends to help filter messages during harassment attacks [33]. Since microaggressions are highly contextual to interpersonal history and

styles of interaction, crowdsourced and even friendsourced moderators may be unable to identify some microaggressions without further context.

Similarly, microaggressions are more complex to pinpoint by models compared to hate speech. Existing models are mostly trained to detect hate speech [19, 20, 24, 44]; however, some researchers are developing machine learning techniques to identify microaggressions (based on gender, race, and sexuality) [10]. We encourage researchers to continue investigating ways of identifying ableist microaggressions online.

**5.2.2 Designing for Disability Education and Awareness.** Participants suggested that social media should educate users about disability and ableism, as a preventive measure to reduce microaggressions. For example, some wanted improvements in current community guidelines, wishing for explicit policies around ableism. Such community norms can educate and disincentivize perpetrators from being ableist [41]. One participant proposed that the platform, instead of other users, can combat microaggressions when they occur. Similarly, Bennett calls on online dating platforms to dispel the notion that disabled people are asexual [6]. Although education around disability and ableism should extend beyond online settings, social media platforms have a unique opportunity to combat harassment and discrimination by educating their users.

In the event that ableist microaggressions could be detected, social media platforms can combat ableist microaggressions proactively by nudging the perpetrator, asking them to reflect if their comment or post has ableist microaggressions. Perhaps this nudge can activate only when there are indicators of ableism. This nudge can educate perpetrators on the potential harms before they engage with disabled users on the platform. Other scholars have explored educating users through nudges to alter future behaviors [53] and such lightweight interventions while sharing have been found to be effective in reducing the propagation of fake news [26]. For example, Jahanbakhsh et al. explored the use of nudges in fact-checking information on social media and experimented with a variety of behavioral nudges; such as using checkboxes to assess the information or implementing text with rationales on why the information is inaccurate. We recommend that designers explore how such lightweight interventions can be adapted to prevent ableist microaggressions from being sent in the first place.

Social media platforms also need reactive approaches to mitigate the harms of ableist microaggressions. Consider the microaggression: “can disabled people have sex?” The platform can present information that: 1) answers the microaggressive question and replies for the disabled person reducing the emotional labor, and 2) debunks the assumption that disabled people are uninterested in or incapable of sex. If the ableist microaggression is a post, there could be a public correction, much like credibility indicators to combat misinformation and fake news [26, 46]. A public correction would not censor or augment the original post, but include more information about the content, educating all users on ableist stereotypes and misconceptions. The proposal to contradict an existing discriminatory comment on social media is similar to counter-speech, which is used to combat hate-speech online [18, 23]. A recent study has found that counter-speech reduces the probability of other

users becoming hateful [23]. This further motivates a design opportunity for social media platforms to contradict narratives behind ableist microaggressions. Similar to traditional media, inaccurate portrayals of disability on social media perpetuate ableism [43].

In this study, we were limited to self-reported experiences of ableist microaggressions. Future work should quantitatively investigate the breadth, frequency, and impact of these microaggressions, and examine disabled people’s preferences in moderating microaggressions online. Visibly disabled people and disabled women are known to experience more ableist microaggressions [4, 28], but other aspects of a person’s identity might influence the kinds and frequency of microaggressions that they are targeted for. We encourage researchers to consider intersecting identities of those who may be more susceptible to these harmful experiences.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Our work is the first attempt to examine how disabled people experience and cope with ableist microaggressions on social media. From our interviews with 20 disabled people, we uncovered 12 microaggression archetypes, validating in-person microaggressions and introducing manifestations that are unique to social media. Some participants responded to perpetrators using platform features, while others either ignored them or engaged with them in the hopes of changing the perpetrators’ mindset about disability. Overall participants felt that experiencing ableist microaggressions affected their wellbeing and heavily transformed the way they used social media. We see our work as a starting point in examining exclusionary experiences of disabled people on social media. As we work towards inclusion, we call upon researchers and designers to consider disability as a facet of diversity along with race, gender, and sexuality.

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