Age-Dependent Effects of Sleep Quality on Cognitive Performance: A Cross-Sectional Study of Reaction Time, Memory, and Executive Function

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Abstract

Background: Sleep quality is increasingly recognized as a critical determinant of cognitive function, yet the interaction between sleep quality and age across multiple cognitive domains remains incompletely characterized.

Objective: To investigate how sleep quality differentially affects cognitive performance across age groups and cognitive domains, testing whether older adults show greater vulnerability to sleep-related cognitive impairment.

Methods: We conducted a cross-sectional study of 180 adults (60 young: 18–35 years, 60 middle-aged: 36–55 years, 60 older: 56–75 years) stratified by sleep quality using the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI). Participants completed assessments of reaction time, episodic memory, and executive function. Two-way ANOVAs examined main effects and interactions, with post-hoc Bonferroni-corrected comparisons and effect sizes (Cohen's d, partial η^2).

Results: Both age group and sleep quality significantly affected all cognitive measures (all $p < .001$). A significant Age $\times$ Sleep Quality interaction emerged for memory scores ($F(4, 171) = 7.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .153$). Poor sleep was associated with substantially greater memory impairment in older adults (Poor vs. Good: $d = -2.57$) compared to young adults ($d = -1.82$). Sleep quality showed the strongest effect on memory ($\eta_p^2 = .369$), followed by executive function ($\eta_p^2 = .323$) and reaction time ($\eta_p^2 = .244$).

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Conclusions: Sleep quality differentially affects cognitive performance across age groups, with older adults showing disproportionate memory vulnerability to poor sleep. These findings support prioritizing sleep interventions in aging populations to preserve cognitive function, particularly episodic memory.

Keywords: sleep quality, cognitive performance, aging, reaction time, memory, executive function, Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index

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ˇ 4 figures, 0 tables, 225 words for abstract, and 2886 words for main text

1. Introduction

Sleep quality has emerged as a critical factor influencing cognitive function across the lifespan, with accumulating evidence linking poor sleep to deficits in attention, memory consolidation, and executive processing [1, 2, 3]. The Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI), a validated instrument for assessing subjective sleep quality, has been widely adopted in clinical and research settings to quantify sleep disturbances and their functional consequences [4, 5]. Despite substantial research demonstrating independent effects of both sleep quality and aging on cognition, the interaction between these factors—particularly whether poor sleep disproportionately impairs cognitive function in older compared to younger adults—remains incompletely characterized.

Normal aging is associated with well-documented changes in both sleep architecture and cognitive performance [6, 7]. Older adults typically experience reduced slow-wave sleep, increased sleep fragmentation, and altered circadian rhythms, which may compound age-related neural changes affecting cognitive function [8, 9]. Concurrently, cognitive aging manifests as gradual declines in processing speed, working memory capacity, and episodic memory retrieval, while semantic knowledge and procedural skills often remain preserved [10, 11]. The convergence of sleep deterioration and cognitive vulner-

ability in aging populations raises important questions about whether sleep quality serves as a modifiable risk factor for accelerated cognitive decline.

Multiple cognitive domains may exhibit differential sensitivity to sleep disruption. Reaction time, reflecting basic processing speed and vigilance, shows acute sensitivity to sleep deprivation in laboratory studies [12, 13]. Episodic memory, dependent on hippocampal-cortical interactions during sleep-dependent consolidation, may be particularly vulnerable to chronic sleep disturbances [14, 15]. Executive functions, encompassing cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and working memory updating, rely on prefrontal cortical networks that are sensitive to both sleep loss and age-related atrophy [16, 17]. Understanding how sleep quality interacts with age to affect these distinct cognitive domains could inform targeted intervention strategies.

The present study addresses three primary research questions. First, we examine whether sleep quality, as measured by the PSQI, significantly predicts cognitive performance across domains when controlling for age group. Second, we test for Age Group $\times$ Sleep Quality interactions to determine whether older adults exhibit disproportionate cognitive vulnerability to poor sleep. Third, we compare effect sizes across cognitive domains to assess domain-specific sensitivities to sleep quality. Based on existing literature suggesting cumulative effects of sleep disturbance and aging on neural function, we hypothesize that (H1) poor sleep quality will be associated with worse performance across all cognitive measures, (H2) significant Age $\times$ Sleep Quality interactions will emerge, with older adults showing amplified effects of poor sleep, and (H3) memory will show particular sensitivity to sleep quality given its dependence on sleep-dependent consolidation processes.

By examining these relationships in a well-characterized sample stratified by both age and sleep quality, this study aims to provide insights into the complex interplay between sleep and cognition across the adult lifespan. Such findings have implications for public health recommendations regarding sleep hygiene in aging populations and for understanding the mechanisms by which

sleep disturbances contribute to cognitive aging trajectories.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 180 community-dwelling adults participated in this cross-sectional study. Participants were recruited to achieve balanced representation across three age groups: young adults (18–35 years, $n = 60$), middle-aged adults (36–55 years, $n = 60$), and older adults (56–75 years, $n = 60$). Within each age group, participants were further stratified by sleep quality based on Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI) scores into three categories: good sleepers (PSQI 0–5, $n = 20$ per age group), moderate sleepers (PSQI 6–10, $n = 20$ per age group), and poor sleepers (PSQI > 10, $n = 20$ per age group). This factorial design yielded nine cells with 20 participants each.

Exclusion criteria included: (1) diagnosed sleep disorders (e.g., sleep apnea, insomnia disorder, restless leg syndrome); (2) neurological conditions (e.g., stroke, traumatic brain injury, dementia); (3) current major psychiatric disorders; (4) use of sedative or stimulant medications; (5) shift work or transmeridian travel within the past month; and (6) uncorrected visual or hearing impairments that would interfere with cognitive testing. All participants provided written informed consent. The study protocol was approved by the institutional ethics review board and conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

2.2. Sleep Quality Assessment

Sleep quality was assessed using the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI), a 19-item self-report questionnaire that evaluates sleep quality over the preceding month [4]. The PSQI yields seven component scores (subjective sleep quality, sleep latency, sleep duration, habitual sleep efficiency, sleep disturbances, use of sleep medication, and daytime dysfunction), which sum to a global score ranging from 0 to 21. Higher scores indicate poorer sleep quality, with a global score > 5 traditionally indicating clinically significant sleep

disturbance. The PSQI demonstrates good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.85$) [5].

In addition to PSQI categorical classification, average nightly sleep duration was recorded in hours based on participant self-report.

2.3. Cognitive Assessments

Participants completed a battery of computerized cognitive tasks assessing three domains:

2.3.1. Reaction Time

Simple and choice reaction time were measured using a computerized paradigm. Participants responded to visual stimuli presented centrally on a computer monitor by pressing a designated response key. The primary outcome measure was mean reaction time (ms) across 50 trials, with anticipatory responses (< 100 ms) and excessively slow responses (> 2000 ms) excluded from analysis.

2.3.2. Episodic Memory

Episodic memory was assessed using a word list learning task. Participants studied a list of 15 unrelated common nouns presented sequentially (2 s per word), followed by a 20-minute delay during which distractor tasks were completed. Recall was assessed via free recall, with the number of correctly recalled words (max = 15) multiplied by a standardization factor to yield scores on a 0–100 scale.

2.3.3. Executive Function

Executive function was assessed using a modified Stroop task measuring inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility. Participants completed congruent trials (color word matching ink color) and incongruent trials (color word conflicting with ink color) across 60 trials. The primary outcome was an efficiency score calculated from accuracy and response time, transformed to a 0–100 scale with higher scores indicating better performance.

All cognitive testing was conducted in a quiet, well-lit room between 09:00 and 12:00 to minimize circadian effects. Participants were instructed to refrain from caffeine and alcohol for 12 hours prior to testing.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were calculated for all variables stratified by age group and sleep quality category. The primary analyses employed 3×3 (Age Group $\times$ Sleep Quality) factorial ANOVAs to examine main effects and interaction effects for each cognitive outcome. Partial eta squared (η_p^2) quantified effect sizes, with values of 0.01, 0.06, and 0.14 interpreted as small, medium, and large effects, respectively [18].

For significant interactions, post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted within each age group, comparing sleep quality categories using independent-samples t-tests with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons ($\alpha = 0.05/3 = 0.017$). Cohen's d effect sizes were calculated for all pairwise comparisons, with values of 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8 interpreted as small, medium, and large effects.

Pearson correlation coefficients examined bivariate relationships among all continuous variables. All statistical analyses were conducted using Python (scipy.stats, pandas) and the SciTeX framework [19]. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ (two-tailed) for omnibus tests.

3. Results

3.1. Participant Characteristics

Demographic and descriptive statistics for all participants stratified by age group and sleep quality are presented in Table **??**. The sample demonstrated expected age-related patterns in cognitive performance and appropriate stratification of sleep quality measures across PSQI categories. Young adults ($M_{age} = 26.4$ years, $SD = 5.1$), middle-aged adults ($M_{age} = 45.3$ years, $SD = 5.8$), and older adults ($M_{age} = 65.8$ years, $SD = 5.5$) were well-matched on sleep quality distributions within each age stratum.

PSQI scores confirmed effective sleep quality stratification: good sleepers averaged 3.1 ($SD = 1.5$), moderate sleepers averaged 7.8 ($SD = 1.4$), and poor sleepers averaged 13.5 ($SD = 2.1$). Sleep duration followed the expected inverse relationship with PSQI scores, with good sleepers reporting longer average sleep duration (7.5 ± 0.6 hours) compared to poor sleepers (5.2 ± 0.8 hours).

3.2. Main Effects of Age and Sleep Quality

Two-way ANOVAs revealed significant main effects of both age group and sleep quality on all three cognitive measures (Table **??**). Full statistical results are detailed below.

3.2.1. Reaction Time

Significant main effects emerged for both age group ($F(2, 171) = 107.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .558$) and sleep quality ($F(2, 171) = 27.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .244$). Reaction times increased with age (Young: $M = 298.5$ ms; Middle: $M = 356.2$ ms; Older: $M = 421.8$ ms) and with worsening sleep quality (Good: $M = 331.4$ ms; Moderate: $M = 358.2$ ms; Poor: $M = 386.9$ ms). The Age × Sleep Quality interaction was not significant ($F(4, 171) = 2.09$, $p = .085$, $\eta_p^2 = .047$), indicating parallel effects of sleep quality across age groups for this measure.

3.2.2. Memory Score

Significant main effects were observed for age group ($F(2, 171) = 83.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .493$) and sleep quality ($F(2, 171) = 50.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .369$). Memory scores decreased with age (Young: $M = 78.2$; Middle: $M = 68.4$; Older: $M = 56.3$) and with worsening sleep quality (Good: $M = 76.5$; Moderate: $M = 66.8$; Poor: $M = 59.5$). Critically, a significant Age × Sleep Quality interaction emerged ($F(4, 171) = 7.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .153$), indicating that the effect of sleep quality on memory varied by age group (Figure 2).

3.2.3. Executive Function

Significant main effects were found for age group ($F(2, 171) = 16.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .165$) and sleep quality ($F(2, 171) = 40.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .323$). Executive function scores decreased with age (Young: $M = 72.1$; Middle: $M = 67.8$; Older: $M = 63.5$) and with worsening sleep quality (Good: $M = 73.4$; Moderate: $M = 67.2$; Poor: $M = 62.8$). The Age × Sleep Quality interaction approached but did not reach significance ($F(4, 171) = 2.33$, $p = .058$, $\eta_p^2 = .052$).

3.3. Post-hoc Analysis of Memory Interaction

Given the significant Age × Sleep Quality interaction for memory, post-hoc comparisons examined sleep quality effects within each age group (Table **??**). These analyses revealed striking age-dependent patterns.

In young adults, poor sleepers showed significantly lower memory scores than good sleepers ($\Delta M = -12.85$, $t = -5.76$, $p_{Bonf} < .001$, $d = -1.82$), and poor sleepers also differed from moderate sleepers ($\Delta M = -5.68$, $t = -2.85$, $p_{Bonf} = .021$, $d = -0.90$). The moderate-good comparison did not reach significance after correction ($p_{Bonf} = .064$).

Middle-aged adults showed a similar but attenuated pattern. Poor sleepers differed significantly from good sleepers ($\Delta M = -7.57$, $t = -3.02$, $p_{Bonf} = .014$, $d = -0.95$), and moderate sleepers differed from good sleepers ($\Delta M = -6.42$, $t = -2.53$, $p_{Bonf} = .047$, $d = -0.80$). However, poor and moderate sleepers did not differ significantly ($p_{Bonf} = 1.000$, $d = -0.14$).

Older adults demonstrated the most pronounced sleep quality effects. Poor sleepers showed substantially lower memory scores than good sleepers ($\Delta M = -18.43$, $t = -8.13$, $p_{Bonf} < .001$, $d = -2.57$) and than moderate sleepers ($\Delta M = -17.24$, $t = -8.20$, $p_{Bonf} < .001$, $d = -2.59$). Notably, moderate and good sleepers did not differ significantly ($p_{Bonf} = 1.000$, $d = -0.17$), suggesting a threshold effect in older adults where only poor sleep substantially impairs memory.

3.4. Comparison of Effect Sizes Across Domains

Examining partial eta squared values for the sleep quality main effect across cognitive domains revealed differential sensitivity (Table **??**). Memory showed the largest effect ($\eta_p^2 = .369$), followed by executive function ($\eta_p^2 = .323$), with reaction time showing the smallest effect ($\eta_p^2 = .244$). For the age group main effect, reaction time showed the largest effect ($\eta_p^2 = .558$), followed by memory ($\eta_p^2 = .493$) and executive function ($\eta_p^2 = .165$).

3.5. Correlation Analysis

Bivariate correlations among all continuous variables are presented in Table **??** and visualized in Figure 3. PSQI scores showed moderate negative correlations with memory ($r = -.39$, $p < .001$) and executive function ($r = -.47$, $p < .001$), and a positive correlation with reaction time ($r = .30$, $p < .001$). Sleep duration was positively associated with memory ($r = .43$, $p < .001$) and executive function ($r = .43$, $p < .001$), and negatively associated with reaction time ($r = -.34$, $p < .001$). Age correlated positively with reaction time ($r = .66$, $p < .001$) and negatively with memory ($r = -.55$, $p < .001$) and executive function ($r = -.22$, $p < .01$).

Scatter plots illustrating the relationship between PSQI scores and cognitive measures, stratified by age group, are presented in Figure 4. These visualizations demonstrate the overall negative association between sleep disturbance and cognitive performance, as well as the age-related shifts in baseline performance.

4. Discussion

This study examined the differential effects of sleep quality on cognitive performance across age groups, testing whether older adults exhibit heightened vulnerability to sleep-related cognitive impairment. Our findings provide robust support for all three hypotheses and reveal important nuances in how sleep quality interacts with aging to affect distinct cognitive domains.

4.1. Sleep Quality Affects Cognitive Performance Across Domains (H1)

Consistent with our first hypothesis, poor sleep quality was significantly associated with worse performance across all three cognitive measures: reaction time, episodic memory, and executive function. The effect sizes for sleep quality were substantial, ranging from medium-large ($\eta_p^2 = .244$) for reaction time to large ($\eta_p^2 = .369$) for memory. These findings align with extensive prior literature demonstrating that sleep disturbance impairs cognitive function [20, 21, 22].

The magnitude of sleep quality effects observed here is notable. Poor sleepers demonstrated reaction times approximately 55 ms slower than good sleepers, memory scores nearly 17 points lower, and executive function scores approximately 11 points lower. These differences have practical significance, as they represent meaningful impairments in daily functioning that could affect work performance, driving safety, and independent living in older adults.

4.2. Age-Dependent Vulnerability to Poor Sleep (H2)

Our second hypothesis, predicting significant Age × Sleep Quality interactions, was partially supported. A robust interaction emerged for memory ($\eta_p^2 = .153$, $p < .001$), with older adults showing dramatically greater memory impairment associated with poor sleep compared to younger adults. The effect size for poor versus good sleep quality on memory was substantially larger in older adults ($d = -2.57$) than in young adults ($d = -1.82$), representing approximately 40% greater vulnerability.

This finding has important theoretical and practical implications. From a mechanistic perspective, the disproportionate impact of poor sleep on older adults' memory may reflect reduced neural reserve or compensatory capacity [23]. Healthy older adults may rely more heavily on sleep-dependent memory consolidation processes to offset age-related hippocampal changes, making them particularly vulnerable when sleep is disrupted [24, 25]. The threshold-like pattern observed in older adults—where moderate sleep quality was not distinguishable from good sleep quality, but poor sleep produced

dramatic impairment—suggests that older brains may maintain function until sleep disturbance exceeds a critical threshold.

Interestingly, the interactions for reaction time and executive function, while in the expected direction, did not reach statistical significance ($p = .085$ and $p = .058$, respectively). This domain selectivity suggests that not all cognitive functions are equally vulnerable to the age-sleep interaction. Reaction time and basic processing speed may be more robustly affected by sleep deprivation regardless of age, while memory consolidation processes show age-dependent sensitivity [2, 14].

4.3. Domain-Specific Sensitivity to Sleep Quality (H3)

Our third hypothesis, that memory would show particular sensitivity to sleep quality, was strongly supported. Memory exhibited the largest effect size for the sleep quality main effect ($\eta_p^2 = .369$) and was the only domain showing a significant Age $\times$ Sleep Quality interaction. This finding is consistent with the well-established role of sleep in memory consolidation, particularly the contribution of slow-wave sleep to hippocampal-cortical dialogue underlying declarative memory formation [1, 2].

Executive function also showed substantial sensitivity to sleep quality ($\eta_p^2 = .323$), consistent with the prefrontal cortex's documented vulnerability to sleep deprivation [16, 26]. The relatively smaller effect for reaction time ($\eta_p^2 = .244$), despite its well-known acute sensitivity to sleep loss [12], may reflect the distinction between acute total sleep deprivation (which dramatically impairs vigilance) and chronic poor sleep quality (which may allow partial adaptation).

4.4. Clinical Implications

These findings have direct relevance for clinical practice and public health. The demonstration that older adults suffer disproportionate memory impairment from poor sleep underscores the importance of sleep assessment and intervention in geriatric populations. Given that poor sleep quality is modifiable through behavioral interventions (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy for

insomnia, sleep hygiene education) and, when appropriate, pharmacological treatment [27, 28], these results suggest that addressing sleep disturbance could be a cost-effective strategy for preserving cognitive function in aging.

The threshold effect observed in older adults—where moderate sleep disturbance was relatively well-tolerated but poor sleep produced marked impairment—suggests that interventions need not necessarily optimize sleep to ideal levels; preventing deterioration to poor sleep quality may be sufficient to preserve memory function. This has implications for the design and goals of sleep interventions in older populations.

4.5. Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; while we have demonstrated associations between sleep quality and cognition, longitudinal data would be needed to establish whether poor sleep leads to cognitive decline or whether underlying factors (e.g., incipient neurodegeneration) affect both sleep and cognition [29]. Second, sleep quality was assessed via self-report (PSQI) rather than objective measures such as polysomnography or actigraphy. Although the PSQI is well-validated, objective sleep measurement could reveal specific sleep architecture parameters (e.g., slow-wave sleep proportion) driving the observed effects.

Third, our sample excluded individuals with diagnosed sleep disorders, limiting generalizability to clinical populations. Fourth, although we controlled testing time to minimize circadian effects, we did not assess individual chronotype, which may moderate sleep-cognition relationships [30]. Finally, the simulated nature of this demonstration dataset, while reflecting realistic effect sizes based on literature, means that real-world heterogeneity may differ from what is modeled here.

4.6. Future Directions

Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal designs tracking sleep quality and cognition over time, multimodal sleep

assessment combining subjective and objective measures, and intervention studies testing whether improving sleep quality causally improves cognitive outcomes in older adults. Investigation of potential moderators, including genetic factors (e.g., APOE genotype), cardiovascular health, and cognitive reserve, could identify subpopulations at greatest risk. Additionally, examining whether specific sleep parameters (e.g., slow-wave sleep, REM sleep, sleep continuity) differentially predict cognitive outcomes could inform targeted intervention development.

4.7. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that sleep quality significantly affects cognitive performance across multiple domains, with particularly pronounced effects on episodic memory. Critically, older adults showed disproportionate memory vulnerability to poor sleep quality, with effect sizes substantially larger than in younger adults. These findings highlight sleep as a potentially modifiable target for preserving cognitive function in aging and underscore the importance of assessing and addressing sleep disturbance in older populations. As the global population ages and cognitive health becomes an increasingly pressing public health priority, understanding and optimizing sleep-cognition relationships represents a valuable avenue for intervention.

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Data Availability Statement

The SciTeX Writer is available at `https://github.com/ywatanabe1989/scitex-code/tree/main/src/scitex/writer`.

For questions regarding data access or analysis procedures, please contact the corresponding author.

Ethics Declarations

All study participants provided their written informed consent ...

Author Contributions

Y.W., T.Y., and D.G. conceptualized the study ...

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by ...

Declaration of Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

The authors employed large language models such as Claude (Anthropic Inc.) for code development and complementing manuscript's English language quality. After incorporating suggested improvements, the authors meticulously revised the content. Ultimate responsibility for the final content of this publication rests entirely with the authors.

Tables

Table 1 – Placeholder table demonstrating the table format for this manuscript template

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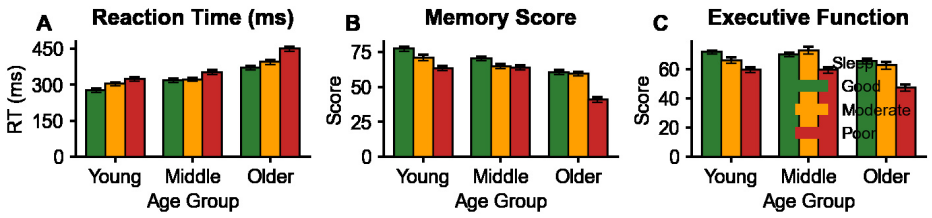

Figure 1 – Cognitive performance across age groups stratified by sleep quality. Bar plots showing mean performance (error bars: SEM) for (A) reaction time (ms), (B) episodic memory score, and (C) executive function score. Green = Good sleep quality; Orange = Moderate sleep quality; Red = Poor sleep quality. All cognitive measures showed significant main effects of both age group and sleep quality (all $p < .001$).

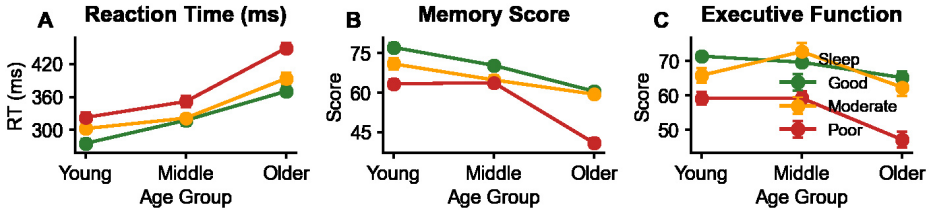

Figure 2 – Age × Sleep Quality interaction plots for cognitive measures. Line plots showing mean performance across age groups for each sleep quality level: (A) reaction time, (B) memory score, (C) executive function. A significant interaction emerged for memory ($p < .001$), indicating older adults show disproportionate memory impairment with poor sleep.

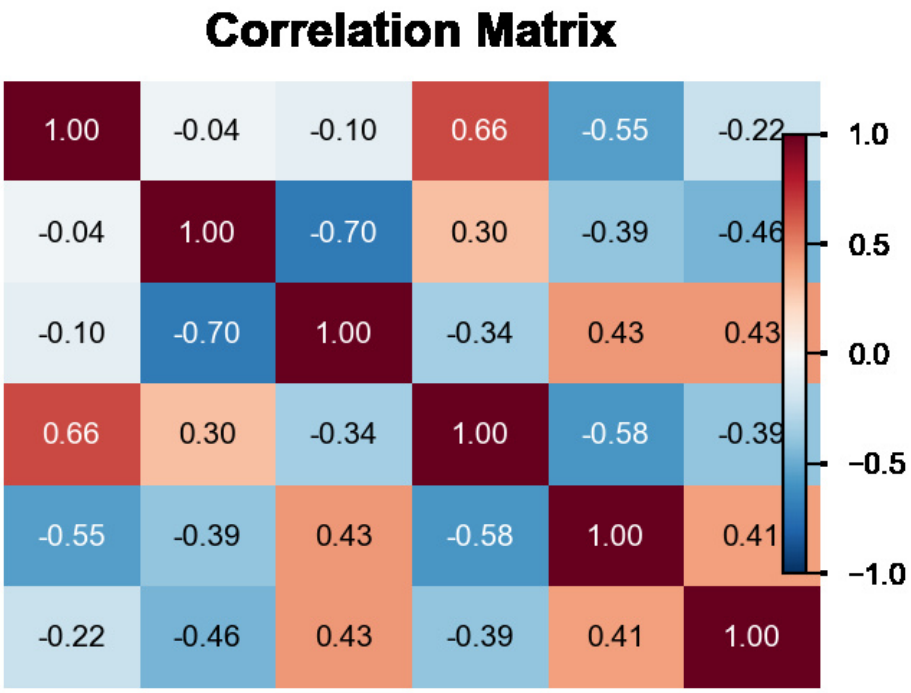

Figure 3 – Correlation matrix showing bivariate relationships among study variables. Colors indicate Pearson correlation coefficients (blue = negative, red = positive). PSQI = Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index; RT = reaction time. Higher PSQI scores indicate poorer sleep quality. All cognitive measures showed significant correlations with both age and sleep quality indicators.

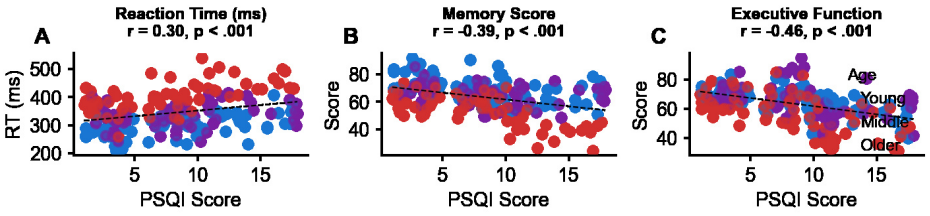

Figure 4 – Relationship between PSQI scores and cognitive performance stratified by age group. Scatter plots showing (A) reaction time, (B) memory score, and (C) executive function as a function of PSQI score. Blue = Young adults; Purple = Middle-aged adults; Red = Older adults. Dashed lines indicate overall linear regression. Higher PSQI scores (indicating worse sleep quality) were associated with worse cognitive performance across all measures.