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Social Media Use in Young Adults Linked to Sleep Disturbances

WASHINGTON, DC – Young adults who spend a lot of time on social media during the day or check it frequently throughout the week are more likely to suffer sleep disturbances than their peers who use social media less, according to new research from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

The research is being presented Wednesday at the Society of Behavioral Medicine's Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions in Washington, DC. It is also scheduled for the April issue of the journal *Preventive Medicine*.

The study indicates that physicians should consider asking young adult patients about social media habits when assessing sleep issues.

"This is one of the first pieces of evidence that social media use really can impact your sleep," said lead author Jessica C. Levenson, PhD, a postdoctoral researcher in Pitt's Department of Psychiatry. "It uniquely examines the association between social media use and sleep among young adults who are, arguably, the first generation to grow up with social media."

Levenson and her colleagues sampled 1,788 U.S. adults ages 19 through 32, using questionnaires to determine social media use and an established measurement system to assess sleep disturbances. The questionnaires asked about the 11 most popular social media platforms at the time: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Google Plus, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, Tumblr, Pinterest, Vine and LinkedIn.

On average, the participants used social media a total of 61 minutes per day and visited various social media accounts 30 times per week. The assessment showed that nearly 30 percent of the participants had high levels of sleep disturbance. The participants who reported most frequently checking social media throughout the week had three times the likelihood of sleep disturbances, compared with those who checked least frequently. And participants who spent the most total time on social media throughout the day had twice the risk of sleep disturbance, compared to peers who spent less time on social media.

"This may indicate that frequency of social media visits is a better predictor of sleep difficulty than overall time spent on social media," Dr. Levenson explained. "If this is the case, then interventions that counter obsessive 'checking' behavior may be most effective."

Senior author Brian A. Primack, MD, PhD, assistant vice chancellor for health and society in Pitt's Schools of the Health Sciences, emphasized that more study is needed, particularly to determine whether social

media use contributes to sleep disturbance, whether sleep disturbance contributes to social media use—or both.

For example, social media may disturb sleep if it is:

- Displacing sleep, such as when a user stays up late posting photos on Instagram.
- Promoting emotional, cognitive or physiological arousal, such as when engaging in a contentious discussion on Facebook.
- Disrupting circadian rhythms through the bright light emitted by the devices used to access social media accounts.

Alternatively, young adults who have difficulty sleeping may subsequently use social media as a pleasurable way to pass the time when they can't fall asleep or return to sleep.

“It also may be that both of these hypotheses are true,” said Dr. Primack, also director of Pitt’s Center for Research on Media, Technology and Health. “Difficulty sleeping may lead to increased use of social media, which may in turn lead to more problems sleeping. This cycle may be particularly problematic with social media because many forms involve interactive screen time that is stimulating and rewarding and, therefore, potentially detrimental to sleep.”

Additional researchers on this study are Ariel Shensa, MA, Jaime E. Sidani, PhD, and Jason B. Colditz, MEd, all of Pitt’s School of Medicine.

The research team will present their findings Wednesday from 6 to 7 p.m. ET during a poster session at the Society of Behavioral Medicine’s Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions, being held in Washington, DC, at the Washington Hilton. Levenson and Primack are society members.

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The Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) is a 2,200-member organization of scientific researchers, clinicians and educators. They study interactions among behavior, biology and the environment, and translate findings into interventions that improve the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities (www.sbm.org).

The University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences include the schools of Medicine, Nursing, Dental Medicine, Pharmacy, Health and Rehabilitation Sciences and the Graduate School of Public Health. The schools serve as the academic partner to the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Together, their combined mission is to train tomorrow’s health care specialists and biomedical scientists, engage in groundbreaking research that will advance understanding of the causes and treatments of disease and participate in the delivery of outstanding patient care (www.health.pitt.edu).

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