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Silent barriers: The hidden impact of microaggressions on migrant entrepreneurs

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Silent Barriers: The Hidden Impact of Microaggressions on Migrant Entrepreneurs

Alexandra David & Judith Terstriep



To the point

- Microaggressions, subtle yet pervasive forms of discrimination, undermine migrant entrepreneurs by adversely affecting their psychological well-being and hindering their business development.
- Through a qualitative multiple-case approach, we show how microaggressions—such as avoidance and pathologisation—impact the business success of migrant entrepreneurs in Germany.
- Our study highlights the compounded challenges of intersecting marginalised identities, urging targeted interventions for inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.
- We call for diverse research and strategies to mitigate microaggressions, urging action by policymakers and practitioners to foster an equitable entrepreneurial landscape.

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Keywords: migrant entrepreneurship, minority entrepreneurship, ethical microaggressions, entrepreneurial ecosystems

1 Exploring Microaggressions in Migrant Entrepreneurship

*“They’re [microaggressions] of enormous importance
in derailing people or hurting them or keeping them
awake at night.”*

(Mary Rowe, MIT, 2020)

Much like organisational theory, entrepreneurship research frequently adopts a social-identity-neutral lens, often treating racial inequality and other forms of bias as external to its core frameworks. This perspective overlooks that entrepreneurship is inherently contextual and unfolds within environments shaped by structural inequalities, even without overt discrimination (Bruton et al., 2023). Despite a growing body of literature on migrant entrepreneurship—focusing on power dynamics, adjustments, and imbalances within entrepreneurial ecosystems (David et al., 2024a)—limited attention has been given to the subtle, often unconscious forms of discrimination that marginalised entrepreneurs face in their daily interactions. This research gap underscores the need to examine how such dynamics, particularly social-identity-related microaggressions, shape entrepreneurial experiences and outcomes.

The concept of “racial microaggressions”, first introduced by Chester Pierce et al. (1977: 65) and further developed by Sue et al. (2007), refers to subtle, often unintentional acts of racism that individuals enact without realising the harm they cause. These acts, rooted in societal biases and stereotypes, manifest as minor hostilities or slights directed at individuals based on their perceived social identities. For example, women entrepreneurs often experience microaggressions that undermine their expertise, such as being interrupted or dismissing their ideas. Similarly, consider the scenario of a German business owner questioning a German-Turkish entrepreneur, “Where are you from?” and the entrepreneur responds, “Gelsenkirchen”. The business owner then persists, asking, “But where are you really from?”. Such interactions, though seemingly minor, are embedded in micro-level interpersonal contexts and contribute to a cumulative, detrimental effect on the psychological well-being and self-esteem of ethnic minorities (Harrell, 2000; Williams et al., 2021). Notably, the term “micro” does not imply that these acts are insignificant or harmless but instead emphasises their occurrence within interpersonal, micro-level contexts (Sue & Spanierman, 2020).

While early research on microaggressions primarily centred on the experiences of Black individuals, it has since expanded to encompass a broader range of racial and

ethnic and other groups, including Indigenous peoples, Latinx communities, and, in this study's context, migrant entrepreneurs in Europe (Sue & Spanierman, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). This evolution has led us to adopt the broader term 'microaggressions', reflecting the intersectionality of various social identities, such as race, gender, class, and origin. These microaggressions—pervasive and rooted in societal inequalities—inflict emotional and psychological harm, particularly on marginalised groups (Huynh, 2012; Kanter et al., 2020).

Despite increasing awareness of microaggressions, their long-term consequences in entrepreneurial contexts remain underexplored. Entrepreneurial ecosystems, as dynamic settings where opportunities and resources are distributed (Isenberg, 2010; Stam, 2015), are far from neutral and often embed inequalities that subtly disadvantage migrant entrepreneurs. In line with Bruton and colleagues' (2023) call, there is a pressing need for dedicated research exploring how microaggressions, as subtle and nuanced manifestations of bias, influence entrepreneurial trajectories and exacerbate systemic barriers, including limited access to networks, funding, and resources (Abumummar & Campbell, 2024; David & Terstriep, 2024; Wingfield & Taylor, 2016).

In response to this research gap, the current study examines the role of microaggressions in shaping the trajectories of migrant entrepreneurs. By exploring these subtle yet pervasive forms of exclusion, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how microaggressions impact entrepreneurial outcomes and to inform the development of more inclusive policies and practices.

2 What are Microaggressions?

Microaggressions serve as a crucial theoretical framework in this study. Sue et al. (2007) classify (racial) microaggressions into microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. *Microassaults* encompass overtly racist actions or slurs, whereas *microinsults* consist of subtle comments or behaviours that belittle a person's racial identity. *Microinvalidations* undermine the experiences or realities of minorities. Within entrepreneurship, these forms of microaggressions can appear as blatant racism from clients or investors, subtle doubts regarding an entrepreneur's competence, or dismissal of their experiences with discrimination.

The psychological effects of microaggressions are well-documented, encompassing emotional distress, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem (de Vries, 2024; Sue et al., 2007). For entrepreneurs who rely heavily on confidence and resilience, the psychological toll of microaggressions can impede business development by diminishing risk-taking, innovation, and engagement with business networks. Allen (2010) highlighted how racial microaggressions adversely affect emotional well-being and educational outcomes. Similar effects are evident in entrepreneurial contexts (cf.

Low & Shah, 2023; Song et al., 2020), where migrant entrepreneurs may avoid mainstream business networks or be reluctant to seek funding due to fears of rejection or discrimination (David et al., 2024a).

Intersectionality, i.e. the interplay of race with other social identities such as gender, nationality, culture, religion and sexual orientation, compounds the effects of microaggressions (Loh & Shah, 2023; David et al., 2024b). Balsam et al. (2011) showed that individuals with multiple marginalised social identities face heightened exclusion, a phenomenon particularly relevant in entrepreneurial ecosystems. For example, female entrepreneurs of colour may encounter racial and gender biases, leading to further barriers in obtaining venture capital or forging business partnerships (Fairlie et al., 2022; Terstriep et al., 2024).

Institutional and environmental microaggressions further complicate the entrepreneurial landscape for minority entrepreneurs. Research by Constantine (2007) revealed how microaggressions in professional relationships undermine trust and erode networks. Similarly, stereotypes, tokenism, and slights in entrepreneurial ecosystems may diminish opportunities for minority entrepreneurs, preventing them from building the necessary relationships for business success (Santos et al., 2024; William & Embrick, 2023).

Entrepreneurs often develop coping mechanisms in response to microaggressions, such as creating “counterspaces” (Grier-Reed, 2011: 181) or “counterframes” (Wingfield & Taylor, 2016: 1677) where they can find support and belonging (Bruton et al., 2023; David & Terstriep, 2024). However, these ‘safe’ spaces or frames may inadvertently limit exposure to broader entrepreneurial networks, resulting in a paradox between protection from microaggressions and access to mainstream opportunities (Grier-Reed, 2010). Addressing these dynamics is crucial for fostering more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Considering the above, we draw on Williams and colleagues’ (2021) taxonomy of 16 categories of microaggression to shed light on how microaggressions impact migrant entrepreneurs’ business activities (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Taxonomy of microaggressions

Type of microaggression		Description	Affected communities
1	Not a true citizen	The assumption that the target is not a legitimate citizen often implies that non-Whites are immigrants and reinforces feelings of exclusion	Migrants and ethnic minorities
2	Racial categorisation and sameness	Compelling people of colour to disclose their racial identity, exposing them to stereotypes or forcing them into a single, uniform identity that overlooks the complexity of their heritage.	People of colour, especially biracial/multiracial individuals, intersectional identities
3	Assumptions about intelligence, competence, or status	Positive or negative assumptions about intellectual abilities or social standing based on race, such as disbelief in academic excellence for African Americans or assumptions of competence for Asians	Racial and ethnic minorities
4	False colour blindness/invalidating identity	Ignoring racial identity by professing 'colour blindness' invalidates the racial or ethnic experiences of people of colour and prevents honest discussions about race.	Ethnic minorities
5	Criminality or dangerousness	Stereotypes that people of colour are dangerous or untrustworthy, with a focus on African American and Latino males, sometimes involving law enforcement.	Primarily, men of colour, particularly Black and Latino men, and other groups stereotyped as threatening
6	Denial of individual racism	Claiming a lack of racial bias, often in response to accusations of racist behaviour, which can invalidate people of colour's experiences.	People of colour
7	Myth of meritocracy/race irrelevant for success	Denial of systemic racism, asserting that success is based only on individual effort and not influenced by race while refuting the existence of White privilege	Racial and ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups
8	Reverse-racism hostility	Hostility or resentment toward perceived unfair advantages for people of colour is often expressed through claims that Whites are being treated unjustly.	Ethnic minorities benefiting from diversity initiatives or affirmative action policies
9	Pathologising minority culture or appearance	Criticism of cultural differences in appearance or behaviours, promoting Whiteness as the norm or ideal and viewing non-White identity as inferior or undesirable.	Marginalised cultural and ethnic groups whose traditions and appearances differ from dominant norms

	Type of microaggression	Description	Affected communities
10	Second-class citizen/ignored and invisible	Treating people of colour with less respect or consideration or ignoring their presence and contributions in social or professional settings.	Racial and ethnic minority groups
11	Tokenism	Including a person of colour, only to create an illusion of inclusivity while ignoring their talents and homogenizing their views with racial stereotypes.	People of colour
12	Connecting via stereotypes	Using racial stereotypes or jokes to try to connect or communicate with people of colour, often awkwardly or offensively	People of colour, ethnic minorities
13	Exoticisation and eroticisation	Sexualizing or exoticizing people of colour based on racialized stereotypes, such as fascination with Black hair or the sexualization of Asian women.	People of colour, especially women
14	Avoidance and distancing	Avoiding physical proximity or social interactions with people of colour often leads to exclusion from certain spaces or discussions.	People of colour
15	Environmental exclusion	Minimizing or excluding representations of certain racial groups in environments, such as art, literature, or social spaces, signalling to people of colour that they do not belong.	Racial and ethnic minorities
16	Environmental attacks	Presence of decorations, symbols, or other environmental factors that insult or threaten the cultural group or heritage of people of colour, such as buildings named after slave owners or offensive mascots.	Marginalised groups whose cultural symbols or histories are trivialised or mocked

Source: Own compilation based on Williams et al. (2021)

3 Methodology

As microaggressions are a nascent, emerging field in migrant entrepreneurship research, we chose a qualitative explorative multiple-case study approach (Yin, 2018) to investigate how they affect migrants' entrepreneurial journeys and interactions in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This approach is considered particularly useful for exploring emerging topics in their real-life setting, as it allows for an in-depth examination of complex, real-world phenomena (Massaro et al., 2019; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

By selecting two distinct case studies for this publication, from a sample of 23—one featuring a female Turkish-German entrepreneur and the other a female Iranian-German entrepreneur—our analysis captures the nuanced experiences of microaggressions faced by female migrant entrepreneurs across various sectors within the same ecosystem. Purposive sampling was employed to maximise the diversity of entrepreneurial journeys, offering insights into how microaggressions manifest in different professional contexts. The selected cases of “Hülya” and “Sara”, based in Essen, Germany, illustrate how deeply embedded social-identity biases affect entrepreneurial activities. Hülya’s event management business contends with ethnic biases, while Sara’s consultancy business faces scepticism regarding her expertise due to her Iranian background. These two cases highlight how subtle, often unconscious forms of discrimination, such as avoidance, exclusion, and undermining, shape the entrepreneurial landscape for migrant entrepreneurs.

Through narrative interviews (Erlach & Müller, 2020) and ethnographic fieldwork that included observations in the interviewees’ working environments and informal conversations (Flick, 2018), this study gathered rich data to contextualise the impact of microaggressions on everyday business operations. The cases provide valuable insights into the localised nature of microaggressions.

4 Case Studies

4.1 Hülya’s Entrepreneurial Journey

Hülya, a Turkish-born female entrepreneur residing in Essen, Germany, exemplifies the complex journey of migrants who achieve success in a foreign land. Now 55 and having moved to Germany at the age of three, she has navigated a dual identity while striving for professional success. Her story highlights the systemic challenges and familial motivations that drive immigrants towards entrepreneurship. Born in Konya, Turkey, Hülya immigrated to Germany in 1971 with her family and now holds German citizenship. Her early education in Germany was marred by bullying and isolation due to her immigrant status, which resulted in absenteeism during primary school. Despite these challenges, she persevered and successfully completed her education.

Her career began in the beauty industry and quickly advanced to a managerial position. Hülya’s managerial skills later proved crucial in her entrepreneurial ventures. In 2005, seeking more flexibility as a single parent, she founded an event location business in Essen, offering customisable services for weddings and corporate events. She was motivated by the need for a flexible schedule to be more present for her son. Despite her achievements in professional life and cultural integration, Hülya faces ongoing microaggressions, affecting her personally and professionally.

4.1.1 *Avoidance and Distancing*

Avoidance and distancing are forms of microaggression that systematically exclude individuals through physical or social separation. Hülya recounts struggles securing venues for her event business due to her name, often denied opportunities over the phone. This exclusion based on assumptions about her ethnic identity reveals how distancing is maintained through bias. Research shows that such avoidance perpetuates minority marginalisation, undermining societal participation (Leyerzapf & Abma, 2017).

4.1.2 *Pathologising Minority Culture or Appearance*

Pathologising involves devaluing minority cultures as deviant from the norm. Hülya faced scrutiny regarding her business intentions due to her Turkish background, requiring a trusted intermediary to vouch for her reliability. This undermined her credibility as a competent business owner. Her educational experiences reflect this dynamic, as she faced bullying and alienation, limiting her opportunities. Such microaggressions privilege dominant cultural norms while denigrating minority identities (Williams et al., 2020).

4.1.3 *Perception of Not Being a True Citizen*

Despite living in Germany for over 50 years and obtaining citizenship, Hülya frequently faces treatment that frames her as an outsider, illustrating how entrenched biases persist despite legal integration. This marginalisation extends to younger generations, as evidenced by her nephew's challenges securing employment after graduation. In stark contrast to the success of his peers, his experience highlights how perceptions of citizenship remain unequal, often dictated by ethnicity rather than legal status or individual merit, perpetuating systemic inequities and narratives of exclusion across generations (Sue et al., 2007).

4.2 **Sara's Entrepreneurial Journey**

Sara, an Iranian-born entrepreneur in Essen, Germany, exemplifies how migration, culture, and systemic barriers influence entrepreneurial experiences. She migrated to Germany at the age of 14, and her story highlights her ambition alongside the systemic hurdles faced by migrant entrepreneurs. Born in Iran, Sara moved to Germany due to political upheaval. Coming from a once-privileged family, her family encountered financial challenges upon arrival. Having grown up in North Rhine Westphalia, where she attended school, Sara later pursued her university studies in Southern Germany before moving to Essen. Her entrepreneurial journey commenced when she took over a medical practice at 30, later expanding into a large centre, a clinical research company, and a digital health startup.

Despite her professional success, Sara faced subtle discrimination and exclusion, revealing how being an immigrant, especially a non-European woman, requires constant negotiation of identity.

4.2.1 Avoidance and Distancing

Sara faced significant barriers in securing resources for her businesses, often encountering delays and denials due to her migrant background. These challenges involved complex bureaucracy, a lack of accessible information in various languages, and an overall lack of institutional support for migrant entrepreneurs. For instance, she emphasised the difficulty of navigating the paperwork for grants and funding, describing the system as burdensome and exclusionary for non-native speakers. This mirrors the experiences of other migrant entrepreneurs struggling with ethnic assumptions.

4.2.2 Pathologising Minority Culture or Appearance

Sara's Iranian background often led to scepticism about her professional abilities, resulting in questions about her credentials and projects. Her experience is underpinned by Hack-Poly et al. (2020), who find that cultural differences, in addition to stereotypes, adversely affect migrant businesses in the UK. Sara's family's shift from wealth in Iran to poverty in Germany shaped her entrepreneurial journey as one of overcoming adversity.

4.2.3 Perception of Not Being a True Citizen

Despite long-term residence in Germany, Sara continues to be treated as an outsider. Her experience with the German bureaucracy, where her entrepreneurial activities were undermined due to ethnicity, illustrates how perceptions of citizenship remain unequal.

4.2.4 Denial of Personal Experience

Sara often encounters reactions that deny the relevance of her challenges as a migrant entrepreneur, with statements like "all entrepreneurs face the same problems". This denial harms the recognition of migrants' unique experiences.

4.3 Summary of Findings

Focusing on the journeys of Hülya and Sara, the study revealed that despite achieving professional success and cultural integration, both women encounter systemic biases that perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation. Both women face significant challenges tied to their ethnic backgrounds. They contend with microaggressions and stereotypes that undermine their professional credibility. For Hülya, this manifests as ethnic bias when securing venues, while Sara experiences scepticism re-

garding her credentials due to her Iranian background. Despite their long-term residence in Germany and citizenship, both women are perceived as outsiders. This outsider status persists, influencing how they are treated in the business world and affecting their opportunities. For Hülya, this bias extends to her children, reflecting the generational persistence of this prejudice. Similarly, Sara's entrepreneurial challenges are often overlooked, with her struggles dismissed as typical for all entrepreneurs, further reinforcing her outsider status. Finally, both women encounter difficulties accessing resources, whether securing venues or obtaining funding. They are forced to rely on intermediaries to overcome these barriers, highlighting the need for external support to counteract their systemic challenges.

However, the sectors in which they operate also reveal differences in their entrepreneurial journeys. Hülya initially entered the beauty industry and later transitioned into the events business to gain flexibility as a single parent. Her work is more consumer-oriented and centred around creating experiences for others. In contrast, Sara's career spans the medical and digital health sectors, where she manages a medical practice, a clinical research company, and a digital health startup. Her ventures are rooted in healthcare and technology, often demanding a high level of expertise and access to funding, making her journey more complex in bureaucratic navigation. While both face ethnic and gender biases—also termed “intersectional microaggressions” (Singh et al., 2021)—the type and scope of these barriers differ. Hülya's challenges are primarily tied to personal interactions, such as bias against her name and the perception of her credibility in more informal settings like event planning. In contrast, Sara's barriers are embedded in the bureaucratic systems of healthcare and technology, where institutional barriers such as language difficulties, exclusion from funding opportunities, and challenges navigating complex regulations are more prominent.

Extending William and colleagues' (2021) taxonomy, this study identified two additional indications of microaggression: the denial of personal experience and ongoing exclusion.

5 Discussion & Conclusions

This exploratory case study examined the microaggressions encountered by two female migrant entrepreneurs, Hülya and Sara, in Essen, Germany, emphasising the significant role that racial and intersectoral microaggressions play in shaping their entrepreneurial journeys. Despite their professional success and cultural integration, their experiences underscore the persistence of systemic biases that hinder their business development. The findings suggest that microaggressions not only challenge the legitimacy of migrant entrepreneurs but also limit access to critical resources, networks, and opportunities, resulting in feelings of isolation and exclusion within the ecosystem. This exclusionary dynamic undermines the potential for

migrant entrepreneurs, particularly women, to fully engage with the ecosystem, thereby restricting their capacity to grow and innovate.

5.1 The Dual Impact of Microaggressions: Migrant Entrepreneurs and Ecosystems

Microaggressions erode trust within the entrepreneurial ecosystem and foster an uneven playing field where resources are unequally distributed. Hülya's Turkish background, for instance, restricts her access to key markets and networks, forcing her to rely on intermediaries for validation. Similarly, Sara's Iranian heritage engenders scepticism regarding her professional abilities, hindering her access to vital resources. These systemic biases perpetuate a power imbalance, reinforcing the marginalisation of migrant entrepreneurs and exacerbating inequities in their business development. This exclusion also diminishes the ecosystem's overall competitiveness, as the valuable contributions of migrant entrepreneurs are sidelined, depriving the ecosystem of diverse perspectives that could foster innovation and drive economic progress.

Furthermore, (racial) microaggressions—often subtle yet pervasive—affect the psychological well-being of migrant entrepreneurs and undermine their self-confidence, entrepreneurial agency, and creativity. These microaggressions instil self-doubt, diminishing the resilience and risk-taking abilities crucial for entrepreneurial success. The cumulative effect of such discrimination restricts access to essential networks and social capital, thereby limiting opportunities for collaboration, funding, and support. This exclusion in professional settings exacerbates long-term inequities and hinders the capacity of migrant entrepreneurs to establish the necessary relationships for business growth. The intersectionality of these experiences further compounds the challenges, as female migrant entrepreneurs encounter additional layers of discrimination based on both gender and ethnicity, which further restricts access to resources and opportunities.

The failure of ecosystems to embrace diversity and inclusivity has far-reaching implications for both individual migrant entrepreneurs and the broader ecosystem. Ecosystems that perpetuate exclusion not only undermine fairness and equality but also hinder innovation and growth. By marginalising migrant entrepreneurs, ecosystems miss the opportunity to leverage their unique ideas and skills, creating a homogeneous environment that restricts adaptability and problem-solving capacity. In contrast, inclusive ecosystems actively embrace diversity and are more resilient, innovative, and positioned for long-term growth (Hameed et al., 2023; Sen, 2023). They promote cross-cultural collaboration, encourage diverse perspectives, and establish a level playing field where all entrepreneurs can contribute, ultimately strengthening the entrepreneurial landscape.

To address these issues, ecosystems must proactively dismantle systemic barriers, implement inclusive policies, and create supportive environments that enable all

entrepreneurs to thrive, regardless of their background. Interventions such as mentorship programs, diversity training, and the integration of inclusive policies within business incubators and accelerators are essential to fostering a more equitable ecosystem. Recognising and valuing the cultural and entrepreneurial contributions of migrant entrepreneurs is crucial not only for their individual success but also for the broader economic vitality of the ecosystem. By embracing diversity, entrepreneurial ecosystems can unlock innovation, promote sustainable growth, and ensure all entrepreneurs, including migrants, can realise their full potential.

5.2 Future Research Avenues

Acknowledging the exploratory nature of this study, which offers initial insights into the role of (intersectoral) microaggressions in shaping the experiences of migrant entrepreneurs within their ecosystems, without doubt, more extensive analysis is required. Future research should examine the broader implications of microaggressions across different entrepreneurial ecosystems, aiming to deepen our understanding of how cultural and social-identity-related biases affect migrant entrepreneurs' experiences. Comparative studies involving migrant entrepreneurs from diverse regions or countries would provide a more nuanced understanding of how systemic barriers manifest in varying ecosystems. Additionally, research should explore the intersectionality of microaggressions, focusing on how factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status intensify the challenges faced by migrant entrepreneurs, particularly women. Longitudinal studies could offer valuable insights into the long-term psychological and entrepreneurial effects of these microaggressions, tracking their impact on the well-being and business trajectories of migrant entrepreneurs over time.

Finally, the role of policy in addressing these barriers merits further investigation. Future research could assess the impact of diversity and inclusion policies within entrepreneurial ecosystems, examining their effectiveness in fostering equitable access to resources and networks for migrant entrepreneurs. Lastly, exploring the role of counter spaces—ethnic or migrant-specific networks—could provide valuable insights into how these alternative support systems help mitigate systemic exclusion's effects while revealing their limitations in facilitating long-term integration into broader entrepreneurial ecosystems.

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