

When and How Multitasking Impacts Consumer Shopping Decisions

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Abstract

This project provides insights into how multitasking impacts consumer decision-making. The effect of multitasking on shopping task performance is investigated across three studies. Authors propose that the effect of multitasking on consumers' shopping task performance (e.g., to purchase low calorie snacks for a get together) is moderated by whether the consumer is in a how (implementation) or why (deliberation) mindset. To the benefit of consumers, results from two lab studies and a field experiment in a retail context suggest that shoppers in how-mindsets can multitask without any negative impact on shopping task performance. However, consumers in a why (deliberation) mindset are negatively affected by multitasking and this effect is mediated by task-induced stress. Results demonstrate that intervention to reduce the stress level eliminates the negative impact of multitasking on consumers in why-mindsets. Taken together, the results suggest that interventions to channel consumers to an implementation mindset or strategies to alleviate the stress levels can help consumers avoid negative impact of multitasking on shopping decisions.

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It is not uncommon that we speak on the phone as we shop, text as we eat, check social media as we read an article. From shoppers to drivers, individuals today have a hard time putting their cell phones down to focus on a single task. Though cell phone multitasking is a common phenomenon with mostly negative effects on performance (i.e., reduces driving performance, Strayer and Drews 2007; Strayer, Drews, and Johnston 2003; Strayer and Johnston 2001), the effect of multitasking in the consumption and retailing context has not been addressed.

Interestingly, what a consumption and retailing context is, has evolved. From traditional department stores and supermarkets that are open 24/7 to creatively designed pop-up stores, and online shopping capabilities, consumers today can shop anytime, anywhere. This suggests that one can be in various mindsets due to their surroundings as they are trying to accomplish a shopping

task. The current paper explores how various mindsets interact with multitasking in consumption and retailing contexts.

In general, multitasking, performing multiple tasks *simultaneously* is difficult and costly (Rogers and Monsell 1995). In multitasking, the individual is dealing with two or more tasks at the same time where each task has its own set of stimuli and responses. Carrying out multiple tasks at the same time has consequences for task performance (Kahneman 1973; Meyer and Kieras 1997; Monsell 2003; Pashler 1994). In the current project, we seek to understand the effect of multitasking on consumers' shopping task performance.

In particular, we study the effect of multitasking on consumer's ability to accomplish one's shopping plans, which we refer to as shopping task performance in this research. Most tasks performed at the point of purchase include having a shopping plan and evaluating choice options according to one's shopping plan, and picking an alternative that is the most suitable given the shopping plans. We seek to understand how multitasking impacts shopping task performance, that is a consumer's ability to accomplish his or her shopping plans (e.g., to purchase low calorie snacks for a get together).

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We propose that consumers' active mindset (Gollwitzer 1990)—which may either be a function of the shopping environment or the previous tasks that the consumer engaged in, prior to the shopping task—will moderate the effect of multitasking on shopping task performance. Multitasking increases demand on the perceptual system. The increased demand on the perceptual system requires the use of different information processing strategies (Kahneman 1973; Meyer and Kieras 1997; Monsell 2003; Pashler 1994). Mindsets are activated response styles that bring up different information processing strategies. In other words, in each mindset different cognitive procedures are active. Thus depending on the cognitive procedures used based on the active mindset, shopping task performance may be affected differently while multitasking. More specifically, when consumers are multitasking, we predict that their performance on the shopping task will be influenced negatively when they are in a why-mindset and we expect this effect to be stronger than when consumers are in a how-mindset. In this context, we also investigate the effect of stress induced as a consequence of multitasking.

Theoretical Background

Multitasking involves performing two or more tasks at the same time. Prior research examined the cognitive mechanisms that make multitasking possible (Kahneman 1973; Meyer and Kieras 1997; Monsell 2003; Pashler 1994), and the challenges multitasking poses by increasing individuals' perceptual load (Hoffman, von Helversen and Rieskamp 2013). The findings suggest that performing multiple tasks at the same time has a negative impact on task performance (Pashler 1994; Wickens 2002) due to limited processing capacity (Kahneman 1973; Lang et al. 2002; Lang 1995). We propose that performance on a focal task (i.e., shopping task) while multitasking will depend on consumers' active mindset as each mindset brings up a different set of cognitive procedures and styles of processing information. These different styles of information processing may have different effects on how processing capacity is used. We argue that, while multitasking, the different styles of processing information in each mindset will impact performance on a focal task differently.

Mindsets. Mindsets are general response styles that are not task specific (Gollwitzer 1990). Mindset theory suggests that making a decision or implementing a decision instantiate different mindsets (Büttner et al. 2014). Mindsets can be activated by a task at hand or the stimuli in the environment. Just like thinking about “why one should buy a product” versus “how one should use a product” can instantiate a mindset, message framing used in persuasive marketing messages (White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011), retail environments such as the ceiling height in a retail environment (Meyers-Levy and Zhu 2007) can also instantiate particular mindsets. Interestingly, an activated mindset remains active beyond the initial task or context that activated it, and impacts subsequent unrelated tasks (Gollwitzer, Fujita, and Oettingen 2004).

Recently, Wieber, Sezer, and Gollwitzer (2014) looked at the effects of *why* and *how* mindsets on goal pursuit. Broadly,

in why mindsets the focus of the individual is on the motivational aspects of a decision: That is, individuals are focused on *why* they should engage in a particular behavior. Wieber, Sezer, and Gollwitzer (2014) argued that why-mindsets induce defensive deliberation; being in a why-mindset activates a procedure that contemplates the pros and cons of a goal. On the other hand, in how mindsets, the focus of the individual is on the volitional aspects of a decision. That is, individuals are focused on *how* they should engage in a particular behavior (Gollwitzer 1990; Gollwitzer and Bayer 1999). Mindsets instantiated by asking *how* questions, generate a determination to complete a task (Gollwitzer and Kinney 1989). Those who are in how-mindsets are better able to focus their attention on information that is relevant to their decisions; they are closed-minded (Gollwitzer and Bayer 1999; Henderson, de Liver, and Gollwitzer 2008).

When multitasking, we expect that the decisive and determined nature of how-mindsets—the ability to stay focused on information that is consistent with the task (i.e., the consumers' shopping plans) will protect consumers from the potential negative impact of multitasking on shopping task performance. On the other hand, the indecisive nature of why-mindsets—the openness to information—will negatively impact consumer shopping task performance while multitasking.

Task-Induced Stress

In today's fast paced world individuals often find themselves in situations that they have to multitask even if they do not prefer to do so. Recent research in multitasking has explored individual preferences for multitasking (Kantrowitz, Grelle, and Beaty 2012; Poposki and Oswald 2012). Polychronicity refers to individuals' preferences for shifting attention among multiple tasks as opposed to staying focused on a single task until the task is finished, and before switching to a new task (Poposki and Oswald 2012). This research finds that stress tolerance is a predictor of polychronicity (Kantrowitz, Grelle, and Beaty 2012). More specifically, having a high preference for multitasking is positively related to stress tolerance. That is, those who tend to tolerate stress well have higher preferences for multitasking.

Given the positive link between stress tolerance, and multitasking (Kantrowitz, Grelle, and Beaty 2012), we expect that task-induced stress will mediate the effect of multitasking and mindset interaction on consumer shopping task performance. Task-induced stress is distress that can arise due to factors that are intrinsic or extrinsic to a given task. Specifically, it refers to the stress one experiences due to overt environmental factors (i.e., time pressure) or individual factors (i.e., emotional intelligence) in response to the task one needs to complete (Matthews et al. 2006).

We expect that task-induced stress will particularly be prominent in why-mindsets. In why-mindsets individuals are focused on why they should engage in certain goals. They are open to information and they consider aspects of the issue that are not supportive of their goal. In this respect, being in a why-mindset increases the load of information processed in the working memory (Gollwitzer and Bayer 1999). Tasks that require high

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