



## Analyzing Microaggression Through a TV Series: How I Met Your Mother

*Bir Televizyon Dizisi Aracılığıyla Mikro Saldırganlığın Analizi: How I Met Your Mother*

### ABSTRACT

This article presents a comprehensive analysis of microaggressions within the context of the popular American television series "How I Met Your Mother" (HIMYM), exploring how this comedic narrative embeds and reflects subtle forms of discrimination that are prevalent in society. The study employs a dual-method approach, integrating a review of existing literature on microaggressions with a content analysis of the entire series. By examining dialogues, character interactions, and plot developments, the research identifies and categorizes instances of microaggressions based on their nature and implications. The findings suggest that HIMYM, while celebrated for its humor and storytelling, also serves as a cultural artifact that mirrors and perpetuates microaggressions related to race, gender, and ethnicity. The analysis suggests that HIMYM employs micro-invalidations and micro-insults that sometimes extend beyond the scope of humor, entering the realm of micro-assaults, which are often portrayed and framed through dark humor. These instances of microaggressions reflect the societal norms of the era in which they were produced. It's imperative to contextualize these microaggressions within the time frame of the series' original broadcast, acknowledging the evolving understanding of such interactions in society.

**Keywords:** Microaggression, Humor, Discrimination, Media and Discrimination, HIMYM.

### ÖZET

Bu makale, mikrosaldırıcılık kavramını kapsamlı olarak analiz edebilmek ve örneklendirebilmek için popüler Amerikan televizyon dizisi "How I Met Your Mother" (HIMYM) dizisini incelemektedir. Bu komedi dizisinin toplumda yaygın olan; az fark edilen ayrımcılık biçimlerini nasıl barındırdığı ve yansıttığı araştırılmaktadır. Çalışmada, mikrosaldırıcılıkla ilgili mevcut literatür incelemesini ve tüm serinin içerik analizini birleştiren iki katmanlı bir araştırma yaklaşımı kullanılmaktadır. Diyalogları, karakter etkileşimlerini ve olay örgüsünü inceleyerek araştırmada, mikro saldırıcılık örnekleri doğalarına ve sonuçlarına göre tanımlanıp ve sınıflandırılmıştır. Bulgular, HIMYM dizisinin bir taraftan mizahı ve hikaye anlatımıyla beğenilen bir dizi olsa da, diğer taraftan ırk, cinsiyet ve etnik kökenle ilgili mikro saldırıcılıkları yansıtan ve sürdüren bir eser olarak hizmet ettiğini göstermektedir. Dizisi analiz edildiğinde, bazen mizah kapsamının ötesine geçen mikro geçersiz kılma ve mikro hakaretler kullandığı görülmüş; mikro saldırı alt alanındaki örneklerin ise genellikle kara mizah ile çerçevelendirildiği fark edilmiştir. Bu mikro saldırıcılık örnekleri, üretildikleri dönemin sosyal normlarını yansıtmaktadır. Toplumdaki bu tür etkileşimlerin gelişen anlayışını kabul ederek, bu mikro saldırıcılıkları dizinin orijinal yayın zaman çerçevesi içinde değerlendirmek gerekmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mikrosaldırıcılık, Mizah, Ayrımcılık, Medya ve Ayrımcılık, HIMYM.

### INTRODUCTION

In this article, the renowned American sitcom "How I Met Your Mother," commonly known as HIMYM, is intended to be analyzed through the perspective of microaggression theory. The title of the series will be referred to as HIMYM using the abbreviation mentioned in the rest of the article.

HIMYM is a nine-season television series that narrates the story of Ted Mosby and his companions as he embarks on a quest to find his future spouse, who, in reality, is the mother of his children in the future. The character has started narrating the story from the very beginning to his adult children. Throughout the series, the children listen to their father's past relationships. As a result, the viewers of this sitcom find themselves empathizing with the children as they wonder about who the mother is during all of these relationships (Bays & Thomas, 2005-2014).

HIMYM spanned from 2005 to 2014. Over the course of more than a decade, notable societal changes and shifts emerged. Particularly in the 2010s, with the widespread adoption of social media, heightened awareness surrounding various forms of discrimination (racial, ethnic, sexist, religious, etc.) became evident. People became

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increasingly sensitive to these issues. This awareness has notably influenced the content of contemporary television shows, with streaming platforms like Netflix leading the way. In these newer shows, it has almost become a trend to feature individuals from various minority groups in the United States, such as members of the LGBTQ+ community, Afro-Americans, and Muslims, in diverse roles.

However, when we reflect upon the not-so-distant past, particularly the period between 2005 and 2014, it is evident that the landscape was notably different in HIMYM. In that context, if this was a time of comparatively lower societal awareness, could it be possible that microaggressive elements were present in HIMYM? This paper seeks to analyze specific aspects of the show, including characters and dialogues, to explore whether they can be considered as instances of microaggression or merely elements of humor.

To initiate this analysis, key definitions related to intergroup conflicts that may result in microaggression will be established. Subsequently, a more comprehensive definition of microaggression will be provided by delineating its various subtypes. Following this, specific examples from the show will be illustrated and discussed in order to shed light on the presence and nature of potential microaggressive elements within HIMYM.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this article is to examine the portrayal of microaggressions in the popular American television series "How I Met Your Mother" to understand how such subtle forms of discrimination are embedded and normalized in media content. By analyzing the interactions, dialogues, and character developments within the series, this study aims to identify instances of microaggressions, categorize them according to established academic frameworks, and discuss their potential impacts on audiences. Furthermore, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on media representation and its influence on social perceptions of race, ethnicity, and gender.

## METHOD

The methodology of this article is twofold. Firstly, it involves a comprehensive literature review to outline the theoretical framework of microaggressions, drawing from seminal works in the field such as Sue et al. (2007) and Pierce (1970). This establishes a foundational understanding of microaggressions, including their subtypes and effects on individuals and society. Secondly, the method includes a detailed content analysis of "How I Met Your Mother," where episodes across all seasons are watched and scrutinized for dialogue, scenarios, and character interactions that potentially exhibit microaggressive behavior. Each identified instance is then critically examined within the context of the literature review to determine whether it constitutes a microaggression and, if so, how it is presented—whether as humor or hostility—and its possible implications for the viewer's perception of social dynamics. This dual approach ensures a robust analysis that connects theoretical concepts with practical manifestations in popular media.

## LITERATURE VIEW

### Microaggression or Humor?

#### Discrimination and Microaggression

People usually tend to be belonged to a group in society. When we belong to a certain group with shared characteristics, we call it ingroup. If there is a group that we don't feel membership, then we call it outgroup (Franzoi, 2009).

Outgroup discrimination refers to prejudicial attitudes and behaviors directed towards individuals who are not considered part of one's own group, the ingroup. This phenomenon is underpinned by social identity theory, which posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into various social groups, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Franzoi (2009) elaborates on this concept by highlighting how personal and social identities are crucial in shaping perceptions and interactions between different groups. He points out that such discrimination often stems from stereotypes, leading to generalized negative attitudes and behaviors towards members of outgroups.

Research has shown that outgroup discrimination can manifest in various forms, ranging from subtle microaggressions to overt acts of hostility (Sue et al., 2007). These behaviors are not only harmful to the individuals who experience them but also reinforce societal divisions and perpetuate inequalities. Studies in social psychology have explored mechanisms behind outgroup discrimination, identifying factors like intergroup anxiety, competition, and a lack of intergroup contact as key contributors (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Moreover, interventions aimed at reducing outgroup discrimination emphasize the importance of increasing empathy, promoting intergroup dialogue, and fostering environments where positive intergroup interactions can

occur (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). By understanding the roots of outgroup discrimination and implementing strategies to counteract it, societies can move towards greater inclusivity and equity.

In our social interaction, we tend to group people and try to find the similarities in terms of their appearance, characters, motives. That categorical look, which we call stereotype, is actually for being fast in our cognitive process. However, when we take ingroup and outgroups into account, stereotypes could function as discriminative prejudice.

Though racial discrimination is usually obvious, in 1970, the term “micro-aggression” was started to use to define minor racial discrimination which are not very obvious, but still damaging (Pierce, 1970).

The article by Pierce, C., Carew, J. V., Pierce-Gonzalez, D., & Wills, D. (1978) titled "An experiment in racism: TV commercials" serves as a pivotal continuation of their groundbreaking work first introduced in the 1970s on the concept of microaggressions. While their initial exploration laid the foundation for understanding subtle forms of racism embedded within everyday interactions, this subsequent study delves deeper into the specific realm of television advertising to examine how such media representations contribute to the perpetuation of racial stereotypes and prejudices.

In this follow-up research, Pierce and colleagues employ a methodological approach that combines content analysis with experimental designs to assess the impact of racially charged messages in TV commercials on viewers' perceptions and attitudes. The study meticulously analyzes a variety of commercials aired during the late 1970s, identifying both overt and covert racist elements that, despite their subtlety, have profound effects on reinforcing societal racial biases.

The significance of this article lies not only in its methodological rigor but also in its contribution to expanding the discourse on microaggressions from interpersonal interactions to include media and cultural representations. By focusing on TV commercials, a ubiquitous component of daily life, the authors highlight the pervasive nature of microaggressions and their role in normalizing discriminatory views across broader audiences.

Furthermore, this work emphasizes the critical need for media literacy and the development of frameworks that can identify and challenge the subtle forms of racism present in media content. It calls for a reevaluation of advertising practices and suggests that media producers bear a responsibility to mitigate racial stereotypes rather than perpetuate them.

Overall, Pierce and colleagues' article is a seminal piece that not only advances the study of microaggressions but also underscores the importance of scrutinizing media representations as a key factor in the social construction of race and racism. It serves as a foundational text for researchers and practitioners alike who are interested in the intersections of media, race, and society.

Later on, in the second half of 2000s, microaggression was more popular topic in the world. In 2015, microaggression was the most used word according to the Global English Monitor (Lilienfeld, 2017).

If there was something almost unconscious, we might even not understand if there was a discriminative context, then can we say that it's something problematic? Once microaggression started to be searched deep, its relationship between psychological wellbeing was also analyzed. A study conducted in 2013, Helm showed that, in African American college students, there is positive correlation between depression and racial ethnic microaggression.

These studies were not only in academical literature, but also in social life. Because 2010s was very important in any social awareness as it was the decade of rising social media usage. A lot of unconscious context became conscious. Awareness and sensitiveness increased in society in a lot of context.

### **Forms of Micro-aggression**

Sue et al. (2007) differentiated three subtypes of micro-aggression: These are, micro-assaults, micro-insults and micro-invalidation.

Micro-assaults are seemingly discriminate certain groups in a negative and humiliated way. Though in definition we say that it could be unconscious, in this form of micro-aggression, we can consciously see the putting down. Using negative stereotypes, bad words, derogatory jokes, maybe some drawings (exp, drawing swastika) are examples of this form of microaggression.

Micro-insults are usually not directed to people, but to a certain group. If we give some examples to this using generalized bad meaning “this is so gay” or in professional setting when a man calls a woman “sweetie, honey” these could mean micro-insults.

The last sub category of micro-aggression is, micro-invalidating. This type is more like ignoring, for example, by making color blindness. Always trying to emphasize on “race doesn’t matter” or “I don’t see any difference here” is also trying to press something. People are different, and it is better to see that rather than ignoring according to this idea.

### Examples from HIMYM

Before specific examples, I want to focus on characters first. The gang include 4 US citizen and one Canadian. From the beginning, until the end, Robin’s Canadian citizenship is always a part of humor. Here it seems like the group is open to other nationalities. However, there is no Afro-American or Asian-American friends in their life. Interestingly, when we look at all 9 seasons, if we list Ted’s relationships (not dates) the ethnicity is the same: Victoria, Robin (already mentioned in gang), Stella, Zoey and Tracey. Throughout the series, Ted’s relationships display a notable homogeneity in terms of cultural and ethnic diversity. His romantic partners are predominantly women from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds, which stands out as a significant omission in the portrayal of a character living in the multicultural metropolis of New York City. The series, through Ted’s relationships, thereby misses an opportunity to reflect the rich tapestry of diversity found in real-life social settings, raising questions about the representation of multicultural interactions and relationships in popular media.



**Figure 1:** Robin is yelling to Patrice

**Reference:** Bays & Thomas (2005-2014)

Another poignant example of the nuanced portrayal of interpersonal dynamics within "How I Met Your Mother" can be observed in the relationship between Robin Scherbatsky and Patrice. Their interaction predominantly showcases a one-sided dynamic where Robin, often depicted as assertive and occasionally abrasive, directs a disproportionate amount of animosity towards Patrice, who is characterized as overly enthusiastic and unconditionally supportive. This relationship dynamic, while intended for comedic relief, inadvertently underscores a lack of depth in exploring meaningful cross-character interactions beyond superficial conflicts.

Moreover, the relationship dynamic between Robin and Patrice, when examined through the lens of Patrice's Asian background, introduces another layer of complexity concerning microaggressions within "How I Met Your Mother." Patrice's character is one of the few representations of Asian heritage in the series, yet her interactions are often overshadowed by the one-dimensional portrayal of her personality and her relationship with Robin. This oversight not only simplifies the representation of a character from a diverse background but also inadvertently engages in microaggressive behavior by relegating Patrice's role to the butt of jokes or the recipient of unwarranted hostility.

The series' approach to Robin's treatment of Patrice, without a meaningful exploration of Patrice's cultural background or any acknowledgment of the potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding, perpetuates a subtle form of exclusion. It reflects a missed opportunity to address and challenge the microaggressions that individuals from minority backgrounds frequently encounter. By not delving deeper into the complexities of Robin and Patrice's relationship with respect to cultural diversity and the potential for enriching the narrative through a more respectful and understanding interaction, the series neglects to contribute positively to the discourse on representation and diversity in media.

While addressing the microaggressive elements in the interaction between Robin and Patrice from HIMYM, it's also crucial to explore the elements of exaggeration and humor within this dynamic. The exaggerated reactions of Robin towards Patrice serve as a comedic device aimed at eliciting laughter from the audience, showcasing how humor is employed within the series. Such humor, while on the surface appears to play on the characters' quirks and relational dynamics, also subtly reflects on the complexities of interpersonal relationships and communication. By incorporating these exaggerated and humorous elements, the show navigates the delicate balance between highlighting microaggressions and maintaining its comedic essence. This approach allows viewers to engage with the content on multiple levels, prompting reflection on the underlying themes of social interactions and the nuanced ways in which individuals relate to one another.

In conclusion, the portrayal of Robin and Patrice's relationship, especially when considering Patrice's Asian heritage, underscores a broader issue of microaggressions and the lack of cultural sensitivity in popular media narratives. A more nuanced and respectful exploration of such relationships could offer valuable insights into overcoming stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive representation of diverse cultures and backgrounds.

While discussing the origins of the characters, it is also pertinent to touch upon Barney Stinson's brother who is from a different dad. When Barney's brother locates their father, Barney adamantly claims him as his father as well. This scenario is presented with a sort of color-blind stance, albeit in a satirical and humorous manner that accentuates their differences, leading viewers to chuckle at Barney's naive perspective. In this instance, the humor employed does not disregard the ethnic variances but rather acknowledges them in a way that is accessible and relatable to the audience. Thus, it could be argued that the series utilizes humor to recognize and celebrate diversity, while simultaneously critiquing the notion of color-blindness through a comedic lens.

Barney's brother is portrayed as an openly gay African American, adding a layer of diversity to the character dynamics within "How I Met Your Mother." Here, actually it might be said that there is an awareness of micro-invalidating (Sue et al., 2007). This inclusion not only broadens the representation within the show but also introduces discussions around themes of sexuality and racial identity in a predominantly white and straight character ensemble. Through Barney's brother, the series navigates the complexities of integrating diverse family dynamics and challenges societal norms and stereotypes. His character provides an opportunity to explore the intersectionality of race, sexuality, and familial relationships, offering insights into the evolving nature of societal acceptance and the portrayal of diverse identities in mainstream media. The portrayal of Barney's brother can be seen as the show's attempt to address and include more diverse perspectives, reflecting a broader shift towards inclusivity and representation in television narratives.

Another ethnicity that should be mentioned here is Indian-Americans. One of the most repeated side roles is of Ranjeet's, an Indian-American and he is the gang's chauffeur. When Barney slept with Robin, Ranjeet is very angry and started to say bad words in his own language. This sequence serves as a comedic trope, where the use of a foreign language for cursing capitalizes on the surprise and unfamiliarity of the audience to generate laughter. Although this may superficially seem to cater to comedic tastes, it is essential to recognize the potential reinforcement of stereotypical views that such depictions might inadvertently encourage. By placing Ranjit, a recurring side character with a specific ethnic background, in situations where his emotional outbursts are expressed through a non-English language, the show navigates the thin line between humor and the perpetuation of ethnic stereotypes. This invites an examination of how humor intersects with cultural representation and the implications it carries for the portrayal of minority characters in media.

To further analyze the microaggressive undertones of the scene with Ranjit, let's consider it from an alternative perspective. If instead of Ranjit, a character of European descent and a New Yorker were in a similar situation, would the portrayal involve swearing in a language such as Swedish or German? This thought experiment enables us to dissect the nuances of comedic representation. If a European New Yorker were to swear in their native tongue, it might be received differently due to the audience's varied preconceptions and biases. The comedic effect could potentially stem from the audience's familiarity with European languages or stereotypes associated with European directness or candor. The laughter might not derive from the strangeness of the language itself, as it often does with less commonly portrayed languages in media, but rather from the context in which the swearing occurs and the incongruity of hearing a non-English outburst in an otherwise English-speaking setting. Actually, there is one German character as well, in very later episodes, very similar kind of language jokes about German language was done. But in that case, Klaus was originally from Germany. He was in US for Victoria. And even in the jokes, humor is not focus on how the language sounds but focus on the structure (very long words) of the language. As we find the Eastern (Bangladesh) language very funny as sound, we are expected to know some structural background of German to understand the joke.

There is another Indian-American character in 7th season. This time, he is able to include in gang. He is a psychologist whose license is from Harvard. Kevin is a character who has no stereotype in script through his relationship with Robin. When we focus on these details, that character was interesting and one might think maybe because of 7th season, awareness was higher and that's why we see that kind of change. However, in the episode while we see all character's parents, again very short micro-aggressive scene occurred. We saw Kevin's mother in very local traditional Indian costumes while all the other mothers and father in modern American clothes.

The character analysis thus far has primarily focused on the portrayal of microaggressions within the narrative framework of the series. Beyond the general analysis of characters, it is noteworthy to mention that the series sporadically addresses issues related to gender roles, sexual orientation, and identities of other social groups through certain attitudes and behaviors depicted. For example, the character of Robin remarks on her appearance with excessive body hair by saying, "I look like a Turkish Lesbian," which can be interpreted as a micro-insulting subtype of microaggression. This comment implies a derogatory stereotype, not only towards Turkish individuals but also towards the lesbian community. The problematic nature of this idiom becomes apparent particularly as it is used to describe an unfavorable situation, despite there being no individuals from the mentioned groups present to represent themselves. This instance exemplifies how microaggressions can subtly infiltrate dialogue, revealing underlying biases and perpetuating stereotypes. There are some other variations of micro-insults through all seasons. However, in that part, it is very hard to distinguish whether it's a joke or micro-aggression. Because in the show, we see a lot of stereotype breaking situation. In Marshall and Lily's relationship, there are a lot of examples in which Lily has more masculine personality while Marshall has more feminine features in terms of gender role stereotypes. Robin loves guns, she is usually more masculine than other guys. For example, in season 8, Robin is with a handsome guy, Nick. But there is a problem. He is very sensitive; Robin doesn't like that type. When she criticizes, she says that "Now he's probably crying in the lady's restroom". As a micro-insult example, useless sensitive and crying behavior is matched with ladies.

There were micro-invalidation and micro-insult examples. What about micro-assaults? Yes, actually there is, a lot. However, these jokes are usually made by Barney Stinson, the most sociopath character of the gang. He has a lot of categorization about every social group. Not only for women, or Canadian, but also for people who play laser tag, people who get marry, magicians, etc. Therefore, whatever he says about any group is mostly a part of Barney's personality, and we usually see that the other people of gang (especially Lily) doesn't approve his jokes. This dynamic suggests that while the series does engage in darker forms of humor, it simultaneously positions such humor as socially unacceptable through the reactions of the more empathetic characters. This nuanced depiction allows the series to broach sensitive topics through a comedic lens while still signaling a level of critique against such behaviors, setting the stage for a deeper discussion on the interplay between humor and social sensitivity in contemporary media.

## DISCUSSION

### Changing Decade

Researchers suggest that the origins, circumstances, and defense mechanisms of racial microaggressions are often elusive. Without meticulous documentation and analysis, racial stereotypes and perceived threats can be rationalized as racial micro-agreements, and attacks can be easily overlooked or minimized. However, it is emphasized that the cumulative effects of racial microaggressions can be devastating (Solorzano, 1997).

In their research, Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning (2015) have posited that individuals subjected to microaggressions are likely to adopt behaviors characterized by avoiding direct confrontation with the perpetrator. Instead, they might quietly sever ties with the offender, conceptualize their troubled interactions as mere mishaps, and adapt to the situation. This perspective underscores a tendency towards non-confrontational coping mechanisms in response to subtle forms of aggression, highlighting a nuanced understanding of social dynamics in the context of microaggressions.

Upon examining all of these examples, it is hard to say that there was a conscious racial discrimination in HIMYM. When we analyze the theory of micro-aggression, we see a lot of examples which are not directly to make a joke. However, we should take decade into account. When the show started, micro-aggression was existing as term but not exist in literature in that way. It means that, awareness level was different for everybody. Maybe that awareness was low for people like Ted Mosby, and even in NYC, maybe people didn't really have friends from other ethnicities. If it is so, then this show was not micro-aggressive as show itself but it was realistic to show the micro-aggressive level of society.

In my opinion, there were especially racial micro-aggression in HIMYM. But if we look at it from 2000's concept, it would be hard to detect. If we look from 2010's, it might be said that there were big mistakes which may cause lynch on social media. However, we don't know how to evaluate it in 2020s. It could be possible to criticize more, or it could be possible to congratulate the jokes more. Social changes will change our perception about humor and microaggression as time goes.

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