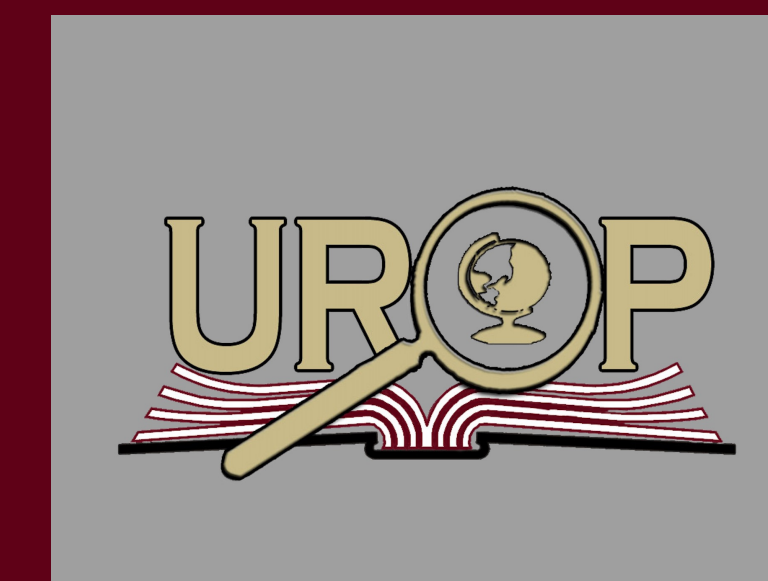




# Fight or Flight: Examining Social Media as a Mediator for Attachment Security and Internal Stress

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## INTRODUCTION

- Perceptions of romantic relationship quality are associated with individuals' health and wellbeing across the lifespan (Langlais et al., 2016; Viejo et al., 2015).
- Maintaining a high-quality romantic relationship can be challenging due to partners needing to be considerate of themselves, their partner, and the goals of their relationship.
- Because humans are, by nature, self-interested, prioritizing partner- or relationship-oriented goals can create internal stress (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).
- Correspondingly, couples who experience internal stress are at heightened risk for reductions in relationship quality (Breitenstein et al., 2017; Ledermann et al., 2010).
- It remains imperative to identify characteristics that are most likely to predict internal stress in order to promote high quality relationships.
- Individuals with insecure attachment orientations – high in attachment anxiety or avoidance – are at heightened risk for experiencing internal stress and stress-related reductions in relationship quality.
- A potential variable that could impact internal stress in a relationship is social media.
- Studies have shown that certain behaviors on social media, such as stalking and excessive posting, can lead to internal stress (Seidman et al., 2019).
- Therefore, the goal of this study is to understand how attachment anxiety and avoidance impacts internal stress in relationships, and whether or not social media mediates this relationship.

## HYPOTHESES

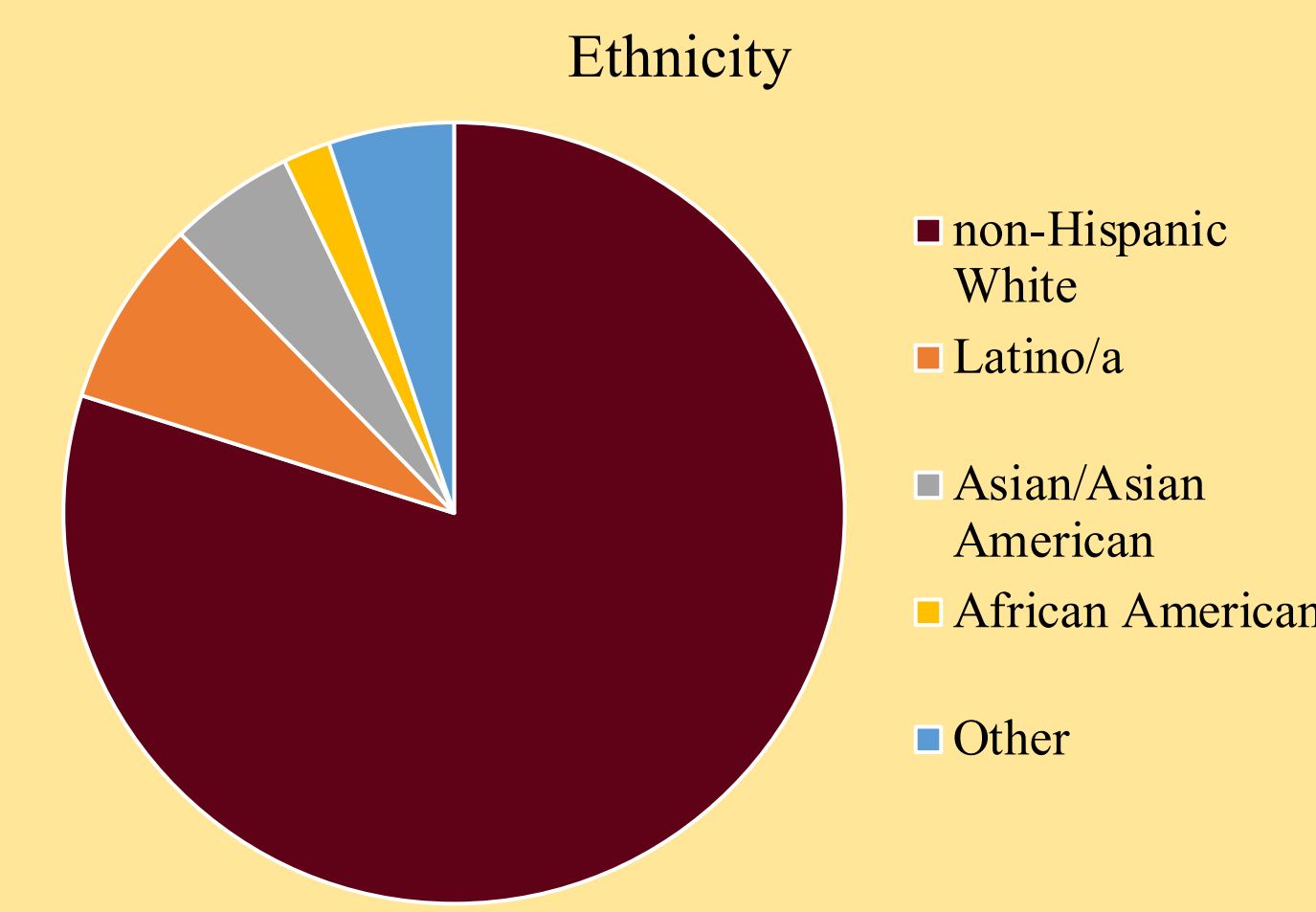
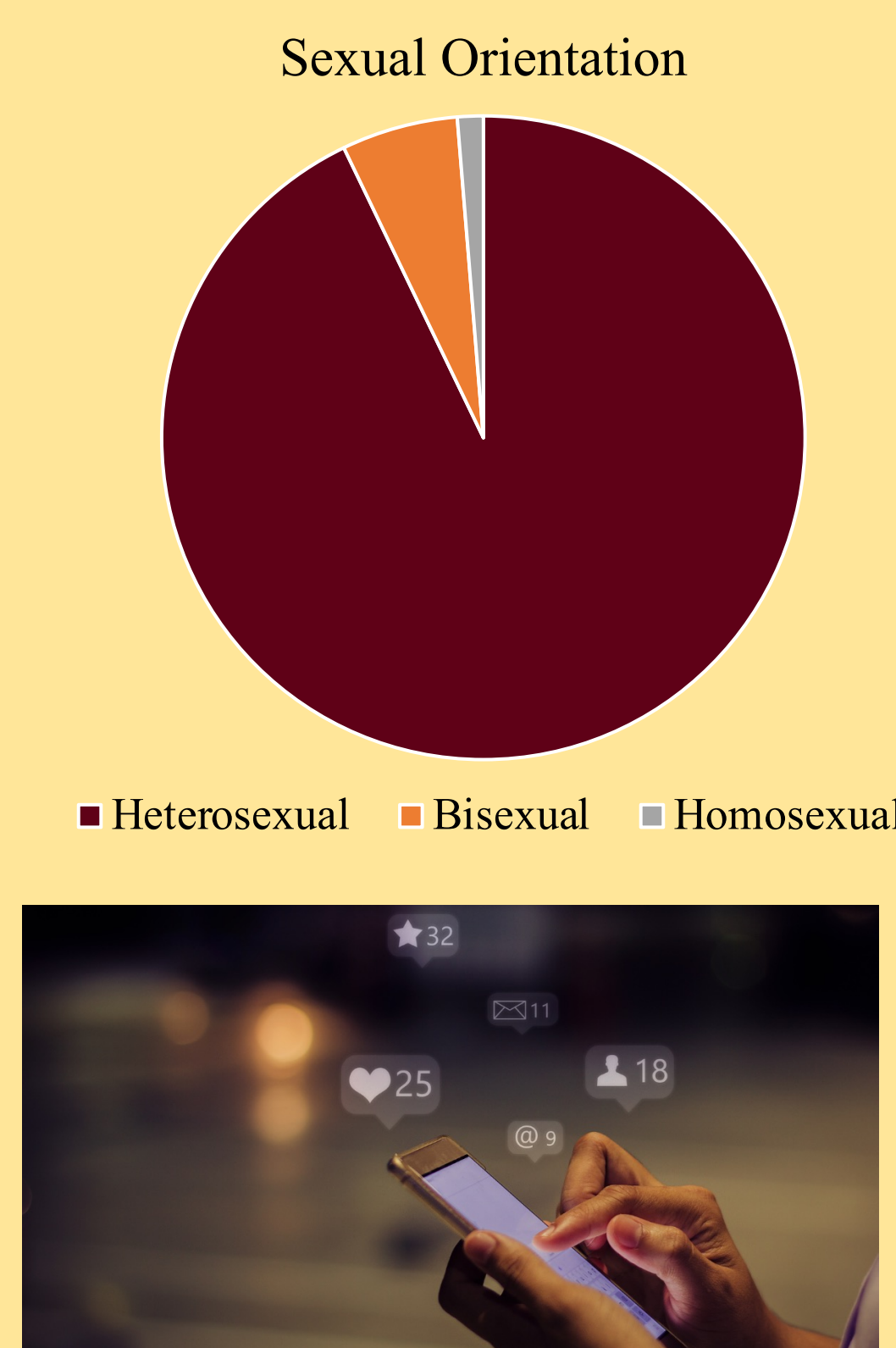
- Hypothesis 1:** Individuals who are insecurely attached will experience heightened internal stress across consecutive days
- Hypothesis 2a:** Individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety would spend more time on social media, which would result in greater experiences of internal stress over two consecutive days
- Hypothesis 2b:** Individuals with higher levels of attachment avoidance would experience higher levels of internal stress, but this stress would not be indirectly explained through more time on social media

## METHODS

- This study used a daily diary approach to collecting data.
- Eligibility criteria required that participants were at least 18 years old and had at least one active social media account.
- If deemed eligible, the research team responded to each recruited participant by detailing the procedures of the study and a four-digit code that participants would use for each daily online survey, which would help organize the data by participant.
- Participants were sent a link to complete a daily survey shortly after 9:00 pm in the time zone in which they were recruited.
- Participants were asked to respond to the surveys before going to sleep that night, or first thing in the morning when they woke up.
- The first daily survey (day 1, or "baseline") was a 30-minute survey assessing self-reported demographics, attachment style, and relationship quality.
- Participants then completed a brief 15-minute survey for nine consecutive days that asked about social media use and stress in their romantic relationships (as well as other variables not associated with the current investigation).

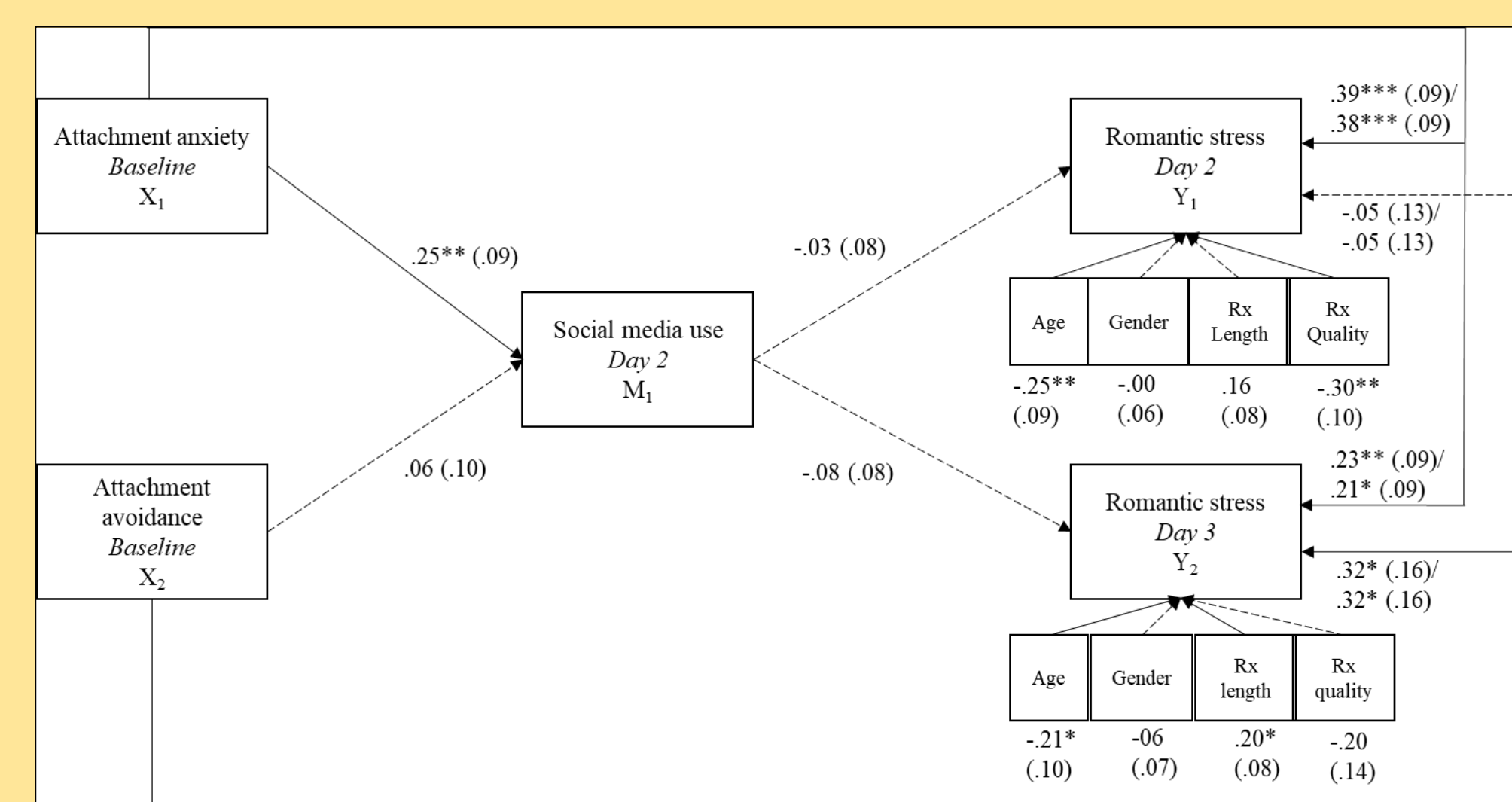
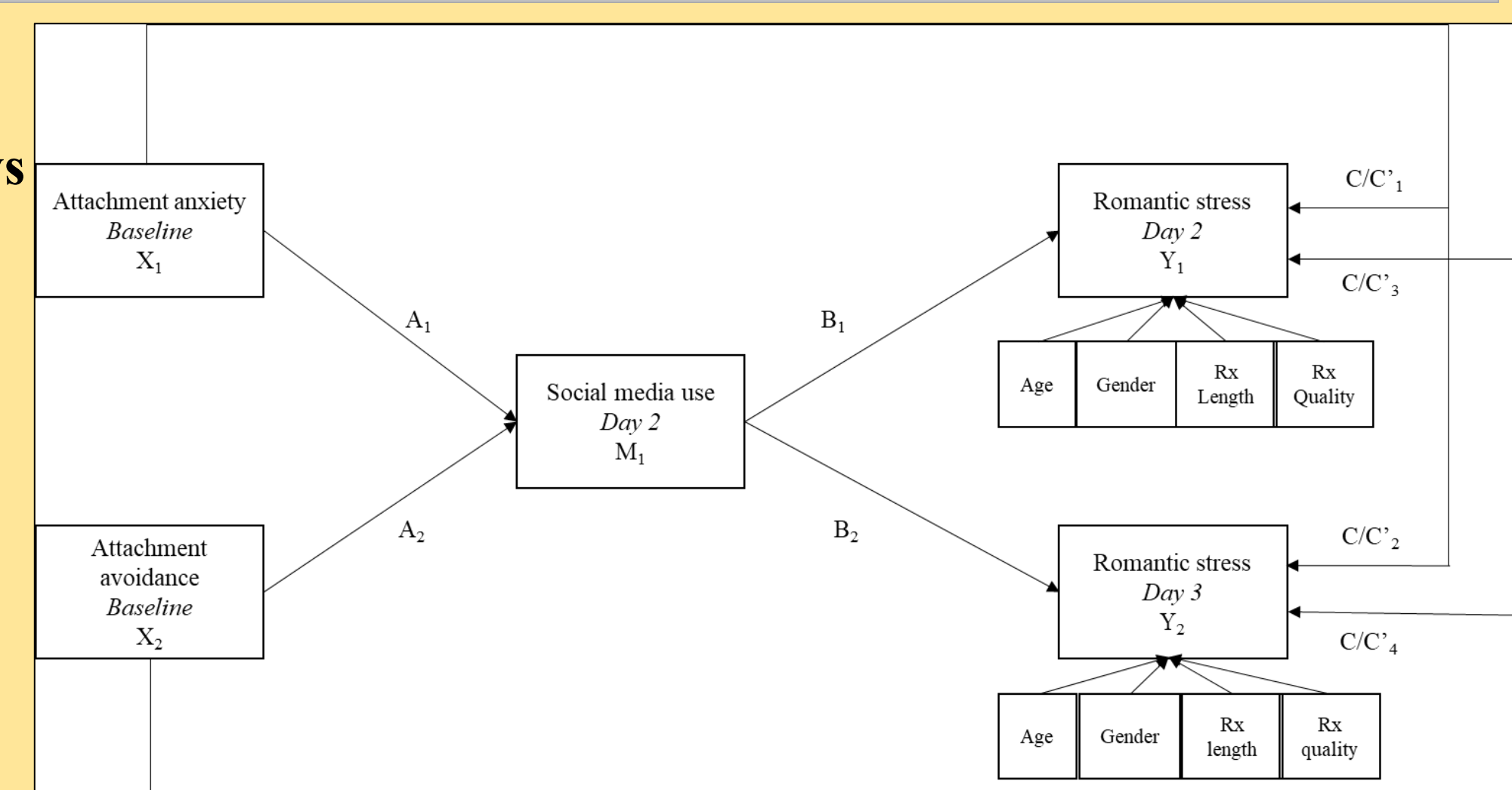
## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were recruited in the Midwest and Southwest United States from online advertisements on Facebook or announcements by faculty within selected departments, resulting in a mixture of college students and community participants ( $N = 154$ ; 76.6% female and 23.4% male).
- Participants ranged in age from 18 to 68 years ( $M = 28.03$ ,  $SD = 10.25$ ).
- The average relationship length was 6.15 years ( $SD = 7.07$  years,  $range =$  less than one month to 43 years).



## RESULTS

This figure displays the hypothetical model, with attachment predicting social media use on Day 2, which predicts romantic stress on Day 2 and Day 3.



This figure displays the results, which shows that attachment anxiety predicts social media use on Day 2; however social media use did not mediate the relationships between attachment and stress.

## RESULTS CONTINUED

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study Variables ( $N = 154$ ).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Attachment Anxiety	3.38	1.21	1.17 - 6.83	---	.38**	.41**	.35**	.27**	-.16
2. Attachment Avoidance	2.09	1.04	1.00 - 5.50		---	.24**	.48**	.16	-.61**
3. Internal Stress - Day 2	1.39	.46	1.00 - 3.33			---	.55**	.13	-.28**
4. Internal Stress - Day 3	1.35	3.48	1.00 - 3.67				---	.06	-.38**
5. Social Media Use - Day 2	88.41	79.20	5.00 - 510.00					---	-.08
6. Relationship Quality	6.06	.92	2.56 - 7.00						---

Note: Attachment security is measured on a scale of 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating more anxiety or avoidance. Stress is measured on a scale of 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating more stress. Social media use is measured in minutes. Relationship quality is measured on a scale of 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating higher relationship quality. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

This table reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations for all study data. Stress is on a scale of 1 to 4, with four reporting higher levels of stress. Attachment is measured on a scale of 1 to 7, with higher score indicated more insecure attachment. Participants averaged 88 minutes of social media use on Day 2.

Table 2  
Tests of Indirect Effects for Path Analysis Models ( $N = 154$ ).

Paths	Direct	Mplus estimate of indirect effects		
		Total	Indirect	95% CI Indirect
Attachment anxiety → Social media use → Internal stress (Day 2)	.39*** (.09)	.38*** (.09)	-.01 (.02)	-.05 - .03
Attachment anxiety → Social media use → Internal stress (Day 3)	.23** (.09)	.21* (.09)	-.02 (.02)	-.06 - .02
Attachment avoidance → Social media use → Internal stress (Day 2)	-.05 (.13)	-.05 (.13)	-.00 (.01)	-.02 - .02
Attachment avoidance → Social media use → Internal stress (Day 3)	.32* (.16)	.32* (.16)	-.01 (.01)	-.03 - .02

Note: Attachment anxiety and avoidance were measured at the initial "baseline" assessment. Social media use was measured on day 2. Mplus estimates of indirect effects reflect standardized coefficients. CI = confidence interval. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

This table shows significant direct effects between anxiety and internal stress on Day and Day 3. Attachment avoidance was directly related to stress on Day 3, but not Day 2. No significant indirect effects were found.

## DISCUSSION

- Both attachment anxiety and avoidance were positively associated with individuals' experiences of daily internal stress across two consecutive days.
- These findings are in line with prior research noting that those with attachment anxiety are more likely to report greater personal distress (e.g., stress, jealousy, conflict) concerning a romantic partner over consecutive days, potentially from not feeling enough closeness
- No significant indirect concurrent or lagged effects were found; both attachment anxiety and avoidance did not predict internal stress via social media use on days 2 or 3.
- This lack of significance was surprising given previous research that has found excessive social media use a distraction from meaningful relational interactions and decreases in relationship certainty.
- One possible explanation for the null result could be explained by how this was measured, only examining three days worth of data due to inconsistencies.
- One of the main limitations was that the use of primarily college students enrolled in psychology courses in the United States, and the snowball sampling technique.
- Future directions include testing the proposed model of attachment insecurity and experiences of daily internal stress via social media with a dyadic sample that can account for both partners' attachment styles and social media use behaviors over a longer span of time.

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