

## THE ROLE OF ANTI-MATTERING IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES: DECISION RUMINATION AS A MEDIATOR OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

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### ABSTRACT

Perceived relational insignificance (anti-mattering) is associated with depression, anxiety, and stress, yet the cognitive mechanisms sustaining this relationship remain unclear. This study examined decision-related rumination as a mediating pathway between anti-mattering and psychological distress in a sample of 205 adults recruited via Prolific. Participants completed measures of anti-mattering, fear of not mattering, decision rumination, and psychological distress (DASS-21). Bootstrapped mediation analyses revealed that decision rumination partially mediated the anti-mattering–distress relationship, accounting for approximately 26% of the total effect. Younger adults and ethnic minority participants reported elevated distress and rumination. These findings suggest that feeling insignificant to others promotes maladaptive decision-focused overthinking, which in turn amplifies psychological distress, identifying rumination as a promising intervention target for individuals high in anti-mattering.

**Keywords:** anti-mattering, rumination, distress, well-being, insignificance

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Psychological distress has increased substantially over the past decade, with marked elevations in depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress-related impairment among young adults (Flett & Nepon, 2019; Giangrasso et al., 2021). Emerging adulthood is a developmental period characterized by identity formation, relational evaluation, and consequential decision making—may amplify vulnerability to these outcomes (Shafiq et al., 2024). While loneliness and social isolation have received considerable scholarly attention, evidence suggests that perceived insignificance, defined by experiencing feelings that one does not matter to others, may represent a distinct and underexamined psychological risk factor.

Mattering refers to the perception that one is noticed, valued, and relied upon in interpersonal relationships (Elliott et al., 2005). Higher perceived mattering is associated with lower loneliness and greater psychological well-being, underscoring its protective factor against psychological distress (Dadafar et al., 2020). In contrast, anti-mattering reflects the subjective experience of insignificance and social invisibility (Flett, 2021). Rather than simply representing low feelings of mattering, anti-mattering captures the felt absence of interpersonal value and demonstrates predictive power for psychological distress above and beyond general mattering (Giangrasso et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). Empirical findings have linked anti-mattering to elevated loneliness, depressive symptoms, anxiety, reduced life satisfaction, and

increased risk for suicidal ideation (Giangrasso et al., 2021; McComb et al., 2020; Tonini et al., 2025; Etherson et al., 2024; Shafiq et al., 2024).

Where anti-mattering reflects experienced insignificance, fear of not mattering reflects the anticipatory insecurity regarding one's social value. McComb et al. (2020) describes fear of not mattering as “a ruminative preoccupation about the threat of the depreciation of one’s worth or value to others and the loss of important social relationships or resources” (p. 3), highlighting its repetitive and threat-focused cognitive quality. Therefore, anti-mattering represents the felt experience of relational devaluation, whereas fear of not mattering reflects ongoing cognitive vigilance about the potential loss of social value. Together, these constructs suggest that perceived insignificance may function as both a current emotional state and as a long-term cognitive vulnerability.

Longitudinal evidence further supports the vulnerability framework. Bidirectional associations between anti-mattering and depression indicate that perceived insignificance and distress mutually reinforce one another over time (Krygsman et al., 2022). These findings suggest that repeated experiences of relational insignificance are associated with negative self-evaluation and elevated emotional distress, may signal disruption in core self-evaluation and regulatory processes. Perceiving oneself as insignificant may weaken self-worth, diminish perceived agency, and undermine confidence in one’s capacity to influence relational or environmental outcomes, thereby compromising resilience, motivation, and adaptive functioning.

Although anti-mattering has been conceptualized as a vulnerability factor, vulnerability alone does not explain how distress manifests psychologically. Clarifying this pathway requires identifying the cognitive processes that maintain and amplify relational threat. Rumination is a well-established transdiagnostic mechanism implicated in depression and anxiety characterized by repetitive self-focused thinking that prolongs distress. Within the mattering research, diminished mattering is consistently associated with maladaptive processing of interpersonal feedback. Flett and Nepon (2019) note that individuals low in mattering “perceive and report a history of receiving unsupportive feedback” and respond in ways that “prolong or exacerbate distress” ( pp. 671–672). Similarly, Etherson et al. (2024) observe that individuals high in anti-mattering are likely to “draw upon and ruminate about their past interpersonal encounters and experiences that fail to elicit a sense of care and affection” (p. 728). These findings suggest that experiences in relational devaluation may be cognitively rehearsed in a way that intensifies and sustains emotional vulnerability.

Existing research has not directly examined decision-related rumination as a specific pathway linking anti-mattering to psychological distress. Decision rumination involves persistent, repetitive thinking about decisions and their perceived consequences, including second-guessing, counterfactual comparison, regret, and self-criticism. Decision rumination differs from general rumination in both content and function. General rumination centers on mood states and global distress, while decision rumination involves evaluation and reflection on choices and their perceived implications for identity and future outcomes. It is future-oriented, choice-focused, and inherently self-evaluative, making it particularly relevant during periods of identity consolidation. This specificity supports its examination as a distinct cognitive process rather than a redundant variant of general rumination.

During emerging adulthood, decisions concerning education, relationships, and career trajectories contribute substantially to identity consolidation (Shafiq et al., 2024). When concerns about mattering are salient, these decisions may carry higher personal stakes, increasing the likelihood that individuals will revisit alternatives, anticipate regret, and hesitate to commit. Fragile self-acceptance may filter decisions through doubts about worthiness; diminished agency may amplify concerns about competence; compromised autonomy may render choices externally constrained; limited adaptability may also transform uncertainty into emotional overwhelm. Consequently, weakened self-system capacities may be associated with greater decision rumination.

Achievement-focused and performance-driven environments may further intensify this process. Socially prescribed perfectionism—defined as the belief that others require perfection of oneself, which reflects a context in which relational value is perceived as contingent upon performance (Etherson et al., 2024, p. 726). Individuals who perceive others as excessively demanding often report heightened feelings of not mattering (Etherson et al., 2024). In such contexts, decisions may function not merely as behavioral choices but also as implicit evaluations of self-worth. Feelings of marginality have been shown to undermine perceived competence and likelihood of success, whereas mattering itself serves a motivational function (Goodman, 2024; Tonks et al., 2020). Thus, when relational significance is uncertain, decisions may become psychologically loaded events in which perceived value appears at risk.

From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, anti-mattering can be conceptualized as a schema-level belief about the self in relation to others (Krygsman et al., 2022). When activated, this schema may lead individuals to interpret ambiguous outcomes as evidence of their insignificance. Decision-related uncertainty may trigger automatic thoughts centered on inadequacy or anticipated rejection. Repetitive cognitive review may initially serve as an attempt to regain certainty or restore control. However, such rumination may reinforce doubt and negative self-appraisals, maintain heightened emotional arousal and contribute to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

This proposed pathway differs from loneliness-based models. Loneliness reflects a perceived lack of connection, whereas anti-mattering reflects a perceived lack of significance. The latter may be more directly linked to identity evaluation and therefore more strongly associated with evaluative cognitive replay. Identifying decision rumination as a mediating pathway advances mattering theory by providing a process-level explanation for how perceived insignificance contributes to sustained psychological distress. The present study tested a cross-sectional mediation model examining whether decision rumination may statistically account for the association between anti-mattering and psychological distress. It was hypothesized that higher anti-mattering would be associated with greater decision rumination and elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, and that decision rumination would partially mediate the association between anti-mattering and psychological distress. The potential contribution of the role of fear of not mattering was also examined.

## 2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Participants

Participants were recruited through the Prolific platform, an online research participant recruitment service. Eligibility criteria included being a U.S. resident, ages 18 to 65 years, fluent in English, and having an active Prolific account with internet access. A target sample of 200 participants was established based on a priori power analysis using G\*Power, which determined that a minimum of 77 participants would be required to detect a medium effect size ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ) in a multiple regression with three predictors at  $\alpha = 0.05$  and power = 0.80. The larger sample size was selected to provide adequate power for mediation analyses and to account for potential attrition.

## 2.2 Measures

**Anti-Mattering Scale.** The AMS (Flett et al., 2016) is a five-item self-report measure assessing feelings of insignificance and being invisible to others. Items are rated on a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater feelings of anti-mattering. Internal consistency reliability analyses indicated excellent reliability for the Anti-Mattering scale ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and very good reliability for the Decision Rumination scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Fear of Not Mattering Inventory.** The FNMI (Flett et al., 2022) is a five-item scale measuring anxiety related to perceived insignificance and the fear of losing one's importance in the eyes of others. The measure uses a Likert-type response format, with higher scores reflecting greater fear of not mattering. Previous research has established strong reliability for this instrument.

**Decision Rumination Subscale.** This seven-item subscale from the Decision-Specific Reinvestment Scale (DSRS; Kinrade, Jackson, & Ashford, 2010) assesses persistent negative thoughts about past decisions. Respondents rate items on a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater decision-related rumination. The DSRS exhibited strong coherence ( $\alpha = .88$ ), appropriate for inferential analysis.

**Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21.** The DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) is a validated 21-item self-report questionnaire that measures symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress over the past week. The measure yields three subscale scores (depression, anxiety, and stress) as well as a total psychological distress score. Items are rated on a 4-point severity scale. The DASS-21 has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across diverse populations. The DASS-21 scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .71$ ).

**Demographic Questionnaire.** Participants completed brief demographic questions assessing age, gender, ethnicity, and education level.

## 2.3 Procedure

The study was conducted entirely online through the Prolific platform. Eligible participants viewed the study listing on their Prolific dashboard, which included a brief description of the study, estimated completion time (15-20 minutes), and compensation amount (\$2.00 USD). Participants who chose to participate clicked the study link and were directed to a secure Qualtrics survey.

The first page of the survey presented an online informed consent form that explained the study's purpose, procedures, time commitment, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality

protections, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were required to electronically agree to the consent form before proceeding.

After providing informed consent, participants completed the demographic questionnaire followed by the four psychological measures (AMS, FNMI, Decision Rumination subscale, and DASS-21).

Upon completion, participants viewed a debriefing page that explained the study goals in accessible language and provided mental health resources, including the 988 Crisis Line and other national and international support services. Participants received \$2.00 compensation via Prolific upon survey completion. Those who chose to withdraw early received full compensation if they notified the researcher or followed the exit instructions. The study involved a single session with no follow-up procedures.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and ranges) were computed for all primary variables. Data was assessed for normality and outliers. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha for each scale.

Bivariate correlational analyses using Pearson correlation coefficients to assess the relationships among anti-mattering, fear of not mattering, decision rumination, and psychological distress. Hierarchical linear regressions examined whether anti-mattering and fear of not mattering significantly predicted DASS-21 scores above and beyond demographic covariates (age and gender).

Mediation analyses using bootstrapped procedures tested whether decision rumination mediated the relationship between anti-mattering (and fear of not mattering) and psychological distress. Indirect effects such as AMS → Rumination → DASS-21 were tested, with the significance of indirect effects determined via bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals.

## 2.5 Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Chaminade University of Honolulu Institutional Review Board (Protocol #25-07-041). All participants provided informed consent electronically before beginning the survey. No personally identifying information was collected from participants. Prolific IDs were used temporarily for compensation verification but were not retained in the final dataset used for analysis. All data were stored securely on encrypted, password-protected university servers accessible only to approved research team members. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty and were provided with mental health resources both in the consent form and debriefing page.

## 3.0 RESULTS

Pearson correlations revealed significant positive associations among all study variables. Anti-mattering was positively correlated with decision-related rumination,  $r(203) = .47, p < .001$ , and psychological distress (depression  $r = .54$ , anxiety  $r = .47$ , stress  $r = .56$ ; all  $p < .001$ ).

Decision-related rumination was also positively correlated with all distress measures ( $r = .44-.49$ , all  $p < .001$ ).

Simple linear regression indicated that anti-mattering significantly predicted decision-related rumination,  $\beta = .47$ ,  $t(203) = 7.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .22$ ,  $F(1, 203) = 58.6$ ,  $p < .001$ . Anti-mattering also significantly predicted each dimension of psychological distress: depression,  $\beta = .54$ ,  $t(203) = 9.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .29$ ; anxiety,  $\beta = .47$ ,  $t(203) = 7.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .22$ ; and stress,  $\beta = .56$ ,  $t(203) = 9.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .31$ .

Mediation analysis using bootstrapped regression procedures with 5,000 samples examined whether decision-related rumination mediated the anti-mattering–distress relationship. The total effect of anti-mattering on overall psychological distress was significant,  $b = .56$ ,  $p < .001$ . When decision-related rumination was included as a mediator (path  $b = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the direct effect of anti-mattering on distress remained significant but was reduced,  $b = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating partial mediation. The indirect effect through decision-related rumination was significant,  $b = .15$ , 95% CI [.08, .21], accounting for approximately 26% of the total effect.

Exploratory analyses revealed no significant gender differences on any variable ( $p > .42$ ). However, age differences emerged, with younger participants (18–24 years) reporting significantly higher rumination ( $M = 2.50$ ) and stress ( $M = 3.09$ ) than older participants (55+ years: rumination  $M = 1.78$ , stress  $M = 1.52$ ),  $F(4, 200) = 3.95$ ,  $p = .005$  for rumination;  $F(4, 200) = 8.55$ ,  $p < .001$  for anxiety. Ethnic minority participants, particularly Asian and Hispanic respondents, reported significantly higher depression ( $M = 2.3-2.4$ ) and anxiety ( $M = 2.0-2.8$ ) compared to White participants (depression  $M = 1.39$ , anxiety  $M = 1.42$ ),  $p < .01$ . Anti-mattering levels did not differ significantly by age or ethnicity.

#### 4.0 DISCUSSION

Anti-mattering predicted both decision-related rumination and psychological distress, with rumination serving as a partial mediator. Individuals who feel insignificant engage in excessive decision-related overthinking, likely due to self-doubt stemming from perceived invisibility. This identifies rumination as a cognitive mechanism linking feeling unimportant to daily functioning impairments.

The partial mediation reveals that feeling invisible leads to overthinking decisions, which exacerbates emotional distress. This empirically connects self-perceptions of not mattering to maladaptive decision processing and mental health outcomes, filling a critical gap in the literature.

Clinically, decision-related rumination represents a viable intervention target. Cognitive-behavioral techniques (e.g., mindfulness, metacognitive therapy) may interrupt rumination cycles and mitigate anti-mattering-related distress. Interventions enhancing sense of mattering may also reduce rumination and improve well-being.

Limitations include cross-sectional design precluding causal inferences, self-report measures, and limited ethnic diversity. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and test rumination-focused interventions for individuals high in anti-mattering. In conclusion,

perceived insignificance links to maladaptive decision processing and poorer mental health through decision-related rumination as a mediating pathway.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The study examined whether feelings of anti-mattering are associated with increased decision-related rumination and psychological distress. The findings indicate that individuals who perceive themselves as insignificant or invisible to others report greater tendencies to ruminate about decisions as well as higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. The results reinforce a growing body of research that suggests that perceptions of relational insignificance represent an important psychological vulnerability that can shape both cognitive processing and emotional well-being.

These findings suggest that decision-related rumination functions as a cognitive pathway linking anti-mattering to psychological distress. Individuals who experience strong feelings of insignificance appear to be more likely to repeatedly second-guess and critically evaluate their decisions, and this persistent rumination is associated with heightened emotional distress. The mediation results indicate that a portion of the relationship between anti-mattering and psychological distress can be explained through the ruminative decision process. These findings extend prior mattering research by identifying a specific cognitive mechanism through which perceived insignificance contributes to mental health difficulties.

These results highlight how experiences of not mattering may undermine several intrapersonal regulatory capacities that support adaptive functioning. When individuals question whether they are worthy or valued by others, their sense of acceptance may weaken, and doubts about their competence and abilities may emerge. Diminished perceptions of agency and autonomy may lead individuals to feel less capable, while reduced emotional adaptability may make it more difficult to remain grounded when confronted with uncertainty and setbacks. Under these circumstances, decisions may become psychologically charged experiences in which individuals interpret outcomes as evidence of personal inadequacy or insignificance. This dynamic may increase the likelihood of persistent self-doubt and evaluative rumination.

These findings also contribute to the broader literature on social connection and mental health by distinguishing the psychological consequences of perceived insignificance from more general experiences of loneliness. While loneliness reflects a perceived lack of social connection, anti-mattering reflects the perception that one's contributions and presence hold little value to others. The current findings suggest that a perceived lack of relational significance may be relevant for understanding maladaptive cognitive processes, such as decision-related rumination, that sustain emotional distress.

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the cross-sectional design prevents conclusions about causal direction among anti-mattering, rumination, and psychological distress. Longitudinal or experimental research would be needed to determine whether persistent perceptions of insignificance lead to increases in rumination and distress over time. Second, although the sample included adults across a range of ages and demographic backgrounds, future studies should examine these relationships within more diverse populations and developmental contexts, particularly among adolescents and emerging adults who may be sensitive to mattering-related concerns.

Despite these limitations, the present findings provide new insight into the cognitive processes through which perceptions of not mattering may influence mental health outcomes. By identifying decision-related rumination as a partial mediator of the relationship between anti-mattering and psychological distress, this study highlights a potential target for psychological intervention. Interventions that strengthen individuals' sense of significance while reducing maladaptive rumination may help mitigate some of the distress associated with chronic feelings of insignificance. Ultimately, perceptions of not mattering may shape both how individuals evaluate their decisions and how they experience psychological distress, underscoring the importance of understanding relational significance as a central factor in mental health.

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