

DO I MATTER? THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN BORDERLINE PERSONALITY
TRAITS AND MATTERING

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN PSYCHOLOGY

2026

Oakland University

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my unending gratitude to my incomparable thesis committee. Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Virgil Zeigler-Hill, who was truly the Virgil to my Dante as I would have been completely lost without. You took me under your wing and have offered me so many valuable experiences that I will forever be grateful for. Thank you to Dr. Jennifer Vonk, who helped me to grow as a researcher and writer with unwavering positivity. Both of you truly made me feel like I mattered when you welcomed me into the program.

This accomplishment was possible with support from the most wonderful people in my life: among them, Ainsley McFarland, McKenzie Melosh, Cecilia Sobocinski, and Ashley Villalpando each provided me with their own insights and never stopped cheering me on throughout this process. I appreciate each of you. I offer my biggest thanks to my partner, Kyle Fisher, for his proofreading and his incredible care and encouragement, and my parents, who helped me shape my thoughts into words and supported me through many late nights. I especially want to thank my mother, Dr. Joanne Farley LeBlanc, whose pursuit of higher education inspired me to follow in her footsteps. Per Stephen Sondheim, “it's not so much do what you like as it is that you like what you do.” I *love* what I do. Thank you for standing by my side as I pursue it.

ABSTRACT

DO I MATTER? THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN BORDERLINE PERSONALITY TRAITS AND MATTERING

by

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This thesis examines the connection between borderline personality traits and mattering – one's sense of importance and significance to others. Although prior research has linked borderline traits to interpersonal vulnerabilities such as rejection sensitivity and attachment insecurity, mattering has received comparatively little attention as a distinct construct. This work positions mattering as a core relational perception that may underlie key characteristics of elevated borderline traits. To test these predictions, three studies were conducted using complementary methodologies in samples of U.S. undergraduates. Study 1 used a cross-sectional design to examine associations between borderline traits and trait-level mattering constructs. Study 2 used hypothetical vignettes to assess perceived rejection in romantic contexts. Study 3 utilized a daily diary design to assess fluctuations in emotional experiences and state-level mattering. Findings consistently demonstrated strong links between borderline traits and mattering, suggesting that these traits are closely tied to individuals' perceptions of their relational significance.

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Do I Matter? The Connections Between Borderline Personality Traits and Mattering

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and its associated traits play an essential role in how individuals perceive and experience their close relationships. A defining feature of BPD involves profound fears of abandonment and rejection (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). These fears are closely aligned with concerns about being overlooked, unloved, or unimportant – concerns that can evoke pervasive feelings of emptiness and worthlessness. Consequently, individuals with borderline traits may be especially preoccupied with the extent to which they “matter” to others. Although considerable research has examined the interpersonal difficulties of those individuals with borderline traits (e.g., Smith & South, 2020; Wilson et al., 2017), relatively little is known about how these traits specifically relate to the construct of “mattering.”

Mattering refers to the sense of feeling important, valued, and visible to others (Flett, 2022). For individuals with high levels of borderline traits, who often display heightened sensitivity in interpersonal contexts, disruptions in mattering may be particularly salient. Their intense fear of abandonment and hypervigilance to rejection cues may amplify perceptions of insignificance or invisibility, thereby eroding their sense of mattering. Although theoretical work has proposed a link between borderline traits and disrupted experiences of mattering (Flett et al., 2022), this relationship has not been empirically tested. Rather than focusing exclusively on rejection sensitivity or interpersonal dysfunction, the present research examines the connections that borderline personality traits have with mattering-related constructs.

To address this gap, the present research consisted of three studies examining the role of mattering in the context of borderline personality traits. Study 1 examined the connections that borderline traits had with multiple aspects of mattering, including general mattering, anti-mattering (i.e., feeling invisible or irrelevant), and fear of not mattering. Study 2 tested whether perceived rejection in ambiguous social situations mediated the link between borderline traits and mattering, illuminating a possible mechanism through which interpersonal sensitivity undermines feelings of significance. Finally, Study 3 used a daily diary design to explore how fluctuations in mattering relate to daily affective experiences among individuals with borderline traits. Collectively, these studies provide new insights into how and why feelings of mattering – or the lack thereof – are intertwined with borderline personality traits, deepening our understanding of the interpersonal core of borderline traits.

Borderline Personality Traits

Borderline traits are characterized by affective instability, impulsivity, and heightened sensitivity to rejection – particularly within interpersonal contexts (e.g., Rosenbach & Renneberg, 2014; Staebler et al., 2011; Tragesser & Robinson, 2009; Zeigler-Hill & Abraham, 2006). Within the framework of the Five-Factor Model of personality, BPD and its associated traits are strongly linked to high neuroticism and moderately associated with low agreeableness, low conscientiousness, and high openness to experience (Mullins-Sweatt et al., 2012). Importantly, borderline traits can manifest at subclinical levels in the general population, where individuals may not meet full diagnostic criteria but nonetheless differ meaningfully from those low in such traits

(Fonseca-Pedrero et al., 2011). Accordingly, the present studies focused on borderline personality traits in the general population.

BPD is diagnosed more frequently in women than in men, with men who exhibit similar symptoms often being diagnosed with other disorders (e.g., antisocial personality disorder; Özel et al., in press). Gender differences in BPD symptom expression have been well-documented: men tend to display more intense anger and impulsivity, whereas women more often exhibit affective instability, suicidality, self-harm, and interpersonal turmoil (Qian et al., 2022). These gender differences extend to non-clinical samples, where women generally report greater affective instability, fear of abandonment, and relationship difficulties compared to men (Fonseca-Pedrero et al., 2011).

Individuals with BPD often report significant dissatisfaction in their romantic relationships, which are frequently characterized by poor communication, inadequate conflict management, and higher rates of intimate partner violence compared to the general population (e.g., Bouchard et al., 2009; Selby et al., 2008). These relational difficulties are predicted by borderline traits even after accounting for the influence of comorbid affective disorders such as major depression. Central to these difficulties are fears of abandonment or rejection (Hill et al., 2011), which can distort perceptions of partners and relationships. Individuals with BPD often view their relationships in extreme, dichotomous terms – experiencing them as either completely positive or completely negative – even during periods of low or absent interpersonal stress (Coifman et al., 2012). Such polarized thinking contributes to the relational instability that is a hallmark of BPD (APA, 2013). Consistent with this, Lazarus et al. (2020) found that individuals with elevated levels of borderline traits exhibit instability across multiple

dimensions of romantic relationships, including trust, commitment, and satisfaction, reflecting frequent and rapid shifts between idealization and devaluation.

The combination of rejection sensitivity, abandonment anxiety, and impulsivity associated with borderline traits may undermine the development of secure attachment styles and healthy communication strategies (Faraji & Başçelik Yavuz, 2023; Smith & South, 2020). These disruptions are often associated with feelings of loneliness and alienation, which can contribute to chronic dissatisfaction and a heightened risk of relationship dissolution (Di Bartolomeo et al., 2024). Prior research suggests that such interpersonal dysfunction may stem from earlier experiences of invalidation, which disrupt emotional regulation and interpersonal trust (Selby et al., 2008). Ultimately, the relational challenges faced by individuals with borderline traits – such as difficulties maintaining connection, instability in closeness, and diminished relationship satisfaction – may reflect a deeper and more pervasive sense that they do not matter to their partners. Taken together, the interpersonal instability, rejection sensitivity, and chronic fears of abandonment associated with borderline traits suggest that perceptions of whether one is valued and significant to others – that is, perceptions of *matter*ing – may be especially central to the interpersonal experiences of individuals high in these traits.

Mattering

Mattering refers to the perception that one is significant and important to others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Individuals who feel as though they matter believe that others depend on them, pay attention to them, and recognize their presence – often described as feeling “seen” or “heard” (Flett, 2022). Although mattering overlaps conceptually with other constructs such as belongingness, some researchers emphasize

that it extends beyond mere social connection to encompass the degree to which individuals feel valued and important within those connections (Casale & Flett, 2020).

Early conceptualizations treated mattering as a single continuum ranging from high levels to low levels (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). However, recent work suggests that low mattering may constitute a qualitatively distinct construct known as “anti-mattering” (Flett et al., 2022). Anti-mattering involves perceiving oneself as insignificant or unimportant to others. Although negatively correlated, the relationship between mattering and anti-mattering is not sufficiently strong to consider them direct opposites (Flett et al., 2023). Whereas mattering is associated with feelings of connection and reciprocity, anti-mattering is often linked with avoidance and withdrawal, serving as a defensive response to perceived neglect or rejection (Flett, 2022). These tendencies mirror patterns observed in rejection-sensitive individuals (Brookings et al., 2003), suggesting that mattering may be particularly salient for those prone to rejection sensitivity, such as individuals with borderline traits.

Mattering has been linked to greater satisfaction in romantic relationships (Mak & Marshall, 2004). This association aligns with related constructs such as belonging (Spielmann et al., 2012), perceived value (Lemay & Spongberg, 2014), and significance (Contu et al., 2024). Romantic partners experience high levels of mattering when they pay attention to and validate one another – behaviors that communicate recognition, importance, and love. Individuals who derive a sense of mattering from their relationships also tend to report higher levels of well-being (Paradisi et al., 2024), whereas low mattering predicts heightened attachment anxiety and avoidance (Ybarra &

Seedall, 2024). These patterns likely reflect persistent feelings of insecurity and insignificance for those who believe they do not matter to others (Flett et al., 2021).

A recent extension of this framework is the “fear of not mattering,” which refers to the anxiety that one may not matter – or may not matter enough – to others (McComb et al., 2020). This fear is negatively related to mattering and positively related to anti-mattering and loneliness (McComb et al., 2020). Those with BPD or its related traits often report chronic loneliness (Nenov-Matt et al., 2020), which may stem from both a low level of perceived mattering and a persistent fear of not mattering.

Research has also revealed gender differences in mattering. Women tend to report higher levels of mattering than men, although both men and women derive their sense of mattering from interpersonal relationships (Bonhag & Froese, 2022). The sources of mattering from these relationships differ, however; men most often experience it through romantic relationships, whereas women derive their sense of mattering from close friendships. Notably, no significant gender differences have been observed for anti-mattering (Flett et al., 2022).

The role of mattering in personality pathology remains understudied but theoretically compelling. Some scholars suggest that individuals high in narcissistic personality traits may exhibit an excessive, insatiable need to matter to others, driven by hypersensitivity to cues of being undervalued or disregarded by others (Flett et al., 2023). Their self-image depends heavily on continual validation and attention from others (Grapsas et al., 2020; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2018, 2019). Conversely, individuals with borderline traits may experience an equally intense need to matter, rooted not in self-enhancement, but in a pervasive fear of rejection and abandonment (Matthies et al.,

2018). Persistent deficits in perceived mattering may be conceptually consistent with theories emphasizing invalidation or neglect (Flett et al., 2022). Together, these perspectives suggest that mattering, as well as the absence of mattering, may play a central role in the interpersonal dynamics of those with borderline traits. Because mattering is fundamentally rooted in feeling noticed, valued, and acknowledged by others, processes that heighten sensitivity to rejection may be especially important for understanding when and why individuals come to feel that they do, or do not, matter.

Rejection

A central feature of borderline traits involves heightened sensitivity to rejection and its emotional consequences (e.g., Ayduk et al., 2008; Miano et al., 2013; Peters et al., 2015). Rejection sensitivity reflects a chronic tendency to anticipate rejection from others and to interpret ambiguous or neutral social cues as evidence of rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). This pattern is especially pronounced among individuals with histories of frequent or painful rejection (Rosenbach & Renneberg, 2014). People with borderline traits often ascribe great importance to these past experiences, continuing to experience distress long after the events themselves have passed, suggesting that preoccupation with rejection can become an enduring cognitive-emotional habit (Rosenbach & Renneberg, 2015).

Individuals high in borderline traits commonly display both heightened fear of rejection and strong emotional reactivity to perceived rejection (Staebler et al., 2011). Even when rejection is only imagined rather than real, they are more likely than others to respond with intense affective outbursts or hostility (Chapman et al., 2014). Such heightened sensitivity to perceived rejection – likely shaped by earlier experiences of

neglect and betrayal (Pietrzak et al., 2005) – may fuel dysfunctional expressions of anger and conflict, particularly in romantic relationships where emotional investment is high (Lazarus et al., 2018). In some cases, fear of rejection motivates avoidance strategies such as withdrawal or emotional distancing, serving as a defense against anticipated pain (Brookings et al., 2003). In other cases, individuals with borderline traits may attempt to maintain their attachment through mate retention behaviors, which include both benefit-provisioning behaviors (e.g., displaying affection) and cost-inflicting behaviors (e.g., prohibiting their partner from talking to opposite-sex friends) aimed at preventing rejection or abandonment (Zeigler-Hill & Vonk, 2023).

Some rejection-sensitive individuals continue to pursue closeness in hopes of finding validation and acceptance (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). However, these efforts can expose them to the risk of further rejection. Interestingly, even when others respond with genuine acceptance, individuals with borderline traits may struggle to internalize it fully, responding ambivalently or distrustfully due to the persistent expectation that rejection could still occur (Lazarus et al. 2018).

Although rejection sensitivity has not yet been tested as a predictor of mattering, there are compelling reasons to expect such a link. Flett (2022) argues that individuals with heightened rejection sensitivity or broader forms of interpersonal sensitivity are especially attuned to social cues indicating that they do not matter to others. This hypervigilance may lead them to place exaggerated importance on feeling valued or significant within relationships. Moreover, because rejection sensitivity is associated with deficits in belongingness (Gere & MacDonald, 2010) – a construct that underpins mattering (Prilleltensky, 2020) – it is plausible that rejection sensitivity will predict lower

feelings of mattering, particularly among individuals with borderline traits. These dynamics are likely amplified in romantic contexts, where self-worth and acceptance are deeply intertwined. Indeed, mattering has been found to correlate positively with feelings of love (Myers & Bechtel, 2004) and relationship satisfaction (Mak & Marshall, 2004), whereas rejection sensitivity tends to predict dissatisfaction and relational strain (Mishra & Allen, 2023). These findings suggest that heightened rejection-related interpretations of social interactions may play a key role in shaping perceptions of mattering among individuals with elevated borderline traits, underscoring the need for empirical work that directly examines these associations and their potential interconnections.

Taken together, existing research points to a coherent interpersonal process underlying borderline personality traits. Individuals high in these traits are chronically sensitive to rejection and are prone to interpreting ambiguous or neutral social cues as dismissive, excluding, or invalidating. Over time, these interpretations may erode perceptions of mattering by fostering beliefs that one is unimportant, invisible, or easily disregarded by others. Such disruptions in mattering are likely to be especially consequential for individuals whose sense of self-worth is closely tied to interpersonal validation. In this way, mattering may function as a central interpersonal mechanism linking borderline traits with both relational difficulties and emotional dysregulation.

Overview and Hypotheses

Guided by this interpersonal framework, the present research used a multi-study approach to examine whether borderline personality traits are associated with perceptions of mattering and to clarify the role of rejection-related processes in these associations. Rather than focusing exclusively on rejection sensitivity or interpersonal dysfunction, the

present research considers the connections that borderline personality traits have with mattering-related constructs. Across three studies, this work examined mattering at multiple levels of analysis, ranging from general perceptions of social significance (Study 1), to interpretations of ambiguous interactions within romantic relationships (Study 2), to daily fluctuations in mattering and emotional experience (Study 3).

From this perspective, borderline traits are expected to be systematically associated with how individuals perceive their social value and significance to others. Although it has been theorized that disruptions in mattering may be central to the interpersonal experiences of individuals with borderline traits, this possibility has not been directly tested. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were examined across the three studies.

Hypotheses 1a-1c: It was hypothesized that borderline traits would be negatively associated with mattering (Hypothesis 1a) and positively associated with both anti-mattering (Hypothesis 1b) and the fear of not mattering (Hypothesis 1c). Individuals with borderline traits are characterized by unstable relationships, emotional volatility, and a fragile, externally anchored sense of self (APA, 2013). These characteristics can significantly undermine the perception of being valued or seen as important by others. Because individuals with borderline traits often rely heavily on external validation for their feelings of self-worth (Unoka & Vizin, 2017), even subtle interpersonal slights can feel profoundly destabilizing. Moreover, their heightened interpersonal sensitivity may amplify tendencies to interpret ambiguous social cues as evidence of insignificance or unimportance (Sato et al., 2018). Collectively, these dynamics are expected to diminish

feelings of mattering while simultaneously increasing concerns about not mattering and perceptions of being unimportant.

Hypothesis 2: It was hypothesized that gender would moderate the associations that borderline traits had with mattering-related constructs, such that these associations would be stronger for women than for men. Although gender differences in mattering have been somewhat inconsistent, with women often reporting lower levels of mattering but similar levels of anti-mattering compared to men (Flett et al., 2022), several factors may intensify the connection between borderline traits and mattering among women. Affective instability, chronic feelings of emptiness, and interpersonal turmoil tend to be more pronounced in women with borderline traits (Bozzatello et al., 2024). These experiences likely heighten sensitivity to potential cues of devaluation and insignificance, making women with borderline traits potentially more vulnerable to disruptions in their sense of mattering. Socialization processes also contribute: women are typically encouraged to prioritize connection, affiliation, and social approval (Cross & Madson, 1997), all of which are conceptually linked to mattering (Nepon & Flett, 2024). As such, when relational bonds are threatened or fractured – a common occurrence for those high in borderline traits (Jeong et al., 2022) – women may be more inclined than men to internalize these experiences as indications that they do not matter. Together, these psychological and sociocultural factors suggest that the impact of borderline traits on mattering may be more pronounced for women.

Hypothesis 3: It was hypothesized that the link between borderline traits and mattering would be mediated by perceived rejection. Prior research has demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of borderline traits tend to exhibit elevated rejection

sensitivity – characterized by a heightened tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection (Sato et al., 2020). Importantly, individuals with borderline traits often misinterpret ambiguous or neutral social cues as signs of rejection, leading to a chronic perception of being unwanted or unvalued in their interpersonal environments (Sato et al., 2018). Repeated experiences of perceived rejection are likely to undermine one's sense of mattering, as feeling excluded or dismissed erodes confidence in one's social significance. Conceptually, mattering depends on perceiving that one is noticed, valued, and acknowledged by others (Flett, 2022). When rejection – whether real or perceived – is frequent, maintaining this belief becomes increasingly difficult. Accordingly, perceived rejection is expected to serve as a psychological mechanism linking borderline traits with diminished mattering.

Hypothesis 4: It was hypothesized that the relationship between borderline personality traits and daily emotional states may be mediated by perceived mattering. Although low mattering can elicit a complex mix of negative emotions in individuals with borderline traits, the current research focuses on *anger*, *fear*, *anxiety*, and *sadness*. Anger is particularly relevant because perceived invalidation may provoke intense anger directed outward ("Why don't they care about me?") or inward ("What's wrong with me?"; Sturrock & Mellor, 2014). This reaction often stems from feeling misunderstood, dismissed, or devalued. Fear and anxiety are also relevant, as feeling unimportant may reactivate fears of abandonment or loss of attachment. Likewise, sadness may reflect the pain of unmet belongingness needs and can be especially severe for individuals who already struggle with identity instability and chronic emptiness. Together, these emotional outcomes underscore the affective costs of low perceived mattering and

highlight its potential role in mediating the link between borderline traits and emotional dysregulation.

By examining how borderline traits relate to mattering, anti-mattering, and fear of not mattering, and by identifying rejection-related processes that may link these constructs, the present research aims to advance understanding of the interpersonal experiences that underlie emotional and relational difficulties associated with borderline personality traits.

STUDY 1: BORDERLINE TRAITS AND MATTERING

Previous studies have identified connections between certain personality traits (e.g., narcissism) and perceptions of mattering (e.g., Flett et al., 2023). However, no previous studies have examined whether borderline traits are associated with mattering-related constructs. Study 1 aimed to fill this gap by using a self-report design which examined whether borderline traits were associated with key aspects of mattering. It was hypothesized that individuals higher in borderline traits would report lower levels of general mattering and higher levels of both anti-mattering and fear of not mattering. In addition, gender was expected to moderate these associations, such that the relationships between borderline traits and mattering-related constructs would be stronger for women than for men.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 491 undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at Oakland University who participated in exchange for partial completion of a research participation requirement. All participants completed self-report measures assessing

borderline traits, perceived mattering, anti-mattering, and fear of not mattering through a secure online survey platform.

An a priori power analysis conducted using G*Power indicated that a minimum of 193 participants would be required to detect a small-magnitude association with 80% power at a 95% confidence level. The final sample substantially exceeded this threshold to increase statistical power for examining the moderating role of gender. Because interaction effects are often modest and difficult to estimate precisely (McClelland & Judd, 1993), a time-based stopping rule was implemented: data collection continued throughout a single academic semester to recruit as many participants as possible.

Data from 101 individuals were excluded based on pre-established criteria: missing more than 5% of responses ($n = 41$), failing two or more attention-check items ($n = 38$), being a univariate outlier on one or more variables ($n = 4$), completing the survey in less than 15 minutes ($n = 10$), and displaying an invariant response pattern ($n = 8$). The final sample consisted of 390 participants (285 female, 101 male, 3 non-binary/gender diverse, and 1 preferred not to say). Participants identifying as non-binary or gender-diverse ($n = 3$) were included in the correlational analyses but excluded from analyses involving gender as a moderator. The mean age was 19.78 years ($SD = 3.33$; range = 18-55 years). Reported racial/ethnic backgrounds of the sample were 65.6% White, 15.1% Black, 4.9% Hispanic, 5.1% Asian, and 9.2% identified with another racial/ethnic group.

Measures

Borderline traits. Borderline traits were measured using the Five Factor Borderline Inventory-Short Form (DeShong et al., 2016). This instrument consists of 48 items (e.g., “I feel like I don't belong to anyone”; $\alpha = .97$). Responses were provided

using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Responses were averaged such that higher scores reflected higher levels of borderline traits. This instrument has been found to possess adequate psychometric properties in previous studies (e.g., Ooi et al., 2020).

Mattering. The General Mattering Scale (Marcus, 1991) was used to measure mattering. This instrument consists of five items (e.g., “How important are you to others?”; $\alpha = .82$). Responses were provided using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). Responses were averaged such that higher scores reflected a higher level of mattering. The General Mattering Scale has been found to possess adequate psychometric properties in previous studies (e.g., Flett et al., 2023).

Anti-mattering. Anti-mattering was measured using the Anti-Mattering Scale (Flett et al., 2022). This instrument consists of five items concerning how much respondents feel like they do not matter to people (e.g., “How often have you been treated in a way that makes you feel like you are insignificant?”; $\alpha = .86$). Responses were provided using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a lot*). Responses were averaged such that higher scores reflected a higher level of anti-mattering. The Anti-Mattering Scale has been found to have adequate psychometric properties in previous studies (e.g., Flett et al., 2023).

Fear of not mattering. The fear of not mattering was measured using the Fear of Not Mattering Inventory (Flett, 2022). This instrument consists of five items concerning how much respondents worry about not mattering to people (e.g., “Are you afraid that you will not matter to other people?”; $\alpha = .93$). Responses were provided using a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*almost all of the time*). Responses were averaged such

that higher scores reflected a greater fear of not mattering. The Fear of Not Mattering Inventory has been found to have adequate psychometric properties in previous studies (e.g., McComb et al., 2020).

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for borderline traits and all three mattering constructs. Borderline traits had a large negative correlation with mattering and very large positive correlations with anti-mattering and fear of not mattering. Mattering had large to very large negative correlations with both anti-mattering and fear of not mattering. Finally, there was a very large positive correlation between anti-mattering and fear of not mattering.

This study also examined whether gender moderated the associations that borderline traits had with the mattering constructs. To accomplish this, three hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses were conducted. In each analysis, the main effects of borderline traits and gender (coded as -1 = female, $+1$ = male) were entered on Step 1, followed by the interaction term (borderline traits $\times$ gender) on Step 2. When significant interactions emerged, simple slopes analyses were performed using values one standard deviation above and below the mean of the predictor variable to interpret the nature of the interaction. That is, low levels of borderline traits were represented by a value that was one standard deviation below its mean, and high levels of borderline traits were represented by a value that was one standard deviation above its mean.

Table 1*Study 1: Descriptive Statistics.*

	1	2	3	4
1. Borderline Traits	—			
2. Mattering	-.36***	—		
3. Anti-Mattering	.56***	-.49***	—	
4. Fear of Not Mattering	.46***	-.35***	.63***	—
<i>Mean</i>	2.41	2.95	2.67	2.43
<i>Standard Deviation</i>	0.78	0.62	0.76	0.89

*** $p < .001$.**Mattering**

Both borderline traits ($B = -0.31$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -8.775$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.38, -0.24]$, $f^2 = 0.19$) and gender ($B = -0.15$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = -4.91$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.21, -0.09]$, $f^2 = 0.06$) were negatively associated with mattering, indicating that higher levels of borderline traits and being female were each associated with lower perceived mattering. However, the interaction between borderline traits and gender was not significant for mattering ($B = -0.07$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -1.74$, $p = .083$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.15, 0.01]$, $f^2 = 0.01$).

Anti-Mattering

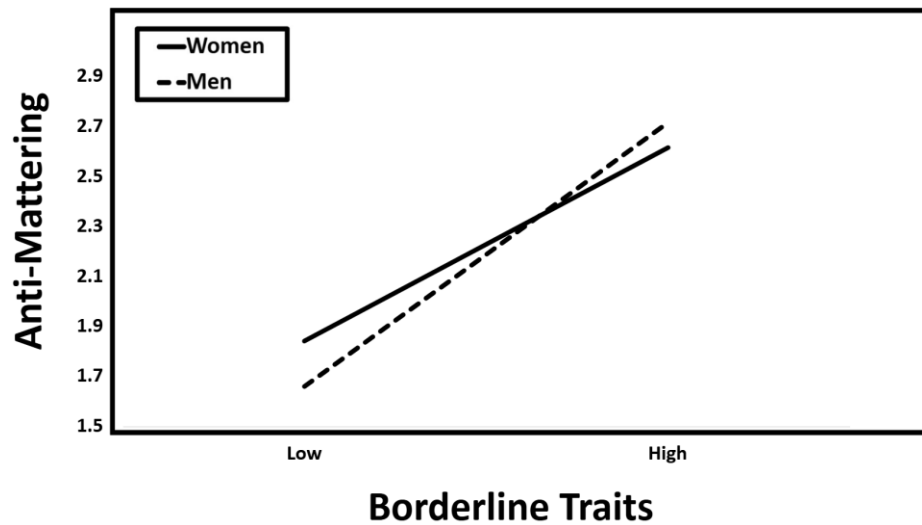
Borderline traits were positively associated with anti-mattering ($B = 0.55$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 13.64$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.47, 0.63]$, $f^2 = 0.44$), whereas gender was not associated with anti-mattering ($B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -0.52$, $p = .601$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.09, 0.05]$, $f^2 = 0.00$). A significant interaction between borderline traits and gender did emerge ($B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 1.98$, $p = .049$, $CI_{95\%} [0.00, 0.18]$, $f^2 = 0.01$). The predicted values for this interaction are presented in Figure 1. Follow-up simple slopes analyses revealed that there was a positive association between borderline traits and anti-mattering for women ($B = 0.46$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 7.69$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.35, 0.58]$, $f^2 = 0.15$), but the association was even stronger for men ($B = 0.62$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 11.50$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.52, 0.73]$, $f^2 = 0.35$).

Fear of Not Mattering

Borderline traits were positively associated with the fear of not mattering ($B = 0.58$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 10.75$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.47, 0.68]$, $f^2 = 0.26$), whereas gender was not associated with the fear of not mattering ($B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = -1.02$, $p = .309$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.14, 0.04]$, $f^2 = 0.00$). Likewise, there was no significant interaction between borderline traits and gender for fear of not mattering ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 1.01$, $p = .313$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.06, 0.18]$, $f^2 = 0.00$).

Figure 1

Study 1: Predicted values illustrating the interaction of borderline traits and gender for anti-mattering.



Discussion

The purpose of Study 1 was to establish whether borderline traits were associated with key mattering-related constructs. Consistent with Hypotheses 1A–C, borderline traits were negatively associated with general mattering and positively associated with both anti-mattering and fear of not mattering. These associations were large in magnitude, indicating that borderline traits are strongly linked to perceptions of social significance even within a nonclinical sample. Together, these findings provide the first empirical evidence that borderline traits are systematically connected to mattering-related perceptions.

Conceptually, these results suggest that interpersonal vulnerability in borderline traits extends beyond concerns about closeness or belonging to include doubts about

one's social value and significance to others. Individuals high in borderline traits may not only desire connection but may also experience persistent uncertainty about whether they are noticed, valued, or important within their relationships. The particularly strong association between borderline traits and anti-mattering is notable, as anti-mattering reflects experiences of being treated as invisible or irrelevant rather than simply feeling less connected. This pattern aligns with theoretical accounts emphasizing chronic invalidation and perceived neglect as central features of borderline pathology. In addition, the positive association between borderline traits and fear of not mattering suggests that interpersonal concerns may operate prospectively as well, such that individuals high in borderline traits remain vigilant to the possibility that their social significance could be withdrawn or undermined.

Study 1 also examined whether gender moderated the associations between borderline traits and mattering-related constructs. Gender moderated only the association between borderline traits and anti-mattering, such that this relationship was stronger for men than for women. Although this finding was contrary to expectations and the effect size was small, it raises the possibility that men with elevated borderline traits may experience heightened feelings of insignificance when their interpersonal needs are unmet. One potential explanation is that men may have fewer socially sanctioned opportunities to seek reassurance or validation (Mancini et al., 2025; Nordin et al., 2024), which could intensify perceptions of invisibility or irrelevance when relational difficulties arise. However, given the modest size of this effect and the gender imbalance in the sample, this finding should be interpreted cautiously and warrants replication in more gender-balanced samples.

Despite the strength of the observed associations, Study 1 was limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report measures. As a result, these findings do not clarify the processes through which borderline traits become linked to diminished mattering. In addition, mattering was assessed at a general level, without reference to specific interpersonal contexts. These limitations highlight the need to identify psychological mechanisms that may explain why individuals with higher levels of borderline traits come to experience lower perceptions of mattering.

Study 2 was designed to address this issue by examining perceived rejection as a potential mechanism linking borderline traits to diminished mattering within romantic relationships. Given that individuals high in borderline traits are especially prone to interpreting ambiguous interpersonal cues as rejecting, perceived rejection may play a key role in shaping beliefs about one's social significance. By focusing on interpretations of ambiguous romantic interactions, Study 2 aimed to clarify whether rejection-related processes help explain why borderline traits are associated with reduced feelings of mattering.

STUDY 2: INDIRECT ASSOCIATION BETWEEN BORDERLINE TRAITS AND MATTERING THROUGH PERCEIVED REJECTION

The goal of Study 2 was to explore whether borderline traits were indirectly associated with mattering through perceived rejection by a romantic partner. Research has shown that individuals with higher levels of borderline traits exhibit heightened rejection sensitivity, marked by anxiously anticipating, easily perceiving, and reacting intensely to perceived rejection (Miano et al., 2013; Rosenbach & Renneberg, 2014; Sato et al., 2020). A key feature of this sensitivity is the tendency to misinterpret ambiguous or

neutral social cues as rejection, which may lead individuals to feel unwanted or unvalued, even without clear evidence (Downey & Feldman, 1996). These misperceptions could erode the sense of mattering experienced by individuals with borderline traits, as repeated feelings of exclusion may undermine the belief that they are important or significant to their romantic partner (Prilleltensky, 2020). Mattering is based on being seen, valued, and acknowledged within one's social world. When perceived rejection is frequent or intense – which is common among those with borderline traits – it becomes difficult to maintain the belief that one matters. Thus, the tendency to interpret ambiguous behavior as indicators of rejection may help explain why borderline traits are linked to diminished feelings of mattering, as chronic rejection undermines the development of positive, validating social connections necessary for feeling valued.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 241 undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at Oakland University who participated in exchange for partial completion of a research participation requirement. All participants completed self-report measures of borderline traits as well as items following a series of vignettes concerning ambiguous interactions with their romantic partner. As in Study 1, a time-based stopping rule was implemented such that data collection continued throughout a single academic semester to recruit as many participants as possible. Data from 55 individuals were excluded based on pre-established criteria: missing more than 5% of responses ($n = 8$), failing two or more attention-check items ($n = 29$), completing the survey in less than 15 minutes ($n = 14$), and displaying an invariant response pattern ($n = 4$). The final sample consisted of 186

participants (153 female, 27 male, 5 non-binary/gender diverse, and 1 preferred not to say). Participants identifying as non-binary or gender-diverse ($n = 5$) were included in the correlational analyses but excluded from analyses involving gender as a moderator. Reported racial/ethnic backgrounds of the sample were 67.7% White, 12.9% Black, 2.7% Hispanic, 5.9% Asian, and 10.8% identified with another racial/ethnic group. The marital status of participants was 35.5% single, 4.4% casually dating, 55.7% seriously dating, 1.6% cohabiting, 0.5% engaged, 1.6% married, and 0.5% divorced. Relationship length ranged from 1 month to 14 years, with the average length being 23.62 months. Self-identified sexual orientations of the sample were 79.6% heterosexual, 5.4% homosexual, 12.4% bisexual, and 2.7% identified with another sexual orientation.

Measures

Borderline traits. Borderline traits were measured using the Five Factor Borderline Inventory-Super Short Form (DeShong et al., 2025). This instrument consists of 22 items (e.g., “I worry a lot about people leaving me” [$\alpha = .94$]). Responses were provided using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Responses were averaged such that higher scores reflected higher levels of borderline traits. This instrument has been found to possess adequate psychometric properties in previous studies (e.g., Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2024).

Hostile attributions in romantic relationships. Participants completed a modified version of the Hostile Attributions in Romantic Relationships Test (Li et al., 2024) to assess their perceptions of ambiguous interactions with a hypothetical romantic partner. The instrument consists of nine separate vignettes that involve the participant attempting to interact with their romantic partner resulting in an unexpected response

(e.g., “You make plans with your romantic partner to go on a short trip for the weekend. You’re very excited about these plans and have been looking forward to the trip. However, at the last minute, your romantic partner says that they no longer want to go on the trip and have made plans with a friend for the weekend.”). After each vignette, the participant was asked about their perceived rejection in the vignette (i.e., “How likely is it that you would feel rejected by your partner if this happened to you?” [$\alpha = .86$]). In addition, participants were asked about how much they would feel like they did not matter to their partner in each vignette (i.e., “How likely is it that you would feel like you did not matter to your partner if this happened to you?” [$\alpha = .88$]). Participants provided their responses to these items using scales that range from 0 (*not at all likely*) to 3 (*very likely*).

Results

Table 2 shows the descriptive and zero-order correlations for borderline traits, perceived rejection, and perceived lack of mattering. Borderline traits had large positive correlations with perceived rejection and lack of mattering. Perceived rejection had a very large positive correlation with perceived lack of mattering.

Results of the mediation analysis are presented in Figure 2. Borderline traits had a small positive association with perceived rejection ($a = 0.32$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 4.51$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.18, 0.45]$, $f^2 = .11$). Perceived rejection had a large positive association with perceived lack of mattering ($b = 0.85$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 22.52$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.77, 0.92]$, $f^2 = 2.77$). Borderline traits had a small positive total association with perceived lack of mattering ($c = 0.34$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 4.95$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.21, 0.48]$, $f^2 = .13$), which was reduced in magnitude but remained significant when the mediator was

included in the analysis ($c' = 0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 2.00$, $p = .047$, $CI_{95\%} [0.00, 0.15]$, $f^2 = .02$). Tests of mediation indicated that borderline traits had a positive indirect association with perceived lack of mattering through perceived rejection ($ab = 0.27$, $SE = 0.06$, $Z = 4.42$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.15, 0.38]$).

An analysis was conducted to determine whether gender moderated the indirect association that borderline traits had with perceived lack of mattering through perceived rejection. Results showed that gender did not moderate the associations that borderline traits had with perceived rejection ($B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 0.85$, $p = .398$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.12, 0.30]$, $f^2 = 0.00$) or lack of mattering ($B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 0.30$, $p = .765$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.09, 0.13]$, $f^2 = 0.00$). Further, the indirect association that borderline traits had with perceived lack of mattering via perceived rejection was not moderated by gender ($ab = 0.15$, $SE = 0.17$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.20, 0.47]$).

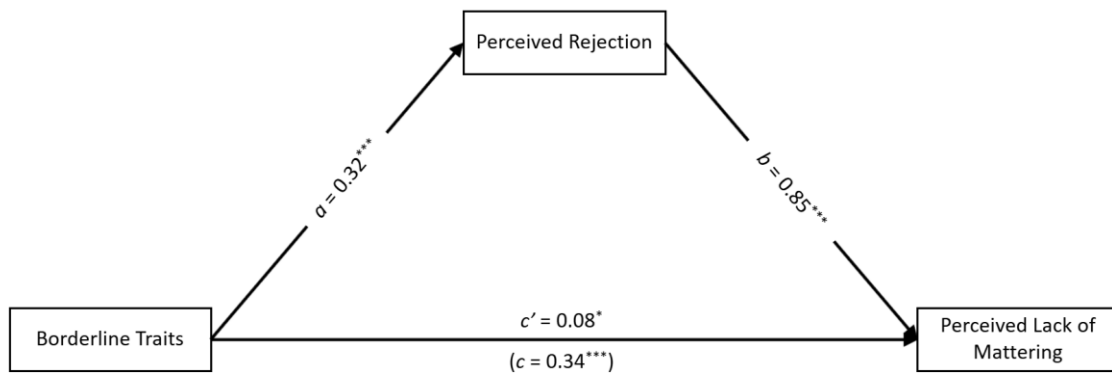
Discussion

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine whether perceived rejection helps explain the association between borderline traits and diminished perceptions of mattering within romantic relationships. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, individuals higher in borderline traits were more likely to interpret ambiguous romantic interactions as rejecting, and these perceptions of rejection were strongly associated with feeling that they mattered less to their partner. Mediation analyses indicated a significant indirect association, such that perceived rejection partially accounted for the link between borderline traits and perceived lack of mattering.

Table 2*Study 2: Descriptive Statistics*

	1	2	3
1. Borderline Traits	—		
2. Perceived Rejection	.32***	—	
3. Perceived Lack of Mattering	.34***	.87***	—
<i>Mean</i>	2.15	2.62	2.48
<i>Standard Deviation</i>	0.85	0.66	0.72

*** $p < .001$.

Figure 2*Study 2: Results of the mediation analysis*

Note. Solid black arrows indicate significant positive associations.

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

These findings are consistent with extensive prior research demonstrating heightened rejection sensitivity among individuals high in borderline traits (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Miano et al., 2013; Rosenbach & Renneberg, 2014), while also extending this literature by identifying mattering as a meaningful interpersonal consequence of rejection-related concerns. In doing so, Study 2 builds on the results of Study 1 by clarifying a plausible interpersonal process through which diminished mattering may emerge for those with elevated levels of borderline traits.

Conceptually, these results suggest that diminished mattering among individuals with elevated borderline traits may arise not solely from objective relational experiences, but from how interpersonal situations are interpreted. Individuals high in borderline traits are known to anxiously expect rejection and to assign threatening meanings to ambiguous social cues. When such interpretations occur repeatedly, they may accumulate into broader beliefs that one is unimportant, undervalued, or easily dismissed by others. In this way, perceived rejection may function as a cognitive–affective mechanism that undermines mattering by signaling to the individual that they do not hold meaningful social significance within their relationship.

The focus on romantic relationships is particularly relevant given the central role these relationships often play in providing validation, security, and emotional closeness. For individuals with borderline traits, romantic partners may represent a primary source of reassurance and belonging. As a result, ambiguous partner behaviors – such as changes in availability, responsiveness, or plans – may be especially likely to be interpreted as rejecting. These interpretations may carry disproportionate weight for perceptions of mattering, as romantic rejection can directly threaten beliefs about being valued or

important to a significant other. Thus, the romantic context may amplify the impact of rejection-related interpretations on perceived mattering.

Study 2 also explored whether gender moderated the indirect association between borderline traits and perceived lack of mattering through perceived rejection. No evidence of moderation emerged, suggesting that the rejection-related process linking borderline traits to diminished mattering may operate similarly across genders. However, the gender distribution of the sample was uneven, which limits the strength of conclusions that can be drawn regarding gender invariance. Future research using more gender-balanced samples is needed to more definitively evaluate whether gender shapes these processes.

Several limitations of Study 2 should be acknowledged. First, perceived rejection and mattering were assessed using hypothetical vignettes rather than real-life interactions, which may limit ecological validity. Participants' responses may reflect general expectations or past relational experiences rather than momentary reactions to actual partner behavior. Second, although the mediation model was theoretically grounded, the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes conclusions about temporal ordering. Nonetheless, these limitations do not detract from the central contribution of the study, which was to identify perceived rejection as a potential mechanism linking borderline traits to diminished mattering in an interpersonal context.

Taken together, the findings of Study 2 suggest that interpretations of interpersonal ambiguity play an important role in shaping beliefs about social significance among individuals with borderline traits. Study 1 demonstrated that borderline traits are associated with lower perceptions of mattering in general, and the

results of Study 2 extend this work by clarifying how these perceptions may emerge within romantic relationships. Building on this foundation, Study 3 examined whether mattering functions as a dynamic, state-level construct and whether daily fluctuations in mattering help explain the emotional instability commonly associated with borderline personality traits.

STUDY 3: BORDERLINE TRAITS, MATTERING, AND EMOTIONAL STATES

In order to understand the role that perceptions of mattering play in the connections between borderline traits and emotional experiences, Study 3 used a daily diary format that followed an individual's perceptions of mattering and their self-reported emotions each day for up to seven days. This study conceptualized mattering as a state construct that may change from day to day. Very little research exists about mattering as a state, and only one such study has utilized a daily diary format to track mattering (Guthrie et al., 2024). The goal of Study 3 was to further the understanding of mattering as a malleable construct and the role it plays in the daily emotional experiences of individuals with borderline personality traits. The current study uses a mediation model which suggests that borderline traits may have indirect associations with emotional states through perceived levels of mattering on a given day. Individuals with high levels of borderline traits are expected to report higher levels of negative emotions as a result of low levels of mattering.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 881 undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at Oakland University who participated in exchange for partial completion of a research

participation requirement. A time-based stopping rule was implemented for sampling, such that data were collected from as many participants as possible over the course of two academic semesters. All participants completed an initial measure of borderline traits at the beginning of the study as well as other instruments that are not relevant to the current study. Participants who completed this measure were considered for participation in additional daily measures that capture emotional states and mattering every evening for up to one week.

Data from 305 individuals were excluded based on pre-established criteria: failing to complete at least one of the daily measures ($n = 187$), failing two or more attention-check items ($n = 82$), being a univariate outlier on one or more variables ($n = 1$), completing the survey in less than 15 minutes ($n = 11$), or displaying an invariant response pattern ($n = 24$). The final sample consisted of 576 participants (435 female, 128 male, and 13 did not specify). The mean age was 19.56 years ($SD = 2.84$; range = 18-55 years). Reported racial/ethnic backgrounds of the sample were 65.8% White, 16.1% Black, 4.6% Hispanic, 5.9% Asian, and 7.6% identified with another racial/ethnic group. The marital status of participants was 56.4% single, 6.0% casually dating, 33.0% seriously dating, 2.1% cohabiting, 0.8% engaged, 1.6% married, and 0.1% divorced. Self-identified sexual orientations of the sample were 78.3% heterosexual, 5.9% homosexual, 11.9% bisexual, and 3.9% identified with another sexual orientation. These final participants contributed a total of 2,231 daily diary measures, which was an average of 3.87 daily diary measures for each participant.

Measures

Borderline traits. As in Study 1, the Five Factor Borderline Inventory-Short Form (DeShong et al., 2016) was used to assess borderline traits ($\alpha = .97$).

Daily perceptions of mattering. Daily perceptions of mattering were measured at the end of each day using a modified version of the 5-item General Mattering Scale (Marcus, 1991). This modified version of the General Mattering Scale involved prompting participants to provide the response that best characterizes how they felt at that particular moment and altering the wording of each item to focus on current perceptions of mattering rather than more general perceptions ($\alpha = .87$). For example, the item “How important do you feel you are to other people?” was modified to “How important do you feel you were to other people today?” Responses were made using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*).

Daily emotional states. Daily emotional states were assessed at the end of each day using a modified version of the Discrete Emotions Questionnaire (Harmon-Jones et al., 2016). In this modified version, participants were prompted to report the extent to which they experienced the following emotions over the course of the day: *anger* (4 items; i.e., “anger,” “rage,” “mad,” and “pissed off” [$\alpha = .90$]), *fear* (4 items; i.e., “fear,” “terror,” “scared,” and “panic” [$\alpha = .90$]), *anxiety* (4 items; i.e., “anxiety,” “dread,” “nervous,” and “worry” [$\alpha = .87$]), *sadness* (4 items; i.e., “sad,” “grief,” “lonely,” and “empty” [$\alpha = .85$]), *disgust* (4 items; i.e., “grossed out,” “nausea,” “sickened,” and “revulsion” [$\alpha = .82$]), *happiness* (4 items; i.e., “happy,” “satisfaction,” “enjoyment,” and “liking” [$\alpha = .83$]), *relaxation* (4 items; i.e., “relaxation,” “easygoing,” “chilled out,” and “calm,” [$\alpha = .83$]), and *desire* (4 items; i.e., “desire,” “wanting,” “craving,” and “longing”

[$\alpha = .82$]). Responses were provided using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*an extreme amount*).

Results

This study followed an indirect effects model, suggesting that the association between borderline traits and daily emotional states would be at least partially mediated by daily perceptions of mattering. To test this hypothesis, a multilevel mediation analysis was conducted using the MLMED macro (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020). This analysis was necessary due to the multilevel structure of the data, where responses about daily experiences were nested within individuals (Bauer et al., 2006). A 2-1-1 model was used, with borderline traits (the predictor variable) entered at Level 2. Daily perceptions of mattering (the mediators) and daily emotional states (the outcome variables) were entered at Level 1. Person-centering was applied to the mediators. To estimate indirect effects, Monte Carlo simulations were run with 10,000 resamples, generating 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Indirect effects were considered significant if the CIs did not contain zero.

Table 3 shows the descriptive and zero-order correlations for borderline traits, aggregated daily mattering, and aggregated daily emotional states. Consistent with the previous studies, borderline traits had a large negative correlation with mattering. Borderline traits had large positive correlations with all of the negative emotions (i.e., anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, and disgust) and moderate negative correlations with the positive emotions of happiness and relaxation. Borderline traits had a moderate positive correlation with desire. Mattering had negative correlations with all of the negative emotions that ranged in magnitude from small to large. Mattering had moderate positive correlations with happiness and relaxation, whereas it had a moderate negative

correlation with desire. ICCs suggested that mattering, negative emotions, and desire were predominantly characterized by between-person variance, whereas happiness and relaxation showed greater within-person variability, indicating more pronounced day-to-day fluctuations.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that borderline traits would have indirect associations with daily emotional states through daily mattering. For all analyses, between-person results indicated that borderline traits had a large negative association with daily mattering ($a = -0.33$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = -10.86$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.39, -0.27]$).

Table 3*Study 3: Descriptive Statistics.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Borderline Traits	—									
2. Mattering	-.34*	—								
3. Anger	.32*	-.23*	—							
4. Fear	.36*	-.20*	.66*	—						
5. Anxiety	.41*	-.26*	.58*	.73*	—					
6. Sadness	.43*	-.36*	.64*	.69*	.70*	—				
7. Disgust	.34*	-.19*	.69*	.70*	.55*	.64*	—			
8. Happiness	-.21*	.50*	-.17*	-.14*	-.26*	-.28*	-.07*	—		
9. Relaxation	-.23*	.36*	-.27*	-.26*	-.37*	-.28*	-.13*	.70*	—	
10. Desire	.26*	-.11*	.45*	.49*	.50*	.57*	.45*	.10*	.01	—
<i>Mean</i>	2.27	2.92	2.05	1.93	2.91	2.33	1.85	4.19	4.32	3.00
<i>Standard Deviation</i>	0.77	0.74	1.34	1.30	1.56	1.40	1.14	1.40	1.40	1.50
<i>ICC</i>	—	0.53	0.53	0.63	0.60	0.65	0.66	0.47	0.46	0.64

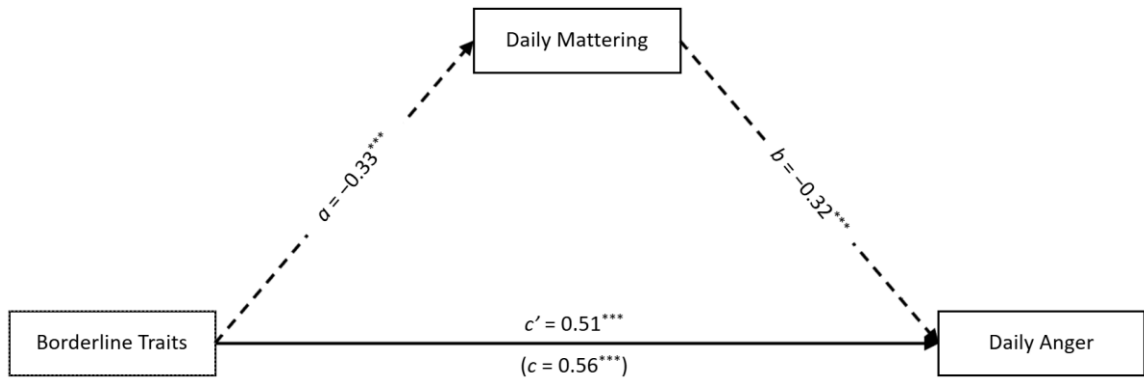
* $p < .001$.

Anger

Figure 3 shows the MLMED results for anger. Daily mattering had a negative association with daily anger ($b = -0.26$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -3.43$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.42, -0.11]$). Borderline traits had a positive total association with daily anger ($c = 0.56$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 15.91$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.49, 0.63]$), which was reduced in magnitude but remained significant when daily mattering was included in the analysis ($c' = 0.51$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 8.19$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.39, 0.63]$). Test of multilevel mediation indicated that borderline traits had a positive indirect association with daily anger through daily mattering ($ab = 0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, $Z = 3.26$, $p = .001$, $MCCI_{95\%} [0.04, 0.14]$).

Figure 3

Study 3: Results of the MLMED analysis for anger.



Note. Solid black arrows indicate significant positive associations. Dashed black arrows represent significant negative associations.

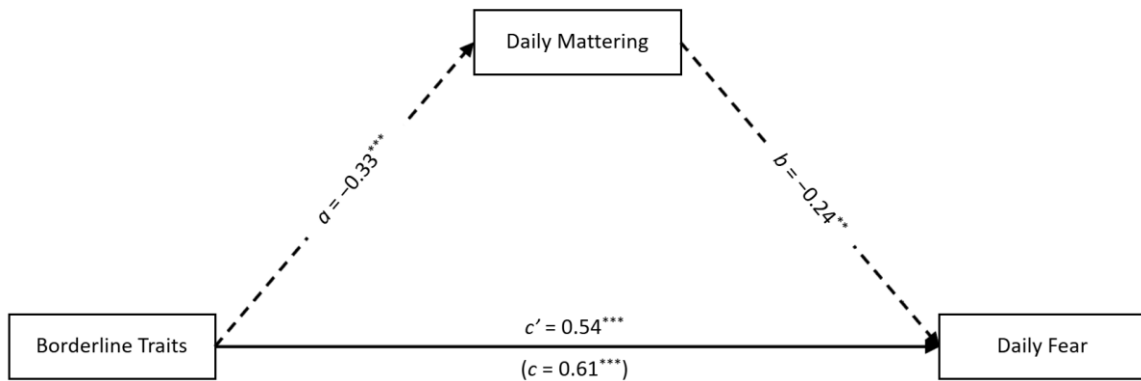
*** $p < .001$.

Fear

Figure 4 shows the MLMED results for fear. Daily mattering had a negative association with daily fear ($b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -2.96$, $p = .003$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.39, -0.08]$). Borderline traits had a positive total association with daily fear ($c = 0.61$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 18.19$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.55, 0.68]$), which was reduced in magnitude but remained significant when daily mattering was included in the analysis ($c' = 0.54$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 8.42$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.41, 0.67]$). Test of multilevel mediation indicated that borderline traits had a positive indirect association with daily fear through daily mattering ($ab = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $Z = 2.84$, $p = .005$, $MCCI_{95\%} [0.03, 0.13]$).

Figure 4

Study 3: Results of the MLMED analysis for fear.



Note. Solid black arrows indicate significant positive associations. Dashed black arrows represent significant negative associations.

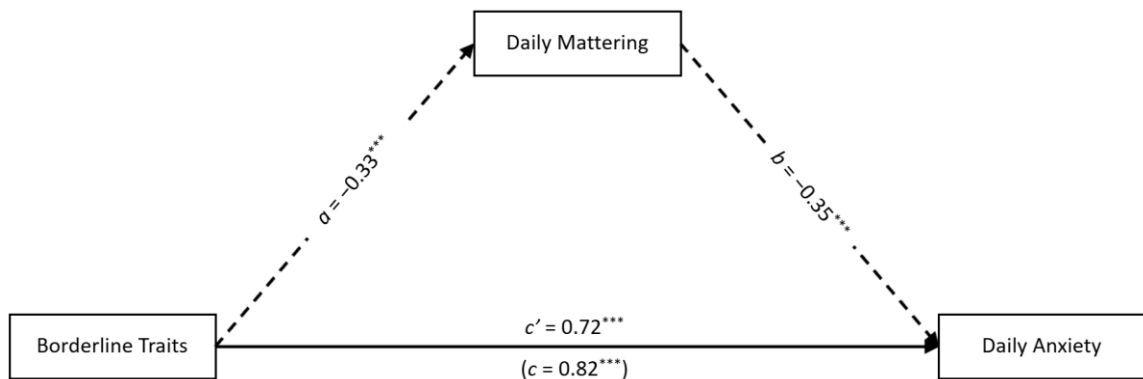
** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Anxiety

Figure 5 shows the MLMED results for anxiety. Daily mattering had a negative association with daily anxiety ($b = -0.35$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -3.93$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.52, -0.17]$). Borderline traits had a positive total association with daily anxiety ($c = 0.82$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 20.91$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.75, 0.90]$), which was reduced in magnitude but remained significant when daily mattering was included in the analysis ($c' = 0.72$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 10.03$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.58, 0.86]$). Test of multilevel mediation indicated that borderline traits had a positive indirect association with daily anxiety through daily mattering ($ab = 0.12$, $SE = 0.03$, $Z = 3.68$, $p < .001$, $MCCI_{95\%} [0.06, 0.18]$).

Figure 5

Study 3: Results of the MLMED analysis for anxiety.



Note. Solid black arrows indicate significant positive associations. Dashed black arrows represent significant negative associations.

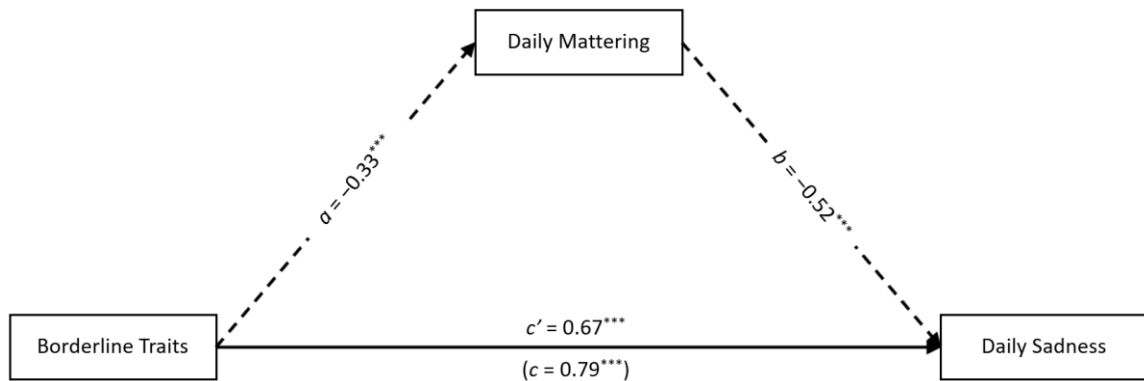
$^{***}p < .001$.

Sadness

Figure 6 shows the MLMED results for sadness. Daily mattering had a negative association with daily sadness ($b = -0.52$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -6.62$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.68, -0.37]$). Borderline traits had a positive total association with daily sadness ($c = 0.79$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 22.71$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.72, 0.86]$), which was reduced in magnitude but remained significant when daily mattering was included in the analysis ($c' = 0.67$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 10.60$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.55, 0.80]$). Test of multilevel mediation indicated that borderline traits had a positive indirect association with daily sadness through daily mattering ($ab = 0.17$, $SE = 0.03$, $Z = 5.63$, $p < .001$, $MCCI_{95\%} [0.12, 0.24]$).

Figure 6

Study 3: Results of the MLMED analysis for sadness.



Note. Solid black arrows indicate significant positive associations. Dashed black arrows represent significant negative associations.

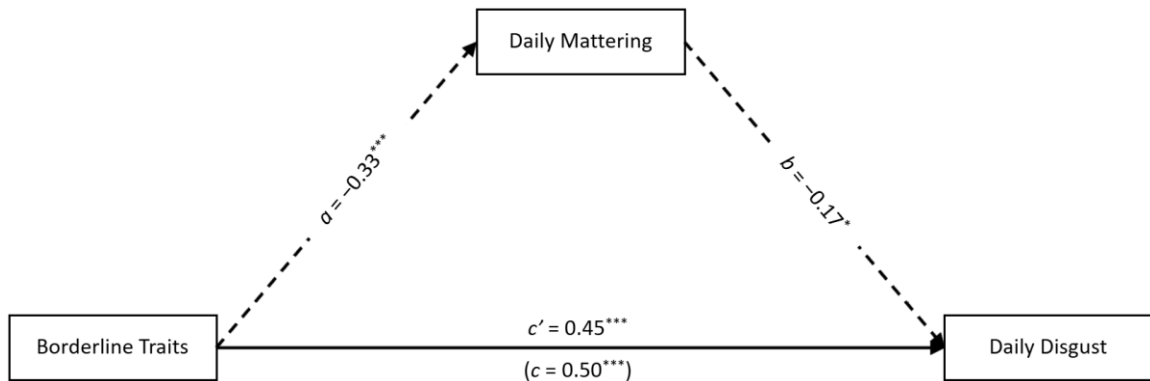
*** $p < .001$.

Disgust

Figure 7 shows the MLMED results for disgust. Daily mattering had a negative association with daily disgust ($b = -0.17$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = -2.36$, $p = .019$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.31, -0.03]$). Borderline traits had a positive total association with daily disgust ($c = 0.50$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 16.91$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.44, 0.56]$), which was reduced in magnitude but remained significant when daily mattering was included in the analysis ($c' = 0.45$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 7.68$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.34, 0.57]$). Test of multilevel mediation indicated that borderline traits had a positive indirect association with daily anger through daily mattering ($ab = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $Z = 2.29$, $p = .022$, $MCCI_{95\%} [0.01, 0.11]$).

Figure 7

Study 3: Results of the MLMED analysis for disgust.



Note. Solid black arrows indicate significant positive associations. Dashed black arrows represent significant negative associations.

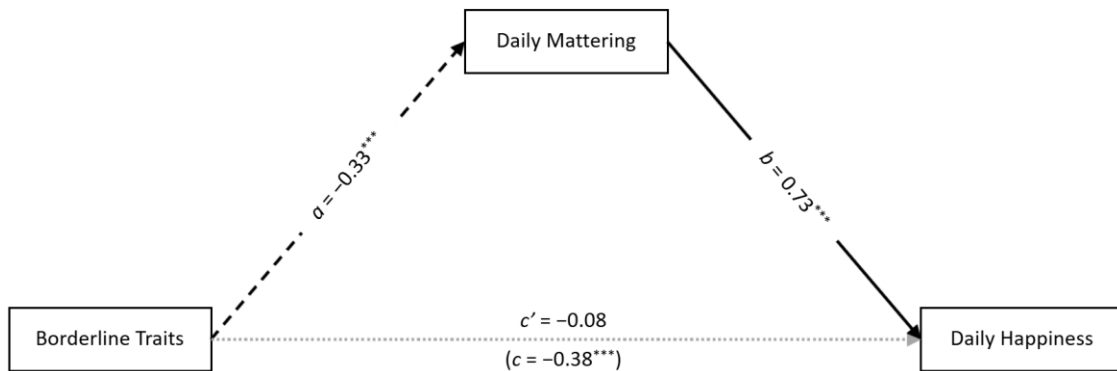
* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

Happiness

Figure 8 shows the MLMED results for happiness. Daily mattering had a positive association with daily happiness ($b = 0.73$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 14.51$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.64, 0.82]$). Borderline traits had a negative total association with daily happiness ($c = -0.38$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -10.06$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.46, -0.31]$), which did not persist when daily mattering was included in the analysis ($c' = -0.08$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -1.37$, $p = .171$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.19, 0.03]$). Test of multilevel mediation indicated that borderline traits had a negative indirect association with daily happiness through daily mattering ($ab = -0.34$, $SE = 0.04$, $Z = -8.68$, $p < .001$, $MCCI_{95\%} [-0.42, -0.26]$).

Figure 8

Study 3: Results of the MLMED analysis for happiness.



Note. Solid black arrows indicate significant positive associations. Dashed black arrows represent significant negative associations. Dotted grey arrows represent nonsignificant associations.

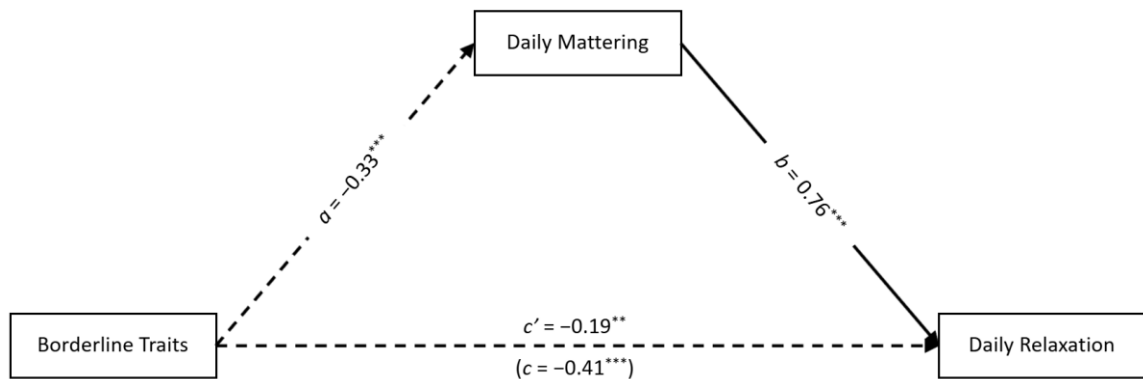
$^{***}p < .001$.

Relaxation

Figure 9 shows the MLMED results for relaxation. Daily mattering had a positive association with daily relaxation ($b = 0.76$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 10.29$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.62, 0.91]$). Borderline traits had a negative total association with daily relaxation ($c = -0.41$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -10.94$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.49, -0.34]$), which was reduced in magnitude but remained significant when daily mattering was included in the analysis ($c' = -0.19$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -3.14$, $p = .002$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.30, -0.07]$). Test of multilevel mediation indicated that borderline traits had a negative indirect association with daily relaxation through daily mattering ($ab = -0.25$, $SE = 0.03$, $Z = -7.45$, $p < .001$, $MCCI_{95\%} [-0.33, -0.19]$).

Figure 9

Study 3: Results of the MLMED analysis for relaxation.



Note. Solid black arrows indicate significant positive associations. Dashed black arrows represent significant negative associations.

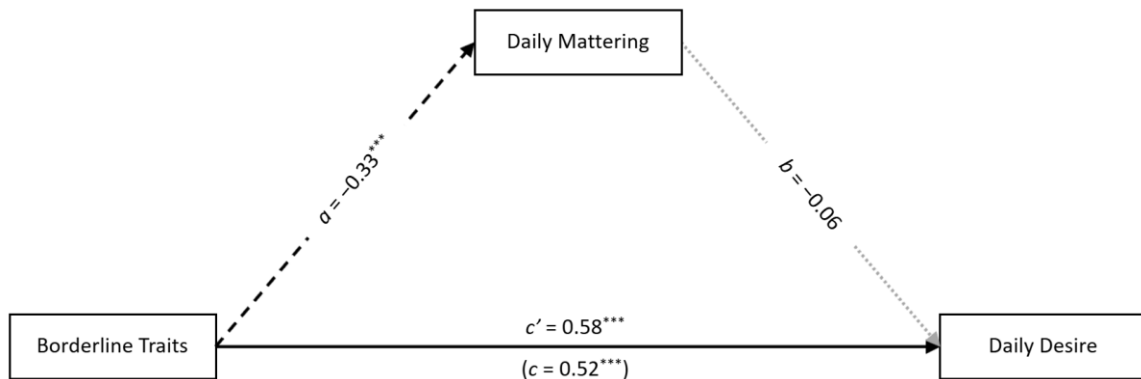
** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Desire

Figure 10 shows the MLMED results for desire. Daily mattering was not associated with daily desire ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = -0.61$, $p = .542$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.24, 0.13]$). Borderline traits had a positive total association with daily desire ($c = 0.52$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 12.94$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.44, 0.60]$), which was relatively unchanged when daily mattering was included in the analysis ($c' = 0.58$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 7.76$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} [0.43, 0.73]$). Test of multilevel mediation indicated that borderline traits did not have an indirect association with daily desire through daily mattering ($ab = 0.02$, $SE = 0.03$, $Z = 0.61$, $p = .544$, $MCCI_{95\%} [-0.04, 0.08]$).

Figure 10

Study 3: Results of the MLMED analysis for desire.



Note. Solid black arrows indicate significant positive associations. Dashed black arrows represent significant negative associations. Dotted grey arrows represent nonsignificant associations.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The purpose of Study 3 was to examine whether mattering operates as a dynamic, state-level construct and whether daily fluctuations in mattering help explain the emotional experiences associated with borderline personality traits. Extending the trait-level findings of Study 1 and the interpersonal mechanism identified in Study 2, this study demonstrated that mattering varies meaningfully from day to day and is associated with a broad range of emotional states. Individuals higher in borderline traits reported lower daily perceptions of mattering at the between-person level, and daily mattering showed substantial within-person variability, indicating that perceptions of social significance fluctuate in response to everyday experiences.

At the daily level, mattering was systematically related to emotional experiences. On days when individuals felt that they mattered less to others, they reported higher levels of negative emotions, including anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, and disgust, as well as lower levels of positive emotions such as happiness and relaxation. Moreover, daily mattering partially mediated the associations between borderline traits and these emotional states, suggesting that diminished perceptions of social significance may function as a proximal interpersonal regulator of emotion. These findings are consistent with theoretical models emphasizing the role of interpersonal validation and invalidation in emotional dysregulation, and they suggest that even short-term changes in mattering may have immediate emotional consequences for individuals high in borderline traits.

One notable exception to this pattern was desire. Although desire is often conceptualized as a positive emotional state, it was positively associated with borderline traits and negatively associated with daily mattering, aligning more closely with the

pattern observed for negative emotions. In addition, daily mattering did not mediate the association between borderline traits and desire. This finding suggests that desire may not uniformly reflect pleasure or reward in this context, but instead may capture longing or unmet interpersonal needs. For individuals who feel socially insignificant or undervalued, desire may reflect a heightened awareness of what is lacking rather than anticipation of positive outcomes. Although this interpretation is speculative, it highlights the importance of considering the subjective meaning of emotional states when examining daily emotional processes among individuals with elevated interpersonal vulnerability.

Several methodological considerations specific to Study 3 should be noted. The daily diary design represents a strength in that it captures within-person variability and reduces reliance on retrospective reporting. At the same time, the relatively brief assessment window and reliance on self-report measures limit conclusions about longer-term dynamics and the role of specific interpersonal events. In addition, mattering was assessed at the end of each day rather than in response to discrete interactions, which may obscure the temporal ordering of interpersonal experiences and emotional reactions. Future research would benefit from incorporating event-contingent designs or longer assessment periods to more precisely track how changes in mattering unfold over time.

Taken together, the findings of Study 3 extend the multi-level framework examined in the present research. Study 1 demonstrated that borderline traits are associated with diminished perceptions of mattering, and Study 2 identified perceived rejection as a mechanism through which these perceptions may arise within romantic contexts; building on this work, Study 3 shows that daily fluctuations in mattering are closely tied to emotional experience. These findings underscore the importance of

matter as a central interpersonal process linking borderline traits to emotional instability.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate whether borderline traits are meaningfully connected to perceptions of mattering – the perception that one is significant, valued, and noticed by others – and to examine how this connection unfolds across trait-level beliefs, interpersonal interpretations, and daily emotional experiences. Specifically, borderline traits involve more than a fear of rejection; they also involve a pervasive uncertainty about whether one matters at all. By examining mattering across general, romantic, and daily contexts, this work aimed to examine whether mattering is a central interpersonal construct that drives the emotional instability and relational insecurity characteristic of borderline traits.

Borderline traits may involve more than heightened sensitivity to exclusion. They may also reflect chronic uncertainty about one's social value. Across three studies, we tested the idea that diminished perceptions of mattering – and heightened anti-mattering and fear of not mattering – are central to the interpersonal and emotional experiences of individuals higher in borderline traits. These findings established the central conclusion that individuals higher in borderline traits experience diminished perceptions of mattering.

Study 1 demonstrated significant associations between borderline traits and mattering-related constructs. Individuals higher in borderline traits reported lower general mattering as well as higher anti-mattering and fear of not mattering. Elements of these trait-level associations were similar across Studies 2 and 3, reinforcing the idea that

matter-related concerns operate consistently across contexts. Beyond establishing novel associations, these findings broaden how interpersonal vulnerability in borderline traits can be conceptualized. The observed pattern of associations is theoretically consistent with core features of borderline pathology, including heightened interpersonal difficulties (Foxhall et al., 2019), fear of abandonment (Hill et al., 2011), and the need to belong (Sato et al., 2020). The findings suggest that perceptions of mattering, including perceived significance and visibility, may be an equally important psychological process. That is, individuals high in borderline traits may not only fear losing relationships, but also question whether they truly matter within them. A similar process has been discussed in existing literature that suggests that mere social inclusion is not enough to allay feelings of rejection or negative emotions among individuals with high levels of borderline traits (De Panfilis et al., 2015).

Study 2 extended this work by examining how diminished mattering may emerge within romantic contexts. Individuals higher in borderline traits were more likely to interpret ambiguous romantic scenarios as indicative of rejection. These perceptions of rejection helped explain reduced feelings of mattering within romantic relationships. Borderline traits appear to be characterized by cognitive-affective processes that shape how individuals interpret and respond to ambiguous interpersonal cues, particularly those involving the possibility of rejection. When faced with uncertainty regarding a romantic partner's motives or intentions, individuals higher in borderline traits may be more likely to infer rejection, which, in turn, undermines their sense of significance to their partner. Thus, diminished mattering may not simply be a static belief; it may be continually constructed through biased interpersonal interpretations. This finding clarified how

diminished mattering may develop in romantic contexts, highlighting rejection sensitivity as a pathway through which borderline traits may affect perceptions of mattering.

Study 3 further extended this framework by conceptualizing mattering as a state-level construct and examined its role in daily emotional life. Using a daily diary design, results suggested that perceptions of mattering fluctuate from day to day. These daily fluctuations in mattering were meaningfully associated with daily emotional states, including anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, disgust, happiness, and relaxation. Moreover, daily mattering mediated the associations between borderline traits and emotional experiences. These findings suggest that affective instability may be partly grounded in shifting perceptions of social value. When individuals perceive that they matter less on a given day, they tend to experience more negative affect. When they perceive that they matter more, they often report experiencing more positive affect.

Taken together, these studies form a coherent progression. At the trait level, borderline traits are linked to diminished mattering as well as heightened anti-mattering and fear of not mattering. At the interpretive level, borderline traits shape how ambiguous interpersonal cues are construed, increasing perceived rejection and diminishing perceptions of mattering in romantic relationships. At the daily level, fluctuations in perceived mattering correspond to fluctuations in emotional experience.

The present findings refine our theoretical understanding of mattering-related constructs by demonstrating that, although they are related, they are not interchangeable. Borderline traits were associated with all three constructs – mattering, anti-mattering, and fear of not mattering – yet each reflects a distinct form of interpersonal vulnerability. Borderline traits were linked to lower levels of mattering, which refers to the perceived

sense of being significant and important to others. Low mattering captures doubts about one's interpersonal value. However, borderline traits were also associated with anti-mattering, a construct that reflects perceived invisibility or insignificance and represents more than simply the absence of mattering. Rather than indicating reduced feelings of importance, anti-mattering captures the experience of being actively overlooked or irrelevant. In addition, borderline traits were related to fear of not mattering, which reflects anticipatory anxiety about losing one's social value. This construct is future-oriented and centers on concerns that one's significance to others may diminish or disappear. Taken together, these findings indicate that borderline traits are associated with multiple, conceptually distinct dimensions of mattering-related vulnerability: current doubts about significance (low mattering), perceived invisibility (anti-mattering), and anxiety about potential loss of interpersonal value (fear of not mattering).

These mattering constructs are also separate from similar experiences such as rejection or belonging. Rejection concerns exclusion or being pushed away from a relationship, whereas belonging concerns inclusion and acceptance within a relationship. Mattering, in contrast, reflects whether one is important, valued, and impactful in the lives of others. An individual may feel included yet still perceive themselves as interchangeable or insignificant. Thus, mattering addresses not simply whether one is accepted, but whether one has value. The present findings suggest that borderline traits are associated not only with concerns about exclusion, but also with deeper anxieties about personal significance. This distinction extends existing models focused on rejection sensitivity by suggesting that individuals with elevated borderline traits may be attuned not only to the threat of exclusion, but also to the possibility of being perceived as

insignificant or unimportant to others. In other words, the interpersonal vulnerability associated with borderline traits may involve more than concerns about being rejected; it may also reflect heightened sensitivity to cues that one lacks value, visibility, or importance within close relationships.

Additionally, mattering may be especially important because it is more directly tied to identity. Rejection is often event-based, and belonging reflects inclusion within a group or relationship, but mattering concerns one's perceived value and significance. Therefore, mattering is inherently self-evaluative, making deficits particularly consequential for individuals with elevated borderline traits who may experience instability in their sense of self, or who derive their sense of self from external sources such as relationships (Wilkinson-Ryan & Westen, 2000).

Emotional dysregulation, a defining feature of borderline traits, may be grounded in interpersonal perceptions of social value. That is, emotions may not fluctuate randomly, but in response to perceived changes in social value. Fluctuations in mattering may function as interpersonal triggers. A perceived drop in mattering as a result of feeling ignored or unimportant may elicit a variety of responses, including sadness in response to perceived insignificance or anxiety in anticipation of further loss of significance. Daily desire, on the other hand, may represent a special case. Rather than reflecting positive affect, desire may indicate unmet interpersonal needs, such as longing for reassurance, closeness, or validation when mattering feels uncertain.

Across studies, evidence for the moderating role of gender was mixed, and if existent, was small in magnitude. It is possible that socialization processes shape how individuals experience and express concerns about mattering. Norms surrounding

validation, reassurance-seeking, and emotional expressiveness may differ across genders, potentially influencing how mattering-related concerns manifest. However, the present findings do not provide strong or consistent evidence for gender differences, likely due to the gender imbalance in the undergraduate student samples. Future research using larger and more gender-balanced samples is necessary to clarify whether gender meaningfully moderates the association between borderline traits and mattering.

Mattering-related constructs may capture an important aspect of interpersonal vulnerability in borderline traits. Assessing mattering, anti-mattering, and fear of not mattering could provide clinicians with insight into patients' concerns about social significance in addition to fears of rejection. Clinically, the findings suggest that individuals with elevated borderline traits may benefit from therapy that directly address experiences of feeling seen, valued, and significant. Interventions may focus on identifying and challenging biased interpretations of ambiguous interpersonal cues or differentiating between reassurance, which may temporarily reduce the fear of rejection, and fostering genuine experiences of significance, which can enhance mattering. Helping individuals recognize and manage perceived threats to their social value may reduce emotional volatility and interpersonal conflict.

Several limitations of the studies should be considered. First, all three studies relied on U.S. undergraduate student samples, limiting generalizability to other age groups and cultural contexts. Emerging adulthood is a developmental period characterized by identity exploration, heightened relational instability, and strong sensitivity to peer evaluation, all of which may intensify concerns about social value and mattering (e.g., Baggio et al., 2017; Jones & Rozenman, 2025). As such, the associations

observed in the present studies may be amplified in college-aged samples. Conversely, mattering concerns may manifest differently across the lifespan when social roles and sources of validation shift. As for cultural contexts, the samples were drawn from a predominantly Western, individualistic cultural context in which personal validation may be especially central to self-concept. In more collectivistic cultural settings, perceptions of mattering may be grounded instead in fulfilling relational roles or obligations.

A related limitation concerns the use of subclinical samples to assess borderline traits. Although assessment of borderline traits in subclinical samples enhances relevance to broader populations, there is no evidence whether these findings can generalize specifically to individuals diagnosed with BPD. It is possible that mattering-related concerns in clinical populations are not only stronger in magnitude, but also more rigid.

Second, all studies relied on self-report methods, which may introduce response bias. Study 2, specifically, relied on hypothetical vignettes to assess perceived rejection and mattering, which may limit ecological validity. Participants' responses may not fully reflect how they would react in real-life relationships, particularly for those not currently in romantic relationships. Study 3 addressed this limitation in part by capturing daily experiences; however, the time frame remained short. In addition, participants were instructed to complete the survey at approximately the same time each day – ideally in the evening to capture a full day's experiences – but adherence to this schedule could not be guaranteed, potentially introducing additional variability into daily reports.

Future research should examine these processes in clinical samples to determine whether mattering-related concerns are amplified among individuals diagnosed with BPD. Importantly, a variety of study designs should be considered to address the

limitations of the current research. Longitudinal designs, for example, could assess the concerns that arise from chronic low mattering. Similarly, event-contingent designs may help capture moment-to-moment shifts in mattering following specific interpersonal events.

Additionally, future research would benefit from examining mattering across multiple relationship contexts, such as within family relationships or friendships. Though feelings of mattering may be especially contingent on romantic partners, especially among those high in borderline traits, perceptions of mattering within friendships, family relationships, or workplace dynamics may be shaped by different expectations.

Finally, integrating mattering into more models of personality pathology may offer important conceptual insights. Diminished perceptions of mattering may be relevant to other forms of personality pathology characterized by interpersonal insecurity, hypersensitivity to evaluation, or unstable self-concept. For example, individuals with elevated avoidant personality traits may experience chronic doubts about their social value, leading them to withdraw from relationships to avoid perceived inadequacy. In contrast, individuals with elevated histrionic personality traits may pursue attention and approval as a way of affirming their significance. Examining these distinctions may clarify how similar vulnerabilities surrounding social significance give rise to various interpersonal strategies across personalities.

Overall, across three studies, the present research provides strong evidence that borderline traits are closely and consistently linked to mattering. Individuals higher in borderline traits report lower mattering, higher anti-mattering, and greater fear of not mattering. They are more likely to interpret ambiguous interpersonal cues as rejecting,

which may undermine their sense of significance, and their daily emotional experiences fluctuate alongside their perceptions of mattering. Understanding borderline traits, therefore, requires asking the central question of whether one matters to others. By establishing social significance as a central interpersonal concern, this work expands current models of borderline traits and highlights mattering as a critical construct for future theoretical, empirical, and clinical work.

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Appendix

IRB Approval



Date: December 19, 2024

Study #: IRB-FY2022-44

Study Title: Personality and Motivation F21

Submission Type: Modification

IRB Decision: Approved

Research Team:
Virgil Zeigler-Hill

The IRB has reviewed the Modification submission related to the above referenced study and determined that the changes listed below do not affect the exemption status of the study. The Modification submission is Approved and the study remains Approved per federal regulations.

The approved modifications are the following:

- Increase enrollment from 3000 participants to 4000 participants
- Revision to Survey

You are approved to implement the aforementioned modifications. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records.

This letter can also be found in Cayuse under the Letters tab in the Submission Details page.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB