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#Sleepyteens: Social media use in adolescence is associated with poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem



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ABSTRACT

This study examined how social media use related to sleep quality, self-esteem, anxiety and depression in 467 Scottish adolescents. We measured overall social media use, nighttime-specific social media use, emotional investment in social media, sleep quality, self-esteem and levels of anxiety and depression. Adolescents who used social media more – both overall and at night – and those who were more emotionally invested in social media experienced poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression. Nighttime-specific social media use predicted poorer sleep quality after controlling for anxiety, depression and self-esteem. These findings contribute to the growing body of evidence that social media use is related to various aspects of wellbeing in adolescents. In addition, our results indicate that nighttime-specific social media use and emotional investment in social media are two important factors that merit further investigation in relation to adolescent sleep and wellbeing.

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Introduction

Social media sites – such as Facebook and Twitter – have rapidly become a central part of young people's lives, with over 90% now using social media, day and night (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Evidence is increasingly supporting a link between social media use and various aspects of adolescent wellbeing, including sleep and mental health (e.g. Espinoza, 2011; Farahani, Kazemi, Aghamohamadi, Bakhtiarvand, & Ansari, 2011; Pantic et al., 2012). Poor sleep quality is prevalent in adolescents (Telzer, Fulgini, Lieberman, & Galván, 2013), and is known to contribute to depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Alfano, Zakem, Costa, Taylor, & Weems, 2009; Fredriksen, Rhodes, Reddy, & Way, 2004). Since adolescence is a period of increased vulnerability for low self-esteem and the onset of depression and anxiety (McLaughlin & King, 2015; Orth, Maes, & Schmitt, 2015), it is essential to understand how social media use relates to these factors. The present study makes a novel contribution to the literature by examining how overall vs. nighttime-specific social media use and emotional investment in social media relate to sleep quality, anxiety, depression and self-esteem in adolescents.

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Social media and sleep quality

There is a substantial body of evidence linking poor sleep to computer and Internet use in general, with only a small number of recent studies examining social media use specifically. Increased Internet use is associated with shorter sleep duration (Garmy, Nyberg, & Jakobsson, 2012; Pea et al., 2012); later bedtimes and rise times (Garmy et al., 2012; Shochat, Flint-Bretler, & Tzischinsky, 2010; Van den Bulck, 2004); longer sleep latencies (Shochat et al., 2010); and increased daytime tiredness in adolescents (Garmy et al., 2012; Van den Bulck, 2004). Concerning social media in particular, Espinoza (2011) surveyed 268 young adolescents and found that 37% reported losing sleep due to the use of social networking sites. However, as a relatively recent phenomenon, social media has yet to be extensively researched. To address this gap in the literature, the present study will examine how adolescents' sleep quality relates to social media use specifically. It is expected that greater social media use will be associated with poorer sleep quality, in line with previous findings on general Internet use.

Previous findings on Internet use in general are certainly relevant when considering social media use specifically, as young people spend 54% of their time online using social media (Thompson & Loughheed, 2012). However, unlike other uses of the Internet, social media involves incoming alerts at all times of the day. This unique feature of social media is particularly relevant to sleep quality for two reasons. Firstly, incoming alerts during the night have the potential to disturb sleep, as 86% of adolescents sleep with their phone in the bedroom – often under their pillow or in their hand (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). A quarter of adolescents report sleep interruptions from incoming text messages (Van den Bulck, 2003) and social media alerts are likely to cause similar sleep disturbances. Secondly, constant incoming alerts create considerable pressure to be available 24/7 and contribute to a fear of missing out (Thomé, Dellve, Harenstam, & Hagberg, 2010). Young adults experience considerable anxiety when their access to texting is restricted and report feeling stressed and guilty when they do not reply to a message immediately (Skierkowski & Wood, 2012; Thomée et al., 2010). It is therefore possible that young people struggle to relax at bedtime due to anxiety at missing out on new messages or content. These unique aspects of social media use provide further reason to expect a link with poor sleep quality.

Sleep interruptions from alerts and anxiety at missing out on new content are just two of the many possible mechanisms underlying a link between social media use and poor sleep. Cain and Gradisar (2010) outlined a number of possible mechanisms for the observed link between electronic media use and poor sleep, including reduced overall levels of physical activity and digital screen exposure before bedtime interfering with melatonin production and delaying circadian rhythms. The approach adopted here will contribute to our current understanding of the mechanisms underlying a link between social media use and poor sleep, by examining overall vs. nighttime-specific use and emotional investment in social media, which includes feeling upset or disconnected when unable to access social media accounts. For example, an association between poor sleep quality and overall social media use would support the role of a less physically active lifestyle. In contrast, a stronger relationship with nighttime-specific use would point towards sleep interruptions from alerts or disrupted circadian rhythms from digital screen exposure at bedtime. Alternatively, an association between poor sleep and emotional investment in social media would suggest that anxiety at missing out on new content means that young people struggle to relax at bedtime. Therefore, by examining the timing of social media use and the level of emotional investment in social media – as opposed to simply the daily duration of use – this study aims to inform our understanding of the mechanisms underlying a link between social media and poor sleep.

In line with previous findings on Internet use in general, it is expected that greater social media use – both overall and specifically at night – will be associated with poorer sleep quality. It is also expected that higher levels of emotional investment in social media – which includes distress at being unable to log on – will be associated with poorer sleep.

Social media and psychological wellbeing

Since poor sleep is known to contribute to anxiety, depression and low self-esteem during adolescence (Alfano et al., 2009; Fredriksen et al., 2004), this study also examines how adolescents' social media use relates to these aspects of psychological wellbeing. Adolescence is a vulnerable period where individuals are at risk for low self-esteem (Orth et al., 2015) and the onset of anxiety and depression (McLaughlin & King, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial that we explore how adolescents' social media use relates to psychological wellbeing. With an apparent link between social media use and poor sleep – which in turn is known to contribute to anxiety, depression and low self-esteem (Alfano et al., 2009; Fredriksen et al., 2004) – we need to examine these factors together and explore how they are related. This study extends previous work by examining how anxiety, depression and self-esteem relate not only to social media use in general, but also nighttime-specific use and emotional investment in social media.

Previous studies have reported that adolescents who spend more time online and using social media sites tend to experience higher levels of anxiety and depression (Banjanin, Banjanin, Dimitrijevic, & Pantic, 2015; Farahani et al., 2011; Pantic et al., 2012). We therefore expect that social media use will be associated with increased anxiety and depression in the present study. Furthermore, social media – unlike other Internet or computer use – is unique in the social pressure it creates to be available at all times and respond to messages and new content immediately (Thomé et al., 2010). Young adults in particular report considerable anxiety when their access to text-based communication is restricted (Skierkowski & Wood, 2012). We therefore expect that emotional investment in social media – which includes feeling upset and disconnected from others when unable to access social media sites – will be associated with higher anxiety and depression levels.

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