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Third-Party Intervention to Address Gender Microaggressions Among College Students: The Role of System Justification Beliefs and Contact With Counter-Stereotypical Women

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ABSTRACT

Third-party intervention against gender-based microaggressions in the university context helps mitigate harmful effects of these experiences and creates a more supportive environment. The present study aimed to contribute to this line of research by investigating the extent to which system justification ideologies—that is, hostile and benevolent sexism and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)—and contact with counter-stereotypical women are related to third-party intervention to stop gender microaggressions, both directly and indirectly through the mediation of perceptions of microaggression severity. A sample of 428 students living in southern Italy completed a self-report questionnaire that included real-life situations with male professors and peer aggressors, and measures of the study variables. Data were analysed using structural equation modelling and multigroup analysis. Results showed that for both professor and peer aggressors, SDO was negatively associated with perceived microaggression severity and intervention, whereas benevolent sexism was associated with a greater likelihood of intervention. Perceived microaggression severity mediated the effects of hostile sexism on bystander intervention for male participants when observing professors committing microaggressions against female students. For all participants, the relationship between contact with counter-stereotypical women and intervention was mediated by perceived microaggression severity for professor aggressors. Limitations, future research, and implications for intervention are discussed.

1 | Introduction

Microaggressions are defined as ordinary verbal, behavioural, or environmental offences, either intentional or unintentional, that convey hostile messages to a target group (Sue et al. 2007). Research on microaggressive behaviour originally focused on racial minorities, and only later and more recently has expanded its scope to include other groups such as sexual minorities, gender identity minorities, and women (Sue 2010). Gender microaggressions, like other forms of subtle sexism, can be conceptualised as low-severity forms of violence that are at one end of a spectrum that includes sexual assault at the opposite end (Gartner and Sterzing 2016). Indeed, by fostering a culture of sexual violence, they can act as a precursor to more severe aggressive behaviour. Gender microaggressions include both sexual harassment and gender-based harassment, which is not motivated by sexual interest or intent, but rather by hostility and is often aimed at making the target feel unwelcome in their

environment. In line with EU directives, Italian legislation addresses and punishes sexual harassment (Law 198/2006) (as well as gender violence—Laws 93/2013 and 69/2019) as a form of discrimination.

In Italy, gender inequalities in education and research are far from being resolved (Gaiaschi 2022), and gender-based microaggressions are common in higher education institutions around the world (Cho and Corkett 2022). In the U.S. women and students from racial minorities report reiterated experiences of being targets of gender and race-based microaggressions (McCabe 2009; Nadal et al. 2015), as do international students (e.g., Kim and Kim 2010). Gartner (2021), acknowledging that the experience of students may be different from that of adult women, developed a specific data-driven microaggressions taxonomy for undergraduate female students, which only minimally overlaps with the one proposed by Capodilupo et al. (2010). Midgette et al. (2023), focusing on how students in the role of observers make sense of microaggressive experiences in the classroom, found that there was little consensus in responses and that interpretations of such experiences were varied. Italian studies on sexual harassment in universities (De Riu and Mancini 2024; Romito 2019; Santinello and Vieno 2004) have shown the persistence of everyday sexism in academia and the magnitude of gender-based discrimination among students, researchers, and staff.

As far as students are concerned, a growing literature on stressors and mental health symptoms experienced by college students has attested that being the target of microaggressions is associated with binge drinking and a lower sense of self-efficacy (Blume et al. 2012), greater depression and anxiety (Boyle et al. 2022), and psychological distress (Burton et al. 2022; Cushwa 2013), and lower total well-being (Romero and O'Brien 2020). Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that the emotional and psychological well-being of undergraduate female students—as well as students of colour, international students, and LGBTQ+ students—is threatened by this particular source of stress, with potential implications for their academic performance and sense of belonging in the university environment.

An important role in buffering the stress of microaggressions can be played by third parties, such as witnesses, bystanders, and allies. The potential positive impact of third parties has been highlighted in recent research on gender microaggressions in the workplace (Basford et al. 2014; Bond and Haynes-Baratz 2022; Haynes-Baratz et al. 2021, 2022; Kim and Meister 2023). Indeed, they can play a critical role in supporting the targets: third parties intervention alleviates the catch-22 for targets who risk being negatively perceived as complainers if they confront the perpetrators, and feel guilty and ruminate about the experience if they fail to confront (Sechrist and Swim 2008). Allies can also mitigate the effects of microaggressions by affecting how women make sense of their negative experience of microaggressions (Kim and Meister 2023). Moreover, while confrontation by the targets is perceived as defensive and dismisses the message, intervention by third parties is likely to attract more attention and be seen as more reasonable, and thus more effective in discouraging future stereotypical remarks and limiting prejudice (Czopp et al. 2006). Overall, through their 'microinterventions', they can help determine a more inclusive and supportive environment (Ashburn-Nardo 2018; Sue et al. 2019) and interrupt injustice.

Many factors can influence a third party's decision to intervene to support targets or confront aggressors. Because of their subtle nature, gender microaggressions may go unnoticed or be perceived as trivial, so perceptions of the severity of observed microaggressive behaviour, acting as a signal that an injustice has been perpetrated, may be a critical proximal antecedent of bystander intervention. At the same time, perceived severity may vary according to a range of individual dispositions and social factors. Our study extends research in the area of gender microaggressions among college students by examining the role of individual differences in social dominance orientation and ambivalent sexism, as well as contact with counter-stereotypical women, in microaggression severity perception and intervention to stop microaggressive behaviour toward female peers.

2 | System Justifying Ideologies: SDO and Ambivalent Sexism

Within social dominance theory (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) measures an individual's endorsement of social hierarchy and the dominance of higher status groups over lower status groups. Individuals high in SDO tend to adhere to ideologies that justify the status quo and legitimise hierarchical relationships between groups, including ideologies that endorse traditional gender roles (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). It is associated with both hostile and benevolent sexism (Christopher and Mull 2006) and explains misogynistic attitudes (Renström 2023), bias against women in the workforce (Christopher and Wojda 2008) and negative evaluations of female leaders (Hoyt and Simon 2016). SDO may also play a role in the ability to recognise gender microaggressions, as suggested by Ako-Brew (2020), who found that individuals with higher levels of SDO were less likely to recognise gender microaggressions than those with lower levels. Following a similar line of reasoning, our study examined whether SDO might play a role in the decision of third parties to take action when observing microaggressive behaviour directed at female peers.

One more belief system that directly justifies gender inequalities is ambivalent sexism (Glick and Fiske 2001), to which gender microaggressions have been linked along with other forms of sexism, such as subtle sexism (Swim et al. 2005) and everyday sexism (Swim et al. 2001). Ambivalent sexism has a hostile and a benevolent component: the former is expressed through overt and blatant negative evaluations of women (e.g., incompetent, emotional, indecisive, unintelligent, etc.) and reflects misogynistic attitudes and gender stereotypes. The latter combines seemingly positive evaluations of women (romanticised and seen as excelling in tasks and areas considered feminine) with a general assumption of weakness and frailty in need of protection. The two forms are complementary and both reinforce the patriarchal ideology that sees women as subordinate to men (Connelly and Heesacker 2012). It should be noted, however, that support for hierarchy is provided differently: hostile sexism is more likely to be associated with

ideologies that reflect power and dominance motives (such as social dominance orientation), whereas benevolent sexism is more likely to be associated with ideologies that reflect a motivation to maintain traditional social roles and norms. This difference explains, for example, why in the rights and policies domain the former opposes policies aimed at promoting gender equality, while the latter provides some kind of limited support (Bareket and Fiske 2023).

In the specific microaggressions domain, Ako-Brew's (2020) study mentioned above found that high levels of both hostile and benevolent sexism were negatively correlated with the ability to identify gender microaggressions. While the results confirmed the researcher's expectations for hostile sexism, this was not the case for benevolent sexism. In fact, the author hypothesised that because benevolent sexism views women as creatures in need of care, this belief would have made observers more susceptible and attuned to recognising gender microaggressions, but the results did not confirm this expectation. Our study deepened the investigation of ambivalent sexism by examining how it relates to third party intervention to address microaggressions against women.

3 | Counter-Stereotypical Contact

Because stereotypes about traditional gender roles have been blamed for perpetuating gender inequality (Ellemers 2018), research in social psychology has suggested that counterstereotypes are likely to influence attitudes: indeed, exposure to examples of men and women in counter-stereotypical gender roles may undermine stereotypes and thus promote gender-equal attitudes. However, a series of experimental studies conducted by Jung and Tavits (2024) showed that exposure to gender counterstereotypes, while undermining stereotypes about the specific gender roles presented in the experiments, did not change core beliefs about women and men. They concluded that mere exposure to specific counter-stereotypical examples does not appear to be sufficient to change stable attitudes and counteract sexism, and that more active engagement and experience with counter-stereotypical prototypes is needed. In this sense, it can be argued that personal direct contact with counter-stereotypical women may be a more effective way to undermine sexist beliefs. Nevertheless, the influence of contact on sexism has been very little studied. To our knowledge, only Taschler and West (2017) examined its effects on hostile and benevolent sexism, rape myth acceptance, intention to rape (in men), and less projected sexual arousal at the thought of being raped (in women). Their study showed that positive counter-stereotypical contact was negatively associated with hostile sexism but unrelated to benevolent sexism, suggesting that this form of sexism may be resistant to contact-based interventions. Building on this study, we decided to explore the relationship between counter-stereotypical contact and third parties' intervention.

4 | Goal and Aims

The primary purpose of the study was to explore the extent to which SDO, ambivalent sexism, and contact with counter-stereotypical women are associated with third parties' intervention to address gendered microaggression toward college female students perpetrated by male professors and peers through the mediation of the perception of microaggressions' severity.

Consistent with previous research on the relationship between SDO and prejudice against women (Renström 2023), and ambivalent sexism and support for gender inequality (Barreto and Doyle 2022), we predicted that SDO, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism would be negatively related to perceived microaggression severity. Indeed, as beliefs that support the subordination of women to men, individuals high in SDO or one or the other form of ambivalent sexism are likely to dismiss microaggressions as trivial and minimise them. We also predicted that SDO and hostile sexism would be negatively associated with third-party intervention, whereas benevolent sexism would be positively associated with it. Indeed, because the role of benevolent sexism is less established and more controversial, we expected that the tendency to protect women might act as a driver for post hoc intervention even when microaggressive behaviour is minimised.

In contrast, we predicted that contact with counter-stereotypical women, by undermining traditional gender roles that feed gender-unequal attitudes and outcomes would be positively related to perceived microaggression severity and also to third parties' intervention. Indeed, familiarity with examples of women who contradict gender stereotypes is likely to make observers more aware of the unfair nature of microaggressions that perpetuate and reinforce gender inequality and would also directly encourage them to intervene to address injustice.

Finally, we hypothesised that perceived microaggression severity would mediate the relationships between all four of our variables and third-party intervention by signalling that an injustice had been committed and requires intervention.

We assumed that these relationship patterns would hold both when the microaggression was perpetrated by male professors and by male peers, and also for both the male and female students participating in the study. Nevertheless, we tested for possible group effects based on gender. Indeed, there is evidence for differences between men and women in their perceptions of the prevalence of microaggressions (Periyakoil et al. 2020) and also in their recognition (Basford et al. 2014), so we could not rule out the possibility that gender might introduce variation in some of the hypothesised pathways.

5 | Method

We conducted a preliminary study followed by a main study, whose design, procedures and instruments were reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Salento. The research was designed and conducted by a team of three female researchers of varying seniority, two faculty and one postdoctoral researcher. In addition, 3 female postgraduate students were involved as co-researchers in the preliminary study.

TABLE 1 | Vignettes.

Professors	Peers
During class, Prof. X sometimes indulges in remarks that, while joking, belittle the abilities and skills of female students or women in general.	During class, in the study hall, or in the hallways, some male students indulge in remarks that, while joking, belittle the abilities and skills of female students or women in general.
During class and/or exams, Prof. X tends to make comments or appreciations about the physical appearance of female students.	During class, in the study hall, or in the hallways, some male students make comments or remarks about the physical appearance of other female students.
During class, Prof. X tends to be friendly and supportive to male students who speak up. When female students speak, he often ignores them or addresses them with condescension or sarcasm.	

a. Preliminary study: The purpose of the study was to identify the most common microaggressions experienced by female college students in order to create realistic vignettes to be used in the main study. We used a snowball sampling approach to collect real-life narratives of microaggressions experienced or witnessed by female students at the university where they are enrolled (i.e., University of Salento). The first group of participants was contacted by the senior researcher among female students in psychology classes. They were informed of the research objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the data collection procedures. They were assured that their information would be handled in accordance with privacy laws and were informed of whom to contact with questions and of their right to withdraw at any time in accordance with Standard 3.10, Informed Consent, as stated in the APA Ethical Guidelines. In addition, participants provided written informed consent.

Participants were provided with the following input: 'The term 'microaggressions' refers to small and common everyday offenses, intentional but often unintentional, that implicitly or explicitly convey hostile, derogatory, or negative messages toward women. These offenses, which can occur in all or some contexts of daily life, can come from other people in either verbal or behavioural form, or they can come impersonally from one's environment (through rules, hierarchies/roles, etc.). If you would like to share an experience of microaggressions in a university setting in writing, you can do so anonymously here. It can be any moment, episode, or situation in which you have received a message that is hostile to you as a woman through words, behaviours, mannerisms, practices'. Responses could be submitted online.

After completing the task, they were asked to provide referrals to recruit additional participants from among their acquaintances. The eligibility criterion was to be a female student enrolled in an undergraduate program at the University of Salento. A total sample of 64 students (Age range: 19–39 years old, $M = 23.2$, SD = 3.74, Med = 23) shared their experiences with microaggressions. The majority (71.9%) were enrolled in humanities and social sciences programs, 18.8% in STEM, and 9.4% in business and law programs.

Responses were reviewed by the research team and three students from the first group of participants contacted by the senior researcher to begin the data collection. Six responses were excluded because they did not explicitly refer to gender microaggressions. The remaining 58 narratives were examined in light of both Capodilupo et al.'s (2010) and Gartner's (2021) taxonomies, which collectively include the following categories of microaggressions: (a) sexual objectification, (b) second-class citizenship, (c) assumption of inferiority, (c) use of sexist language, (d) endorsement of traditional gender roles, (e) denial of the reality of sexism, (f) environmental invalidation, (g) invisibility, (h) intersectionality, (i) caretaker and nurturer, (j) female-dominated occupations, and (k) presumed incompetence. Responses were assigned independently by each member of the research team, then the assignments were discussed collectively and discrepancies debated until a final agreement was reached. The final assignments resulted in 6 categories of microaggressions, perpetrated by both male peers and professors: five were drawn from the list above (sexual objectification = 18; sexist language/comments = 7; environmental invalidation = 6; presumed incompetence = 5; gender stereotypes = 3), and 1 category was created ad hoc based on the data: differential treatment based on gender (=20), specifically attributed to male professors who treated female students differently from male students.

Based on the significance and frequency of the experiences collected, we created five vignettes describing plausible microaggressions toward female students perpetrated within the university by either male professors or male peers (Table 1). Two vignettes replicated the same scenario for male professors and male students and referred one to sexual objectification and the other to presumed incompetence, while a unique vignette was created to address the differential treatment that some male professors give to their female students. The vignettes were discussed with the students who had participated in the review and categorisation of the collected narratives, who validated them for plausibility and realism based on their experience. All the five vignettes developed were used in the main study.

b. Main study: The main, cross-sectional, study was aimed to test the hypotheses about the relationships between SDO, ambivalent sexist, perceived severity of gender

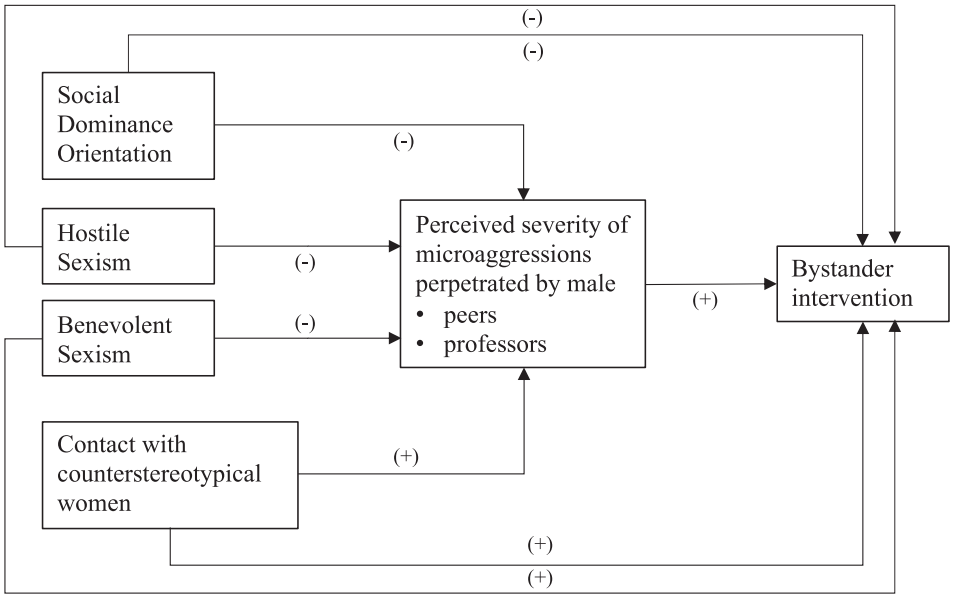

FIGURE 1 | Theoretical model.

microaggressions, and bystander intervention. Specifically, we tested a model with the expectation of the following patterns of relationships (Figure 1):

- Negative association between SDO/hostile/benevolent sexism and perceived microaggression severity.
- Negative association between SDO/hostile sexism and bystander intervention
- Positive association between benevolent sexism and bystander intervention.
- Positive association between counter-stereotypical women and both perceived microaggression severity and bystander intervention.
- Positive association between perceived microaggression severity and bystander intervention.

5.1 | Procedures and Participants

A paper self-report questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 428 students (52.7% female) living in southern Italy. The sample had a mean age of 21.9 years (SD = 2.57). The students were enrolled in a variety of undergraduate (81.3%) and graduate (18.7%) programmes in humanities and social sciences (36.8%), business and law (29.4%), and STEM (33.8). Almost all of them were enrolled at the University of Salento (94.3%).

Participants were contacted by a group of 24 undergraduate psychology students as part of their internship under the supervision of a senior researcher. Each was instructed to recruit a small sample of 12–18 students, balanced by gender and program (humanities and social sciences, business and law, STEM), through their direct or indirect social networks. Data collection lasted approximately 2 months, from July to September 2023. Respondents spent approximately 15 min completing the questionnaire, and no incentives were offered. As with the preliminary study, before engaging in the survey, participants were informed of the study's aims, the voluntary nature of their participation, the expected duration, and the data collection procedures, and assured that their information would be handled in accordance with privacy laws. Participants provided written informed consent.

5.2 | Instruments

Data were collected using a self-report questionnaire including the following measures:

Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDO), developed by Sidanius and Pratto in the Italian adaptation of Di Stefano and Roccato (2005). It consists of 8 items reflecting general group-based egalitarianism and is rated on a scale from 1 'Strongly disagree' to 5 'Strongly agree scale'.

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) (Glick et al. 1997) in the short Italian version of Rollero et al. (2014). The scale included 12 items measuring Hostile sexism (6 items) and Benevolent sexism (6 items) toward women. Items were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 'Strongly disagree' to 5 'Strongly agree'.

Perceived Gender Microaggressions' Severity Scale. Participants were asked to rate the 5 different gender microaggression vignettes (Table 1) developed through the preliminary study, indicating their severity on a 4-point Liker scale, with 1 representing 'Not at all' to 4 representing 'Very severe'. Two total scores were calculated, one by summing the responses to the three vignettes with professors as aggressors (min 3–max 12) and the other by summing the responses to the two vignettes with students as aggressors (min 2–max 8). Higher scores indicated greater perceived severity.

Counter-Stereotypical Contact Scale. Items were adapted from Taschler and West (2017) to measure the amount of contact with counter-stereotypical women. Prior to responding, participants were asked to provide a brief description of women they considered counter-stereotypical, and then to report their experiences

TABLE 2 | Correlations matrix.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Benevolent sexism	—					
2. Hostile sexism	0.240***	—				
3. CSC	−0.088	−0.089	—			
4. SDO	−0.051	0.194***	−0.048	—		
5. Bystander intervention	0.157***	−0.129**	0.242***	−0.272***	—	
6. PGMS (M students)	−0.021	−0.167***	0.099	−0.119*	0.143**	—
7. PGMS (M professors)	−0.132**	−0.120**	0.150**	−0.053	0.121*	0.480***

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

with women like those they described on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 to 4 about. Examples of items were 'Right now, how many of the people you see on a typical day are women like this?' (1 = None, 2 = A few, 3 = About half, 4 = Most, 5 = Almost all); 'How often do you spend time with friends or relatives who are like these women?' (1 = Never, 2 = Occasionally, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Quite often, 5 = All the time).

Bystander Intervention Scale. The items were adapted from Nickerson et al.'s (2014) scale used in the domain of bullyism and sexual harassment so as to fit gender microaggressions. Prior to responding, participants were provided with the following definition of gender microaggressions: 'Microaggressions refer to small and common everyday offenses, intentional but often unintentional, that implicitly or explicitly convey hostile, derogatory, or negative messages toward women'. The 16-item scale was developed based on Latané and Darley's (1970) five step model, with 3 items each: (1) Notice the event, (2) Interpret the event as an emergency, (3) Accept responsibility to help, (4) Know how to help, and (5) Implement intervention decision. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating 'Strongly disagree' to 5 'Strongly agree'. The adaptation of the items to subtle forms of bias and the shift from the concrete observation of a single specific episode to the abstract observation of a class of events resulted in the following components: (1) Awareness (e.g., 'Gender microaggressions are a problem at my university'); (2) Acknowledgement (e.g., 'I believe that microaggressions are harmful and damaging to female students who experience them'); (3) Responsibility (e.g., 'When I witness a microaggression in my university, I feel personally called to intervene and help'); (4) Competence (e.g., 'I know what to say to stop someone from insulting a woman in my university'); (5) Action (e.g., 'If I heard or saw my fellow students using sexist language or behaving in a sexist way, I would tell them to stop').

5.3 | Analyses

Preliminary exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were run on the scales measuring *Social Dominance Orientation* ($\alpha = 0.828$), *Benevolent Sexism* ($\alpha = 0.792$), *Hostile Sexism* ($\alpha = 0.846$), *Counter-Stereotypical Contact* ($\alpha = 0.888$), and *Bystander Intervention*. Given that the *Bystander Intervention* Scale was adapted for use in the Italian context, an EFA was performed to determine its factorial structure (Hambleton 2005). For each of these scales, the items clustered into a single factor except for the items of the *Bystander Intervention* scale, for which a four-factor solution accounted for approximately 59% of the total variance extracted. All items were retained except item 5, which was dropped due to a factor loading lower than 0.32. Factors corresponded to the expected components (1. Awareness, 2. Acknowledgement, 3. Responsibility, 4. Competence, and 5. Action), except that items on Acknowledgement and Responsibility were merged in the same factor. To further validate the structure, three Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) were conducted following best practices in cross-cultural validation studies, where sample size constraints necessitate multiple CFAs on the same dataset (Worthington and Whittaker 2006). The first CFA confirmed the four-factor structure (Awareness, $\alpha = 0.826$; Acknowledgement & Responsibility, $\alpha = 0.824$; Competence, $\alpha = 0.850$; and Action, $\alpha = 0.879$). The second CFA tested a second-order factor model, in which the four subscales loaded into a higher order latent factor representing overall Bystander Intervention. This model demonstrated a strong fit (SRMR = 0.055, RMSEA = 0.070, CFI = 0.996, TLI = 0.995), supporting the use of a higher-order factor structure. Finally, the third CFA further assessed the construct validity of the second-order latent variable. Based on these analyses, we adopted two scoring approaches for the Bystander Intervention Scale: (1) individual scores for each of the four subscales and (2) a total Bystander Intervention score, computed by averaging responses across all items. These results and scoring procedures are detailed further in the Supporting Information, which includes EFA and CFA tables and fit indices (see Supporting Information for EFA and CFAs tables and fit indices).

The research hypotheses were estimated using a variance-based estimator, Partial Least Square Structural Equation modelling (PLS-SEM; Wold 1985), for testing mediation and multigroup comparisons (Hair et al. 2017).

6 | Results

The correlation matrix is shown in Table 2. Two mediation models were performed to explore the mediating role of gender microaggressions' perceived severity (PGMS) perpetrated by two different actors: Model 1—Male professors; Model 2—Male students. Path coefficients were estimated using PLS bootstrapping (10,000 iterations, 5% significance level). Results for each

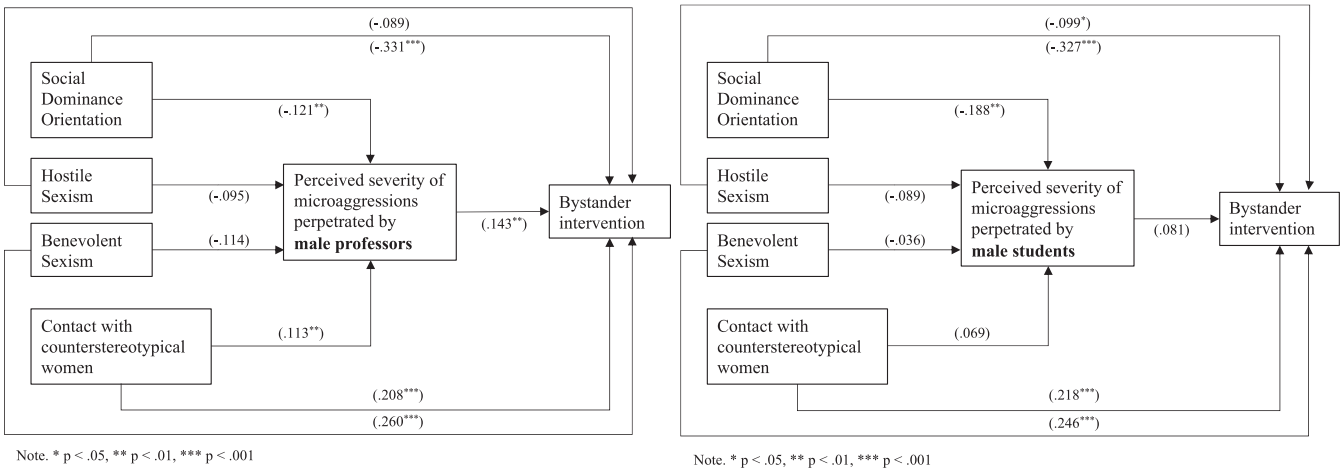

FIGURE 2 | Mediation models. Model 1 (on the left): Mediating role of gender microaggressions' perceived severity perpetrated by male professors. Model 2 (on the right): Mediating role of gender microaggressions' perceived severity perpetrated by male students.

TABLE 3 | Indirect effects for bystander intervention with microaggressions enacted by male professors and male students.

Indirect effects	Estim	2.5%	97.5%	*p*	Estim	2.5%	97.5%	*p*
Hostile sexism → PGMS → bystander intervention	−0.014	−0.041	0.003	0.227	−0.007	−0.024	0.003	0.296
SDO → PGMS → bystander intervention	−0.017	−0.040	−0.003	0.072	−0.015	−0.039	0.000	0.133
Benevolent sexism → PGMS → bystander intervention	−0.016	−0.038	0.001	0.100	−0.003	−0.020	0.009	0.668
CSC → PGMS → bystander intervention	0.016*	0.003	0.032	0.032	0.006	−0.004	0.021	0.374

Note: *$p < 0.05$.

path coefficient are shown in Figure 2, while indirect effects are shown in Table 3.

In both models we found: (a) a positive association between benevolent sexism and bystander intervention; (b) a positive association between counter-stereotypical women and bystander intervention; (c) a negative association between SDO and bystander intervention; (d) a negative association between SDO and perceived microaggression severity. Only in Model 1 did we also find a positive association between perceived microaggression severity and bystander intervention, with the mediating effect of PGMS confirmed only for counter-stereotypical contact. Only in model 2 did we find a negative association between hostile sexism and bystander intervention. Details of the results for each model follow.

6.1 | Model 1. Microaggressions Perpetrated by Male Professors Against Female Students

Only the mediation of Counter-Stereotypical Contact (CSC) on Bystander Intervention via Perceived Gender Microaggression Severity (PGMS) ($\beta = 0.016$; CI: [−0.003, 0.032]) was confirmed (Table 3). Significant positive direct associations were found between Benevolent Sexism ($\beta = 0.260$; CI: [0.183; 0.338]), CSC ($\beta = 0.208$; CI: [0.130; 0.283]) and PGMS ($\beta = 0.143$; CI: [0.059; 0.229]) with Bystander Intervention, and also between CSC ($\beta = 0.113$; CI [0.023; 0.197]) and PGMS.

Significant negative associations were found between Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) ($\beta = -0.331$; CI: [−0.420; −0.242]) and Bystander Intervention, and between SDO ($\beta = -0.121$; CI: [−0.223; −0.027]) and PGMS. Hostile Sexism showed no significant relationship with PGMS and Bystander Intervention.

R^2 for Bystander Intervention was 26.9%, indicating weak but acceptable explanatory power (Hair et al. 2017). Effect sizes (f^2) ranged from small (e.g., Hostile Sexism, 0.009) to medium (e.g., SDO, 0.129). Predictive values (Q^2) for all the constructs were all above 0. Model fit was good (SRMR = 0.069).

6.2 | Model 2. Microaggressions Perpetrated by Male Students Against Female Peers

No mediation effects were found (Table 3). Direct positive associations were found for the following paths: Benevolent Sexism ($\beta = 0.246$; CI: [0.169; 0.327]) and CSC ($\beta = 0.218$; CI: [0.138; 0.292]) with Bystander Intervention. Direct negative associations were found for the following paths: Hostile Sexism ($\beta = -0.099$; CI: [−0.196; −0.007]) and SDO ($\beta = -0.327$; CI: [−0.418; −0.230])

TABLE 4 | Model 1—Pairwise comparisons of path coefficients through permutation mean difference based on gender.

	Difference (male–female)	2-Tailed (male vs. female), *p*
Direct effects		
Benevolent sexism → bystander intervention	0.047	0.564
Benevolent sexism → PGMS	0.153	0.215
CSC → bystander intervention	0.046	0.559
Hostile sexism → bystander intervention	−0.042	0.732
Hostile sexism → PGMS	−0.422	0.051
SDO → bystander intervention	0.092	0.310
SDO → PGMS	−0.088	0.356
PGMS → bystander intervention	0.235**	0.006
Indirect effects		
Hostile sexism → PGMS → bystander intervention	−0.049*	0.046
SDO → PGMS → bystander intervention	−0.034	0.060
Benevolent sexism → PGMS → bystander intervention	−0.009	0.699
CSC → PGMS → bystander intervention	0.022	0.180

Note: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

with Bystander Intervention; and SDO ($\beta = -0.188$; CI: [−0.292; −0.090]) with PGMS.

R^2 for Bystander Intervention was 25.5%, and effect sizes (f^2) ranged from small to medium. Finally, Q^2 values for all the constructs were all above 0. The SRMR value of 0.072 indicates a good model fit.

6.3 | Multigroup Analysis

A multi-group analysis was performed using MGA-PLS. A few significant differences were found comparing gender (F/M) in Model 1 (gender microaggressions enacted by male professors) (Table 4). The results revealed several significant differences in path coefficients between male and female students. Specifically, the relationship between PGMS (professors) and Bystander Intervention was significantly stronger for male students (difference = 0.235, $p = 0.006$); the paths Benevolent Sexism → Bystander Intervention and CSC → Bystander Intervention also had stronger effects for male students, although small. In contrast, the SDO → Bystander Intervention pathway showed a stronger negative association for female students compared to males, suggesting that SDO discourages intervention more strongly among females. The most notable gender difference concerned the Hostile Sexism → PGMS (Professor) pathway, which was significant for males but not for females, and for the Hostile Sexism → PGMS → Bystander Intervention mediation: this indirect effect was significant for male students but not for females (Table 5).

7 | Discussion

Building on the experience of a group of female students, this study extends research in the area of microaggressions among college students and provides insights into the impact of system justification beliefs and contact with counter-stereotypical women on peers' intervention to address microaggressive behaviour in the university educational setting. The collection of real-life narratives of microaggressions experienced or witnessed by female students revealed that microinsults and microassaults, as well as environmental microinvalidation, are not uncommon in our workplaces, and that classes and classrooms are not free from this subtle form of sexism. Although we are aware that gender-based microaggressions are common in higher education institutions (Johnson and Johnson 2019), this is the first study to focus on the experiences of undergraduate students in Italian universities. In fact, while previous studies (Anastasia 2019; De Riu and Mancini 2024; Santinello and Vieno 2004) have investigated sexual harassment among students, researchers and staff, our study extended its scope to include gender-based harassment, that is, discrimination motivated by hostility rather than sexual intent.

Moving to the factors that were expected to impact third-party intervention, our study confirmed that irrespective of who the aggressor is, SDO is likely to make observers perceive microaggressive behaviour as trivial and also less willing to intervene to address it. This was also the case for hostile sexism, but only among the male participants in our study when it came to professors committing microaggressions against female students. These findings are consistent with the general picture emerging from research that has highlighted both the intuitive correlation between SDO and hostile sexism (Abrams et al. 2003; Kelly et al. 2014; Kteily et al. 2012; Ruthig et al. 2017) and the association of these ideologies with support to gender-based violence (Berke and Zeichner 2016), greater acceptance of domestic violence (Sakall 2001), and also with a more limited ability to recognise potentially aggressive and humiliating behaviour toward women (Rollero et al. 2019). While SDO and hostile sexism have been studied in the realm of severe gender

TABLE 5 | Model 1—Groupwise estimates of path coefficients.

	Original (female)	Original (male)	Mean (female)	Mean (male)	STDEV (female)	STDEV (male)	*p* (female)	*p* (male)
Benevolent sexism → bystander intervention	0.218***	0.265***	0.202	0.267	0.061	0.061	0.000	0.000
Benevolent sexism → PGMS	−0.191*	−0.038	−0.227	−0.048	0.092	0.085	0.038	0.656
CSC → bystander intervention	0.205***	0.251***	0.201	0.249	0.058	0.055	0.000	0.000
CSC → PGMS	0.145*	0.093	0.132	0.095	0.070	0.063	0.038	0.139
Hostile sexism → bystander intervention	−0.052	−0.093	0.056	−0.091	0.100	0.073	0.605	0.203
Hostile sexism → PGMS	0.210	−0.212**	0.077	−0.217	0.206	0.074	0.308	0.004
SDO → bystander intervention	−0.369***	−0.277***	−0.393	−0.281	0.058	0.070	0.000	0.000
SDO → PGMS	−0.058	−0.146*	−0.067	−0.160	0.070	0.067	0.407	0.030
PGMS → bystander intervention	−0.003	0.232**	−0.012	0.231	0.052	0.069	0.957	0.001
Hostile sexism → PGMS → bystander intervention	−0.001	−0.049*	−0.002	−0.051	0.012	0.025	0.959	0.049
SDO → PGMS → bystander intervention	0.000	−0.034	0.001	−0.037	0.005	0.021	0.975	0.102
Benevolent sexism → PGMS → bystander intervention	0.001	−0.009	0.004	−0.011	0.013	0.020	0.966	0.669
CSC → PGMS → bystander intervention	−0.000	0.022	−0.002	0.021	0.008	0.016	0.959	0.168

Note: *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

violence, our study suggests that they also operate in subtle, low-severity forms of aggression that are at the opposite end of the same spectrum.

The role of benevolent sexism is more complex. This attitude played no role in influencing perceptions of microaggression severity, irrespective of the perpetrator (professor or student), but it was associated with a greater likelihood of intervening to address microaggressive behaviour. This finding suggests that benevolent sexist third parties intervene regardless of how severe they perceive the offence to be: intervention is directly driven by the tendency to protect warm but incompetent women, that is, paternalistic prejudice (Glick and Fiske 2001). Once again, we see an ironic effect of benevolent sexism that, while reinforcing traditional gender roles and norms, also acts as a possible defence against men's perpetration of microaggressions. We could sensibly argue, however, that while benevolent sexism may increase the likelihood that third parties will take action, their intervention would not be directed at challenging the system of gender inequality and advocating for women's equality, but rather at pacifying and normalising.

In conclusion, we found more evidence that hostile and benevolent sexism operate differently and have opposite effects, with the covert form encouraging observers to take action, and the overt form discouraging from intervening (even though this evidence is less consistent in our data). Since these two tendencies coexist at the intrapersonal level, it could be argued that 'true' ambivalent sexists may act inconsistently. While Glick et al. (1997) have shown how men overcome inconsistency by dividing women into two different groups, targeting the bad ones with hostile treatment and the good ones with benevolent treatment, we know less about how this inconsistency is reconstructed in women. Moreover, the conceptualisation of ambivalent sexism proposed by Glick and Fiske (1996) fails to consider that ambivalence is not only generated by the coexistence of hostile and benevolent attitudes within the same individuals, but is built into benevolent sexism itself, which combines positive and negative attitudes toward women.

Finally, we found support for the hypothesis that greater contact with counter-stereotypical women makes observers more aware of the unfair nature of microaggressions and encourages them to intervene to address injustice. In contrast to the intervention driven by benevolent sexism, we might speculate that the action stimulated by contact would be directed toward challenging gender inequalities. However, since in our data the role of counter-stereotypical contact was limited to microaggressions perpetrated by professors and did not extend to peer aggressors, this finding raises the question of whether contact increases general condemnation of microaggressions per se or, specifically condemnation of microaggressions perpetrated by individuals in positions of power (i.e., professors). Therefore, our study also brings to the table the overarching issue of symmetric versus asymmetric relationships in the dynamics of gender microaggressions, and the possibility of different perceptions of microaggressions based on the status of the perpetrator.

8 | Limitations, Future Research, and Implications for Interventions

There are limitations to our study that must be acknowledged. First, a major limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the research design, which makes it impossible to infer causal relationships among variables. In addition, our preliminary study used a snowball sample, which has the potential to introduce biases and limited sample diversity, and our main study was based on a convenience sample of students, so the findings cannot be generalised to the Italian student population. Finally, the data were self-reported, so there may have been an influence of social desirability bias on participants' responses.

Future research could further explore the process by which university students evaluate gender microaggressions and how they arrive at judgments about their severity, and gain a deeper understanding of the effects of interventions according to the different motivations behind people's decisions to take action, depending on whether they aim to change or maintain the status quo. In addition, microaggressions against women by female perpetrators, either professors or peers, should be explored.

Institutional measures to prevent and curb gender microaggressions in universities and higher education institutions are becoming more common than in the past, both for third parties (Bond and Haynes-Baratz 2022; Haynes-Baratz et al. 2021, 2022) and for targets (Byrd 2018). However, in the Italian academic context, the issue of subtle sexism is far from central, given the persistence of traditional gender norms that permeate the broader cultural environment. Although universities have a person who in her institutional role ('Consigliera di fiducia', in Italian) is responsible for providing advice and support to students and staff who are victims of harassment, bullying and discrimination, victims are discouraged from reporting (Anastasia 2019; De Riu and Mancini 2024). In addition, while sexual harassment is normed by law and more easily detected and recognised as a violation, gender-based harassment is blurred and more difficult to recognise and norm.

Focusing on the behaviour of third parties is crucial in that it can help establish a dynamic or trending norm (Mortensen et al. 2019). Indeed, the more third parties take action to address microaggressions, the more they signal that a behaviour is perceived to be on the rise (even if it is still practiced by a minority of people), and the more likely it is that other people will adopt the behaviour themselves. This seems essential to breaking the silence and creating a non-hostile academic environment.

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Consent

Written Informed consent was as obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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