Ability emotional intelligence amplifies affective responses to social media content in young people

Current Psychology
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-025-08237-5

Ability emotional intelligence amplifies affective responses to social media content in young people

Rosanna Lea[1] · Bérénice Mahoney[1] · Pamela Qualter[1] · Sarah K Davis[1]

Accepted: 9 July 2025

Abstract

Social media can be a pertinent stressor for young people. Exposure to distressing material online can be especially challenging to navigate in adolescence, since self- regulation skills are still developing. Emotional intelligence (EI) represents a range of emotion skills and self-perceptions, including emotion regulation that, in theory, should help adolescents regulate their emotions online effectively. The current paper uses mixed methods to explore whether EI, measured as both a trait (TEI) and an ability (AEI), amplifies or reduces affective responses to emotive social media posts. In contrast to the conventional social media research method of testing for an association between EI and self- reported social media behaviours, we examine the active workings of EI using an innovative, applied approach. We constructed an artificial yet ecologically relevant social media 'newsfeed', comprising both positively and negatively valenced stimuli. After completing a battery of measures, 189 adolescents (73.5% females; ages 16–18 years) viewed the newsfeed and indicated how each post made them feel. Findings provide support for the hypersensitivity hypothesis: adolescents adept at managing and perceiving emotion (AEI) were more likely to experience an amplified reaction to emotive social media posts. Such findings suggest that adolescents' emotional skill (i.e., AEI), but not emotional self-perceptions (i.e., TEI), may influence how emotionally reactive they are to the content they encounter on social media. Furthermore, mediation analyses tentatively suggest that the magnification of positive emotional experience could be one mechanism through which AEI contributes to wellbeing.

Keywords Emotional intelligence · Social media · Adolescence · Affect · Reactivity · Wellbeing

Introduction

Social media can be a significant stressor in adolescence (Orben et al., 2022; Wolfers & Utz, 2022), such that widespread use of social media among adolescents is of considerable interest to researchers, policy makers, and parents alike. Surveys suggest that, since the Covid-19 pandemic, 94% of 16–17-year-olds use regularly at least one social media app or site (Ofcom, 2022), and that adolescents aged 13–18 years spend, on average, 8 h 39 min per day using media for entertainment, of which 1 h 27 min is spent on social media (Common Sense Media, 2021). However, the relationship between social media use—often operationalised as screentime—and adolescent mental health and wellbeing is complex.[1] Overall, while individual studies vary considerably in their conclusions (i.e., whether screen-time is linked with detrimental effects, positive effects, or no effect, on wellbeing), large-scale investigations often

✉ Sarah K Davis
sarah.davis@worc.ac.uk

[1] University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

[1] While we acknowledge that there is a significant body of work examining links between social media use and poor mental health, or specific mental health conditions, in our paper we focus on 'wellbeing' as a construct encompassing broad indicators of positive psychological health, such as life satisfaction and happiness. It should also be noted that research has explored the impact of social media on a broad range of adolescent psychosocial outcomes, including, for example, self-esteem, body image, prosocial/risky behaviours, loneliness, as well as biopsychological factors, such as sleep quality, which can interact with those factors (Bozzola et al., 2022). In addition, there are a number of ways that social media use can be operationalised for research purposes. For example, one can examine the extent social media is used passively (e.g., scrolling through newsfeeds) versus actively (e.g., connecting with others) (Valkenburg, van Driel & Beyens, 2022a, 2022b). Studies have also explored social media use in the context of 'problematic' use and/or social media addiction (Boer, et al., 2020). However, social media 'use' in the social sciences is most often operationalised as screen-time and is therefore the focus of the discussion in this paper.

Published online: 01 August 2025

suggest that adolescents' amount of social media usage per se is not a strong predictor of wellbeing[2] (for a review of reviews, see Valkenburg et al., 2022a, 2022b). Qualitative research also suggests that adolescents acknowledge that social media can have both positive and negative impacts on their mental health (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Regardless of whether the 'net' effect of using social media is positive or negative, social media is perceived to be an important, yet poorly understood, component of everyday stress for young people, warranting further investigation. Many working in this space claim that, rather than asking 'whether' a relationship exists between social media use and wellbeing, it is more pertinent to ask which factors moderate it.

Acknowledging individual differences in emotional self-regulation skills is crucial for understanding the effect of social media use and adolescent wellbeing. The 'rich-get-richer' hypothesis, also known as the social enhancement hypothesis, suggests individuals with strong social skills and resources benefit most from social media. Generally, evidence is more supportive of that hypothesis over the competing 'poor-get-richer' hypothesis (Cheng et al., 2019). For example, compared to socially anxious or lonely (i.e., socially 'poor') individuals, those who are extraverted (i.e., socially 'rich') engage actively with social media to enhance their opportunities for social interaction and acquire more online social capital (Cheng et al. (2019). The remainder of the introduction explains how evidence suggests emotional intelligence (EI)—our capacity to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotion effectively – could also function as an advantageous individual difference. These protective emotional skills and resources may help adolescents to self-regulate online effectively and use social media in a way that supports their psychological wellbeing.

EI as an adaptive marker in adolescence

EI can be conceptualised and measured in two ways: as a trait (i.e., emotion-related dispositions) or as an ability (i.e., emotion-related skills). Trait EI (TEI) can be viewed as emotional self-efficacy, partially determined by personality, whereas ability EI (AEI) is considered a distinct form of intelligence covering two areas of emotional cognition; experiential (perception of emotion; using emotion to facilitate thought) and strategic (understanding emotion; managing emotion) (Mayer et al., 2008). A wealth of evidence points to EI as a notable predictor of several positive life outcomes and a protective marker during adolescence (for example, EI predicts academic achievement; MacCann et al., 2020). Theoretically, adolescents 'rich' in emotional capital (i.e., possessing high levels of TEI and/or AEI) may be better positioned to reap the benefits of social media, and better protected against the potential harms. While research has begun to test that hypothesis from a self-report perspective (e.g., Sundvik and Davis, 2023), it has not been examined experimentally.

Understanding the precise adaptive nature of EI is especially important in light of the continuing interest in developing educational programmes aiming to cultivate EI in young people (e.g., INTEMO; Castillo-Gualda et al., 2017). To make useful progress towards that goal, the ongoing challenge for the EI field is to introduce nuance: to test and understand the processes through which EI exerts effects (Sarrionada & Mikolajczak, 2019)—for example by buffering stress (Lea et al., 2019)—and to explore whether high levels of EI are beneficial in all contexts. Furthermore, given the established integration of social media into the everyday lives of young people, the value of EI needs to be investigated in the online context.

Processing emotions online: a role for EI?

One potential 'harm' of social media can arise from the emotional impact of exposure to distressing content (e.g., fear-inducing, sadness-inducing, or violent material). Consistent exposure to emotionally triggering material online can adversely affect adolescent mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Popat & Tarrant, 2023), likely exacerbated by the heightened emotional sensitivity and protracted development of cognitive control during adolescence (Crone & Konijn, 2018). In this paper, we test whether EI moderates reactivity to emotive posts on social media. Emotionally intelligent individuals might be more adept at recognising and appraising emotive content online more quickly and accurately, a finding of 'offline' experimental data (e.g., Gillioz et al., 2023), resulting in enhanced reactivity. Furthermore, EI has been proposed as a magnifier of emotional experience, a phenomenon called the "hypersensitivity hypothesis", whereby individuals high in EI might be hyperaware of emotions and emotional information (Fiori & Ortony, 2021). While such hypervigilance is helpful in threatening or high-risk contexts, such hyperawareness could be maladaptive unless combined with an ability to regulate emotion (Double et al., 2022). Thus, to successfully navigate social media stress, emotionally intelligent individuals should be able to perceive *and* regulate emotions effectively and flexibly.

As previously mentioned, EI can be conceptualised as an ability or a trait. Hypersensitivity is theoretically more strongly linked to AEI (Fiori et al., 2023), leading research to focus primarily on the ability perspective (e.g., Fiori & Ortony, 2021; Fiori et al., 2024; Gillioz et al., 2023).

[2] In line with recommendations for scales with fewer than five items, the mean inter-item correlations for each Big Five trait) was calculated as an alternative estimate of internal consistency reliability.

However, the theory may also extend to TEI. Individuals with high TEI are deeply attuned to their emotional world (Fiori et al., 2023), a heightened awareness that could plausibly apply to their 'online' emotional experiences as well.

Joining up EI and emotion regulation traditions

In order to address the question of how EI (TEI or AEI) may relate to emotional reactivity, we draw on the emotion regulation (ER) literature. While the EI and ER research traditions have developed in parallel, many call for emotion research that considers both perspectives (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015). ER focusses on the strategies people use to modify their emotions in situationally bound, valenced states (Gross & Thompson, 2007); effective deployment of such strategies is central for healthy psychological functioning (Daniel et al., 2020). In simple terms, while EI seeks to understand *who* shows adaptive emotional functioning (i.e., outcome-oriented), ER attempts to understand *how* individuals do so (i.e., process-oriented) (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015). Gross' pioneering ER framework has been applied extensively to understand ER in multiple contexts (McRae & Gross, 2020), thus providing a useful lens to consider how EI might influence reactivity to emotional stimuli. The framework proposes five ER 'families': (1) situation selection, (2) situation modification, (3) attentional deployment, (4) cognitive change), and (5) response modulation. To explore whether, and how, EI might work to influence the processing of emotion in an online context, we focus on the three most salient families from Gross' framework for our paradigm*: response modulation*, *attentional deployment*, and *situation selection*.

There is clear theoretical rationale for why high levels of EI could correspond with the ER family of *response modulation* (i.e., affectivity) (see the hypersensitivity hypothesis discussed earlier; Fiori & Ortony, 2021). However, since experimental evidence documenting the relationship between EI and stress reactivity in 'offline' contexts is largely mixed, and very rarely uses adolescent samples (Lea et al., 2019), this study investigates this from a unique perspective.

We also propose a potential role for EI on social media with respect to two other families of ER strategy (McRae & Gross, 2020) where the evidence is smaller, but still promising. First, EI may moderate *attentional deployment* (i.e., directing one's attention with the goal of altering one's emotional response) in the form of being drawn to, or drawn away, from certain social media posts, given findings from attention studies linking EI to an attentional bias for positive emotion (Lea et al., 2018; Nicolet-dit-Félix et al., 2023). Second, we suggest EI may moderate *situation selection* (i.e., approaching or avoiding stimuli in order to regulate emotions) in the form of choosing to engage, or not, with certain posts, based on evidence linking EI with enhanced cognitive control (Checa & Fernández-Berrocal, 2019). Further work is needed to test whether EI (both TEI and AEI) – often touted as adaptive markers for wellbeing– moderates how adolescents regulate their emotions when they encounter highly valenced content on social media, and whether this might have implications for their mental health and wellbeing.

Typically, previous work investigating the relationship between individual differences and social media has een descriptive, neglecting to examine real-time social media behaviours (Seabrook et al., 2016). For example, methodology often involves testing for associations between an individual difference (e.g., personality) and a self-reported, retrospective estimate of social media behaviour (e.g., average screen time) (Cheng et al., 2019). As pointed out by EI commentators, to fully elucidate the value and nature of EI as a protective marker, the field needs to move beyond the paradigm of correlating EI scores with outcomes. Testing the utility of EI 'in action' is needed to better understand in which contexts and circumstances EI might be advantageous (or not) (e.g., Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015; Sarrionandia & Mikolajczak, 2019). Thus, we sought to collect adolescents' 'live' emotional responses upon exposure to a realistic social media newsfeed.

The present study

The goal of the current study is to explore whether adolescents' levels of EI moderate reactivity to emotive posts on social media, using a novel applied methodology. We aimed to evaluate EI's role 'in action' using a naturalistic and bespoke social media newsfeed containing a range of content (e.g., animals, objects, people, scenes) and an equal ratio of positively and negatively valenced posts. Utilising Gross' ER framework (e.g., McRae & Gross, 2020), we designed proxy variables salient to the paradigm of the current study, for three families of ER processes: (1) response modulation, by asking participants how posts made them feel, (2) situation selection, by asking participants about their likelihood of engaging with the posts, and (3) attentional deployment, by asking participants how attracted they were to posts.

In this study, we adopt the perspective that TEI and AEI represent complementary approaches to the study of EI, rather than as competing, mutually exclusive conceptualisations; AEI signals the potential of an individual given optimal circumstances, whereas TEI is indicative of everyday behaviour (Davis & Humphrey, 2014). We consider the contribution of both TEI and AEI in our study. Furthermore, a common critique of the empirical EI literature is a lack

of experimental control (e.g., Lea et al., 2019), we opted to test the incremental contribution of EI towards emotion processing *beyond* confounding variables that have a high potential to influence the outcomes of interest: personality, cognitive ability, desirable responding, social media use, mood, and subjective wellbeing. The rationale for including those covariates is provided in Table 1.

Aims and hypotheses

The primary aim of the present study was to test whether an adolescent's level of EI predicts their affective response to social media posts. The two secondary aims of the study were to consider whether EI scores moderated two proxies of ER: attentional deployment (self-reported attentional preference for posts) and situation selection (self-reported likelihood of engaging with posts). To address those aims, one primary and two secondary hypotheses were generated:

- **H1** (primary): EI will predict the magnitude of affective responses for both positively and negatively valenced posts, in line with the hypersensitivity hypothesis of EI (Fiori & Ortony, 2021);
- **H2** (secondary): EI (particularly TEI) will predict an attentional preference for positive posts, based on findings from eye-tracking studies (e.g., Lea et al., 2018); and
- **H3** (secondary): EI (particularly AEI) will predict a lower likelihood of choosing to engage with negative posts, based on evidence linking AEI with cognitive control (Checa & Fernández-Berrocal, 2019).

Table 1 Covariates included in the present study

Construct	Rationale for inclusion
Big Five personality traits	Trait EI scores tend to correlate with several of the Big Five, notably positively with extraversion and negatively with neuroticism (van der Linden et al., 2017). Controlling for personality helps indicate the incremental effects of TEI
Crystallised intelligence	Evidence suggests that ability EI empirically and theoretically confounds with crystallised intelligence (Gc) – the ability to use acquired skills, knowledge, and experience to solve problems (e.g., Davis et al., 2021). Controlling for vocabulary knowledge also ensures that scores on AEI measures do not simply reflect comprehension
Socially desirable responding	The innate tendency of participants to provide socially desirable responses (i.e., to over-report positive behaviour, and under-report negative behaviour) has the potential to influence self-reported outcomes, even when data collection takes place online (Hart et al., 2015)
Social media use	There is an ongoing debate concerning the precise nature of the relationship between quantity of social media use and adolescent mental health and wellbeing, with mixed evidence (Valkenburg et al., 2022a, 2022b). Furthermore, some evidence suggests that repeatedly encountering violence or fear-inducing stimuli on social media can lead to emotional desensitisation (e.g., Stevens et al., 2021). Both phenomena associated with amount of social media use have the potential to influence the outcomes in the present study
Mood	Individuals preferentially process emotional stimuli that possesses a similar affective tone or valence (e.g., Forgas & Eich, 2013). The uncontrolled nature of the data collection environment (i.e., online) means transient affect could influence how participants process the emotive stimuli in the study
Subjective wellbeing	While typically perceived as an *outcome* of how individuals process information, this is often viewed as a bidirectional relationship; individuals' levels of wellbeing can also *predict* how they process emotional information (e.g., Diener et al., 2018)

Method

Participants and procedure

A-priori power analyses suggested that a minimum of 157 participants was required to attain an 80% probability of detecting genuine effects. 189 opportunity-sampled adolescents completed the online study (73.5% female; age 16–18 years). Participants were recruited via social media networks and non-commercial participant recruitment websites, and did not receive compensation for taking part. The study complied with the recommendations of the British Psychological Society, and ethical approval was granted by the University Ethics Committee. Participants were fully informed in advance about the types of imagery they would see, in the information sheet and again just before the stimuli were shown. After providing consent, participants first completed a battery of questionnaires that assessed emotional intelligence, personality, cognitive ability, social media use, desirable responding, and subjective wellbeing. Measures were presented in a random sequence. Second, participants reported their current mood. Finally, participants completed our bespoke Social Media Task. Participants could stop the study at any time by clicking a button, which would take them to the final screen. On the final screen, participants were debriefed and shown a mood relief video (puppies playing). On average, participants took 35–40 min to complete the study.

Measures

Table 2 displays example items for all measures.

Table 2 Measures used in the questionnaire battery

Construct	Tool	Subscales	Example item
Trait emotional intelligence	TEIQue-ASF (30 items)	Emotionality	I often find it hard to see things from someone else's point of view (R)
		Self-control	Sometimes, I get involved in things I wish I could get out of (R)
		Sociability	I'm good at getting along with my classmates
		Wellbeing	I'm happy with my life
Emotion management ability	STEM-B (18 items)	None	Julie hasn't seen Ka for ages and looks forward to their weekend trip away. However, Ka has changed a lot and Julie finds that she is no longer an interesting companion. What action would be the most effective for Julie? (a) Cancel the trip and go home. (b) Realise that it is time to give up the friendship and move on. (c) Understand that people change, so move on, but remember the good times. (d) Concentrate on her other, more rewarding friendships
Emotion perception ability	Emotion recognition test (36 items)	None	N/A (audiovisual stimuli: see Supplementary material)
Big Five personality traits	BFI (10 items)	Openness	I see myself as someone who… …has an active imagination
		Conscientiousness	…does a thorough job
		Extraversion	…is reserved (R)
		Agreeableness	…tends to find fault with others (R)
		Neuroticism	Gets nervous easily
Crystallised intelligence	Vocabulary test (18 items)	None	Choose the word that is closest in meaning to 'energetically': Inspiringly Skilfully Delightfully Vigorously
Desirable responding	BIDR-16 (16 items)	Impression management	"I never cover up mistakes"
		Self-deceptive enhancement	"I am a completely rational person"
Mood	PANAS (10 items)	Positive affect	Excited
		Negative affect	Upset
SWB: Affective wellbeing	Subjective happiness scale (4 items)	None	"Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself [more happy/less happy]"
SWB: Cognitive wellbeing	Satisfaction with Life Scale (5 items)	None	"In most ways my life is close to ideal"

(R) = reverse-scored item; TEIQue-ASF = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Adolescent Short Form (Petrides, 2009); STEM-B = Situational Test of Emotion Management-Brief (Allen et al., 2015); BFI = Big Factor Inventory (Rammstedt & John, 2007); BIDR-16 = Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Short Form) (Hart et al., 2015); PANAS = Positive Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988); SWB = subjective wellbeing

Emotional intelligence

Trait emotional intelligence

TEI was measured using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire—Adolescent Short Form (TEIQue-ASF), one of the few TEI measures developed specifically for adolescent populations (Petrides, 2009). Individuals indicate their level of agreement with a set of 30 statements; higher scores denote higher levels of TEI.

Ability emotional intelligence

The study included coverage of both the experiential and strategic branches of AEI (Mayer et al., 2008). The vignette-based Situational Test of Emotional Management—Brief (STEM-B) was selected to measure emotion management ability (i.e., the strategic branch of AEI) (Allen et al., 2015). In the STEM, participants select the optimum emotional management strategy for dealing with emotional scenarios; item responses are scored according to expert opinion. Higher scores signify greater capacity to manage emotion.

Emotion perception ability (i.e., the experiential branch of AEI) was measured using a bespoke emotion recognition test (ERT) using audio-visual stimuli from the Ryerson Audio-Visual Database of Emotional Speech and Song (RAVDESS; Livingstone & Russo, 2018). In the ERT, participants choose the emotion they think is being expressed from a choice of six, for 26 videos, resulting in a score of % correct emotions identified (see supplementary material of Lea et al., 2023 for detail on the ERT used).

Personality

The Big Five personality traits were measured using the Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI-10; Rammstedt & John, 2007); participants indicate the degree to which 10 brief statements accurately reflect their characteristics, using a 5-point scale. The mean inter-item correlation was 0.326, with all inter-item correlations for each scale (i.e., between the two items for each Big Five trait) falling within the optimal range of 0.2 to 0.4.[3]

Cognitive ability

Cognitive ability was estimated using an 18-item Vocabulary test sourced from the Kit of Factor-Referenced Cognitive Tests (Ekstrom et al., 1976). In the test, participants read a list of words and select alternatives that most closely align with their meaning.

Socially desirable responding

The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding—Short Form (BIDR-16) (Hart et al., 2015) was used to assess socially desirable responding. Two core aspects of socially desirable responding are measured by the BIDR-16: impression management (a deliberate tendency to provide positive responses with the intention of deceiving others), and self-deceptive enhancement (an inclination to provide overly positive responses, without conscious awareness). Participants express to what extent they agree with 16 overly positive statements using a 7-point scale. However, despite previous supportive evidence for the BIDR-16 (Hart et al., 2015), Cronbach αs in the present study were only borderline acceptable (Table 3); results relating to this measure should be interpreted with caution.

[3] IAPS images are not permitted to be distributed in online publications to avoid compromising their value as stimuli (Lang et al., 2008), and so examples of the social media posts used are not included in this paper. IAPS images vary in their elicitation of a range of human emotion (e.g., joy, disgust, fear, sadness, anger), and portray a vast array of categories, for example: people, landscapes, bodies, insects, photojournalism from wars and disasters, medical treatments, baby animals, household objects.

Social media use

Participants were asked to approximate how often they use 10 social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) on a 7-point scale from "I do not use this platform" to "I use this platform 5 or more times a day", mirroring the approach taken by Lin et al. (2016). Summed responses across all platforms yielded a global frequency score, representing an index of typical daily social media use.

Subjective wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) is typically considered a multifaceted construct, comprised of affective (i.e., feelings: positive affect, happiness) and cognitive components (thoughts: judgements, satisfaction) (Diener, 1994). Affective and cognitive SWB was measured using the two most commonly used and validated measures: the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; 4 items; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; 5 items; Diener, et al., 1985). The SHS comprises four statements in which participants either self-rate themselves or make comparisons to others, whereas in the SWLS, participants rate their agreement with five brief statements. In both measures, participants used a 7-point slider scale to provide their answers.

Mood

Subjective mood was captured immediately prior to participation in the social media task, using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). The scale assesses two broad and independent dimensions, each represented by its own subscale: positive affect (PA), and negative affect (NA). Participants rate to what extent they are experiencing 20 adjectives in the present moment on a 5-point Likert scale; each subscale contains ten items. Summed scores on each scale indicate current levels of PA and NA.

Further information about each instrument (including psychometric properties and rationale for inclusion in the present study) is available as supplementary material.

Social media task

A bespoke Social Media Task was designed specifically for the present study, using 48 still images (24 positive, 24 negative) from the International Affective Picture System (IAPS; Lang et al., 2008), adapted to imitate video previews on Facebook posts. A detailed description of how that task was constructed, including information about the stimuli selection and modification process, and a full list of the IAPS stimuli used, is provided as supplementary

Table 3 Correlations and whole-sample descriptive statistics for EI, personality, cognitive ability, desirable responding, social media use, and mood

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. TEI: total	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. AEI: EP	.03	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. AEI: EM	**.18***	**.34****	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. O	-.04	.12	**.14***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. C	**.45****	.02	.00	-.04	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. E	**.38****	-.04	.03	.10	**.24****	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
7. A	**.29****	.14	**.19***	-.11	.16*	.04	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
8. N	**-.54****	.05	-.08	-.02	**-.23****	**.18***	**-.16***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9. DR1	**.38****	.06	.08	**.26****	**.61****	**.67****	**.44****	-.02	-	-	-	-	-	-
10. DR2	**.21****	**-.18***	-.08	**-.17***	**.29****	-.05	**.29****	-.11	.19*	-	-	-	-	-
11. SMU	**-.15***	-.06	-.12	-.08	-.01	.00	.11	**.28****	.20	-.08	-	-	-	-
12. GC	.07	.09	.12	.06	.13	.13	-.11	-.03	.12	-.14	-.03	-	-	-
13. PA	**.37****	-.13	.07	.11	**.34****	**.30****	.12	**-.25****	**.32****	.08	-.03	.00	-	-
14. NA	**-.29****	**-.30****	**-.26****	-.04	-.10	.06	**-.21****	**.20****	-.06	-.06	.08	.04	**.19****	-
M	4.32	70.32	9.73	6.82	6.41	5.57	6.92	7.03	3.12	3.90	32.20	60.06	23.86	17.83
(*SD*)	(0.76)	(15.78)	(2.73)	(1.71)	(1.75)	(2.19)	(1.74)	(2.15)	(.47)	(.80)	(7.35)	(5.95)	(8.63)	(7.38)
Range	2.07–6.03	5.56–94.44	.04–.78	2.00 −10.00	2.00 −10.00	2.00 −10.00	2.00 −10.00	1.00 −9.00	2.00–4.50	2.25–6.63	10.00–50.00	12.00–100.00	10.00–50.00	10.00–50.00
Skew	-.14	−2.02	-.94	-.11	.10	.20	-.71	-.53	.12	.23	-.38	-.01	.50	.1.22
Kurtosis	-.40	4.51	.74	.23	-.28	-.70	.06	-.52	.20	.02	.15	-.33	-.29	1.63
α	.85	.83	.75	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	.67	.60	.50	N/A	.70	.89	.88

TEI = Trait emotional intelligence; AEI = ability emotional intelligence; EM = emotion management; EP = emotion perception; O = openness; C = conscientiousness; E = extraversion; A = agreeableness; N = neuroticism; DR1 = self-deceptive enhancement; DR2 = impression management; SMU = social media use; GC = general cognitive ability; PA = positive affect; NA = negative affect; N/A = not applicable * = p<.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001

material. Several steps and precautions were taken to ensure the images selected were appropriate for the age of the participants and unlikely to evoke extreme affective responses (also see supplementary material for more detail).[4] Posts were either positively or negatively valenced, with assignment to categories determined by IAPS valence and arousal ratings. There was an equal ratio of image types (i.e., animals, objects, people, scenes) across both categories. A small pilot study ($n=11$) showed that 100% of participants correctly allocated posts to their intended 'negative' or 'positive' category. Participants viewed the stimuli as one continuous page, akin to a standard social media newsfeed.

Participants were directed to imagine they were scrolling through their personal social media newsfeed from top to bottom, at their usual pace. 'Posts' were presented in a random order for each participant. Next, participants viewed the same 'newsfeed' again, but this time were asked to retrospectively evaluate each 'post' in turn, based on their initial viewing. The rating process took place during the second viewing to mimic uninterrupted and 'naturalistic' initial viewing. For each post, participants were asked three questions, responding on a 7-point slider scale: (1) "How did this post make you feel?" (from 'negative' to 'positive') (*affectivity*), (2) "How likely would you be to notice this post on your newsfeed?" (from 'not at all' to 'very much') (*attentional deployment*), and (3) "How likely would you be to watch the video?" (from 'not at all' to 'very much') (*situation selection*). Composite scores were subsequently generated to reflect affectivity (derived from Q1) attentional deployment (derived from Q2), and situation selection (derived from Q3).

Results

Analysis plan

Separate hierarchical regressions were conducted to examine whether EI predicted the dependent variables of interest: (1) affectivity, (2) attentional allocation, and (3) situation selection. Big Five personality traits, cognitive ability, desirable responding, frequency of social media use, subjective wellbeing, and mood, were included in the first step of the regression as covariates. EI (TEI, emotion management ability, emotion perception ability) was entered in the second step. The Bonferroni correction was used to account for the effects of multiple comparisons. Based on the observed findings, an exploratory, post-hoc mediation analysis was conducted to investigate whether the relationship between EI and subjective wellbeing (SWB) was mediated by affective reactivity to posts.

Data screening and preliminary analyses

All 518 responses were screened for response completeness. 329 participants did not complete the questionnaire battery; 18 completed the questionnaire battery only; 171 fully completed the study (i.e., the questionnaire battery *and* the social media task). Participant data for the latter two categories were retained in the dataset (69% female). Whole-sample descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for EI and all covariates are displayed in Table 3.

Hypothesis 1: EI will predict the magnitude of affective responses.

PA state significantly predicted affective reactivity to *positively* valenced posts ($\beta=0.21$, $p=0.026$; $R^2=0.26$, $F(13, 148)=3.61$, $p<0.001$, adjusted $R^2=0.19$). While the addition of TEI ($\beta=0.10$, $p=0.42$) or emotion perception ability ($\beta=-0.05$, $p=0.53$) did not significantly improve the model further, the inclusion of emotion management ability emotion management ability did ($\Delta R^2=0.07$, $\Delta F(1, 134)=4.59$, $p<0.001$, adjusted $R^2=0.25$). Higher levels of emotion management ability predicted a stronger positive reaction to positive posts ($\beta=0.28$, $p=0.026$).

For reactivity to *negative* posts, life satisfaction was the only significant predictor of reactivity in the base model ($R^2=0.16$, $F(13, 146)=2.12$, $p=0.016$, adjusted $R^2=0.08$) whereby higher life satisfaction predicted a stronger negative reaction ($\beta=.-0.26$, $p=0.024$). Adding in the TEI term did not significantly improve R^2 further ($\beta=-0.17$, $p=0.20$. However, the addition of emotion perception ability *did* explain additional variance in reactivity ($\Delta R^2=0.05$, $\Delta F(1, 145)=9.36$, $p=0.003$, adjusted $R^2=0.13$), in the same direction as life satisfaction ($\beta=-0.24$, $p=0.003$). The same pattern was found for emotion management ability, but to a lesser degree. While higher emotion management ability levels predicted stronger negative affective reactions to negative posts ($\beta=.-0.16$, $p=0.049$), its addition only marginally improved the model ($\Delta R^2=0.02$, $\Delta F(1,145)=3.95$, $p=0.049$, adjusted $R^2=0.10$) and with the Bonferroni correction used, results did not cross the significance threshold.

In sum, adolescents' ability to manage their emotions was associated with amplified reactivity to positive stimuli. For negative stimuli, an ability to perceive emotion – and to some extent, manage emotion – related to stronger

[4] In cases where data were provided, analyses comparing participants who completed the study with those that did not did not find any significant age or sex differences (*p*s>.05). However, interestingly, those that fully completed the study had significantly higher emotion perception ability scores ($M=70.84$, $SD=15.42$), than those that only partially completed the study ($M=63.43$, $SD=18.80$), $t(206)=2.52$, $p=.012$). All other independent samples *t*-tests for completions vs. non-completions showed *p*s>.05.

reactivity. Affective responses as a function of AEI, for positive and negative posts, are shown in Fig. 1.

Hypothesis 2: EI will predict an attentional preference for positive posts.

For attentional preference towards *positive* posts, the only significant covariate was frequency of social media use ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$), yielding a significant model, $R^2 = 0.24$, $F(13, 146) = 3.48$, $p < 0.001$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.17$. The addition of EI (TEI or AEI) failed to improve R^2 ($ps > 0.05$). For attentional preference for *negative* posts, the covariates did not produce a statistically significant model either on their own, or with the addition of TEI and emotion perception ability. However, inserting emotion management ability into the regression ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = 0.023$) resulted in a statistically significant model, $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$, $\Delta F(1, 145) = 5.24$, $p = 0.023$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.08$. In sum, emotion management ability (i.e., one's ability to manage emotions) was associated with attraction towards negative posts (i.e., our proxy for the ER 'attentional allocation' strategy).

Hypothesis 3: EI will predict a lower likelihood of choosing to engage with negative posts.

The only significant predictors of a greater likelihood of engaging with *positive* posts were state PA ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = 0.033$), and frequency of social media use ($\beta = 0.33$,

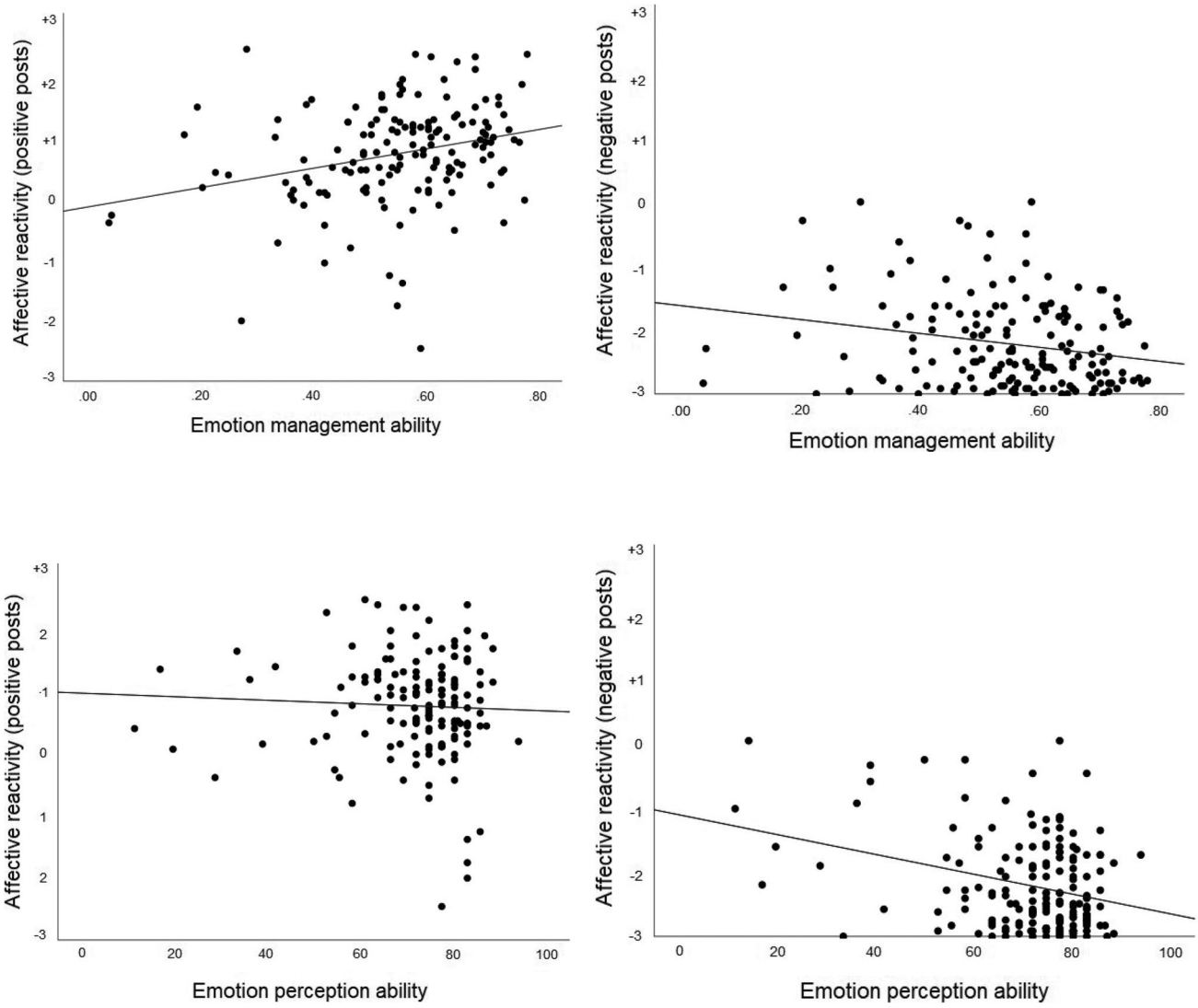

Fig. 1 Relationship between ability emotional intelligence and affective reactivity to social media posts. *Note.* Absolute values are used for ease of interpretation. The *y* axis represents the magnitude of affective response, with positive values representing positive affect, and negative values representing negative affect. Affective responses were ascertained by asking participants how each social media post in the artificial newsfeed made them feel, using a 7-point slider scale from 'negative' to 'positive'. To calculate overall affective reactivity to positive and negative posts, responses were averaged across all positive posts and negative posts, respectively

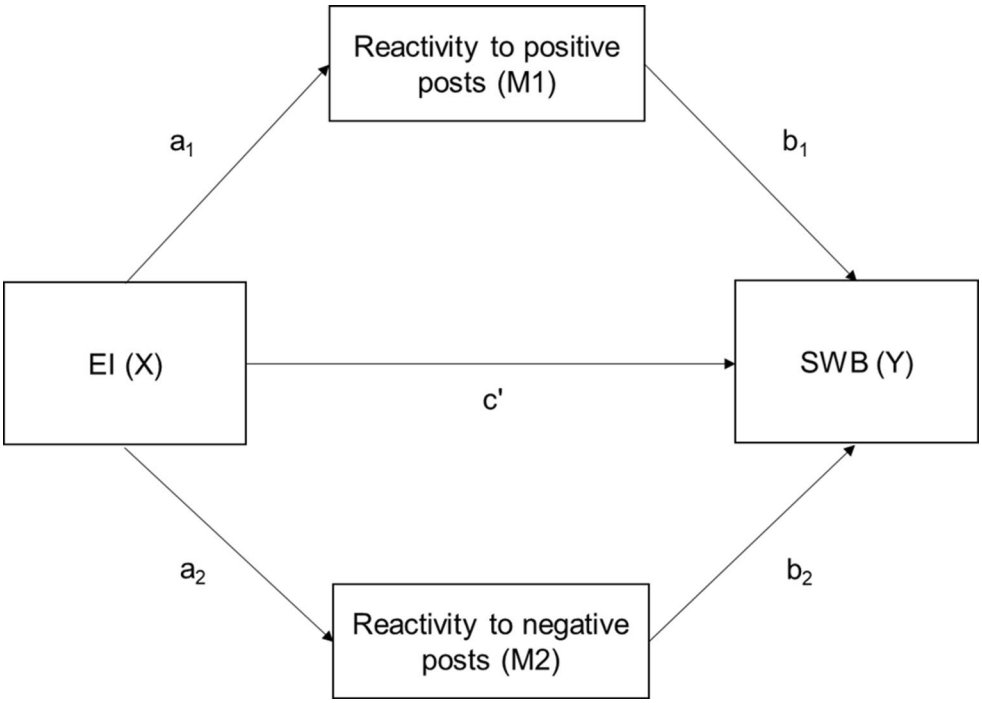

Fig. 2 A conceptual diagram of the mediation model to be tested. Note. EI = emotional intelligence; SWB = subjective wellbeing

$p < 0.001$). Those variables produced a statistically significant model ($R^2 = 0.26$, $F(13, 146) = 3.95$, $p < 0.001$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.19$). The addition of TEI, AEI (EP or EM) did not explain any additional variance ($ps > 0.05$). The regression analysis for *negative* posts did not produce a statistically significant model. EI did not appear to relate to the likelihood of adolescents engaging with posts (i.e., our proxy for the ER 'situation selection' strategy), regardless of post valence.

Post-hoc exploratory analysis: affective response as a mediator of AEI and wellbeing

Findings supported hypothesis 1: ability EI (specifically, the abilities to perceive and manage emotions) was associated with a tendency to magnify affective responses. However, by itself that finding does not indicate whether the this represents an adaptive mechanism for adolescents. To probe the finding further, we conducted an exploratory post-hoc analysis to test whether affective reactivity mediates the relationship between AEI and wellbeing. If adaptive, we would expect to find evidence of mediation. The aims of these analyses were to explore 1) whether hypersensitivity may have implications for wellbeing, and 2) whether hypersensitivity might mediate the relationship between AEI and wellbeing. Four models tested the potential of EI to influence SWB (i.e., an adaptive life outcome) through affective reactivity using the PROCESS macro for SPSS.[5] AEI (EM or EP) was entered as the predictor (X), SWB (either life satisfaction or happiness) as the outcome (Y), and affective reactivity as a mediator (M). The full set of covariates were included (with the exception of SWB, since this was the outcome) in all models (see Table 1). The significance of indirect paths was evaluated through 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs), computed with 10,000 bootstrap samples. That process involved calculating values for the a and b paths (Fig. 2), the direct effect measures the extent to which X predicts Y, while M remains unaltered), and the indirect effects (the extent to which Y varies in relation to M, while X remains unaltered). The full mediation outputs are provided as supplementary material.

Emotion management ability (Models 1 and 2)

For **Model 1** (Y = happiness), all paths except b_2 (regressing reactivity to negative posts onto happiness) were statistically significant. The b_1 path ($b = 0.37$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = 0.001$), indicated that reactivity towards *positive* posts (M1) predicted happiness, whereas the b_2 path indicated that reactivity towards *negative* posts (M2) did not ($b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = 0.759$). There were also direct effects (c*'*: $b = 1.61$, $SE = 0.62$, 95% CI [−2.84, −0.38]) *and* indirect effects, which were observed for M1 ($b = 0.53$, SE = 0.20, 95% CI [0.16, 0.96]), but not M2 ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [−0.20, 0.31]). This result suggests that emotion management ability may directly *and* indirectly predict adolescent happiness (i.e., through facilitation of more positive emotional responses to positively valenced stimuli).

[5] Note that this method results in non-standardised coefficients, meaning the path coefficients in the mediation models can exceed 1.

For **Model 2** (Y = life satisfaction), all paths were again significant with exception of the b_2 path. The b_1 path (regressing reactivity to positive posts onto life satisfaction, M1) was significant (b_1: $b = 1.41$, $SE = 0.64$, $p = 0.030$), but the b_2 path (regression reactivity to negative posts onto life satisfaction, M2), was not, b_2: $b = -1.18$, $SE = 0.879$, $p = 0.138$. There was no direct effect of emotion management ability on life satisfaction, but there were *indirect* effects for both M1 ($b = 2.01$, $SE = 1.03$, 95% CI [0.25, 4.23]) and M2 ($b = 1.01$, $SE = 0.84$, 95% CI [−0.29, 2.99]). Model 2's findings suggest that emotion management ability may indirectly lead to increases in life satisfaction, through amplification of affective responses to emotional material, irrespective of valence.

Models 1 and 2 suggest that stronger affective reactivity (particularly towards positively valenced stimuli) could be one way through which emotion management ability, relates to both affective SWB (i.e., happiness) and cognitive SWB (i.e., life satisfaction). Results indicate full mediation in the case of life satisfaction (i.e., significant indirect effect of X on Y, through M1 and M2, but no direct effects), but partial mediation in the case of happiness (i.e., direct effect of X and Y, and indirect effect through M1), (Rucker et al., 2011). Statistical models are depicted in Fig. 3.

Emotion perception ability (Models 3 and 4)

As reported for Model 1, the b_1 path, though not the b_2 path, was significant in regressing reactivity to posts onto happiness in **Model 3** (Y = happiness). There were no direct (c*'*: $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.01) or indirect effects of emotion perception ability on happiness, for either M1 ($b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.00$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.00]) or M2 ($b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.00$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.00]). The results of Model 3 suggest that emotion perception ability levels are not predictive of adolescent happiness, either directly or indirectly through affective reactivity.

For **Model 4** (Y = life satisfaction), as reported in the above sections for Models 1–3, paths a_2 and b_1 were significant, but a_1 and b_2 were not. There were no direct effects for emotion perception ability on life satisfaction (c*'*: $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [−0.05, 0.09), and moreover, no indirect effects for M1 ($b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.01]) or M2 ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.04]). The results of Model 4 suggest that emotion perception ability does not directly or indirectly predict adolescent life satisfaction.

Models 3 and 4 suggest that affective reactivity does not mediate the relationship between emotion perception ability and SWB.

Discussion

Summary of findings

The present study tested the capacity of EI (measured as both a trait and as an ability) to moderate adolescents' affective reactivity to social media posts. To progress beyond the conventional methodological approach used in social media research (i.e., focussing on the correlations between individual difference scores and screentime), we captured adolescents' affective responses within a naturalistic social media 'newsfeed' paradigm. Findings generally supported the primary hypothesis. **H1**, which posited that EI would predict the magnitude of affective responses, in accordance with the hypersensitivity hypothesis of EI (Fiori & Ortony, 2021). However, findings were restricted to AEI. Adolescents' ability to manage emotions was associated with reactivity to positive content (and to some extent, negative content), and the ability to perceive emotions predicted reactivity to negative content. To interrogate this finding, post-hoc exploratory analyses were performed (Fig. 3). First, those analyses indicated that the amplification of *positive* responses significantly predicted happiness and life satisfaction. Second, results suggested that pattern may be one factor that could explain the relationship between the ability to manage emotion and subjective wellbeing (SWB); the relationship between emotion management ability and SWB was mediated in full by hypersensitive responding for cognitive SWB (life satisfaction), and partially for affective SWB (happiness).

H2 focussed on the ER family of attentional deployment (i.e., directing one's attention with the goal of altering one's emotional response; McRae & Gross, 2020), and posited that EI (particularly TEI) would predict an attentional preference for positive posts, a finding that has emerged from eye-tracking studies (Lea et al., 2018). Findings did not support **H2**. In contrast to expectations, TEI did not predict any aspect of attentional deployment, but emotion management ability was associated with attraction towards negative posts. To investigate situation selection (i.e., approaching or avoiding stimuli in order to regulate emotions; McRae & Gross, 2020), **H3** predicted that EI (namely AEI) would predict a lower likelihood of choosing to engage with negative posts, in light of findings on AEI and cognitive control (Checa & Fernández-Berrocal, 2019). However, **H3** was not supported by the study's findings; levels of TEI or AEI did not influence the likelihood of adolescents choosing to engage with posts.

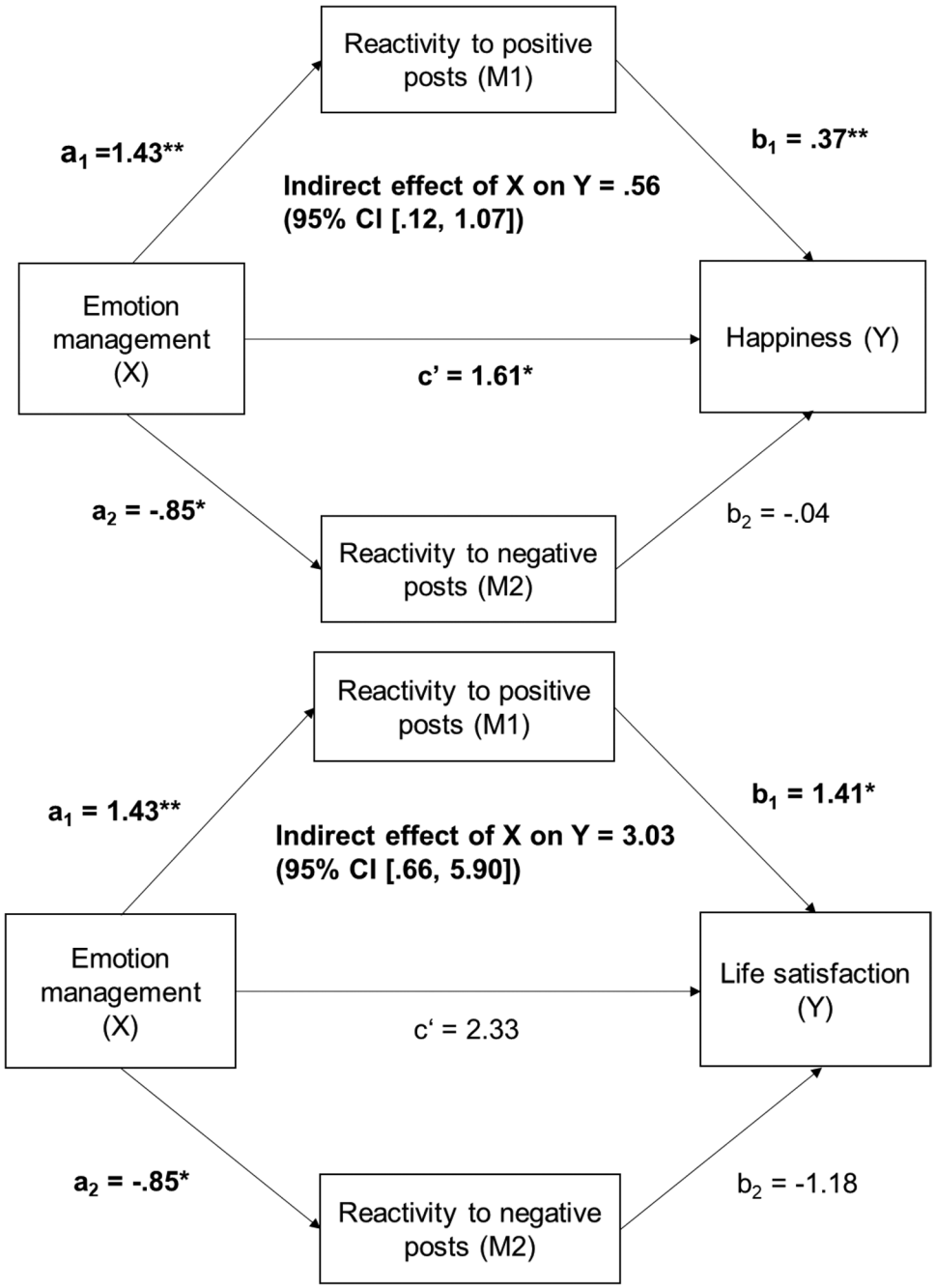

Fig. 3 Conceptual and statistical diagrams of mediation models 1 (top) and 2 (bottom)

EI may moderate emotion regulation on social media: Implications for adolescent wellbeing

The key finding of the current study was that adolescents with high ability EI are more reactive to emotional information, providing support for the hypersensitivity hypothesis (Fiori & Ortony, 2021). Such amplification of emotional responses might exist because, as suggested by experimental data, high EI corresponds to faster and more accurate discrimination of emotions (Gillioz et al., 2023). In other words, emotionally intelligent individuals may react more strongly to emotional material because they are more skilled at processing emotional information. In the context of our study, a working hypothesis could be that upon viewing an emotional post online, adolescents with high EI more quickly and easily recognise the valence of the content, appraise it, and then elicit a magnified affective response.

It is difficult to decipher whether the emotional hypersensitivity observed in our study is ‘useful’ for adolescents or not. While current thinking suggests that healthy emotion processing comprises exhibiting emotional responses that are congruent with the valence of the stimuli encountered

(i.e., positive stimuli evoke a positive response; negative stimuli evoke a negative response) (Panayiotou et al., 2021), it is less clear on what magnitude of response is adaptive. Indeed, the issue of whether a pattern of heightened (i.e., *hyper*arousal) or blunted psychological reactivity (i.e., *hypo*arousal) causes more long-term health issues is often debated (see Turner et al., 2020). Evidence does suggest, however, that stress responses of an intermediate magnitude may be the most adaptive for most individuals, since exaggerated reactivity (such as threatening stimuli) can interfere with effective coping (Panayiotou et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2020). Thus, our findings on hypersensitivity to negative stimuli may flag a potentially undesirable effect of AEI (Fiori & Ortony, 2021).

On the flip side, the amplification of positive responses may represent a benefit of AEI (Fiori & Ortony, 2021). Findings from our post-hoc analysis contribute to the growing literature suggesting that AEI may lead to better wellbeing outcomes through affectivity (Extremera & Rey, 2016), and align with the 'rich-get-richer' hypothesis, where those rich in emotional capital are the most eligible to benefit from social media (Cheng et al., 2019). More specifically, our results tentatively suggest that amplification of *positive* emotion on social media might be helpful, given its relationship with both life satisfaction and happiness. However, since AEI predicted reactivity for *both* positive and negative posts, this signals a potential trade-off between level of AEI and the benefits and costs of hypersensitivity. Whether either benefits or costs are incurred by high EI individuals may depend on what material they generally seek out and engage with online (e.g., encountering mainly positive material may increase the likelihood of experiencing high levels of positive affect, and vice versa for negative material). Somewhat surprisingly, however, significant findings were not found for TEI (i.e., emotional self-perceptions) (Mayer et al., 2008). Clearly, more empirical research testing the hypersensitivity hypothesis of EI is needed to detangle the relationship between, and test causal pathways of, (1) EI, (2) online affectivity, and (3) wellbeing outcomes. More empirical research is clearly needed to test the hypersensitivity hypothesis of EI and detangle the relationship between (1) EI, (2) online affectivity, and (3) wellbeing outcomes. It is important to recognize the inherent complexity of these interactions; evidence suggests that internal factors (such as emotion regulation) and external factors (for example, peer or family relationships) are reciprocally linked (Deng et al., 2024; Poulain et al., 2019). AEI likely interacts in nuanced ways with various environmental and situational influences to shape adolescents' emotional experiences and broader psychosocial development (Deng et al., 2024).

The findings from our investigations into other aspects of emotion regulation – attentional deployment and situation selection—are more difficult to interpret. In contrast to expectations, and previous studies (e.g., Lea et al., 2018; Nicolet-dit-Félix et al., 2023), TEI scores did not relate to attentional allocation. Instead, participants scoring higher in emotion management ability reported greater attentional deployment towards negatively valenced posts. While there is no straightforward explanation for this finding, developmental research demonstrating age-related differences in information processing provides important context. Results from multiple developmental studies indicate that younger adults show a significant general information processing bias toward negative information (versus positive information), whereas older adults show the opposite pattern (Reed et al., 2014). Thus, if adopting the perspective that directing attention to negative stimuli may be the 'norm' for young people, our result may tentatively suggest an adaptive function for AEI. Furthermore, while higher scores for AEI predicted an initial attentional preference for negative posts (i.e., negative stimuli caught participants' attention), this did not translate to a greater likelihood of engaging with those posts (a variable which aimed to capture the ER process of situation selection). However, it is important to note that the study captured overt, deliberate, attentional preferences, rather than preconscious, automatic, attentional bias measured through more robust methods (e.g., eye-tracking). Findings may therefore be an artefact of the methodology used, which differs from other studies examining EI and attention (e.g., Lea et al., 2018). Whilst a causal link between AEI and attentional preference for negative material cannot be concluded from the present data, it is nonetheless a finding that warrants further consideration for future studies exploring the link between AEI and ER.

Limitations and future directions

Analyses in our paper demonstrate the unique, incremental contributions of EI towards the outcomes of interest, since personality, cognitive ability, and mental health were controlled for. However, there are other methodological considerations that need to be considered. An important caveat to the study is that the findings cannot confidently suggest that EI confers *adaptive* responses (i.e., whether amplification of affect should be perceived as categorically beneficial or detrimental). While our mediation analyses conceptually indicate causation, these were exploratory and post-hoc; findings concerning the adaptive value of amplified responses should

be treated with caution until investigated thoroughly with a larger sample. Furthermore, what constitutes healthy and/or useful social media behaviour at the time of data collection cannot be ascertained in the paradigm used. Although situational mood was controlled for (using the PANAS; Watson et al., 1988), those scores will not have captured the nuanced physical, emotional, and social circumstances of participants, due to the uncontrolled nature of the data collection environment. This is important given that the effectiveness of specific ER strategies for a specific individual is highly contextual; emotionally well-adjusted adolescents need to show flexible regulation of their emotions (Double et al., 2022). Future research might consider how to address the challenge of accounting for participants' emotional context whilst also achieving ecological validity.

This paper goes beyond the typical approach of testing for an association between an individual difference and a social media outcome (Seabrook et al., 2016), asking, instead, how EI works 'in action', collecting 'live' responses within a naturalistic social media paradigm. However, the exclusive use of self-reported outcome measures is also a limitation of our study. A logical extension of our work would be to supplement them with objective behavioural measures, such as eye movements (e.g., gaze tracking, dwell time) and measures of physiological stress (e.g., cardiac or electrodermal activity). Employing approaches to measuring social media behaviour traditionally rooted within consumer psychology (for example, measuring scrolling time or click analytics on actual videos, rather than still images) could also prove a promising route forward. It is also necessary to replicate the finding that only actual emotional skills (i.e., AEI), but not self-reported EI (i.e., TEI) are more relevant for affective reactivity in an applied context.

Concluding statement

Our findings provide support for hypersensitivity hypothesis of EI and demonstrate its applicability to adolescent populations. By implementing a bespoke newsfeed with naturalistic (but validated) stimuli, findings offer a unique insight into the role EI might play when adolescents encounter emotive material online. Adolescents adept at managing and perceiving emotion were more likely to experience a magnified reaction to social media posts. While the implications of that phenomenon for long-term wellbeing are unclear, there are grounds for suggesting EI could confer either an advantage (in the case of positive stimuli) or a disadvantage (in the case of negative stimuli). While preliminary, hopefully the findings of the present study will stimulate further research exploring EI and affectivity on social media, a new and novel, but exciting and important field.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-025-08237-5.

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