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'It Keeps the Connection Alive': A Qualitative Analysis of Social Networking Site Use and Mental Health in Emerging Adults Through the Lens of a Novel Trans-diagnostic Cognitive Behavioural Conceptualisation

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in social media and mental health, the field lacks theoretical integration. Here, we drew upon a trans-diagnostic cognitive-behavioural conceptualisation of social media and mental health to explore emerging adults' experiences of social network sites. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 23 emerging adults, exploring positive and negative online experiences, and analyzed using framework analysis. Six themes reinforced key aspects of the conceptualisation, including the role of mindful/mindless engagement, and social connection/disconnection in determining benefits and risks. Several adjustments to the conceptualisation were indicated, including greater emphases on the nature of content engaged with, quality of social interactions experienced, and identity of the user. Findings also highlighted experiences of autonomy and competence (alongside connection) as central to determining online satisfaction/dissatisfaction. The implications of the findings are discussed, including the importance of considering the online lives of emerging adults when developing educational, clinical, and policy materials.

Keywords

mental health, wellbeing, emerging adults, social media, social network sites

Introduction

Social media (SM) has become an integral part of everyday life, particularly for adolescents and emerging adults (Schønning et al., 2020), with 94.2% of internet users worldwide using SM, and levels of daily use dropping linearly with age (Kemp, 2025). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter are not merely tools for communication, but spaces where identities are formed (Thomas et al., 2017), relationships are cultivated (Thomas et al., 2020), and social norms negotiated (Borg, 2022), arguably transforming the way that the developmental challenges of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) are confronted (Michikyan & Suárez-Orozco, 2016; Nesi et al., 2018a, 2018b).

The increase in SM uptake, which has paralleled a growth in mental health difficulties (McElroy et al., 2022), has led to fears about the role of SM use in young people's mental health, and a flourishing of associated research in this field. Much of this research has adopted a reductionistic, causationist, and 'concern-centric' perspective, which conceptualises SM use as *inevitably* and inherently harmful (Orben, 2020). However, research has repeatedly shown that SM use is in fact linked to both real harms *and* benefits (Valkenburg et al., 2022), and further, that emerging adults express agency in their engagement, commonly taking active steps to curate their online identity and interactions (Naudé, 2022).

Despite this concern, there has been relatively little theoretical integration, without which it is hard for a field to progress (Orben et al., 2020). In particular, there has been very little integration that is of practical use to mental health

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professionals and/or clinicians working with young people. Thus, existing theoretical models of SM use have tended to focus on SM uptake [e.g., the *Social Cognitive Theory of Internet Uses and Gratifications* (LaRose & Eastin, 2004) and *Technology Acceptance Model* (Marangunić & Granić, 2015)] or the implications of the online world for the user's sense of self, sense of other, and/or social interactions [e.g., the *Self-Effects Model* (Valkenburg, 2017) or *Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model* (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013)], rather than SM's impacts on mental health and wellbeing. Where models of SM/mental health and wellbeing links *have* been developed, these have commonly focused on SM 'addiction' and extreme and/or problematic patterns of use (Sun & Zhang, 2021), or on the flipside, SM flourishing without parallel consideration of risks and harms of engagement (Gudka et al., 2021). Thus, most existing models of SM use do not provide a deep and nuanced understanding of the complex ways and reasons for which people use SM, nor the manner in which it interacts with *common* mental health difficulties. Further, existing models have tended to ignore potential *benefits* to SM use that might be harnessed in a clinical context, e.g., opportunities to build confidence and test out social skills for people who experience social anxiety (Rice et al., 2020), and as such are of limited clinical utility outside of the treatment of very specific and extreme patterns of problematic SM use.

Against this backdrop, Tibber & Silver (Tibber & Silver, 2022) developed a transdiagnostic cognitive behavioural conceptualisation of the role of SM use in the mental health of adolescents (herein the TCBC; see Figure 1). Developed through a synthesis of existing research, theory and clinical experience, the TCBC is intended to: (i) stimulate further research in the field, and (ii) help mental health professionals formulate the role of SM in *common* mental health difficulties (primarily anxiety and depression), in order to inform treatment delivery and planning (Tibber & Silver, 2022). The potential clinical utility and wide applicability of this conceptualisation -we would argue- lies in its attempts to address aforementioned limitations of existing theoretical models; specifically, through its consideration of potential benefits to harness as well as harms to ameliorate, and its focus on *everyday* relatively pervasive patterns of SM use and online experiences. In addition, the TCBC is firmly in rooted cognitive behavioural theory and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (Beck, 1976), which represents the front-line -and arguably gold-standard- psychological treatment modality in the UK, extensively recommended by National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance, for example (Clark, 2011). As such, a wide range of practising clinicians are likely to find it relatively simple to integrate into their existing practice (Blane et al., 2013).

The central tenet of the TCBC is that the harms and benefits of SM use are determined (in large part) by the extent to which they support or block the user from meeting core, developmentally pertinent needs, *particularly* those relating to acceptance and belonging. Thus, in line with the *interpersonal-connection-behaviour framework,* on which it draws (Clark et al., 2018), the TCBC proposes that the power of SM resides in its potential to (socially) connect or disconnect users. Accordingly, the conceptualisation pays particular attention to thoughts, feelings/sensations and behaviours that are social in nature, e.g., social comparison behaviours, related thoughts such as "other people's lives are better than mine", as well as feelings of envy.

Crucially, the TCBC also posits certain *psychological* and *behavioural* conditions under which benefits and harms (through satisfaction/dissatisfaction of core needs) are more or less likely to be met. Thus, satisfaction of core needs are deemed more probable when the user: (i) engages with the technology in order to enhance or cultivate *positive* experiences (*enhancement motivations*), rather than escape/avoid *negative* ones or compensate for perceived deficits (*compensatory motivations*) (Hughes-Nind et al., 2024), (ii) actively approaches objects, experiences, and crucially, people of value and interest (*approach behaviours/social approach behaviours*) rather than protectively withdraws from the same (*avoidant behaviours/social avoidant behaviours*) (Hayes et al., 1999), and (iii) does so in an intentional and mindful way (*mind-ful mode of engagement*) rather than without awareness (*mind-less mode of engagement*) (Jones, 2024b). Thus, a healthy pattern of engagement is typified by someone who goes online for an express purpose, often (but not necessarily) social in nature, engages for a defined period of time, and does so with awareness, disengaging (for example) when they find that it no longer serves their needs, such as when it is exacerbating rather than alleviating feelings of loneliness and disconnection.

The TCBC also describes how the features and affordances of SM-mediated communication can both support and/or undermine such a pattern of engagement (Nesi et al., 2018a; Nesi et al., 2018a). For example, access to a large audience (*publicness*) brings opportunities for social connection alongside risks of being cyber-bullied (Chen et al., 2025), and delays in communication (*asynchronicity*) may facilitate identity curation and experimentation as well as identity fragmentation (Yang et al., 2022). Such opportunities for, as well as risks to, connection/disconnection and identity consolidation/fragmentation are particularly pertinent to emerging adulthood, which is characterised by a period of intense change during which the individual must (typically) develop a more solid identity structure, individuate from the family system, and cultivate a range of intimate peer relationships, with potential risks to mental health and wellbeing if such demands are not met (Zhu, 2023).

Critically, the conceptualisation also proposes that in the absence of mindful, intentional engagement, 'persuasive design'[1] embedded within an 'attention economy'[2] is more likely to draw the user towards more unhelpful content and patterns of use, e.g., an algorithmic pull toward 'filter bubbles'[3] and 'echo chambers'[4] (Spohr, 2017), which amplify

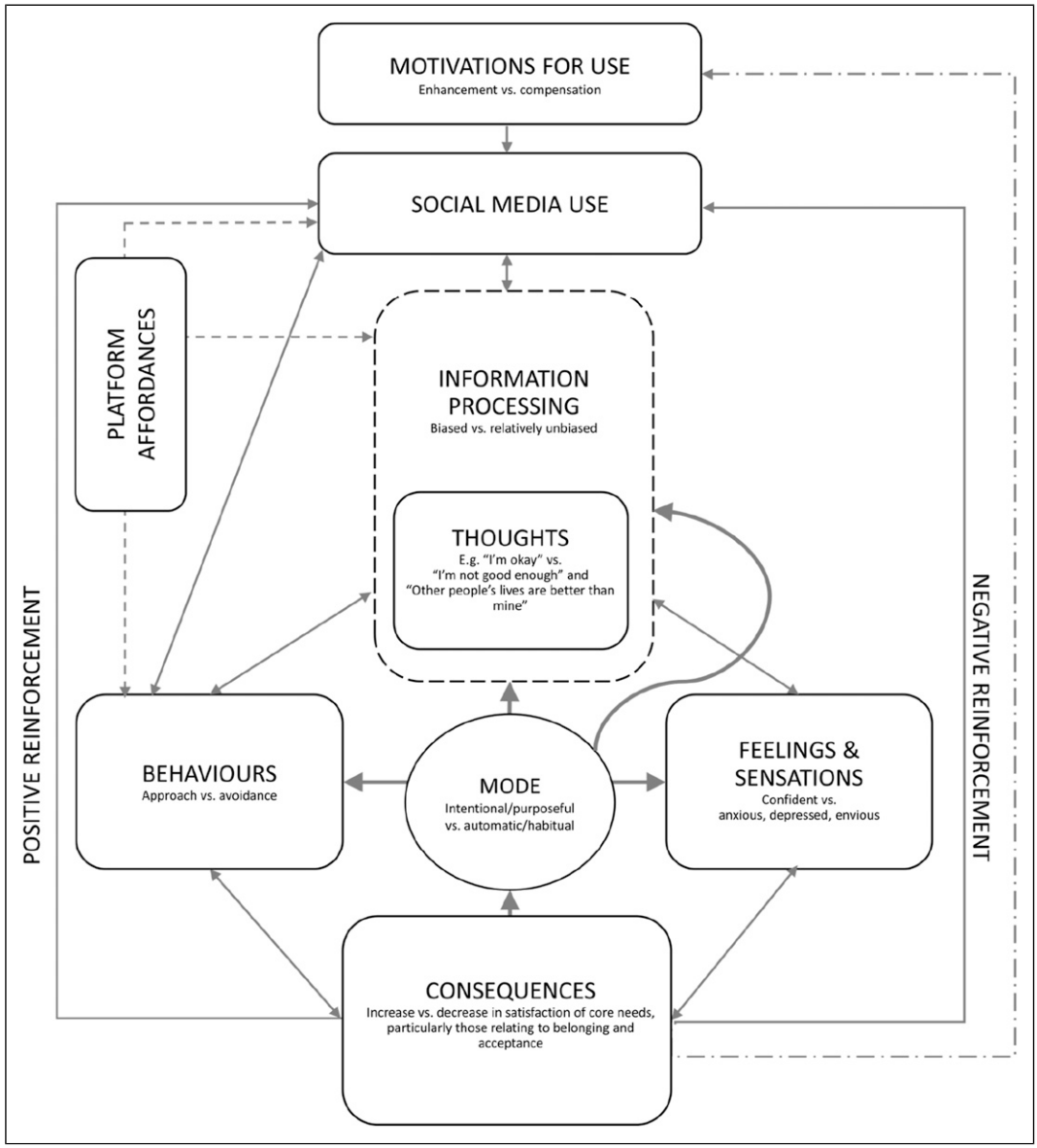

Figure 1. The trans-diagnostic cognitive behavioural conceptualisation of social media use or TCBC (Tibber & Silver, 2022)

emotive/sensationalist content (Kaylor, 2019), expose the user to depressogenic and anxiogenic content (McMullan et al., 2019; Radovic et al., 2017), and pull them towards compulsive engagement. Again, the potential for such effects may be particularly pertinent to emerging adulthood, since evidence suggests that certain brain areas linked to executive function, attention regulation, and social cognition, continue to develop beyond late adolescence and into emerging adulthood (Boen et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2024).

The current study sought to explore the utility of the TCBC in understanding the everyday, positive *and* negative experiences of emerging adults on social networking sites (SNS), with a particular focus on the role of SNS use in mental health and wellbeing. Several key predictions of the conceptualisation have been supported by explicit testing in general population samples (Hughes-Nind et al., 2024; Hutchison et al., 2025; Jones, 2024a, 2024b; Tibber et al., 2022) and it has been shown to be useful in making sense of SM/mental health links in the lives of career musicians (Musgrave et al., 2025). However, the conceptualisation has not yet been explored qualitatively or as a whole in a general emerging adult sample.

To this end, SNSs were defined (as a subset of SM) as *"web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system"* (p.211) (Boyd & Ellison, 2007); and 'everyday' SNS experiences were defined as relatively typical occurrences, distinct from those involving

discrete incidents linked to extreme harm (e.g., online grooming or 'sexploitation') or transformative gain (e.g., winning an online lottery). We adopted a qualitative approach, analysing ideas from a focus group and interviews with emerging adults, in order to facilitate a deep and contextual understanding of the nuanced ways that this population engages with SNS. It was hoped that such an approach would complement parallel *quantitative* tests of the model being undertaken (Jones, 2024a), and crucially, identify areas of good fit as well as areas of poor fit for the model, with a view to updating and/or correcting the conceptualisation as indicated. Ultimately, it is hoped that the conceptualisation will lead to the cultivation of learning and the development of resources of direct and practical relevance in supporting emerging adults to flourish in online (as well as offline) spaces.

Methods

The study was granted ethical approval by the UCL Ethics Committee (25003/001).

Participants

A general population sample was recruited through SM and existing networks of the research team (contacted by email). Purposive sampling was used to try and obtain a diversity of participants; thus, expressions of interest were initially invited via a Qualtrics survey platform (Qualtrics, Provo, UT), and participants selected so as to try and maximise diversity with respect to basic demographics including age, gender and ethnicity. Participants had to be 18 to 29 years of age, sufficiently conversant in English to engage with the interview, and a SNS user. There were no exclusion criteria. Each participant was given a gift voucher worth £10 for their time.

Twenty-three participants were recruited (mean age = 23.96; STDEV = 4.01), with 20 (87%) taking part in semi-structured interviews, and three (13%) taking part in an initial focus group (described below). Whilst the majority of participants identified as female (n = 13; 57%), were White (n = 14), employed (57%, n = 13), and from London (n = 9; 39%), there was considerable diversity with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, and residence (Table 1). Three participants (13%) spontaneously reported having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), one (4%) reported being autistic, and 12 (52.17%) reported experiences of mental health difficulties (current and/or historic), including anxiety (n = 5; 22%) and depression (n = 3; 13%). As this information was not asked of participants, the actual prevalence of mental health difficulties and/or neurodivergence may have been higher within the sample.

Procedures

Interested individuals accessed an information sheet and consent form through a Qualtrics link. Those selected for participation were subsequently contacted for a pre-interview phone-call and invited to attend an initial focus group or interview. Both were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 1 hour each.

Three participants attended the initial focus group, in which a draft interview schedule, informed by key components of the TCBC (see Supplemental Material 1), was discussed with respect to issues of clarity and relevance, and updated accordingly. Given the richness of the ensuing discussion, which organically and enthusiastically shifted to participants' reflections on their own SNS use (and foreshadowed the contents of the interviews), this was also coded. These data were not analysed separately but as part of the larger set of interviews, since transcribing of, and familiarisation with, the data suggested similar experiences were discussed.

With respect to the main interview, participants were asked to recall one positive and one negative experience of SNS use (asked in counterbalanced order across participants) and invited to reflect on the experience. The interview questions followed an inverted funnel structure, with initial questions purposely open so as not to influence patterns of associations between *a priori* constructs, but with follow-up questions eventually exploring core processes of the TCBC, such as motivations for use, behaviours engaged in, mode of engagement, and consequences of use, as well as platforms and platform features used, where required.

Data Analysis

The analysis was informed by a critical realist epistemology, which combines ontological realism and epistemological relativism, positing that while there is an underlying reality independent of human perception, our access to this is always mediated by our experiences, social contexts, and interpretive frameworks (Willis, 2023).

Data were transcribed manually from audio recordings of the interviews. A framework approach to thematic analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) was used because of its capacity to incorporate deductive *and* inductive analyses, i.e. *a priori* constructs and codes informed by theory (the TCBC), as well *a posteriori* constructs and themes emerging bottom-up. The following five analytic steps were followed: (i) *familiarisation:* transcripts were read multiple times, and key ideas and themes noted, allowing for deep immersion in the data and identification of preliminary codes; (ii) *coding*: descriptive labels/codes were attached to relevant text segments for a subset of transcripts (n = 5), using (as noted) *a priori* and *a posteriori* codes. Following this, a working analytical framework was developed and applied to all remaining transcripts (n = 15), in addition to the transcript from the group interview (n = 3 participants); (iii) *indexing*: segments of text were marked with relevant codes; (iv) *charting:* codes and participants were used as column and row headings, respectively, to construct a framework matrix, within which cell contents summarised key themes and sub-themes, allowing

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants. Mental Health Diagnoses = Diagnoses Disclosed Voluntarily/Spontaneously and Represented Historic And/Or Current Formal or Self-Identified Diagnoses. ADHD = Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. ADHD and Autism = Formally Diagnosed or Self-Identifying

Participant demographic factors		N (%)
Gender	Female	13 (57)
	Male	10 (43)
Age	Mean (stdv; range)	23.96 (4.01 18–29)
Ethnicity	White British	9 (39)
	White other	5 (22)
	Black	3 (13)
	Asian	3 (13)
	Mixed	3 (13)
Employment status	Employed	13 (57)
	Student	9 (39)
	Unemployed	1 (4)
Disclosure of mental health	Yes	9 (35)
	No	15 (65)
Mental health diagnosis	Anxiety disorder	5 (21)
	Eating disorder or disordered eating	2 (9)
	Depression	3 (13)
	Severe (unspecified)	2 (9)
ADHD	Yes	3 (13)
	No	20 (87)
Autism	Yes	1 (4)
	No	22 (96)
Geographic region	London	9 (39)
	South East England	1 (4)
	Southern England	1 (4)
	Wales	1
	South West England	2
	Midlands	4
	Northern England	2
	Scotland	3

for exploration of commonalities and differences both within and between participants; (v) *mapping and interpreting*: data were synthesised to generate final, agreed upon themes and subthemes. Step (i) was undertaken for all data *en masse;* all subsequent stages, however, were undertaken separately for positive and negative SNS experiences, so that differences in themes between positive and negative SNS experiences could be identified and tracked separately. Throughout the entire analytic process, codes, themes, and subthemes were reviewed, collapsed/integrated and split (as indicated) in order to balance informativeness with utility.

Whilst primary responsibility for analysis was held by the lead researcher (SS), a second researcher (MT) independently coded 25% of the transcripts, and regular meetings were held between them, during which codes, a coding framework, and themes/subthemes were developed and refined. In addition, a third researcher (CT) offered consultation at multiple stages of the process. By drawing on the wider research team in this way, the primary researcher was able to critically evaluate their interpretations and consider alternative explanations, enhancing both rigour and credibility (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This was aided by the primary researcher undertaking a bracketing interview with CJ prior to data collection and keeping a reflective diary throughout. Finally, following data analysis a summary of the findings was shared with three participants and feedback sought, ensuring that the analysis was aligned with their lived experiences and that participants' voices were accurately represented. Throughout, detailed descriptions of the methods used were kept, ensuring that an audit trail is available (Nowell et al., 2017).

Positionality

As a research team, we brought a range of positions, both as insiders and outsiders to our topic: all of us are SM users, two of us are established SM researchers (MT and CT), and at the time of data collection two were emerging/young adults (SS and CJ). This provided a rich set of experiences and insights, but also introduced potential biases and blind spots, intersecting with differences in gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and geography. As the primary researcher and interviewer, SS reflected on how his own SM use and exposure to media narratives fostered a bias towards potential harms rather than benefits, and how he sought to recognise and

Table 2. Summary of Positive and Negative Social Network Site Experience Themes. SNS = Social Network Site

Experience	Theme	Description
Positive	1. Intentional engagement promoting agency	Intentional engagement with platform features and content allows the user to feel in control of their online experiences and manage their SNS use in line with their goals and values.
	2. Targeted interactions driving connection	Targeted engagement with specific, sought-out users, rather than generalised posting, facilitates reciprocal interactions, promoting a sense of social competence and culminating in social enhancement, both on and offline. Social enhancement with others most valued when associated with the expansion of novel relationships or the maintenance or re-forming of otherwise difficult-to-sustain offline relationships.
	3. Communitainment: Entertainment as gateway	Humorous and/or entertaining content is shared, e.g., in a targeted manner [as in (2)] or more generally. This brief, more surface-level content/interaction, often (initially) at the expense of more vulnerable forms of communication, may act as a springboard into other, more personal forms.
Negative	4. Automatic engagement and the loss of agency	Automatic initiation of a SNS session, often to avoid an unpleasant mood state or boredom, drives passive engagement without intentionality (e.g., passive scrolling), leading to a greater risk of being exposed to less meaningful and potentially more harmful material (in turn linked to social comparisons), and often, guilt at time lost and/or other activities displaced.
	5. Social derailment and the blocking of connection	Experiences of rejection relating to social approach behaviours or online personal disclosures leads the user to feel socially incompetent, alienated and regretful of their approach behaviours. This drives further social withdrawal, both online and offline.
	6. Safety derailment and feelings of powerlessness	Non-targeted interactions in large groups and forums, or, alternatively, over-reliance on algorithms to connect with content, exposes the user to harmful or unwanted content, leading to feelings of unsafety online and disempowerment, as well as fear towards others, especially if the user is from a marginalised/minoritised group. These interruptions often disrupt mindful engagement, leading the user to 'go down a rabbit hole' of shocking or upsetting content.

challenge these assumptions through engagement with the literature, ongoing supervision, and use of a reflective diary. SS also reflected on how his position as a white, cisgender man might have unconsciously prioritised experiences that resonated with his own, which is particularly salient given that SM can reproduce and potentially amplify social prejudices and inequalities. Three of the four team members come from a clinical psychology background, which shaped the lenses through which we viewed SM experiences, e.g., in terms of risks and benefits for mental health and wellbeing (though this was aligned with the remit of the study) and will have inclined us towards intra-psychic explanations over social and systemic ones.

Results

Six themes were generated, three relating to positive SNS experiences and three to negative experiences. The themes identified for both types of experience are outlined in Table 2 and further expanded with specific examples from the data in the discussion that follows. Supplemental Material 2 indicates the presence or absence of a given theme for each participant.

Positive Social Network Site Experiences

Theme 1: Intentional Engagement Promoting Agency. Theme 1 reflects how positive SNS experiences were often characterised by participants implementing strategies to *actively* manage their engagement. Examples given often involved participants using features and affordances of the technology to their benefit, including setting time-limits and reminders and carefully curating their feeds and online interactions.

> Having those timers definitely let me feel in control… reminders that I can put in place to kind of safeguard my time (P20)

> When I see something that I don't like I immediately change it, which obviously impacts what I see (P9)

As a result of this *intentionality* of engagement, participants were more able to align their SNS use with their personal beliefs, values and goals ["I think I am acting in line with my values and that makes me feel good" (P8)]. Whilst this sometimes meant being more intentional and mindful *when online*, at other times this meant taking *breaks* from the online world.

> It's not just scrolling anymore; it's more purposeful (P15)

> Breaking that pattern... it's like, 'Oh, I will go outside now and get some fresh air rather than being glued to the screen' (P20)

Irrespective, a more intentional/mindful mode of engagement seemed to be linked to a number of positive outcomes,

including positive emotional states, a heightened sense of agency, control and empowerment, and a decreased likelihood of drifting into compulsive or excessive patterns of use. Such experiences also enabled SNS to be used as a tool for personal growth.

> I just started clicking 'not interested' on all of the food photos and then it just meant that I got a bit of variety and I was like 'this is nice' (P14)

> Getting curious about the information I'm getting. Maybe digging into it more. Maybe wanting [to] learn more about it (P1)

> I like to spend my time thinking about what I do [i.e. hobbies and interests]. It's something that I'm pretty proud of (P16)

Theme 1, therefore, highlights the capacity of SM users to harness the features and affordances of the technology in the service of their interests, as well as associated positive outcomes, when SM is used with intentionality.

Theme 2: Targeted Interactions Driving Connection. Related to theme 1, participants frequently described how, during a positive SNS experience, targeted interactions (by definition intentional), particularly those involving direct messaging and (closed) group chats rather than more generalised posting to an open network, enhanced their social relationships.

> I often send direct messages to friends when I see something that makes me think of them. It keeps the connection alive (P12)

These targeted interactions were typically intimate, allowing participants to maintain and strengthen their bonds with close friends and family members, especially when physical distance was a barrier or the relationship might be difficult to sustain otherwise.

> I feel like if we hadn't had those interactions, we would have still been kind of just like strangers being like 'oh hey nice to see you again' but actually we felt a lot closer and we were like friends (P14)

> I feel like now I am away from my friends who I grew up with back home and people on my gap year and stuff it's turned more into a way to stay connected with people (P16)

At other times initial interactions were less intimate and low effort, involving (for example) simply commenting on a friend's post. However, this often acted as a springboard for more personalised forms of interaction, reactivating what have been termed *latent ties* (Ellison et al., 2007), i.e. connections that are not actively maintained but can easily be reactivated. Thus, targeted SNS experiences were particularly valued when they not only *maintained* relationships, but *deepened* connections or *expanded* new ones, i.e. increased intimacy and depth of the relationship.

> If I send that to a particular friend […] there's like prompts for conversations… or like yeah deeper questions to ask your friends (P18)

> Seeing something enjoyable and sharing it with a friend can turn into a longer conversation. It's not just about liking a post; it's about engaging with them on something that matters to both of us, which really strengthens our friendship (P13)

Theme 2, therefore, forces us to broaden our perspective of the user's SM environment beyond just the technological features and affordances of the platform, to acknowledge the role of the audience/*the other*, as well as the positive potential of more focused and directed interactions.

Theme 3: Communitainment: Entertainment as Gateway. Theme 3 captures how the sharing of entertaining content, e.g., humorous memes and videos, which had often initially been sought for *personal* consumption, could also serve as a gateway for social connection and community-building (Stollfuß, 2020).

> Sometimes I'll share a meme and it sparks a whole conversation. It's a great way to connect (P11)

Whilst such content was often shared via open networks, sometimes it was shared in a more targeted way with friends (as per theme 2).

> Sometimes a friend of mine will send something. I'll say 'lol hilarious' and then say to them 'Oh I haven't spoken to you in a week' or something (P17)

Irrespective, whilst initiated by the sharing of something seemingly trivial, it often built or strengthened social connections by creating moments of shared joy and humour. Further, for some, this humour had a deeper function, helping them to bond with others over shared struggles, reducing the emotional burden of their experiences, and drawing in social and emotional support in the process.

> Sharing something funny with a friend, especially when we're both stressed, really lightens the mood and brings us closer (P12)

Theme 3, therefore, highlights how experiences of genuine connection are not contingent upon profound self-disclosure, but can be seeded by moments of levity and playfulness.

Negative Social Network Site Experiences

Theme 4: Automatic Engagement and Loss of Agency. In contrast to reported *positive* experiences of SNS use, negative

experiences were often characterised by passive, automatic patterns of engagement, and consequently, a perceived loss of agency and control, and even, fears around a potential loss of attentional capacity.

> You're so tuned into your phone and so tuned out of everything going on around you (P12)
>
> It definitely does get a bit habitual. If you don't check yourself (P1)
>
> I am like 'wow do I have no self-control?' (P8)
>
> People are losing their attention span. And I'm losing my attention span! (P5)

Participants described how particular features and affordances of the technology, e.g., the infinite scrolling function and nature of short-form content, made it easy to lose a sense of time spent on SNSs, disrupting routines, displacing other activities, and driving procrastination. Further, they often linked this to feelings of guilt and regret (sometimes retrospectively).

> You're just sitting down going through [scrolling] and then you think, 'Oh I was supposed to do something' (P2)
>
> I'd come home and watch it for two hours and then I'd be like 'oh my god it's been two hours' like 'that's rubbish'. And I'd feel guilty for watching it. And I'd feel rubbish (P17)
>
> Five-minute break turns into feeling quite guilty because you've then wasted fifteen… twenty minutes (P20)

Frequently driven by boredom, habit, or a desire to escape negative emotions, such as offline social rejection or stress, automatic *initiation* of SNS use (in particular) seemed to be linked to unhelpful patterns of use and negative online experiences, such as exposure to unwanted and upsetting content.

> You find that you are not feeling that connection with the real world. So you maybe just go back home again and sit there [online] (P2)
>
> I thought I'd gotten to the point of like creating this algorithm that kind of allows me to escape from that kind of stuff or those kinds of people. But clearly not (P11)

This often led to a tendency to engage in unhelpful social comparisons, which could fuel pre-existing issues with self-esteem and impact on mental health and wellbeing.

> Seeing other people's success is harmful... especially if you are already struggling with low self-esteem or you're just thinking you're not doing well in life (P4)
>
> I just felt like I was comparing a lot my body (P8)

Thus, theme 4 presents a mirror reflection of theme 1, highlighting how automatic engagement is linked to a range of negative outcomes, as well as how technological features and affordances can drive this automaticity/undermine intentionality.

Theme 5: Social Derailment and the Blocking of Connection. Theme 5 captured experiences of *social derailment*, whereby online social advances were not reciprocated, and interactions did not go as expected, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts or feelings of rejection. Even the absence of positive responses from others could trigger discomfort.

> Sometimes when you post something and you are expecting some... positive reaction then the first person to comment is a negative comment you find you just [think] 'Wow' (P2)
>
> You are talking about something quite personal... You might feel like they didn't care or... you must not be on the same level (P1)

These frustrations could also feed into *offline* interactions, with participants explaining how SNS use could foster unrealistic expectations of offline relationships.

> I have heard of other people having similar instances of maybe… a lack of response and feeling that equates to a problem within the friendship (P18)

These negative experiences and perceived rejections led some participants to hesitate before sharing thoughts or experiences on SNS again, due to a fear of judgment or criticism and *anticipated* social derailment.

> Maybe I was not sharing or speaking my mind because I was afraid of other people... I was afraid of negative people talking about me (P1)
>
> I stopped posting… because I wasn't sure what was appropriate (P20)

In general, experiences of social derailment were associated with an increase in feelings of isolation, low self-esteem and anxiety.

> If I didn't get as many likes on a post [as anticipated]… that kind of thing really would faze me a lot (P7)

In response, some reported withdrawing *completely* from online engagement. For others, however, the potential for online anonymity, particularly in open forums such as Reddit, appeared to provide a buffer against the threat of social derailment.

> Subreddits are almost like anonymous communities on their own... the reason I visit these particular subreddits is… I used to find it difficult to know how to navigate… through relationships (P4)

Theme 5 again reminds us of the importance of considering the user's broader SM environment, particularly the role of the audience/*the other*, but this time highlights the uncertainty and social risks involved.

Theme 6: Safety Derailment and Feelings of Powerlessness. Theme 6 reflects participants' reports of how negative SNS experiences often involved exposure to unwelcome and triggering content that was not sought, such as 'thinspiration' and 'fitspiration' material, i.e. content that aims to inspire thinness and fitness, often through extreme messaging (Talbot et al., 2017), prejudicial comments made against other users, or violent content linked to world events that often triggered distress and feelings of powerlessness.

> Following loads of fitness accounts and then how toxic that was (P20)

> There are no trigger warnings…You just click through stories and suddenly there is something that is really horrible. A really horrible video. Personally, for me I really struggle with that. Like that is something that I can't shake off quickly (P14)

Participants from marginalised and minoritised groups, in particular, noted the pervasiveness of both overt and covert discrimination, and often indicated resignation to its presence.

> I do feel a bit powerless. Like there is nothing I can do or say (P9)

Participants often reflected on the role of the 'algorithm' in this phenomenon, spreading and amplifying distressing and unwanted content despite their efforts to avoid it. This sense of resignation and powerlessness was common and seemed to amplify anxiety and distress for many.

> I think at this point it's less surprising. It's kind of like 'Oh that's just gonna' be there' (P16)

> I've set my preferences to avoid certain types of content, but it just keeps coming back. It's like the algorithm is ignoring what I want (P10)

> Even after I block or mute accounts, I still end up seeing things that really bother me. It makes me anxious to even open the app sometimes (P6)

Building on theme 5, theme 6 further reinforces the risks of SM engagement, emphasising the impact of disturbing content, as well as how this can both mirror experiences of offline stigma and discrimination and be amplified by the features and affordances of the technology.

Discussion

This study set out to explore emerging adults' positive and negative SNS experiences through the lens of the TCBC (Tibber & Silver, 2022), with an intent to explore areas of both good fit and poor fit. Six themes were produced: three relating to positive and three to negative SNS experiences. With respect to the former, themes included *Intentional Engagement Promoting Agency*, which captures how participants mindfully and intentionally managed their SNS use and curated content to feel more in control of their online presence; *Targeted Interactions Driving Connection,* which highlights how intentional and targeted interactions, often across great distances, could deepen social bonds; and *Communitainment: Entertainment as Gateway*, which reflects how entertaining (particularly humorous) content, often initially sought for the user's own gratification, could serve as a gateway to deeper and more meaningful connection.

With respect to *negative* SNS experiences, themes included *Automatic Engagement and the Loss of Agency*, which captures how mindless engagement, often driven by escapist or avoidant motivations, led to a perceived loss of agency and control; *Social Derailment and the Blocking of Connection,* which highlights how attempts to connect on SNS often failed, and resulted in rejection and misunderstanding; *Safety Derailment and Feelings of Powerlessness,* which reflects participants' experiences of being exposed to distressing content, despite efforts to avoid it, and a sense of disempowerment in the face of features and affordances of the technology driving this.

Through the Lens of the Transdiagnostic Cognitive-Behavioural Conceptualisation

Broadly speaking, these themes, and the broader findings from this study provide empirical support for the TCBC (Tibber & Silver, 2022), whilst also indicating areas where it needs to be extended or modified. With respect to the former, there are three areas of the conceptualisation that are *particularly* well supported.

First, with respect to the *mode of engagement* (see Figure 1), and in line with a growing body of literature, whilst mindful and intentional patterns of engagement were commonly reported in descriptions of positive SNS experiences and were associated with a range of positive outcomes including greater social connection, a greater degree of agency and control over the online experience (Jones, 2024b), mindless and automatic/habitual patterns of engagement were commonly reported in descriptions of negative SNS experiences, and were associated in participant reports with a number of negative subjective experiences, including feelings of anxiety, low mood, and more compulsive and problematic patterns of use (Meynadier et al., 2024). Thus, the conceptualisation proposes that mindful engagement allows the user to be more aware of the consequences of their online behaviours and the content to which they are exposed, as a result of

which they can engage more critically, choosing for example, who and what they wish to attend to (Tibber & Silver, 2022).

Whilst this was captured most explicitly by theme 1 (*Intentional Engagement Promoting Agency*) and theme 4 (*Automatic Engagement and the Loss of Agency*), echoes of these processes were reflected in other themes. For example, in theme 2 (*Targeted Interactions Driving Connection*), positive experiences of directly connecting with friends and family are by definition intentional and targeted, requiring purposeful engagement with valued goals. The findings also support the TCBC in highlighting potential underlying mechanisms in this process, including a tendency towards greater algorithmic capture and unhelpful social comparisons when engagement is less mindful (Desjarlais et al., 2024; Weeks, 2023).

Second, and relatedly, the findings highlight the central role of *enhancement motivations* and *social approach behaviours* versus *compensation motivations* and *avoidant behaviours* in determining the impact of SM engagement, i.e. 'toward' and 'away' moves as they are sometimes referred to in the clinical literature (Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004). Thus, the TCBC proposes that whilst SM facilitates the cultivation of social connections, it can also be used as a means of avoidance, i.e. retreating from the social world, with marked consequences for mental health and wellbeing (Tibber & Silver, 2022). Thus, both theme 1 (*Targeted Interactions Driving Connection*) and theme 3 (*Communitainment: Entertainment as Gateway*) highlighted how positive SNS experiences are typified by actions that foster closer connection with others, whether these are initially intended or not. This also reflects the key premise of the *interpersonal-connection-behaviours framework* on which the TCBC draws (Clark et al., 2018), which is that SM is -in large part- helpful or unhelpful to the user to the extent that it supports or hinders satisfaction of core needs, particularly those relating to acceptance and belonging. In contrast, participants' reports of negative SNS experiences emphasised moments when core needs for acceptance and belonging were *not* met, typified for example in theme 5 (*Social Derailment and the Blocking of Connection*) by experiences of rejection and thwarting of social approach behaviours, leading to feelings of disconnection and withdrawal.

Third, with respect to *platform affordances* (Figure 1), participants' reports emphasised the role of platform features and affordances in shaping their behaviour, with resulting impacts on mental health and wellbeing. However, participants' responses also highlighted (in line with the TCBC), that the very same features that afford helpful engagement may also drive unhelpful engagement depending on whether they are used mindfully or mindlessly (Tibber & Silver, 2022). With respect to the former, participants' descriptions of *positive* SNS experiences often referred to intentional use of platform features to curate their online environment and increase their sense of agency, e.g., 'blocking', 'unfollowing' and actively curating content. In contrast, participants' reports of *negative* SNS experiences often reflected a perceived lack of control over the content they encountered, frequently linked to algorithmic capture and resulting exposure to distressing and unwanted material.

With respect to adaptations to the TCBC indicated by our findings, there are four. The first two reflect the TCBC's primary focus on the individual user and insufficient recognition of broader contextual factors, including those that lie outside the user's control. The second two reflect psychological processes that were referenced in descriptions of the TCBC but not given sufficient weight in the conceptualisation itself.

First, we propose that the conceptualisation requires greater (explicit) consideration of the role of *the other* in SNS interactions, i.e. communication partners, other network members, peers, and the broader audience, etc. As discussed, participants' reports suggest that the most profound benefits of SNS engagement were derived when interactions with others were not only frequent, but meaningful, and *reciprocated*, thereby meeting core needs for acceptance and belonging (Clark et al., 2018). Theme 5 (*Social Derailment and the Blocking of Connection*), in particular, points to the fact that despite (even) the most mindful and intentional of engagement, certain external factors that are (partly) outside of the user's control, e.g., the nature of the audience and how it responds, will help shape the extent to which social gratifications sought will be met or thwarted. We would therefore suggest that '*Interaction quality: reciprocal/supportive vs. non-reciprocal or hostile'* be added under SM use (Supplemental Material 3; Figure S1), in order to acknowledge the element of chance and *associated uncertainty* inherent in any SM experience, partly with respect to *the other*, which was (for example) clearly reflected in the role of *anticipated derailment* (under theme 5).

Second, and relatedly, we propose that the conceptualisation focus more on the nature of content engaged with. Thus, participants' responses highlight (not unsurprisingly) how not all content accessed on SM is equal in its impact on users' well-being. Theme 1 (*Intentional Engagement Promoting Agency*), theme 2 (*Targeted Interactions Driving Connection*) and theme 3 (*Communitainment: Entertainment as Gateway*) all make reference to the fact that when content is meaningful, supportive, and aligns with personal values and interests, it is (typically) linked to more positive outcomes. In contrast, theme 6 (*Safety Derailment and Feelings of Powerlessness*) points to the fact that when content encountered is distressing and/or misaligned with the user's values, it can lead to cognitive dissonance, stress and rumination. Once again, however, there is an element of chance and uncertainty that is (arguably) under-acknowledged by the original conceptualisation. Thus, as highlighted by the notion of *derailment*, which conjures images of being sideswiped by something unseen, despite the best of intentions, one may encounter triggering content, particularly in the context of persuasive technology design, including algorithms

that -in competition for users' attention- amplifies emotive, triggering material (Tibber & Silver, 2022). To this end we propose that *'content: meaningful/pleasurable vs. distressing/threatening'* be added to SM use in the conceptualisation (see Figure S1).

Third, we propose that the conceptualisation place a greater emphasis on identity. Whilst not linked to a single theme, participants often reflected on how their SNS experiences were closely tied to their identity. For example, theme 1 (*Intentional Engagement Promoting Agency*) included references to how participants deliberately curated their online presence to reflect values and beliefs, which lie central to their identity. Further, when SNS use aligned with their identity it was typically associated with positive outcomes such as an increased sense of agency. Conversely, theme 6 (*Safety Derailment and Feelings of Powerlessness*) included references to times when SNS interactions or content that threatened the user's identity trigged more negative outcomes, e.g., anxiety, a perceived loss of control, cognitive dissonance and/or identity confusion. Theme 6 also highlighted how participants with marginalised or minoritised identities were more likely to encounter harmful content or hostile interactions (often directly related to their identity), a finding that is consistent with a body of research highlighting how individuals and groups who are victimised in the offline world are more likely to experience similar treatment in online contexts (Weinstein et al., 2021). Consequently, we propose that *'Identity – self-perception and as socially located'* be added to the conceptualisation as its own component (see Figure S1), demarcated by a jagged boundary to infer arrowheads pointing inwards and outwards in *all* directions in order to indicate the complex and varied interacting roles that identity plays with *all* other aspects of the conceptualisation, e.g., shaping behaviours engaged in, content and quality of interactions experienced, etc.

Finally, we propose that a greater emphasis be placed on the role that satisfaction and dissatisfaction of core needs relating to *autonomy* and *competence* play in determining whether benefits or harms of SM use are accrued. Thus, whilst the TCBC -drawing on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017)- proposes that SM engagement is most likely to be helpful or harmful to the extent it leads to satisfaction or dissatisfaction (respectively) of core needs relating to autonomy, competence, and relatedness, its *primary* focus as a social technology is on social needs relating to acceptance and belonging (Tibber & Silver, 2022). Whilst the findings reported here justify the centrality of acceptance and belonging, the need for autonomy and competence emerged as highly important also. Thus, in participants' reports, high levels of intentional engagement seemed to be important not solely because of the control that this gave the user to engage in 'toward' moves (i.e. approach behaviours), but also because it contributed (positively) to an *implicit* sense of agency and control, e.g., over how and how much time was spent online. Consequently, we propose to adapt the '*consequences'* component of the conceptualisation to read *'consequences – increase vs. decrease in satisfaction of core needs, including those relating to autonomy, relatedness and competence'* rather than *'consequences – increase vs. decrease in satisfaction of core needs, particularly those relating to belonging and acceptance'* (see Figure S1). Such a shift in emphasis also reflects the growing recognition of the relevance of self-determination theory to the field of SM and mental health (Skeggs & Orben, 2025).

Relevance to Emerging Adulthood

Locating the findings within the broader SM in emerging adults literature, they support research that highlights the importance of SM as a novel and prominent context in which the traditional social challenges of this developmental phase are now played out, particularly in a post-COVID-19, increasingly digital world (Cleofas et al., 2022). Thus, amongst emerging adults (as well as adolescents) SM has become a space where relationships (romantic, sexual and platonic) are often initiated, deepened, and maintained, ruptures are repaired, and social skills cultivated and refined (Hood et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2021). Our findings also shed light on some of the underlying processes involved, including threats to, and opportunities for, connection, and how these are facilitated or hindered by the features and affordances of online communication.

These online relationships are also crucial in the development of adolescents' and emerging adults' identity. With greater opportunities to experiment with how one presents oneself come risks of acceptance and rejection, identity consolidation and fragmentation (Yang et al., 2022). Online social comparisons simultaneously open a window to a wider world and provide inspiration for ways of being, but also, risks to self-esteem and mental health (Tibber et al., 2020, 2024). Further, as shown by the work of Butler (2024) and others, and echoed in our data, the external pressures that impinge upon adolescents and emerging adults whilst trying to negotiate these developmental challenges risk being replicated (or even amplified) in online spaces, including experiences of stigma and discrimination (Weinstein et al., 2021).

The importance placed in participants' reports on SM's capacity to either enhance or undermine feelings of control is also crucial to consider in the context of research that highlights emerging adulthood as a period of intense structural as well as biological, psychological, and social change; thus, emerging adulthood often coincides with leaving the family home, travelling or moving long distances, e.g., to seek employment or higher education opportunities. It is perhaps not surprising against this backdrop, therefore, that emerging adults commonly report a reduced sense of control and agency during this period (Cerino et al., 2023).

Finally, late adolescence and emerging adulthood coincides with a period of elevated SM use (Schønning et al., 2020), heightened sensitivity to the negative effects of SM

engagement (Orben et al., 2022), and an increased risk of developing a mental health condition (Kessler et al., 2005). Taken together, we believe that these facts, complemented by our findings, emphasise the importance of developing a deep and nuanced understanding of the (many) roles SM plays in emerging adults' mental health and wellbeing, as well as the importance of incorporating this understanding in clinical, educational and public health practices.

Implications

Given that the key tenets of the TCBC were strongly supported by the stories we heard from our participants, we would suggest that the TCBC is a useful starting point for both conceptualising SM/mental health links in this population, as well as designing ways to address them, e.g., through the development and implementation of strategies, tools, and interventions to support healthy SM use. Specifically, supported by our findings, the conceptualisation highlights the importance of cultivating mindful and intentional, values-consistent SM use, as well as an understanding of the ways in which features and affordances of the technology can both support and undermine such healthy engagement.

In terms of how to cultivate this type of engagement *in practice*, we would orient the reader to Table 1 (p. 29-32) in Tibber & Silver (2022), which describes practical ideas for assessment and intervention in clinical practice based on the TCBC, as well as standard (and well-documented) cognitive-behavioural and third-wave[5] cognitive behavioural tools and strategies used to elicit mindful, values-consistent behaviour and positive behavioural change (Hayes et al., 1999; Packer & Tibber, n.d). In addition, one author has used the TCBC clinically, specifically to support emerging adults (and adolescents) accessing mental health support with respect to their SM use, as well as in educational settings in the form of SM/mental health workshops, i.e. as prevention/public health intervention. Drawing on these experiences, as well as the TCBC itself, we would propose several core ingredients to be tested as the foundations for future clinical, educational and public health interventions to support young people to use SM in healthy ways. These include: (i) digital literacy training and psychoeducation to raise SM users' awareness of how platform features (e.g., infinite scroll and automatic replay) interacts with psychological processes to increase habitual/automatic engagement (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021); (ii) values-clarification exercises to elucidate and consolidate users' goals and values with respect to their SM engagement, e.g., the values bullseye[6] (Berkout, 2021); (iii) mindfulness based exercises to increase users' capacity to reflect upon, and track, whether their engagement is aligned or misaligned with their values, e.g., use of activity diaries and between session self-reflection exercises (Jones & Tibber, n.d; Webb, 2023); and (iv) basic skills training on how to implement positive behavioural change in order to reduce any potential misalignment between current behaviour and desired, values-consistent behaviour, e.g., setting of SMART (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals, and the linking of target behaviours to cues and rewards (Bailey, 2017).

Building on -and extending- the TCBC, however, this study also highlights how implementation of any such intervention, whether delivered in clinical, educational or health contexts, should also be sensitive to: (i) the role of chance and uncertainty in accessing the harms and benefits of SM, particularly in relation to content and social feedback elicited, as well as the implicit anxiety this may evoke; (ii) the ways in which SM can undermine feelings of agency and control, and drive feelings of guilt and regret linked to mismanagement of time and displacement of valued activities; (iii) the importance of identity in shaping online experiences, risks and benefits; and (iv) the broad array of functions that SM can serve, which will be highly specific to the individual, and likely, intimately linked to their identity and values. Consequently, whilst the findings support the value of the TCBC in understanding (and addressing) the role of SM in emerging adults' mental health, they highlight a need for the conceptualisation to be embedded in a more relational and contextual understanding that is sensitive to the idiosyncratic needs of the individual, their social relations, and the complex systems in which they are embedded (Ong et al., 2024), and hence arguably, broader work with the systems in which young people are embedded. Thus, a common criticism of CBT is that it can lead to a locating of problems (and hence responsibility for change) within the individual, at the risk of minimising social and systemic responsibility for change (Proctor, 2008). This is particularly relevant given current debates around corporate responsibility -and its absence- in addressing the potential harms of SM use, alongside increasing pressure for legislative and policy change, which we would support.

With respect to the greater emphasis on chance and uncertainty that our changes to the conceptualisation imply, we would emphasise that these do not strip SM users of agency; thus, in the face of this uncertainty, SNS users can (and do) often take active, mindful steps to try and control the nature of their online interactions and content to which they are exposed, in ways that maximise their chances of having positive, prosocial interactions, e.g., adjusting privacy settings, using 'blocking' and 'unfollowing' functionalities, or targeting their interactions to known and trusted individuals. In this sense, we would suggest that these changes only further reinforce the importance the TCBC places on cultivating a more intentional and purposeful mode of engagement (Tibber & Silver, 2022). In addition, however, they highlight the potential value of incorporating strategies to cultivate the SM user's capacity for acceptance and tolerance of uncertainty in the face of challenges to their sense of control, both of which can be successfully targeted using well-evidenced and commonly used cognitive behavioural strategies (Bomyea et al., 2015).

Limitations

With respect to the limitations of the study, there were several. First, whilst we purposively sampled participants following screening of expressions of interest in order to try and maximise diversity with respect to basic demographics, the sample was heavily skewed towards English participants, particularly Londoners. This likely introduced biases since differences in SM use and mental health have been documented between rural and urban contexts (Gonzales, 2025).

Second, whilst we focused our interviews on positive and negative SNS experiences since we hypothesised that these would be linked to positive and negative wellbeing/mental health, respectively (Skogen et al., 2023), there is a risk that we limited content that participants could bring in the process, e.g., complex experiences that involved a combination of positive *and* negative experiences. In practice, however, we think this is unlikely since interviews followed a traditional funnel structure, with initial broad open-ended questions to initiate discussion, including *"how does social media, and in particular online social networking, play a role in your life?"*, before focusing in explicitly on positive and negative online experiences and asking about these directly.

Third, given our stated aim ("*to explore the utility of the TCBC in understanding the everyday, positive and negative experiences of emerging adults on SNS")*, which shaped all aspects of our methodological design -from our focus on positive *and* negative SNS experiences to the use of framework analysis in order to incorporate *a priori* codes- we are unable to say anything about the relative fit of the TCBC to other conceptualisations, models, or theoretical approaches. However, this was not our intention; nonetheless, future research, potentially better suited to quantitative approaches, might be used to pit different models against one another to address the question of best fit.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore everyday experiences of emerging adults on SNS through the lens of the TCBC. The findings were generally supportive of the conceptualisation and revealed that participants' experiences are highly context-dependent, and further, that the *mode* of engagement –whether mindful or mindless– plays a critical role in shaping likely psychological outcomes. Thus, participants who engaged with SNS in a mindful and intentional manner tended to report positive experiences characterised by a sense of control, social enhancement, and alignment with personal values. Further, these experiences were associated with positive mental health outcomes, such as increased self-esteem and a sense of connection. In contrast, participants who engaged with SM in a passive and automatic manner commonly reported negative experiences, characterised by social comparison, exposure to harmful content, and feelings of guilt and regret following use. These were, in turn, associated with negative mental health outcomes, including decreased self-esteem, increased anxiety, and a reduced sense of safety, both online and offline. The findings also highlight potential areas areas of the TCBC that are ripe for modification, most notably a greater emphasis on the role of *interaction quality* and *content* accessed in determining the harms and benefits of engagement, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the role of interindividual differences, including the user's identity and particular sets of needs and values in shaping their experiences, and the functions that SM plays in their life. It is hoped that these findings will inform future research, and ultimately, the work of clinicians, educators, and policy makers intent on improving the mental health and wellbeing of emerging adults.

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The transcripts and coding frameworks (etc.) used in this manuscript are not openly available but are available upon reasonable request to the author.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Persuasive design is the incorporation of technological features intended to influence user behaviour towards specific actions or to maximise engagement.
2. The attention economy is a system in which attention is competed for by digital platforms and advertisers through design that maximises engagement.
3. A filter bubble is an algorithmically personalised information environment that exposes users to content that matches their prior behaviour and preferences, limiting diverse or challenging viewpoints.
4. An echo chamber is a social or media environment where individuals primarily encounter opinions that reinforce their own, with dissenting views underrepresented or excluded.
5. Third-wave cognitive behavioural therapies refer to a group of CBT-based approaches that extend traditional cognitive-behavioural models by emphasising contextual, experiential, and process-oriented strategies, such as mindfulness, acceptance,

values, and metacognition, over a narrow focus on symptom reduction or the content of thoughts.

6. The Values Bullseye is a visual worksheet that helps people identify their core values across life domains and assess how closely their current actions align with those values, so that any discrepancies between the two can be used to guide values-based goal setting and behaviour change.

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Dr. Charlotte A. Jones is a Clinical Psychologist and alumnus of University College London. Her areas of interest include emerging adults and social media use, with a particular focus on the benefits as well as the harms of social media. As part of her doctoral thesis, she completed a systematic review exploring links between mindfulness, mental health, and social media use.

Dr. Catherine V. Talbot is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Bournemouth University, specialising in health and cyberpsychology. Her research uses qualitative methods to investigate how digital technologies can be harnessed to promote wellbeing, identity, and social inclusion among underserved groups, with a particular focus on people affected by dementia. She also addresses digital inequalities through co-design approaches and educational interventions.

Dr. Marc S. Tibber is a Senior Clinical Psychologist and Lecturer in Clinical Psychology at University College London, specialising in young people's mental health. His recent work has focused on the role of interpersonal / social processes in mental health (including social media communication), and how issues of connection and disconnection affect individuals and communities.