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Workplace micro-aggressions and affective consequences: the moderating role of emotional contagion

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Abstract
This study applied affective events theory to conceptualize micro-aggressions as affective micro-events and tested (1) the mediating role of negative affect in the relationship between micro-aggressions and (a) emotional exhaustion and (b) work engagement, and (2) the moderating role of emotional contagion in these indirect relationships. A daily diary design was employed with a sample of 40 participants over five consecutive days, resulting in 200 observations. The findings revealed that daily micro-aggressions were positively associated with emotional exhaustion and negatively related to work engagement through negative affect. Additionally, emotional contagion moderated the relationship between daily micro-aggressions and negative affect, with the indirect effect between micro-aggressions and emotional exhaustion being stronger for individuals with lower levels of emotional contagion. A similar pattern emerged for work engagement. These results provide valuable insights into the impact of daily micro-aggressions in the workplace and highlight the role of emotional contagion, offering important implications for future research in this area.

Keywords Micro-aggressions · Negative affect · Emotional exhaustion · Work engagement · Emotional contagion · Individual differences

Introduction

Organizations often fail to mitigate the negative impact of behaviors, such as micro-aggressions, that undermine employees' well-being and create uncomfortable or distressing work environments. Micro-aggressions, which include verbal or gestural behaviors and biased expressions (e.g., unjust blame attribution or inappropriate jokes), are frequently unintentional or unconscious but still convey specific messages, often targeting individuals from historically marginalized groups (Nadal, 2018; Williams et al., 2021). These behaviors can significantly affect employees' mental health (Priya & Sreejith, 2024) and overall well-being (Hernández & Villodas, 2020; Salari et al., 2024).

This study adopts the Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) as a theoretical framework to conceptualize workplace micro-aggressions as affective micro-events that elicit emotional responses, subsequently shaping work-related attitudes and behaviors, such as work engagement. Micro-aggressions are characterized as affective micro-events based on empirical evidence demonstrating their systematic nature and their strong associations with affective reactions (Adedeji et al., 2023; DeLapp & Williams, 2021; Wang et al., 2011). These affective reactions, in turn, are known to influence a broad spectrum of attitudes and more stable psychological states (Cancela et al., 2024; Kimber et al., 2024).

Within the AET framework, it is plausible that the negative affective responses elicited by micro-aggressions may have a cascading effect on work-related attitudes, particularly work engagement. Work engagement is defined as a positive, energetic, and absorbed state of mind toward one's work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Simultaneously, the repeated arousal of negative affect caused by micro-aggressions is likely to contribute to emotional exhaustion, a central component of burnout (De Beer et al., 2022).

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According to AET, individual differences play a crucial role in shaping how employees respond to micro-aggressions. Emotional contagion, as proposed by Rueff-Lopes et al. (2017), may act as a moderating variable, influencing the extent to which affective micro-events, such as micro-aggressions, shape emotional reactions and work engagement. Emotional contagion is defined as "a process in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotional states and behavioral attitudes" (Schoenewolf, 1990, p. 50).

Given that emotional contagion is predominantly activated through social interactions and often results in behavioral synchrony (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021), it is expected to play a pivotal role in determining how individuals emotionally and attitudinally respond to the micro-aggressions they experience in the workplace. This suggests that employees who are more susceptible to emotional contagion may react differently to micro-aggressions compared to those less prone to emotional influence, further emphasizing the interplay between individual traits and workplace dynamics in shaping emotional and attitudinal outcomes.

Existing research has predominantly focused on the impact of micro-aggressions on minority groups (Hernández & Villodas, 2020; White-Williams et al., 2023). However, a critical gap remains in understanding that micro-aggressions—defined as micro-events characterized by their daily occurrence (Williams, 2021), origination from interpersonal interactions (Sue & Sue, 2016), and often unconscious or unintentional nature (Fattoracci & King, 2023)—are not exclusive to socially marginalized groups. By solely considering micro-aggressions as a phenomenon affecting minority groups, we overlook their broader organizational implications and the potential for these behaviors to emerge in diverse workplace interactions. This narrow focus limits our understanding of how micro-aggressions shape overall work environments. Consequently, without a more inclusive perspective, organizations may fail to recognize the pervasiveness of micro-aggressions, underestimating their impact on employee well-being.

Moreover, existing studies often conflate micro-aggressions experienced by the broader workforce with workplace incivility (Cortina et al., 2017). Yet, while both micro-aggressions and incivility involve harmful interpersonal dynamics, they differ in key-ways. Workplace incivility is typically defined as overtly rude or discourteous behavior that reflects a lack of consideration for others (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). In contrast, micro-aggressions extend beyond incivility due to their inherently subtle nature, frequent lack of explicit intent, and their capacity to inflict harm regardless of the perpetrator's awareness (Sue et al., 2019a, 2019b; Williams et al., 2021). Recognizing this distinction is critical for expanding the conceptualization of micro-aggressions as a broader workplace phenomenon—one that can affect any employee, irrespective of their background or minority status. Furthermore, these gaps underscore the need for deeper exploration into the affective and behavioral implications of micro-aggressions across diverse workplace populations and not only considering minority groups. Addressing this gap is essential to advancing a more comprehensive framework that not only acknowledges the varied experiences of all employees but also informs policies and practices aimed at cultivating their well-being.

Lastly, while some studies have suggested that daily micro-aggressions negatively affect work engagement (e.g., Dardenne et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2016), others have found no significant association between these variables (Comeaux, 2012). Similarly, although work engagement is often linked to positive work experiences (Junça-Silva et al., 2024), its potential influence on the experience or perception of daily micro-aggressions remains unclear (Algner & Lorenz, 2022), with some studies finding no direct relationship (Sims et al., 2021). These conflicting findings highlight a critical research gap, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive examination of the mechanisms underlying these relationships.

To address these gaps, we argue that micro-aggressions may occur to any individual, regardless of their characteristics, background, or minority profile. Therefore, this study aimed to test (2) the mediating role of negative affect in the relationship between micro-aggressions, emotional exhaustion, and work engagement, and; (3) the moderating role of emotional contagion in these indirect relationships. By broadening the scope of inquiry, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how micro-aggressions influence workplace well-being across the general working population.

Study's contributions

This study makes substantial theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of workplace micro-aggressions. Theoretically, it addresses a critical gap in organizational research by investigating the phenomenon of workplace micro-aggressions, an underexplored yet pervasive issue in organizational contexts (Williams et al., 2021). In contrast to prior research, which has predominantly focused on the experiences of minority groups (Salari et al., 2024; Strand & Cohen, 2022), this study broadens the scope by demonstrating that micro-aggressions are not exclusively experienced by socially marginalized populations. These subtle, often unintentional behaviors can impact any employee, regardless of their demographic background. By challenging the traditional framing of micro-aggressions as

a minority-specific issue, this study introduces a more inclusive framework for understanding their organizational and individual consequences. This expanded perspective not only redefines the boundaries of micro-aggressions research but also opens new avenues for scholarly inquiry into their broader implications.

Practically, this broader conceptualization highlights the need for organizational interventions that address micro-aggressions as a widespread workplace phenomenon. Organizations can develop policies and training programs aimed at mitigating the occurrence of micro-aggressions while equipping employees with tools to manage their emotional responses effectively. This inclusive approach ensures that interventions benefit all employees, fostering a more supportive and equitable work environment.

Additionally, this study advances the understanding of employees' affective experiences by empirically examining the mediating role of negative affect in the relationship between daily micro-aggressions and key well-being outcomes, including emotional exhaustion and work engagement. By unpacking the affective mechanisms underlying micro-aggressions, the study enriches existing literature with empirical evidence on how these micro-events shape emotional states and attitudes, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of their far-reaching impact (Junça-Silva et al., 2024). From a practical perspective, identifying negative affect as a critical mediating mechanism provides actionable insights for designing targeted strategies, such as emotional regulation training programs, to address the adverse emotional consequences of micro-aggressions.

Finally, by exploring the moderating role of emotional contagion, the study underscores the interplay between personal traits and workplace dynamics. The findings reveal that individual susceptibility to emotional contagion can intensify or alleviate the negative affective and well-being outcomes associated with micro-aggressions. This insight adds a new dimension to the literature, demonstrating how personal characteristics interact with workplace behaviors to shape employee experiences (Herrando et al., 2022). On a practical level, these findings suggest that fostering emotional intelligence and awareness in the workplace can mitigate the negative effects of micro-aggressions. Organizations can implement training programs aimed at helping employees recognize and manage emotional contagion, thereby reducing the intensity of negative affect and promoting a healthier, more engaged workforce.

Overall, this study not only fills critical theoretical gaps in the understanding of workplace micro-aggressions but also provides actionable strategies for enhancing individual well-being.

Theoretical framework

Micro-aggressions at work

Pierce et al. (1978) defined micro-aggressions as "subtle, harmless, pre-conscious or unconscious degradations and depreciations," which can manifest in verbal or gestural forms. While an individual micro-aggression may appear insignificant, the cumulative impact of repeated micro-aggressions over time can theoretically lead to serious consequences, including shortened lifespan, increased morbidity, and diminished trust (Pierce et al., 1978, p. 66). These behaviors, whether conscious or unconscious, often occur so automatically in daily interactions that they may go unnoticed or unintentional (Lui & Quezada, 2019; Salari et al., 2024).

Sue and colleagues (2007a, 2007b) identified three types of micro-aggressions: micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations. Micro-assaults are overt verbal, nonverbal, or environmental acts intended to convey discriminatory or biased attitudes, such as humiliation or intentional exclusion (Sue et al., 2019a, 2019b). Micro-insults, on the other hand, refer to unintentional behaviors or verbal comments that reflect rudeness or insensitivity toward the target individual's heritage or identity, such as making hasty judgments about someone unfamiliar with a particular role (Sue & Sue, 2016; Sue et al., 2008). Micro-invalidations involve dismissing, denying, or disregarding the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of the victim, such as ignoring an individual's concerns about a colleague or workplace situation (Dalton & Villagran, 2018; Torino et al., 2018).

Micro-aggressions can cause significant emotional distress (Kim & Meister, 2023) and harm to individuals who are consistently targeted by belittling gestures or comments (Williams et al., 2021; Yang & Carroll, 2018). For instance, a person who is repeatedly the subject of jokes about their appearance—such as a bald or overweight individual—may experience considerable suffering, particularly if their emotional history and previous experiences have been painful. Consequently, the concept of micro-aggressions should be expanded beyond minority social groups to better reflect their broader impact.

The affective events theory as a framework of workplace micro-aggressions

Micro-aggressions can be conceptualized within the framework of Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), which posits that daily workplace events elicit emotional reactions that influence individuals' attitudes and psychological states. In this context, micro-aggressions are

understood as recurring micro-events that evoke affective responses, such as sadness or frustration, which subsequently shape attitudes like work engagement and contribute to more enduring states, including emotional exhaustion (Junça-Silva et al., 2021, 2023, 2024). This framing underscores the classification of micro-aggressions as micro-events, given their capacity to trigger affective reactions that ripple through employees' emotional and psychological experiences.

The relationship between micro-aggressions and work engagement

Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) conceptualized work engagement and burnout as opposite constructs, particularly with respect to three core dimensions: exhaustion versus vigor, cynicism versus dedication, and emotional involvement. Work engagement is defined as a positive, affective-motivational state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, while burnout, as outlined by Maslach and Schaufeli (1993), represents a gradual process of emotional exhaustion accompanied by cynicism and a sense of detachment from work and colleagues (De Beer et al., 2024).

Empirical research highlights the detrimental effects of micro-aggressions on work engagement. For instance, Costa et al. (2023) identified micro-aggressions as a pervasive workplace issue that significantly undermines individuals' emotional well-being. Similarly, Strand and Cohen (2022) demonstrated that daily micro-aggressions negatively impact employees' emotional and cognitive states. Sims et al., (2021) provided evidence of the significant relationship between micro-aggressions and reduced work engagement. Supporting this, Algner and Lorenz (2022) found a robust association between micro-aggressions and various dimensions of workplace well-being, including work engagement.

Based on this body of literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Daily micro-aggressions will influence work engagement.

The relationship between micro-aggressions and emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion, recognized as the core component of burnout, has been consistently identified as a consequence of micro-aggressions due to its cumulative and impairing effects (DeLapp & Williams, 2021). For example, Cancela et al. (2024) demonstrated that micro-aggressions significantly predicted employees' emotional exhaustion, a finding corroborated by Kimber et al. (2024), who also highlighted the deleterious impact of these subtle, yet pervasive, behaviors on employee well-being.

Research on related workplace aggression phenomena has yielded similar results. For instance, Taylor et al. (2017) found a significant association between workplace incivility and emotional exhaustion, emphasizing that both forms of interpersonal mistreatment provoke negative affective responses. Their findings revealed that incivility, regardless of its intensity, can lead to substantial symptoms of emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Cortina et al. (2001) reported that frequent exposure to disrespectful, insensitive, and uncivil workplace behaviors correlates with diminished job satisfaction across multiple domains, including relationships with supervisors and colleagues, compensation, benefits, and career advancement opportunities. Moreover, these studies underscore that increased exposure to workplace incivility not only diminishes job satisfaction but also significantly reduces employees' work engagement (Cortina et al., 2001, 2017). Collectively, these findings strengthen the argument that workplace micro-aggressions are closely linked to a heightened risk of emotional exhaustion.

Based on the empirical evidence presented, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Daily micro-aggressions will influence emotional exhaustion.

The relationship between micro-aggressions and negative affect

Micro-aggressions can be effectively conceptualized as micro-events due to their demonstrated capacity to elicit a wide spectrum of emotional responses (Williams et al., 2021). Williams (2021) described micro-aggressions as a recurring form of subtle aggression that consistently triggers negative affective reactions, emphasizing their persistent impact on individuals' emotional states.

Empirical evidence further reinforces the link between micro-aggressions and various negative affective experiences (e.g., Smith & Griffiths, 2022; Williams, 2021). For example, Costa et al. (2023) identified micro-aggressions as a pervasive workplace issue that significantly disrupts individuals' emotional well-being. Similarly, Strand and Cohen (2022) demonstrated that daily micro-aggressions adversely influence both emotional and cognitive functioning in employees. Adedeji et al. (2023) provided further support by showing that micro-aggressions significantly impact affective responses, such as anger, as well as other dimensions of employees' work-related well-being. Likewise, Salari et al. (2024) reported a robust association between micro-aggressions and affective reactions, highlighting their pervasive emotional consequences.

Based on this body of evidence, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H3: Daily micro-aggressions will influence daily negative affect.

The relationship between negative affect and well-being indicators

Negative affect plays a pivotal role in shaping key workplace outcomes, particularly work engagement and emotional exhaustion (Ferreira et al., 2019). As an aversive emotional state characterized by feelings such as distress, frustration, or anxiety, negative affect can deplete employees' psychological resources, hindering their ability to maintain high levels of engagement (Diener et al., 2020; Zhong et al., 2024).

Work engagement, defined as a positive and fulfilling state of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), thrives on positive emotional and motivational states. However, persistent negative affect undermines this process, reducing employees' energy and focus, and thereby diminishing their engagement (Junça-Silva, 2024).

Simultaneously, negative affect is a well-documented antecedent of emotional exhaustion, the core dimension of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). By continuously taxing emotional and cognitive resources, negative affect contributes to feelings of fatigue and detachment, further intensifying exhaustion over time.

The relationship between negative affect, work engagement, and emotional exhaustion has been extensively documented. For example, Bosman et al. (2005) demonstrated that negative affect influences both emotional exhaustion and work engagement. This finding was later corroborated by Ferreira et al., (2019). Similarly, Gillet et al. (2017), in a study with military personnel, found that negative affect impaired work engagement—an effect also observed by Zhang et al. (2024). More recently, Kwan et al. (2024) and Arhin et al. (2025) further confirmed the impact of negative affect on work engagement, while Costin et al. (2023) and Genoud and Waroux (2021) provided evidence that experiencing negative affect contributes to employees' emotional exhaustion. Therefore, extensive empirical evidence supports the claim that negative affect contributes to both work engagement and emotional exhaustion.

Thus, relying on the mentioned literature, the following hypotheses were defined:

H4: Daily negative affect will influence (a) emotional exhaustion and (b) work engagement.

The mediating role of negative affect

Building on previous arguments, we posit that micro-aggressions constitute a distinct form of micro-events due to their routine occurrence and significant affective repercussions. Research on both micro-aggressions and daily micro-events underscores the central role of affect in shaping workplace attitudes (Adedeji et al., 2023; Sue et al., 2019a, 2019b), as well as in influencing enduring emotional states such as burnout and work engagement (Bakker et al. 2023). For example, Costa et al. (2023) identified micro-aggressions as a pervasive issue with profound adverse effects on individuals' emotional well-being and workplace attitudes. Likewise, Strand and Cohen (2022) demonstrated that daily micro-aggressions significantly disrupt employees' emotional states while undermining positive workplace attitudes.

Drawing on the AET and robust empirical evidence, we therefore propose the following hypotheses:

H5: Daily micro-aggressions will influence daily (a) emotional exhaustion and (b) work engagement through daily negative affect.

The moderating role of emotional contagion

According to the AET, emotional contagion can influence how people react to what happens to them (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Therefore, it is likely that emotional contagion moderates the relationship between micro-aggressions and negative affect and also the indirect effect between micro-aggressions and work engagement and emotional exhaustion.

Emotional contagion is defined as the automatic tendency to mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with another person, leading to emotional convergence (Hatfield et al., 1993). This process operates through mechanisms such as facial mimicry, vocal tone imitation, and shared attention, which allow individuals to internalize and reflect the emotions of others (Prochazkova & Kret, 2017). As highlighted by Herrando and Constantinides (2021), emotional contagion is primarily triggered by social interactions, resulting in behavioral synchrony.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant in workplace settings, where employees frequently interact and share emotional states (Petitta & Naughton, 2015). High interpersonal connectivity among coworkers or team members increases the likelihood of emotional contagion, as close, frequent, and meaningful interactions foster emotional resonance (Barsade et al., 2018). Similarly, well-bonded teams are often more attuned to one another's emotional expressions,

further facilitating the spread of emotions (Cacioppo et al., 2007). Emotional contagion also becomes more pronounced in stressful or high-stakes environments, where heightened emotional intensity amplifies collective reactions (Chu et al., 2012; Lee & Theokary, 2021). Moreover, individuals with higher levels of empathy or emotional sensitivity are particularly susceptible to mirroring and internalizing the emotions of others (Cheshin et al., 2011). Given these dynamics, emotional contagion is posited to play a significant role in shaping how workers respond to micro-aggressions, influencing individual affective reactions.

Previous research has highlighted the significant role of emotional contagion in shaping individual reactions to events (e.g., Herrando et al., 2022; Rueff et al., 2015). For instance, workers' responses to emotions expressed by others—such as anger, frustration, sadness, love, and happiness—can elicit a range of physiological, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes (Chebat, 2002). In the context of interpersonal interactions, individuals are prone to absorbing the emotional states of those around them. According to the theory of emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993), people automatically and involuntarily attune to the emotions of others. Empirical studies have demonstrated that workers can effectively mimic or adopt the emotional expressions of their colleagues (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Furthermore, as Spector and Fox (2005) assert, positive emotions typically elicit voluntary behaviors, fostering cooperation and engagement, whereas negative emotions can intensify negative affect, potentially amplifying the impact of micro-aggressions on attitudes and behaviors. This, in turn, may trigger avoidance behaviors, such as withdrawing from the situation (Petitta & Naughton, 2015). Similarly, individuals with lower levels of empathy are less likely to engage with organizational goals or contribute to organizational growth, suggesting a negative relationship between empathy and work engagement (De Waal, 2008).

Second, the AET (Ashkanasy et al., 2002) provides a framework for understanding the moderating role of emotional contagion in affective processes. According to the AET, individuals' affective reactions to workplace micro-events are shaped by emotional responses, inferential processes, and emotional contagion (Koning & Van Kleef, 2015). Emotional contagion, defined as the automatic transmission of emotional states between individuals, has been shown to either mitigate or intensify the effects of affective experiences on outcomes such as work engagement and related attitudes (Belschak & Hartog, 2009; Zoghbi Manrique Lara & Sharifiatashgah, 2020).

Building on the AET, this study hypothesizes that higher levels of emotional contagion will exacerbate the emotional impact of micro-aggressions. Specifically, emotional contagion is expected to amplify the indirect effects of micro-aggressions on work engagement and emotional exhaustion through negative affect. When individuals experience micro-aggressions, heightened emotional contagion may intensify the negative affective responses triggered by these events. This, in turn, could lead to increased emotional exhaustion and diminished work engagement, underscoring the amplifying role of emotional contagion in the affective dynamics of workplace interactions. Thus, the following was hypothesized:

H6: Emotional contagion will moderate the relationship between daily micro-aggressions and negative affect.

H7: Emotional contagion will moderate the indirect relationship between daily micro-aggressions and (a) emotional exhaustion and (b) work engagement through negative affect, such that the relationship will be stronger for those more prone to emotional contagion (versus less prone).

Method

Procedure and participants

This study utilized a daily methodology, incorporating a general survey and a diary survey completed over five consecutive working days. Data collection was conducted between October 2022 and February 2023.

The participants were recruited through the researcher's professional network, employing a convenience sampling approach. Invitations to participate were sent via email to a total of 82 Portuguese workers. To foster participation, the communication emphasized strict assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, highlighting that the data collected would be used solely for research purposes. Of the 82 individuals contacted, 60 participants completed the general questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 73.1%. Furthermore, 40 participants engaged in the daily diary component of the study, completing all five daily questionnaires over the designated period. This phase achieved a response rate of 48.8%, producing a total of 200 measurement occasions. This sample size was considered adequate because, as suggested by Maas and Hox (2005), when the goal is to perform cross-level interactions (i.e., an inter-individual moderator in an intra-individual relationship), level 2 variables (i.e., emotional contagion at the inter-individual level) should have at least 30 respondents in a multilevel structure to result in a precise estimation of standard errors. Therefore, the sample of 40 participants had satisfactory power and precision, as it exceeded the minimum sampling requirements (Maas & Hox, 2005).

The sample consisted of 72.7% females, with 40.9% holding a bachelor's degree and 30.3% holding a master's degree. The mean age of participants was 43.03 years (SD = 12.57), with an average organizational tenure of 21.26 years (SD = 13.50). Participants reported working an average of 40.68 h per week (SD = 7.30) and represented various occupational sectors, including department heads (17%), administrative technicians (9%), and operational technicians (8%).

Measures

All measures employed in this study were translated into Portuguese using Brislin's (1970) back-translation method to ensure both linguistic and conceptual equivalence. This process involved a bilingual expert translating the original scales into Portuguese, followed by an independent bilingual professional performing a back-translation into the original language. The absence of discrepancies between the original and back-translated versions confirmed that the translated measures faithfully captured the intended meaning and were culturally adapted for the Portuguese-speaking context.

General survey

A general survey was used to collect sociodemographic data and the inter-individual variable: emotional contagion. This was administered once. Emotional contagion was measured using 15 items (Doherty, 1997). Participants were asked to evaluate the items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). An example item was: "When I look into the eyes of the person I like, my mind does not fill with romantic thoughts" (α = 0.93).

Daily survey

Negative affect Negative affect was assessed using four items from the Multi-Affect Indicator (Warr et al., 2014). Participants rated their responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never/almost never) to 5 (always/almost always). An example item is "anxious," and the scale demonstrated high internal consistency (α = 0.89).

Workplace micro-aggressions Seven items from the scale developed by Hupp (2017) were used to measure the construct. Participants responded to the items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item is, "Today, a customer was hostile or rude to me." The scale demonstrated good internal consistency (α = 0.82).

Emotional exhaustion Emotional exhaustion was measured using three items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1996). Participants rated their responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item is, "Today, by the end of the day, I felt exhausted." The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = 0.93).

Work engagement Work engagement was assessed using the 3-item ultra-short work engagement scale (Schaufeli et al., 2017). Participants rated their responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). An example item is, "Today, I felt enthusiastic about my work." (α = 0.87).

Control variables The day of data collection (Monday to Friday) was included as a Level 1 control variable. This approach was adopted because, in daily diary studies, the day of the week has been identified as a potential factor influencing criterion variables (Junça-Silva & Caetano, 2023).

Data analysis

To perform factorial analyses, we used the JASP software, and to test the multilevel moderated mediation model, we utilized SPSS along with the MlMed macro (Rockwood, 2019). Given the multilevel structure of the data, we initially estimated the intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) for daily micro-aggressions, negative affect, emotional exhaustion, and work engagement (Hox, 2010). The ICC values were 0.37, 0.61, 0.40, and 0.54, respectively, indicating that a substantial proportion of the variation in these variables was attributable to intrapersonal fluctuations (that is, presented variations at the within-person level). These findings suggest that daily-level variation plays a significant role in the outcomes being studied. As a result, we adopted a multilevel data analysis approach (Marcoulides & Schumacker, 2001) to account for the nested nature of the data and to appropriately model the relationship between the variables at both the within and between-person levels.

Common method bias and multicollinearity issues

Although we have followed some recommended procedures to reduce the potential common method bias (CMB), by using closed-ended questions mixed in the survey (e.g., "I like my work"), and resorting to previously validated surveys to assess the variables under study, it cannot be

Table 1 Descriptive statistics including zero-order correlations and person-centered

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Micro-aggressions	3.08	1.32	(0.83)	0.69**	0.69**	−0.39**	-	0.04
2.Negative affect	3.10	1.14	0.70**	(0.91)	0.70**	−0.52**	-	0.05
3.Emotional exhaustion	3.21	1.41	0.61**	0.64**	(0.92)	−0.59**	-	0.01
4.Work engagement	2.72	1.09	−0.38**	−0.33**	−0.58**	(0.88)	-	−0.05
5.Emotional contagion	3.92	0.89	0.22**	0.29**	0.13*	0.13*	(0.95)	-
6. Time	-	-	0.06	0.02	−0.01	−0.12	−0.14	-

Zero-order correlations are presented below the diagonal (N = 40). Person-centered correlations are presented above the diagonal (N = 200)

*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$

Table 2 Fit statistics for models based on confirmatory factor analyses representing a data structure aggregated across individuals. ($N_{individuals} = 40$; $N_{observations} = 200$)

Model		*χ2 (df)*	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	Comparison	Δχ2	*Δdf*	*P*
M1	*5 factors*	*1,318.364 (485)*	*0.08*	*0.99*	*0.99*	*0.07*	-	-	-	-
M2	*4 factors*	1,929.898 (489)	0.10	0.99	0.99	0.11	M2-M1	611.534	4	< 0.001
M3	3 factors	2,415.798 (492)	0.12	0.99	0.99	0.12	M3-M1	1,097.434	7	< 0.001
M4	1 factor	6,637.598 (495)	0.21	0.97	0.97	0.27	M4-M1	5,319.234	10	< 0.001

RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation; CFI: comparative fit index; TLI: Tucker–Lewis's index; SRMR: standardized root mean square residual

Model with the best fit in italics

M1: Micro-aggressions, negative affect, emotional exhaustion, work engagement, and emotional contagion were placed into five latent factors

M2: Negative affect and emotional exhaustion were placed into a single factor, while micro-aggressions, work engagement, and emotional contagion were placed into three separate latent factors

M3: Micro-aggressions, negative affect, and emotional exhaustion were placed into a single factor, while work engagement was placed into another latent factor and emotional contagion into another

M4: All variables (micro-aggressions, negative affect, emotional exhaustion, work engagement, and emotional contagion) were placed into a single latent factor

completely avoided (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In order, to understand its presence in the study, it is relevant to follow some recommendations (Podsakoff et al., 2024). First, we performed Harman's single-factor test to check for CMB. The results indicated that the first factor accounted for only 19.53% of the total explained variance. Therefore, consistent with Damanik and Widodo (2024) and Widodo et al. (2024), CMB was not a significant concern.

Second, as Kock (2015) suggested, a full collinearity evaluation test to check for the potential common method bias was performed. The results demonstrated that all the variance inflation factor values ranged from 1.11 to 2.28; because the values were less than the cut-off point of 3.33, multicollinearity concern was not a severe issue in this study.

At last, four models of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) were tested using JASP (Table 1). To assess the adequacy of the model diverse fit indices were analyzed (Hair et al., 2014), namely CFI, TLI, SRMR, and RMSEA. The results indicated that the five-factor model provided the best fit for the data, with the following fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.71$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.08, and SRMR = 0.07. These indices suggest that the five-factor model adequately captured the relationships among the variables, demonstrating strong model fit and supporting its validity for the current study.

Results

Descriptives

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics indicated that micro-aggressions, negative affect, and emotional exhaustion have relatively high mean values (M = 3.08, 3.10, and 3.21, respectively), suggesting that participants frequently experienced these adverse states. In contrast, work engagement showed a lower mean (M = 2.72), which may reflect challenges in maintaining high engagement in environments characterized by frequent micro-aggressions and negative affect.

The correlation analysis demonstrated significant relationships between key variables. Specifically, micro-aggressions showed strong positive correlations with both negative affect ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.01$) and emotional exhaustion ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that frequent exposure to micro-aggressions was associated with heightened negative affect and emotional exhaustion. Conversely, micro-aggressions negatively correlated with work engagement ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$).

Similarly, negative affect correlated positively with emotional exhaustion (r = 0.64, $p < 0.01$) and negatively with work engagement (r = −0.33, $p < 0.01$), reinforcing the notion that experiencing negative emotions can deplete psychological resources and reduce motivation.

Interestingly, emotional contagion correlated positively with negative affect (r = 0.29, $p < 0.01$) and micro-aggressions (r = 0.22, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that individuals with a higher tendency to absorb others' emotions may be more affected by workplace micro-aggressions. However, its correlations with work engagement (r = 0.13, $p < 0.05$) and emotional exhaustion (r = 0.13, $p < 0.05$) were weaker, which may indicate that emotional contagion played a more nuanced role in these dynamics.

Finally, time did not show significant correlations with key variables, suggesting that temporal factors were not a major influence in these relationships.

Hypotheses testing

Following the recommendations of Griep et al. (2022), we evaluated the fit of various models to determine which provided the best representation of the data. The results indicated that the multilevel moderated mediation model exhibited the lowest BIC values, signifying the best fit (emotional exhaustion: BIC = 1108.202, sample-size-adjusted BIC = 1112.202; work engagement: BIC = 1091.195, sample-size-adjusted BIC = 1095.195). Figure 1 illustrates the coefficients associated with the tested relationships within the model, providing a visual representation of the key findings.

As hypothesized, daily micro-aggressions significantly impacted both work engagement ($\gamma = -0.39$, $p < 0.05$) and emotional exhaustion ($\gamma = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$), thereby providing support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Furthermore, the results also corroborated Hypothesis 3, with a significant positive relationship observed between daily micro-aggressions and daily negative affect ($\gamma = 0.89$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, daily negative affect was found to be significantly associated with work engagement ($\gamma = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and emotional exhaustion ($\gamma = -0.45$, $p < 0.001$), thus providing support for Hypotheses 4a and 4b.

Likewise, the findings revealed a statistically significant indirect effect of daily micro-aggressions on daily emotional exhaustion through negative affect ($\gamma = 0.32$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.64]). Notably, the direct effect of daily micro-aggressions on daily emotional exhaustion remained significant after accounting for negative affect ($\gamma = 0.27$, $p < 0.05$), indicating partial mediation. Therefore, Hypothesis 5a was supported.

The analysis also identified a statistically significant indirect effect of daily micro-aggressions on daily work engagement via negative affect ($\gamma = -0.40$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI [−0.79, −0.07]). Unlike the previous model, the direct relationship between daily micro-aggressions and work engagement became non-significant after including negative affect ($\gamma = 0.02$, $p > 0.05$), indicating full mediation. Hence, Hypothesis 5b was supported.

Additionally, the findings supported Hypothesis 6, demonstrating a significant interaction effect between daily micro-aggressions and emotional contagion ($\gamma = -0.28$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI [−0.51, −0.05]). As illustrated in Fig. 2, the relationship between daily micro-aggressions and negative affect was stronger for individuals with a higher propensity for emotional contagion ($\gamma = 0.89$, $t = 19.901$, $p < 0.001$) compared to those with lower susceptibility ($\gamma = 0.61$, $t = 5.569$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, individuals less prone to emotional contagion exhibited fewer negative affect to daily micro-aggressions.

The results provided empirical support for Hypothesis 7a, demonstrating a significant moderated mediation effect of daily micro-aggressions on emotional exhaustion through negative affect ($\gamma = -0.24$, 95% CI [−0.50, −0.04]). Similarly, the findings supported Hypothesis 7b, revealing a significant moderated mediation effect of daily micro-aggressions on work engagement through negative affect ($\gamma = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.37]). Thus, both Hypotheses 7a and 7b were supported.

Discussion

The frequency of workplace micro-aggressions represents one of the most subtly erosive forms of degradation within contemporary organizations (Williams et al., 2021). Despite their pervasive nature, these events are often underestimated

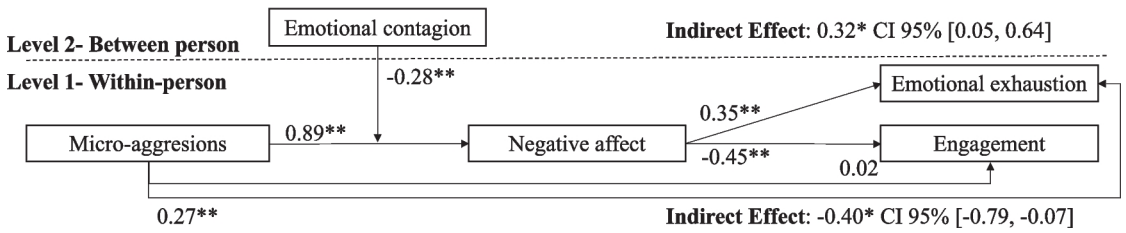

Fig. 1 Results of the multilevel moderated mediation model

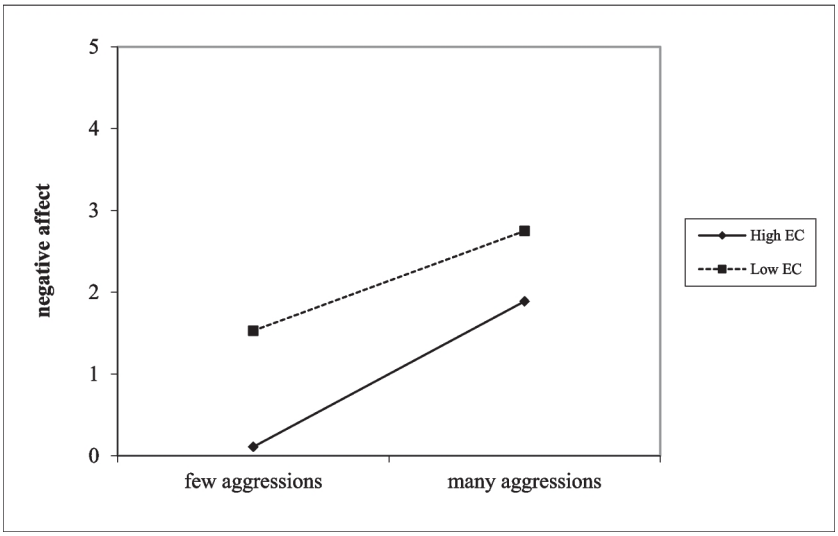

Fig. 2 The interaction between micro-aggressions and emotional contagion

by organizations (Nadal, 2018; Sue, 2017; Sue et al., 2019a, 2019b).

Current research on workplace micro-aggressions primarily focuses on their affective and behavioral effects within minority groups (Adedeji et al., 2023; Sue & Sue, 2016), such as those defined by ethnicity, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity (e.g., Costa et al., 2023; Priya & Sreejith, 2024; Strand & Cohen, 2022; Yang & Carroll, 2018). However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how micro-aggressions impact individuals outside these traditionally studied populations. This study seeks to address this gap by broadening the concept of micro-aggressions to include their potential effects on all individuals, regardless of demographic background. This shift in perspective provides new insights into the pervasive nature of micro-aggressions and challenges the conventional view that these behaviors primarily target marginalized individuals.

While micro-aggressions targeting non-minority groups are often categorized under the umbrella of incivility (Salari et al., 2024; Smith & Griffiths, 2022), Andersson and Pearson's (1999) definition of incivility as rude or discourteous behavior with a lack of consideration for others highlights a key distinction. Micro-aggressions extend beyond incivility due to their inherently subtle nature, their frequent lack of explicit intent, and their potential to inflict harm irrespective of the perpetrator's conscious awareness (Sue et al., 2019a, 2019b; Williams et al., 2021). By conceptualizing daily micro-aggressions as a broader phenomenon applicable to any individual in the workplace, this study makes a theoretical contribution to the existing literature.

This research further investigates the affective mechanisms underlying micro-aggressions, testing the mediating role of negative affect in their relationship with employee well-being. It also examines the moderating influence of emotional contagion, exploring how susceptibility to emotional contagion amplifies or mitigates the effects of micro-aggressions on well-being. This expanded framework offers a more inclusive understanding of workplace micro-aggressions, emphasizing their relevance and consequences for all employees in diverse organizational contexts.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature from multiple perspectives, offering theoretical advancements. First, it addresses a research niche that remains underexplored—the area of workplace micro-aggressions (Williams et al., 2021)—thereby filling a critical gap in understanding the subtle, yet pervasive, dynamics that undermine organizational and individual well-being (Fattoracci & King, 2023; Kim & Meister, 2023). Unlike prior studies, which predominantly focus on micro-aggressions affecting minority groups (Salari et al., 2024; Strand & Cohen, 2022), this research expands the scope of investigation to encompass all employees, irrespective of demographic characteristics, providing a more inclusive framework for understanding these phenomena. This broader perspective challenges the conventional boundaries of micro-aggressions research and opens new avenues for inquiry.

Second, this study makes a significant contribution to the growing body of literature on employees' affective states by empirically testing their mediating role in the relationship between micro-aggressions and well-being outcomes (Adedeji et al., 2023). Specifically, it sheds light on how negative affect serves as a critical mechanism through which daily experiences of micro-aggressions influence two key well-being indicators: emotional exhaustion and work engagement. By integrating insights from the AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), the study provides a nuanced

understanding of how affective micro-events shape employees' emotional and motivational states in the workplace (Junça-Silva et al., 2024).

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that daily micro-aggressions can target any individual, regardless of demographic characteristics. Importantly, the data reveal a clear pattern: the greater the frequency of daily micro-aggressions, the higher the intensity of negative affect experienced. This suggests that these subtle, yet pervasive, behaviors have profound emotional consequences for employees (Costa et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2021), irrespective of their background.

Moreover, the results highlight the significant impact of micro-aggressions on workers' levels of work engagement and emotional exhaustion. Micro-aggressions appear to influence two distinct states: one characterized by high commitment and immersion in one's role—an essential component of work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Bakker et al., 2023)—and the other marked by extreme fatigue, emotional detachment, and reduced psychological resources, which are symptomatic of emotional exhaustion (De Beer et al., 2022, 2024). These adverse outcomes may manifest in behaviors such as diminished voice, increased exit intentions, or medical leaves, underscoring the broader organizational implications of micro-aggressions (Fattoracci & King, 2023; Kim & Meister, 2023; Priya & Sreejith, 2024).

The introduction of negative affect as a mediator in these relationships adds a critical layer to the understanding of micro-aggressions as daily affective micro-events that shape employees' emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral reactions (Junça-Silva et al., 2020, 2024). The results demonstrate that negative affect significantly mediates the relationship between daily micro-aggressions and emotional exhaustion, as well as between micro-aggressions and work engagement. This reinforces the role of affective experiences as pivotal mechanisms through which micro-aggressions exert their influence (Junça-Silva & Caetano, 2024).

While this study establishes negative affect as a key mediator, previous research suggests that the impact of micro-aggressions can extend beyond affective states (Adedeji et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2021). For instance, Williams et al. (2018) found that micro-aggressions are associated not only with negative affect and emotional exhaustion but also with anxiety and trauma-related symptoms linked to experiences of discrimination. Their findings further revealed that the frequency of racial micro-aggressions could predict psychopathological outcomes beyond the scope of negative affect (Kim & Meister, 2023). This underscores the multifaceted and far-reaching consequences of micro-aggressions (Salari et al., 2024), highlighting the need for a more comprehensive exploration of their impact on individual and organizational well-being (Sue et al., 2019a, 2019b).

Moreover, this research advances the literature by examining the moderating role of emotional contagion, a relatively underexplored construct in this context. The findings underscore how individuals' susceptibility to emotional contagion can amplify or dampen the impact of micro-aggressions on their affective experiences and subsequent well-being. This novel insight highlights the interplay between personal traits and workplace dynamics (Herrando et al., 2022), offering a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that exacerbate or mitigate the adverse effects of micro-aggressions.

The findings indicate that emotional contagion significantly moderates the indirect relationship between daily micro-aggressions and both emotional exhaustion and work engagement via negative affect. Specifically, the indirect relationship is stronger for individuals less prone to emotional contagion. This suggests that individuals with lower susceptibility to emotional contagion are more sensitive to situational influences (Rueff Lopes et al., 2017), such as daily micro-aggressions, resulting in a more pronounced impact on their well-being indicators—emotional exhaustion and work engagement—through negative affect. Conversely, those more prone to emotional contagion exhibit greater emotional stability in response to situational influences, thereby attenuating the strength of the indirect relationship (Chu et al., 2012).

These findings are consistent with previous research (e.g., Barsade, 2002; Barsade et al., 2018), which highlights the significant role of emotional contagion in shaping workplace dynamics, behaviors, and attitudes. Barsade et al. (2018) argued that individuals do not exist in "emotional islands," as emotions naturally spread among group members, influencing collective attitudes and behaviors as well as group dynamics. While Barsade's work primarily focused on the intra-group dispersion of emotions, this study provides new insights by demonstrating that emotional contagion not only shapes the disposition and dynamics of group members but also moderates the impact of daily micro-events, such as micro-aggressions, on individual well-being.

By extending the understanding of emotional contagion to include its moderating role in the indirect effects of micro-aggressions, this study contributes to a more nuanced perspective on how affective processes operate within the workplace. It underscores the importance of considering individual differences in emotional susceptibility when examining the interplay between daily workplace experiences and well-being outcomes. This evidence emphasizes that the impact of micro-aggressions is not uniform across all employees but is moderated by individual affective

tendencies, which can either amplify or mitigate the adverse consequences of these micro-events.

Overall, this study advances our understanding of the psychological processes linking micro-aggressions to key workplace outcomes. Specifically, micro-aggressions function as affective micro-events that elicit negative affect in employees, thereby intensifying emotional exhaustion and diminishing work engagement. Notably, this relationship is more pronounced among individuals with lower susceptibility to emotional contagion, highlighting the role of individual differences in moderating the impact of workplace micro-aggressions on well-being outcomes.

Practical implications

This study advances the theoretical understanding of workplace micro-aggressions and their affective and behavioral consequences, while offering actionable insights for the development of more targeted interventions aimed at mitigating the detrimental effects of micro-aggressions on employee well-being.

A key practical contribution of this research is raising awareness among organizations about the significant impact that even subtle aggressive behaviors, such as micro-aggressions, can have on team performance and overall productivity. Recognizing the cumulative effects of these behaviors is essential for organizations to intervene at the appropriate time and place, preventing or addressing such actions before they escalate.

The primary challenge with micro-aggressions lies in their tendency to go unnoticed by those who do not directly witness the incidents, distinguishing them from larger organizational incivilities or macro-aggressions, which are often rooted in toxic leadership and organizational cultures. Once there is heightened awareness of the frequency and impact of micro-aggressions, Sue et al., (2019a, 2019b) advocate for counteracting these behaviors through micro-interventions—small, everyday gestures or intentional actions that signal to targets of micro-aggressions (a) the validation of their lived experiences, (b) recognition of their inherent value, (c) affirmation of their identity (whether racial or group-based), (d) support and encouragement, and (e) reassurance that they are not alone. These interventions empower victims, allies, and observers alike, providing them with a sense of control and effectiveness in addressing micro-aggressions.

Additionally, while many studies on emotional contagion in organizations focus on aspects such as leadership, satisfaction, performance, and decision-making, often based on personality traits, they overlook the subtle influence of discrete emotions, affect (positive versus negative), and unconscious processes within teams. This study underscores the importance of emotional contagion in shaping employees' emotional states and how these emotions can exert far-reaching effects, not only within the workplace but extending beyond it, thus highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of emotional dynamics in organizational settings.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations were identified over the course of this study. Although the sample size, while modest, was considered satisfactory for cross-level interaction research, it is important to recognize the potential for common method bias due to the reliance on self-report measures. However, factor analyses, combined with the high reliability of the instruments used, suggest that common method bias did not significantly influence the findings (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Although this study aimed to analyze cross-level moderation effects, future research should consider examining daily fluctuations in emotional contagion, as prior studies indicate that emotional contagion is a dynamic state that can vary on a day-to-day basis (Kim et al., 2023). Incorporating daily-level assessments would provide a more nuanced understanding of how emotional contagion operates over time.

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that future research explore additional variables—such as personality traits, job satisfaction, and leadership—that may contribute to understanding the relationship between daily micro-aggressions and emotional exhaustion, as well as the factors that influence these dynamics. While research on micro-aggressions should continue to focus on the harm caused by such behavior and strategies for its prevention, adopting more comprehensive approaches is essential. Specifically, future studies should account for the experiences of victims, recognizing that all individuals may be susceptible to becoming targets of micro-aggressions.

Conclusions

The present study investigated the daily occurrence of workplace micro-aggressions, broadening the conceptualization of the term to encompass all individuals within an employment context, regardless of their skin color, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity. While previous research has predominantly focused on the impact of micro-aggressions on minority groups, our findings highlight that micro-aggressions are a widespread organizational phenomenon that can affect employees across various demographic groups. This inclusive approach represents a pioneering step in extending the scope of micro-aggressions

beyond traditionally marginalized groups, emphasizing their potential impact on any employee. However, the focus of this research extends beyond identifying recipients of micro-aggressions to understanding their consequences, particularly the affective and attitudinal effects they elicit.

The findings reveal that micro-aggressions not only contribute to negative emotional states but also detract from work engagement and increase emotional exhaustion, even in the context of daily interactions. Furthermore, the results underscore the moderating role of emotional contagion, showing that individuals more prone to emotional contagion experience amplified negative affective responses to daily micro-aggressions, which, in turn, intensify emotional exhaustion and diminish work engagement. By investigating emotional contagion as a moderating factor, we have highlighted individual differences that can influence how employees experience and respond to micro-aggressions. In conclusion, this study offers a significant contribution to the understanding of workplace micro-aggressions by demonstrating that one does not need to belong to a minority group to experience these behaviors.

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Data availability The data is available only upon reasonable request to the authors.

Declarations

Ethical standard All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Further, the ethics committee of the first authors university approved the study prior to its conduction.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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