You don't belong here: Ableist Microaggressions on Adolescents with Disability(ies) and Special Needs in Social Virtual Reality (VR)

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The advent of the metaverse promises to revolutionize technology-mediated social interaction by seamlessly merging the physical and digital worlds. However, the experiences of adolescents with disabilities and special needs in social virtual reality spaces remain under-explored. This position paper delves into the issue of ableism and microaggressions as a sociotechnical challenge that can perpetuate and exacerbate harmful attitudes and behaviors towards adolescents with disabilities and special needs in social virtual reality.

1 MOTIVATION

As a graduate student with a disability, I have faced numerous challenges in my academic and personal journey. To address the microaggressions and stigmatization I have encountered, my current research at the Epoch Research Lab is focused on making technology more inclusive for marginalized and vulnerable user groups. My advisor, Dr. Karla, and I are dedicated to finding and implementing strategies that improve accessibility, safety, and privacy for these groups. My goal for attending this workshop is to engage in meaningful dialogue with other scholars and researchers to generate new and creative solutions that ensure digital inclusivity and safety for vulnerable users in online spaces while taking into account their unique challenges.

2 SOCIAL VR AND VIRTUAL IDENTITY OF ADOLESCENTS WITH DISABILITY AND SPECIAL NEEDS

The increasing popularity of social Virtual Reality (VR) across diverse demographic groups and age ranges results from its potential to foster a sense of presence, community, and connection [2] by providing affordances such as privacy, immersion, embodiment, identity exploration, etc., within 3D online ecosystems. The recent proliferation of avatar-based customization and avatar texture mapping options in social VR [15] has stimulated extensive research within the HCI community [1, 6, 10] on the implications of identity representation and the inclusion of marginalized communities within virtual environments. For instance, an investigation by Park and Kim [15] on the collective perception of avatar-based representation among People with physical disabilities (PWDs) in Korea revealed that people with disability tend to hide their physical flaws in virtual spaces. Thus utilizing less-identity representative avatars [5].

Several studies [8, 9] on Adolescents with disabilities and special needs (AWDSN) have revealed the exposure of adolescents to forms of discrimination, harassment, and stereotypical prejudices, commonly referred to as "ableism" [9]. The susceptibility of AWDSN to ableist microaggressions have been shown to impact their online and offline experience and development [4, 9] generating often feelings of self-isolation and social exclusion [8, 17]. Scholarships involving AWDSN within social VR context have predominantly being focused on domains such as health [3], rehabilitation [16], education [8], and gaming [2]. Yet, the dynamics of social interaction between AWDSN and various stakeholders (peers, adults, etc.) within social VR environments and the corresponding implications have remained largely under-explored. This constitutes a significant gap in the existing body of research, as social interaction plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of AWDSN within virtual reality. Hence, this paper endeavors to synthesize existing research and prior studies to highlight 1) microaggressions in social VR as a sociotechnical challenge confronting AWDSN and 2) the modes of propagation of microaggressions to social VR aimed at AWDSN.

3 MICROAGGRESSION ON ADOLESCENTS WITH DISABILITY AND SPECIAL NEEDS IN SOCIAL VR

The term 'Microaggressions' can be defined as subtle, often unconscious, and indirect forms of discrimination, racism, harassment, sexism, or prejudice, expressed through words, actions, or behavior directed towards individuals [9] based on their identity characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or ability. The issue of harassment and abuse is not trivial and have been researched from the context of offline social interaction [8] to mainstream online communication, such as social media and private messaging services [9]. These risks pose a significant threat to user experience, especially to vulnerable and marginalized groups such as women, individuals with disabilities, racial minorities, and members of the LGBTQ community [1, 6, 13, 14].

Given the growing body of work focused on accessibility and disability studies within the HCI community, findings from previous research [1, 9, 11] have revealed a trend in replicating behaviors in the physical world to the virtual world, thus, propagating offline microaggression targeted at vulnerable populations. A study by Maloney et al. [11] on the interaction dynamics between minors and between minors and adults discovered that teens were likely to be Cyberbullied and harassed by their peers in social VR spaces. A 2018 study with 600 social VR users revealed that 49% of female participants had experienced sexual harassment in virtual reality [14].

Grounded on previous research, adolescents with disability and special needs (AWDSN) are likely to experience microaggressions in social VR. Forms of microaggression that could be aimed at AWDSN include but are not limited to Avatar-targeted microaggression, affordance-fueled microaggression, and privacy-related microaggression. AWDSN may be exposed to microaggressions based on the choice of avatars they use, which can reflect their physical abilities and limitations or diverge from their real-life appearance [15]. Affordances such as anonymity in social VR can cause the perpetration of microaggressions and harassment due to a sense of disconnect from consequences [4, 12]. Lastly, privacy breaches can result in disseminating personal information or harassing behavior [7].

Going forward, the questions we seek to explore include the following: **RQ1:** How do adolescents with disabilities, and special needs construct virtual identities with avatars? **RQ2:** How do adolescents with disability and special needs experience microaggression in social VR? **RQ3:** How do adolescents with disability and special needs cope with microaggressions encountered in social VR?

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