



A social enterprise providing education and information to protect and enhance the mental health of young people

# Social media before bedtime wreaks havoc on our sleep – a sleep researcher explains why screens alone aren't the main culprit

Brian N. Chin, *Trinity College*

“Avoid screens before bed” is one of the most common pieces of sleep advice. But what if the real problem isn't screen time – it's the way we use social media at night?

Sleep deprivation is one of the most widespread yet overlooked **public health issues**, especially among young adults and adolescents.

Despite needing eight to 10 hours of sleep, **most adolescents** fall short, while **nearly two-thirds of young**

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Poor sleep isn't just about feeling tired – it's linked to worsened **mental health**, **emotion regulation**, **memory**, **academic performance** and even increased risk for **chronic illness** and **early mortality**.

At the same time, **social media is nearly universal** among young adults, with 84% using at least one platform daily. While research has long focused on **screen time** as the culprit for poor sleep, growing evidence suggests that **how often** people check social media – and how **emotionally engaged** they are – matters even more than how long they spend online.

As a **social psychologist and sleep researcher**, I study how social behaviors, including social media habits, affect sleep and well-being. Sleep isn't just an individual behavior; it's shaped by our **social environments and relationships**.

And one of the most common yet underestimated factors shaping modern sleep? How we engage with social media before bed.

## Emotional investment in social media

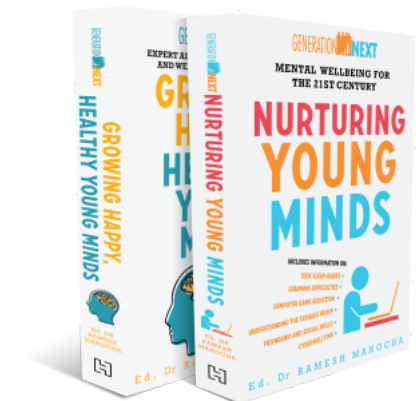
Beyond simply measuring time spent on social media, researchers have started looking at how **emotionally connected** people feel to their social media use.

Some studies suggest that the way people emotionally engage with social media may have a greater impact on sleep quality than the total time they spend online.

In a 2024 study of 830 young adults, my colleagues and I examined how different types of **social media engagement predicted sleep problems**. We found that frequent social media visits and emotional investment were stronger predictors of poor sleep than total screen

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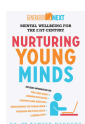
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media's effects on sleep extend beyond simple screen exposure.

I believe these findings suggest that cutting screen time alone may not be enough – reducing how often people check social media and how emotionally connected they feel to it may be more effective in promoting healthier sleep habits.

## How social media disrupts sleep

If you've ever struggled to fall asleep after scrolling through social media, it's not just the screen keeping you awake. While blue light can [delay melatonin production](#), [my team's research](#) and that of others suggests that the way people interact with social media may play an even bigger role in [sleep disruption](#).

Here are some of the biggest ways social media interferes with your sleep:

- **Presleep arousal:** [Doomscrolling](#) and emotionally charged content on social media keeps your brain in a state of heightened alertness, making it harder to relax and fall asleep. Whether it's political debates, distressing news or even exciting personal updates, emotionally stimulating content can trigger increased [cognitive and physiological arousal](#) that delays sleep onset.
- **Social comparison:** Viewing idealized social media posts before bed can lead to [upward social comparison](#), increasing stress and making it harder to sleep. People tend to compare themselves to [highly curated versions of others' lives](#) – vacations, fitness progress, career milestones – which can lead to [feelings of inadequacy and anxiety](#) that disrupt sleep.

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become an automatic habit. Studies have shown that **nighttime-specific social media use**, especially after lights are out, is linked to shorter sleep duration, later bedtimes and lower sleep quality. This pattern reflects **bedtime procrastination**, where people delay sleep despite knowing it would be better for their health and well-being.

- **Fear of missing out, or FOMO:** The urge to stay connected also keeps many people scrolling long past their intended bedtime, making sleep feel secondary to staying updated. Research shows that higher **FOMO levels** are linked to **more frequent nighttime social media use** and **poorer sleep quality**. The anticipation of new messages, posts or updates can create a sense of social pressure to stay online and reinforce the habit of delaying sleep.

Taken together, these factors make social media more than just a passive distraction – it becomes an active barrier to restful sleep. In other words, that late-night scroll isn't harmless – it's quietly rewiring your sleep and well-being.

## How to use social media without sleep disruption

You don't need to quit social media, but restructuring how you engage with it at night could help. Research suggests that small **behavioral changes** to your **bedtime routine** can make a significant difference in sleep quality. I suggest trying these practical, evidence-backed strategies for improving your sleep:

- **Give your brain time to wind down:** Avoid emotionally charged content 30 to 60 minutes

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Set your phone to “Do Not Disturb” or leave it outside the bedroom to avoid the temptation of late-night checking.

- **Reduce mindless scrolling:** If you catch yourself endlessly refreshing, take a [small, mindful pause](#) and ask yourself: “Do I actually want to be on this app right now?”

A brief moment of awareness can help break the habit loop.

[Brian N. Chin](#), Assistant Professor of Psychology, [Trinity College](#)

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