



UNCOVERING THE ANTECEDENTS OF WORKPLACE MICROAGGRESSIONS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF ENVIRONMENTAL LEVEL FACTORS

Sean McCallaghan¹, Renier Steyn²

¹² Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa

Abstract

Microaggressions (MAs), subtle, routine slights conveyed interpersonally or through environmental cues, are pervasive in workplaces and harm employee well-being and performance. Recent studies indicate that most employees experience workplace MAs. Despite extensive documentation of their consequences, the organisational mechanisms that enable MAs remain under-specified. This study consolidates existing research on MAs, focusing on environmental factors that contribute to, reinforce, or enable their occurrence in the workplace. A gap in the literature persists, as previous studies have examined isolated factors rather than providing a comprehensive account of the full range of organisational antecedents. A systematic literature review was conducted, following PRISMA guidelines. The review included empirical studies and excluded purely philosophical or theoretical discussions. Only studies presenting either numerical data in results or qualitative findings through in-text quotations were included. Analysis of 53 articles identified nine environmental mechanisms underlying workplace MAs: (1) exclusionary organisational culture; (2) ineffective or superficial diversity leadership; (3) workforce homogeneity and structural composition; (4) systemic historic discrimination; (5) normalisation of bias through informal norms; (6) organisational policy and procedural gaps; (7) embedded inequities sustaining the MA cycle; (8) materialised bias through spaces and symbols; and (9) hierarchical and informal power structures. This review identifies key organisational conditions that enable MAs and demonstrates that multiple environmental factors contribute to their occurrence. Recognising this full range of factors provides a foundation for developing a comprehensive MA framework to guide preventative strategies aimed at reducing MAs in the workplace.

Keywords

Organizational culture, Workplace microaggressions, Environmental antecedents and Systematic review

Introduction

Microaggressions (MAs) are brief, everyday verbal, nonverbal, or environmental slights that communicate derogatory or negative messages toward individuals who do not conform to a group's prescriptive standard (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). In globalized organizational contexts, these subtle forms of discrimination remain widespread and consequential, with a recent meta-analysis revealing that many workplace participants reported experiencing MAs and that such exposure directly impacted their mental and physical health (Salari et al., 2024).

Research has shown that individuals from marginalized groups often face repeated and compounded MAs at work, even in organizations that invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Newman et al., 2025; Smith & Griffiths, 2022). Also, assessments of workplace bias and diversity training show limited and inconsistent impacts on everyday behaviours, which suggests alternative explanations for why MAs persist despite such programs (Chang et al., 2019; Dobbin & Kalev, 2019; Forscher et al., 2019).

MAs are not just isolated, individualized events; they are also embedded in the structure of organizations (Archuleta et al., 2024). Studies show that organizations somehow retain patterns of power differences, supporting the dominance of advantaged groups while maintaining others in an inferior position, even when they claim to promote equality (Forscher et al., 2019). Thus, in addition to interpersonal interactions, organizational environments play a substantial role in the occurrence of MAs.

Environmental MAs, considered systemic cues present in policies, spaces, images, and symbols, can reinforce dominance by signalling segregation, underrepresentation, tokenism, or criminalization, often operating

without a single identifiable perpetrator (Mills, 2020). These subtle implications influence perceptions of who belongs and which groups are dominant, thereby shaping individuals' experiences and behaviours within the environment (Mills, 2020).

Organizations can signal belonging or exclusion through various environmental cues, such as spatial arrangements, symbols, imagery, and institutional rules that normalize dominance and marginalization, often without the presence of an identifiable perpetrator (Waller, 2020; Wilson, 2018). Experimental research has demonstrated that design elements, such as traditionally masculine décor in technical spaces, can diminish women's sense of belonging and reduce their interest in participation (Cheryan et al., 2009), while studies at the building level have linked office design to psychosocial climate and emotional well-being (Bodin Danielsson & Theorell, 2024).

Few studies distinguish and integrate interpersonal and environmental forms of MAs, leaving mechanisms such as environmental features contributing to MAs underexplored (Mills, 2020). Recent reviews have called for integrative, organization-focused research that clarifies mechanisms and informs actionable prevention and intervention strategies (Newman et al., 2025; Smith & Griffiths, 2022) and have led to proposals for integrative frameworks to construct and facilitate cumulative inquiry (Smith & Griffiths, 2022). This manuscript responds to that call by focusing on environmental features, specifically, workplace culture, leadership, policies, procedures, spatial design, symbolic representations and hierarchical structures within workplaces contribute to, reinforce, or enable MAs.

Problem investigated

MAs are becoming increasingly prevalent in globalized organizational environments. A recent workplace meta-analysis estimates that approximately 73.6% of employees report experiencing MAs, with 18.8% linked specifically to racial discrimination (Salari et al., 2024). Beyond the widely reported associations with poor mental and physical health, MAs have been linked to diminished psychological adjustment (Lui & Quezada, 2019), emotional exhaustion among transgender and gender-diverse employees (Cancela et al., 2024), and anxiety-related trauma symptoms among racial and ethnic minority surgeons and trainees (Ogunnowo et al., 2024). These findings highlight not only substantial risks for affected individuals but also broader implications for organizational performance and well-being (Jones et al., 2017; Kartolo & Kwantes, 2019; Pascoe & Richman, 2009).

Current research, however, remains largely reactive, with influential reviews focusing on the experiences of targets, the harmful consequences of MAs, and post-incident coping or resistance strategies (Spanierman et al., 2021). Interventions frequently address perpetrators or victims after the fact, emphasizing awareness-building and bystander training, rather than seeking to prevent MAs before they occur (Fu et al., 2024; Marie Fletcher et al., 2025). This person-focused approach leaves a significant area of inquiry underexplored: how to prevent or minimize the occurrence of MAs within the workplace in the first place (Fu et al., 2024; Marie Fletcher et al., 2025; Spanierman et al., 2021).

The present study therefore shifts attention toward the organizational level, examining structural, procedural, spatial, and symbolic dimensions of the workplace, and how these features contribute to or mitigate the occurrence of MAs, building on existing research in this domain (Bodin Danielsson & Theorell, 2024; Cheryan et al., 2009; Koval & Rosette, 2021). In doing so, it responds to calls for upstream knowledge that moves beyond individual-level incidents, aiming to enhance diagnostic insight and inform proactive, environment-based prevention strategies (Newman et al., 2025; Smith & Griffiths, 2022).

Research problem: Despite growing awareness of the harmful effects of MAs, little is known about how specific organizational features, spanning physical, procedural, and symbolic domains, contribute to their presence or prevention in the workplace.

Study objectives

The objective of this study is to systematically identify and analyse how environmental features within organisational settings contribute to, reinforce, or enable the occurrence of MAs in the workplace. It is further anticipated that the findings will reveal the underlying mechanisms that give rise to workplace MAs and provide the foundation for developing a framework of environmental factors that drive their occurrence.

Literature Review

MAs are considered subtle, routine slights or exclusions that individuals from marginalized groups often encounter in the workplace. These can take the form of verbal remarks, behaviours, or dismissive attitudes tied to social identity (Williams, 2021). While individually they may appear insignificant, their cumulative impact can be substantial. Research shows that MAs frequently undermine psychological safety, impair performance, and disrupt collaboration and inclusion (Desai et al., 2023; Kim & Meister, 2023; Macintosh et al., 2022).

Across professional sectors, evidence links workplace MAs to harmful individual and organizational outcomes. Among women leaders in STEM fields, gendered MAs have been found to provoke rumination, self-

doubt, and withdrawal from leadership aspirations (Kim & Meister, 2023). Daily diary research confirms that repeated exposure to MAs increases emotional exhaustion and diminishes work engagement (Junça-Silva & Ferreira, 2025). In healthcare contexts, MAs contribute to emotional distress in nurses and burnout symptoms among physicians and trainees (Desai et al., 2023; Heisler et al., 2024). These individual effects often translate into broader organizational challenges such as higher turnover intentions, disengagement, and reduced service quality (Heisler et al., 2024; Junça-Silva & Ferreira, 2025; Kim & Meister, 2023).

While most MAs are studied as interpersonal events, growing evidence points to their normalization within organizational environments. Environmental cues such as naming conventions, symbols, and spatial design can reinforce exclusion and privilege dominant identities (Neikirk et al., 2023). These cues shape perceptions of belonging, behaviour, and hierarchical value. Reviews in professional education and clinical workplaces emphasize that ambient features like rules, imagery, and routine practices can institutionalize exclusion, often inadvertently. Scholars recommend environmental audits and structural interventions to address these systemic patterns (Macintosh et al., 2022). Furthermore, emerging studies show that leadership responses to MAs significantly influence organizational outcomes; climates that tolerate MAs carry system-level risks (Kim et al., 2024; Macintosh et al., 2022).

Organizational environments are composed of observable and structural features that communicate and sustain culture and climate (Norton et al., 2015; Piwowar-Sulej, 2020). These include visible artifacts (e.g., workspace layout, dress codes, signage), language norms, informal networks, leadership routines, and formal structures such as hierarchy and rules (Schein & Schein, 2017). While these features may appear superficial, they convey deep values and expectations that collectively form organizational climate (Schein & Schein, 2017; Schneider et al., 2013). These factors shape how employees interpret their environment and directly affect psychological safety, inclusion, and performance (Zerella et al., 2017).

Inclusive environmental signals, such as diverse representation in organizational materials or equitable spatial design, have been linked to stronger team identity, collaboration, and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). In contrast, exclusionary signals foster silence, disengagement, and mistrust. Language practices and internal discourse also influence inclusion by reinforcing in-group norms and shaping employees perceived legitimacy (Rathbone et al., 2023). Informal networks contribute to subcultures that influence access to opportunity and perceptions of fairness (Daverth et al., 2016; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Leadership behaviours and structural design likewise shape workplace norms and responses to inequality (Sethibe & Steyn, 2016; Zohar & Luria, 2005). For instance, centralized hierarchies may intensify job demands while reducing autonomy, whereas empowering structures align resources with responsibilities, improving both engagement and fairness (Demerouti et al., 2001; Pirnejad et al., 2007; Schneider & Barbera, 2014).

Organizational culture and climate function as informal regulatory systems that shape normative behaviour (Schneider & Barbera, 2014; Schneider et al., 2013). When leadership, policies, and peer norms permit bias, whether through vague rules, weak enforcement, or dismissive reactions, employees may interpret bias as permissible. This perception contributes to the persistence of discrimination and incivility (Greenwald et al., 2022; Kunz & Ludwig, 2022). Permissive climates have been associated with increased harassment, team dysfunction, and poorer employee well-being and performance (Cortina et al., 2022; Yaqoob et al., 2025). Research on ethical climate similarly finds that ego-driven or permissive climates are linked to higher instances of misconduct, while principled or benevolent climates reduce deviance and promote organizational commitment (Cullen et al., 2003; Mazzola & Kessler, 2012).

Leadership is particularly influential in shaping responses to MAs. Leaders who intervene tend to be evaluated more positively by employees, being perceived as fair and trustworthy, whereas silence may be interpreted as tacit approval of bias (Demirtas & Akdoğan, 2015; Mayer et al., 2010). Social identity dynamics often exacerbate exclusionary practices: when cultures tolerate in-group favouritism or stereotyping, minority voices are marginalized and collaboration deteriorates (O'Reilly & Banki, 2016; Pearce et al., 2024). Conversely, inclusive climates that affirm diversity have been linked to greater employee loyalty and improved organizational performance (Pugh et al., 2008).

In sum, MAs arise from a confluence of individual, cultural, and structural factors. While much research has examined individual behaviour and informal culture, fewer studies have focused on the formalized and environmental dimensions of organizational life. These include the material, spatial, and procedural components that silently perpetuate inequities. Addressing MAs thus requires a multilevel approach, one that not only targets individual awareness and cultural norms but also critically evaluates organizational environments, systems, and symbols to ensure they support equity and inclusion.

Research Methodology

To ensure rigor, transparency, and reproducibility, we prospectively preregistered our protocol with PROSPERO Registration (1084639) and Open science Framework <https://osf.io/hzn2s> (McCallaghan & Steyn, 2025). The following section depicts the methodology utilized in the present study.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria, guided by the research question, ensure that only relevant and high-quality literature is incorporated into the review (Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021; Pati & Lorusso, 2018). The present systematic literature review (SLR) only considered credible literature found on academically recognized databases. The study considered the following inclusion criteria: 1) Peer-reviewed empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods). 2) Clear study and population focus on workplace or organizational environments. 3) Analysis of antecedents, causes or preceding factors related to MAs in an organizational context. 4) Published in English between January 2015 and April 2025. 5) Studies involving employed adult participants of 18 years and older.

The following was considered as exclusion criteria: 1) Theoretical or conceptual articles without empirical data. 2) Research solely on overt discrimination, bullying, or macro-level racism not categorized as MAs. 3) Non-peer-reviewed literature, including dissertations, editorials, reviews and conference proceedings. 4) Studies focussed on educational environments and participants (Secondary and/or tertiary environments) without direct relevance to professional workplace environments.

Search strategy and research item retrieval

An electronic search was conducted on the EBSCOhost and Scopus database. The search strategy used several related keywords and Boolean phrases and operators to acquire the most relevant and applicable literature. The main search thread consisted of multiple combinations of the following keywords: (“workplace microaggression”) AND (“antecedent” OR “cause” OR “predictor”) AND (“organizational culture” OR “organizational climate” OR “organizational environment”).

Data analysis

Results for the environmental features contributing, causing or reinforcing MAs in the workplace followed a structured approach as proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008). The process included three stages: (1) line-by-line coding of relevant data; the parts of the text which refers to antecedents, causes or predictors, (2) development of descriptive themes organizing related codes, and (3) generation of analytical themes that extended beyond the original findings. This allows for integrating diverse perspectives and maintaining contextual refinement allowing better understanding of a complex phenomenon such as MAs.

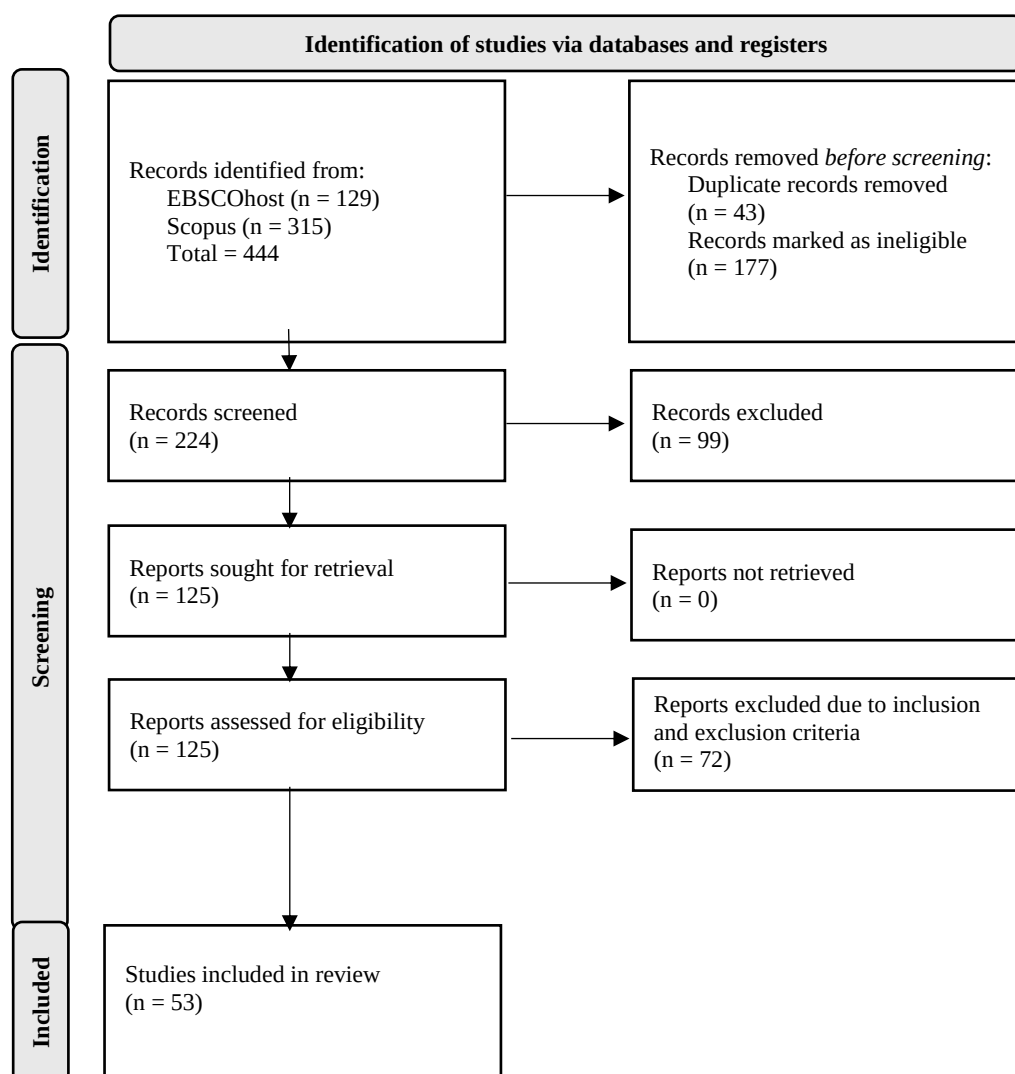
Findings

The results will be presented in two main sections, study and sample characteristics, and organisational factors that contribute to, reinforce, and stimulate microaggressions in the workplace.

Study and sample characteristics

Database searches in EBSCOhost and Scopus identified 444 records. After removing 43 duplicates and excluding 177 records by eligibility criteria, 224 records were screened. Of these, 125 full-text articles were assessed, and 72 were excluded. Ultimately, 53 studies were included in the final synthesis, as shown in the PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1.

Studies comprised of qualitative (n = 25), quantitative (n = 26) and mixed methods (n = 2). Qualitative studies collected data through interviews, focus groups and made use of grounded theory to evaluate MAs in the workplace. Quantitative studies mainly used a cross-sectional design and collected data with structured questionnaires to empirically test relationships between MAs in the workplace and various psychological, behavioural and organisational outcomes. The mixed-methods studies (n = 2) integrated both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of workplace microaggressions.

Figure 1: Process followed to retrieve items for current systematic review**Geographical location of studies**

Studies were conducted in a range of countries and regions. Majority of studies originated from the United States of America (USA) (n = 27), followed by India (n = 6), Australia (n = 4), Canada (n = 3) and several multinational studies (n = 6). Single country studies were conducted in UK, Portugal, Israel, Greece, Poland, Italy, South Africa and an unnamed country from the Western Europe region. When grouped by region, most studies were conducted in North America (n = 30; USA and Canada), followed by Europe (n = 13), Asia (n = 6), and Oceania (n = 4). Six studies explicitly involved multinational or cross-regional samples.

Studies in the current review represented several industries and sectors. Majority of studies were from the healthcare sector (n = 17), followed by higher education (n = 8) and several studies from mixed sectors (n = 11). Sectors included Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM, n = 3), social and human services (n = 3), IT and Technology (n = 2), education (n = 2), and single studies from manufacturing, banking and finance, telecom/pharmaceutical/FMCG, and prisons/criminal justice (all n = 1).

Gender composition

Several studies focused on females in the workplace focussing on only females or whereby majority of the sample consisted of females (n = 20). Majority of studies reported mixed gender groups (n = 25) with a small number of studies focussing on males only (n = 3) and non-binary or gender diverse participants (n = 3). Particularly, studies involving LGBTQIA+, transgender, and non-binary participants (n = 4) provided visibility to gender minorities in MAs research.

Race/ethnicity

A large selection of studies examined racial and ethnic minority groups, including Black/African American (n = 15), Asian/Asian American (n = 10), Hispanic/Latino (n = 7), Indigenous or mixed race (n = 3), and ethnic

minorities in non-USA contexts such as Meo Muslims in India and Palestinian professionals in Israel. Several studies ($n = 5$) had predominantly White/Caucasian participants, often in multinational healthcare or STEM contexts, while others focused explicitly on racially diverse or minority-majority samples.

Sexual orientation and LGBTQIA+ identities

A small number of studies explicitly targeted LGBTQIA+ participants ($n = 3$), while others reported inclusion of LGBTQIA+ identities within broader samples. For example, studies on gender-diverse employees, LGB social workers, or LGBTQIA+ employees in India highlighted specific microaggression dynamics tied to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Occupational roles

Participants were drawn from a range of occupational levels: senior leaders (e.g., corporate leaders, senior STEM faculty, $n = 5$), mid-level managers (banking, IT, $n = 3$), frontline employees (service workers, nurses, $n = 20$), and trainees or early-career professionals (residents, fellows, graduate students, $n = 10$).

Other participant features

A small number of studies addressed less common identity factors in workplace MAs. Disability was included in only a few cases ($n = 2$), while immigrant status featured more often ($n = 5$), including studies on Chinese and Black African migrants. Religious identity was considered in three studies, involving non-religious employees, prison chaplains, and Palestinian professionals.

Thematic synthesis of environmental features contributing to workplace MAs

To determine how environmental features contribute to, reinforce, or precipitate MAs in the workplace, a three-stage thematic synthesis process was applied, following the approach recommended by Thomas and Harden (2008). This method was chosen for its capacity to integrate and interpret qualitative data across diverse contexts, thereby facilitating the identification of organizational-level mechanisms that trigger MAs.

Initially, preparatory line-by-line coding was conducted on relevant data extracted from the results and discussion sections of the 53 reviewed studies. Particular attention was devoted to descriptions of organizational conditions, practices, norms, leadership behaviours, and policy environments identified by study participants or authors as influencing the occurrence or perpetuation of MAs. Codes were generated around descriptions of environmental features associated with contributing to, reinforcing, or directly causing MA behaviour, using language that reflected enabling mechanisms such as exclusion, normalization of bias, policy failure, power asymmetries, or symbolic marginalization.

The resulting codes were organized into theoretically coherent clusters reflecting environmental conditions functioning as antecedents or enablers of MAs. These clusters revealed latent patterns across studies that illustrated how workplace systems, cultures, and hierarchies facilitated MA experiences, either directly, through structural exclusion, or indirectly, through inaction toward bias. Through iterative comparison and analytical refinement, the descriptive clusters were distilled into nine analytical themes representing distinct environmental mechanisms contributing to workplace MAs. These themes were constructed to address the central research aim of identifying not only correlates but also the underlying drivers and reinforcers of MAs.

The nine themes identified through the thematic analysis were as follows: 1) Exclusionary organisational culture; 2) Ineffective and superficial diversity leadership; 3) Workforce homogeneity and structural composition; 4) Systemic and entrenched historic discrimination; 5) Internal organisational normalization of bias and informal norms; 6) Organisational policy and procedural gaps driving MAs; 7) Embedded workplace inequities and the MA cycle; 8) Materialised bias through spaces and symbols reinforcing inequality; 9) Hierarchical and informal power structures.

Table 1 below illustrates a summary of themes and sub-themes extracted from reviewed articles including citations from indicative studies that provided empirical evidence for these themes.

Table 1: Antecedents of workplace microaggressions

Theme	Sub Theme	Authors from indicative studies
Exclusionary organisational culture	Non-sanctioned informal exclusionary networks	(Lee et al., 2019; Pitcan et al., 2018; Priya & Sreejith, 2024)
	Exclusionary professional invalidation	(Heisler et al., 2024; Kim & Meister, 2023; Louis et al., 2016; Mensitieri et al., 2025; Ogunnowo et al., 2024; Shenoy-Packer, 2015)
	Routinized epistemic exclusion and in-group favouritism	(Bakshi, 2024; Holder et al., 2015; Kalembe, 2023; Lee et al., 2019; Mensitieri et al., 2025; Miller & Ball, 2023; Ogunnowo et al., 2024; Pitcher, 2017; Shoshana, 2016)

Theme	Sub Theme	Authors from indicative studies
Ineffective and superficial diversity leadership	Heterogeneity in senior leadership structures	(Holder et al., 2015; Mensitieri et al., 2025)
	Superficial diversity leadership	(Holder et al., 2015; Maji & Rajeev, 2024)
	Lack of diversity and inclusive leadership accountability.	(Haynes-Baratz et al., 2022; Pitcher, 2017; Shoshana, 2016)
Workforce homogeneity and structural composition	Heterogeneities professional environments	(Bakshi, 2024; Bilwani, 2023; DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Holder et al., 2015; Jacob, 2024; Kunte et al., 2025; Lechien et al., 2023; Thomas-Hawkins et al., 2022)
Systemic and entrenched historic discrimination	Institutionalized inequality and historic discriminatory regimes	(DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Heisler et al., 2024; Li, 2019; Louis & Montano, 2021; Mensitieri et al., 2025)
	Masculine heteronormative norms and objectification	(Maji & Rajeev, 2024; Mensitieri et al., 2025; Miller & Ball, 2023; Papadaki et al., 2021; Priya & Sreejith, 2024)
	Societal norms and legacies	(Bilwani, 2023; Gatwiri, 2021; Pitcan et al., 2018; Shenoy-Packer, 2015)
Internal organisational normalization of bias and informal norms	Institutional ambiguity and informal norms	(Blithe & Elliott, 2020; Mensitieri et al., 2025)
	Denial and downplaying discrimination	(Bilwani, 2023; Hunt, 2024; Mensitieri et al., 2025; Papadaki et al., 2021; Priya & Sreejith, 2024; Shoshana, 2016)
Organisational policy and procedural gaps driving MAs	Disconnected inclusive policies	(Maji & Rajeev, 2024; Papadaki et al., 2021)
	Inadequate and insufficient mechanisms to respond to MAs	(Hu et al., 2023; Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Kim & Meister, 2023; Kunte et al., 2025; Mensitieri et al., 2025; Morando & Platania, 2024; Papadaki et al., 2021; Shenoy-Packer, 2015; Shoshana, 2016; Thomas-Hawkins et al., 2022)
	Lack of training and awareness	(Froese et al., 2016; Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Kunte et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2019; Mensitieri et al., 2025; Morando & Platania, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Papadaki et al., 2021; Shenoy-Packer, 2015; Shoshana, 2016)
Embedded workplace inequities and the microaggression cycle	Workplace stratification through pay and role inequality	(Brooks et al., 2023; Hunt, 2024; Myers et al., 2023)
	Gendered attribution bias	(Heisler et al., 2024; Jacob et al., 2024; Mensitieri et al., 2025; Morando & Platania, 2024; Ogunnowo et al., 2024)
Materialised bias through spaces and symbols reinforcing inequality	Unrealistic physical expectations and norms	(Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Ogunnowo et al., 2024)
	Situational Triggers within the Organisational Environment	(Brooks et al., 2023; Heisler et al., 2024; Hunt, 2024; Maji & Rajeev, 2024; Morando & Platania, 2024)
Hierarchical and informal power structures	Power hierarchies and informal dominance normalize microaggressions.	(Bakshi, 2024; Bilwani, 2023; Blithe & Elliott, 2020; Fattoracci & King, 2022; Firmin et al., 2019; Heisler et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2023; Hunt, 2024; Kalemba, 2023; Kim & Meister, 2023; Louis et al., 2016; Morando & Platania, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Roszak et al., 2021)

Theme 1: Exclusionary organisational culture: Organisational culture strongly influences the prevalence of MAs (Kunte et al., 2025). Three sub-themes capture how exclusion is normalised.

The first, *non-sanctioned informal exclusionary networks*, involves intentional social exclusion from informal groups. Illustrative accounts include “If you’re not invited out with your coworkers to events... you realize it’s more of just like you don’t really mesh with your coworkers” (Pitcan et al., 2018, p. 305), “Coworkers scheduling a work ‘happy hour’ without inviting an individual with a disability...” (Lee et al., 2019, p. 180), and “There’s an informal only men WhatsApp group where discussions and decisions are made” (Priya & Sreejith, 2024, p. 6). Such networks establish their own norms, reinforcing exclusionary behaviour (Kalemba, 2023).

The second, *exclusionary professional invalidation*, refers to the sidelining of expertise through interruption, omission, or menial assignments. Extended insider conversations “a twenty-minute discussion of rare rye whisky” - mark who belongs (Kim & Meister, 2023, p. 521), while others are excluded “for reasons of ‘confidentiality’” (Firmin et al., 2019, p. 459). Competence is questioned: a woman “couldn't possibly be the boss” (Mensitieri et al., 2025, p. 6), or an immigrant “would not be able to explain things well because of [her] English” (Shenoy-Packer, 2015, p. 265). Academia remains “a White profession” (Louis et al., 2016, p. 467), with women often restricted to service tasks (Heisler et al., 2024; Ogunnowo et al., 2024). Failure to recognise competence can even result in “multi-million-dollar” losses (Kim & Meister, 2023, p. 520).

The third, *routinized epistemic exclusion and in-group favouritism*, reflects persistent privileging of dominant voices. Examples include “tendency amongst them to speak over Meo participants” (Bakshi, 2024, p. 196) and racialised assumptions such as “You would never see a Black person on the floor working as a waiter” (Kalemba, 2023, pp. 821–823). Credibility is undermined “I have been told... because I don't look like a Native American, I must not know as much as those who ‘look’ Native” (Miller & Ball, 2023, p. 35) and exclusionary language (“the expression I hate most is ‘Arab work’”) or misgendering (“People kept misgendering me...”) (Pitcher, 2017, p. 696) normalise bias. Such “everyday racist language” (Shoshana, 2016, p. 1059) embeds MAs within organisational life.

Theme 2: Ineffective and superficial diversity leadership: Ineffective and superficial diversity leadership encompasses symbolic commitments to inclusion that fail to generate substantive change.

The first sub-theme, *heterogeneity in senior leadership structures*, highlights persistent demographic homogeneity: “The CEO... is male and 90% of the executive committee is male” (Mensitieri et al., 2025, p. 11), and only “two Black senior vice presidents... out of a whole organization of 700 people” (Holder et al., 2015, p. 168). Limited representation communicates whose identities are valued (Ogunnowo et al., 2024).

The second, *superficial diversity leadership*, refers to tokenism and image-based inclusion. “There's always that one or two high-potential exceptions that tend to become the poster child for we do value diversity...” (Holder et al., 2015, p. 168). Minority identities are used for branding rather than transformation (Maji & Rajeev, 2024).

The third, *lack of diversity leadership accountability*, reflects the absence of systems for addressing bias. Academic settings often lack “mechanisms for holding colleagues accountable for uncivil, bullying, and biased behaviour” (Haynes-Baratz et al., 2022, p. 529). Without accountability, exclusion persists, compounding stress among underrepresented groups (Pitcher, 2017; Shoshana, 2016).

Theme 3: Workforce homogeneity and structural composition

Workforce homogeneity and structural composition describe how limited diversity reinforces discrimination. Where “you have three departments, no migrant people or people of colour... Again, no Black people” (Bilwani, 2023, p. 225), exclusionary behaviour becomes routine. Empirical evidence links low representation with heightened MAs and bias (Bakshi, 2024; Holder et al., 2015; Kunte et al., 2025; Sims et al., 2023; Thomas-Hawkins et al., 2022). Homogeneity perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and structural inequity.

Theme 4: Systemic and entrenched historic discrimination: Systemic and entrenched historic discrimination captures the enduring influence of inequality embedded in institutions and societal structures.

The first sub-theme, *institutionalised inequality and historic discriminatory regimes*, reveals how discriminatory legacies shape current practices. “I knew it wasn't just this one manager but the mindset of the organisational structure” (Mensitieri et al., 2025, p. 10). Recruitment reproduces sameness: “Surgeons... recruit partners with characteristics similar to those of the existing surgeons” (Heisler et al., 2024). Academia remains “a White profession” (Louis et al., 2016, p. 467). Broader labour hierarchies' privilege “local Australians with perfect English ability” (Li, 2019, p. 560).

The second, *masculine heteronormative norms and objectification*, refers to dominant gender and sexual standards. “He [customer] is a flirt. We'll definitely get the deposit if you go” (Priya & Sreejith, 2024, p. 7) and “I should complete the work and to sleep with them” (Maji & Rajeev, 2024, p. 8) demonstrate objectification. Stereotypes, “Assuming all Black women can cook” (Miller & Ball, 2023) and gendered expectations, “What would your neighbours think if you [female] get home late...” (Priya & Sreejith, 2024, p. 7) reinforce inequality, while “Have a look at this application... married to another guy, there's a mistake here, right?” (Papadaki et al., 2021, p. 520) reflects heteronormative bias.

The third, *societal norms and legacies*, shows workplace bias mirroring social prejudice. “Patients were refusing to see me because I am Black” (Gatwiri, 2021, p. 665), while Western alignment earns “relief, an admiration” (Gatwiri, 2021, p. 666). Advancement depends on similarity, “People are usually going to look at the people who they find similar to themselves” (Pitcan et al., 2018, p. 307). Persistent racism denial perpetuates exclusion (Bilwani, 2023).

Theme 5: Internal organisational normalisation of bias and informal norms: Ambiguity, denial, and weak governance allow MAs to become routine.

The first sub-theme, *institutional ambiguity and informal norms*, shows how unclear processes entrench inequity. “Women won’t apply because they already know there’s an inside candidate” (Blithe & Elliott, 2020, p. 755). Inconsistent parental-leave policies “there is not, in my college, a policy... that’s consistent” (Blithe & Elliott, 2020, p. 756) reinforce exclusion.

The second, *denial and downplaying of discrimination*, captures avoidance of accountability. “We claim to defend human rights but that’s bullshit ... most social workers offer services to white Greeks, all ‘others’ are worms, faggots, perverts...” (Papadaki et al., 2021, p. 523). Humour targeting minorities (Priya & Sreejith, 2024; Shoshana, 2016) and institutional silence (Mensitieri et al., 2025) trivialise harm.

Theme 6: Organisational policy and procedural gaps driving MAs: Policy gaps and poorly executed inclusivity measures enable MAs.

The first sub-theme, *disconnected inclusive policies*, concerns initiatives that inadvertently reinforce stereotypes. “They didn’t take our consent and just send out all our details by giving our gender as third gender or others.” Prescriptive codes such as “Dress formally. Men should only dress this way...” (Maji & Rajeev, 2024, p. 8) sustain inequality.

The second, *inadequate mechanisms to respond to MAs*, highlights weak reporting and protection systems, leaving victims silent through fear of reprisal (Lee et al., 2019; Morando & Platania, 2024; Papadaki et al., 2021; Thomas-Hawkins et al., 2022).

The third, *lack of training and awareness*, emphasises insufficient education on bias and inclusion. “The lack of education in this aspect of inclusion, discrimination...” perpetuates ignorance (Mensitieri et al., 2025, p. 13). Training deficits correlate with higher MA frequency (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Kunte et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024; Shenoy-Packer, 2015).

Theme 7: Embedded workplace inequities and the MAs cycle: Embedded workplace inequities sustain MAs by reinforcing structural disparities.

The first sub-theme, *workplace stratification through pay and role inequality*, shows that “the disparity between... a full-time paid job and [a] volunteer” (Hunt, 2024, p. 10) translates into perceived status gaps. Pay inequality predicts higher MA occurrence (Myers et al., 2023).

The second, *gendered attribution bias*, links career barriers to stereotypes such as “How would I combine the job with the care for my children?” (Mensitieri et al., 2025, p. 6). Such assumptions hinder advancement (Heisler et al., 2024; Jacob et al., 2024).

The third, *ethno-racial matching*, confines Black professionals to same-race clients, “lead[ing] to pigeonholing and limiting career opportunities” (Bilwani, 2023), reinforcing racialised labour divisions.

Theme 8: Materialised bias through spaces and symbols reinforcing inequality: Physical and symbolic environments communicate exclusion and status.

The first sub-theme, *unrealistic physical expectations and norms*, shows bias materialised through appearance-based judgment. “She made it clear with body language and tone... how dare I want a shirt that fit” (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018, p. 26). Professionals adapt behaviour “by changing... clothing style or manner of behaviour... even adjusting... music” (Ogunnowo et al., 2024, p. 19).

The second, *situational triggers within the organisational environment*, includes exclusionary imagery and language. “But it’s open to everyone, it’s not Christian... all the imagery is Christian” (Hunt, 2024, p. 8). “Even the language is against you!” (Hunt, 2024, p. 9). Displays of homogenous leadership (Heisler et al., 2024; Morando & Platania, 2024) and segregated spaces—“religious education courses... in the basement” (Roszak et al., 2021, p. 340) signal devaluation.

Theme 9: Hierarchical and informal power structures: Power hierarchies embed MAs into everyday interactions. Cultural dominance defines legitimacy: “People always express that American way is the right way. They don’t consider the differences in the culture” (Nguyen et al., 2024, p. 11). Authority can dehumanise, as in “Prisoners are

called ‘nils’... without realising that that might be quite insulting” (Hunt, 2024, p. 6). Studies across contexts (Heisler et al., 2024; Kalemba, 2023; Louis et al., 2016; Morando & Platania, 2024) show that power asymmetries reinforce exclusion, silence dissent, and institutionalise MAs as features of organisational life.

Discussion

This systematic review set out to examine how environmental features within organizational settings contribute to, reinforce, or enable the occurrence of MA in the workplace. A synthesis of 53 peer-reviewed empirical studies spanning diverse topics were included in the study, see the first part of the findings session. Across the reviewed literature, no single methodological approach, geographical region, industry, or gender group appeared to dominate the research landscape. The balanced mix of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies suggests a healthy methodological pluralism in exploring workplace MAs. The USA featured prominently, but studies from Europe, Asia, and Oceania reflect a gradually expanding global interest in the phenomenon. Diversity was also across workplaces, from healthcare and higher education to STEM, finance, and social services, underscores the ubiquity of MAs across professional contexts. Gender representation varied, encompassing studies focused on women and gender-diverse participants, but also on men, illustrating that MAs permeate different gendered experiences. Collectively, this diversity in methods, settings, and populations enhances the robustness and generalizability of insights into how MAs manifest and are sustained in the workplace.

In addressing the primary objective, the review systematically identified and analysed a wide array of environmental features that act as antecedents or enablers of workplace MAs. The findings reveal that MAs are not isolated interpersonal incidents but are deeply embedded in organizational environments. Nine distinct thematic categories were developed, 1) Exclusionary organisational culture, 2) Ineffective and superficial diversity leadership, 3) Workforce homogeneity and structural composition, 4) Systemic and entrenched historic discrimination, 5) Internal organisational normalization of bias and informal norms, 6) Organisational policy and procedural gaps driving MAs, 7) Embedded workplace inequities and the MA cycle, 8) Materialised bias through spaces and symbols reinforcing inequality and 9) Hierarchical and informal power structures. Given the complexity of the findings, their integration poses certain challenges. Nevertheless, the following section offers an attempt to synthesise and interpret these insights within a coherent framework.

It could be argued that MAs are particularly prevalent in environments characterized by (3) workforce homogeneity, where minority groups work within organisations marked by (7) embedded workplace inequities based on minority status and (4) systemic, entrenched, and historic discrimination. These dynamics often become (8) materialised bias through spaces and symbols that reinforce inequality, sustained by (9) hierarchical as well as informal power structures. Together, such conditions foster (1) an exclusionary organisational culture, in which (5) internal organisational normalization of bias and informal norms overrides (6) organisational policies and procedural safeguards, thereby perpetuating MAs. This situation is further aggravated by (2) ineffective and superficial diversity leadership, which fails to challenge or transform the structural conditions that enable these behaviours.

The study represents an effort to clarify the organizational-level mechanisms and environmental conditions that contribute to the emergence and persistence of MAs. The review highlights how these mechanisms operate both structurally, through tangible and concrete features of the workplace, and symbolically, through the resultant culture, thereby reinforcing dominant group norms while marginalizing underrepresented identities. Importantly, the analysis underscores that MAs are sustained not only by individual behaviours but also by systemic organizational dynamics that can be objectively addressed. Physical symbols of exclusion can be removed, and policies can be revised to become more inclusive.

The study offers an empirically grounded thematic framework of environmental factors that drive MAs. This framework provides a basis for understanding MAs from an upstream perspective, before they occur. By identifying the contextual and organizational conditions that give rise to MAs, the framework enables practitioners to implement preventive and practical interventions aimed at transforming workplace environments and reducing the likelihood and prevalence of MAs.

In summary, this review advances scholarly understanding by shifting the analytical focus from individual perpetrators and targets to the broader environmental and systemic conditions that perpetuate MAs. It calls for a reorientation of organizational strategies, beginning with the removal of surface-level barriers to inclusivity, but extending further toward deep structural and cultural transformation. Such an approach is essential to address the foundational causes of exclusion and marginalization embedded within organizational systems and practices.

Declarations

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