

Introduction

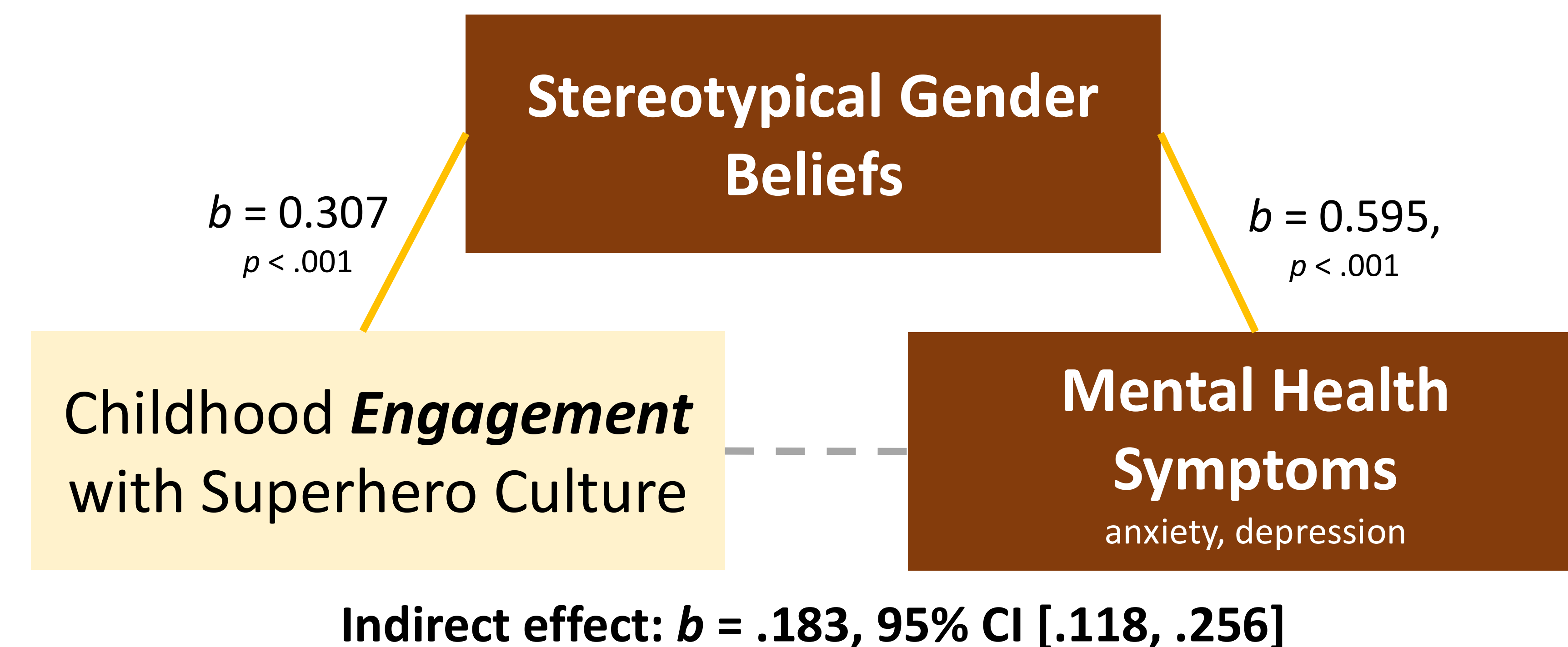
- Greater media exposure is associated with stronger endorsement of **traditional gender beliefs** (Giaccardi et al., 2017).
- Holding more **traditional gender beliefs** is linked to **poorer mental health outcomes** (Santonniccolo et al., 2023).
- Superhero media** are salient contexts of gender socialization, as it often portrays highly gendered traits and extends into children's everyday experiences (e.g., play).

Does childhood superhero engagement and identification predict adolescents' mental health outcomes via traditional gender beliefs?

Method

- Participants.** 341 teen boys aged 13 to 18 (95% White)
- Main Measures.**
 - Childhood engagement with superhero culture (e.g., How frequently did you play video games featuring superheroes?; 6 items; $\alpha = .927$)
 - Childhood identification with favorite superhero (e.g., Sometimes I wished I could be more like this superhero; 13 items; $\alpha = .932$)
 - Stereotypical Gender Beliefs: composite of 4 validated scales (e.g., Male Role Attitude Scale; $\alpha = .975$)
 - Mental Health Symptoms: composite of anxiety and depression subscales of the Brief Symptom Inventory ($\alpha = .980$)
- Covariates.** weekly television hours and age.

Results



$X \rightarrow M$. Both engagement and identification positively predicted stereotypical gender beliefs ($ps < .001$).

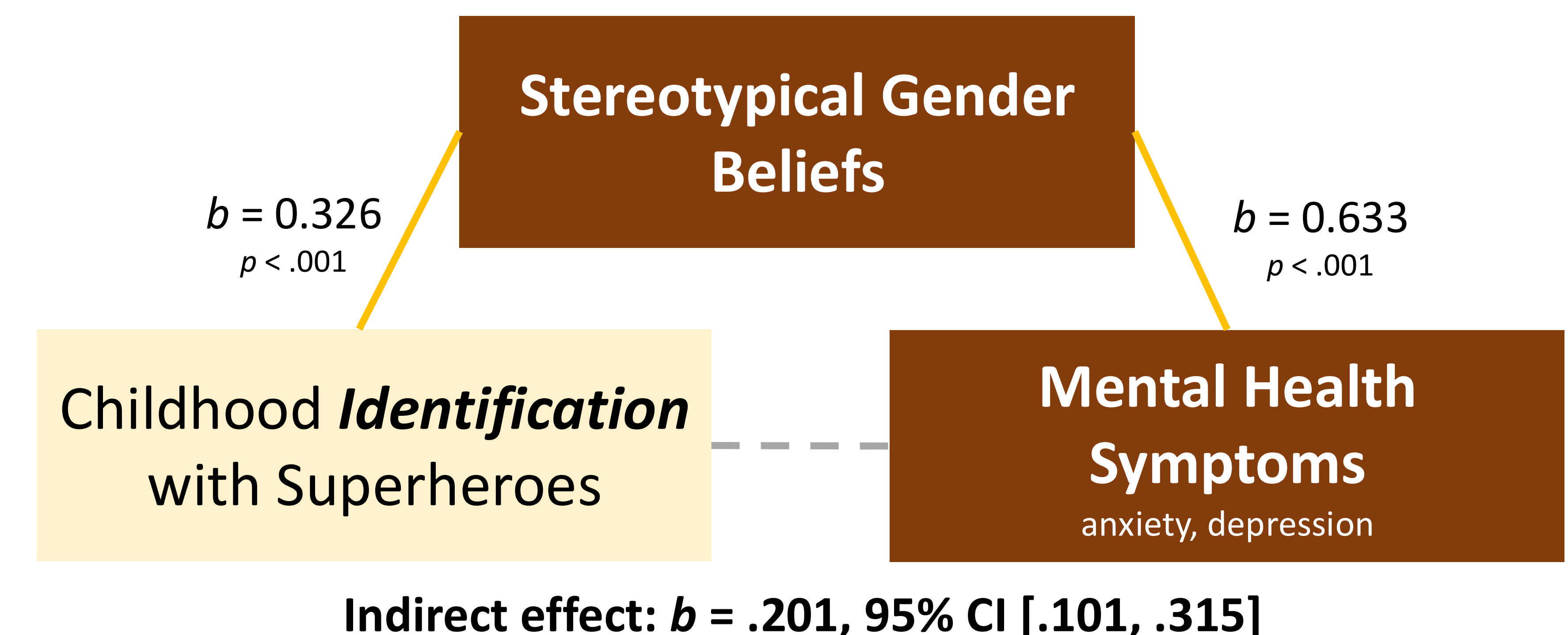
$M \rightarrow Y$. Stereotypical gender beliefs predicted higher psychological distress ($ps < .001$).

Indirect Effects (bootstrapped).

Engagement: $b = .183, 95\% \text{ CI } [.118, .256]$

Identification: $b = .201, 95\% \text{ CI } [.101, .315]$

Engagement and identification are linked to psychological distress *only through adolescents' internalized gender beliefs, not through direct effects.*



Note. All models control for age and weekly television hours.

Summary

Children who are **more engaged** with or who **more strongly identify** with superhero media tend to hold **more stereotypical gender beliefs**, and these beliefs are associated with **greater psychological distress**.

Superhero media are not inherently harmful, but they may become associated with distress when they reinforce rigid gender beliefs.

