Why do media users multitask?: Motives for general, medium-specific, and content-specific types of multitasking

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the major motives for multitasking, and how those motives are related to general, medium-specific, and content-specific types of multitasking. The major motives for multitasking identified in this study are as follows: information, social, enjoyment, efficiency, and habit. Of these motives, general multitasking behavior was predicted by information, efficiency, and habit. In terms of medium-specific types of multitasking, TV-based multitasking was predicted by habit motive, Internet-based multitasking was predicted by information and enjoyment, and mobile-based multitasking was predicted by information motives. In terms of content-specific multitasking, news-related multitasking was predicted by information motives, entertainment-related multitasking was predicted by information and enjoyment motives, and advertising-related multitasking was predicted by information and social motives.

1. Introduction

Media multitasking refers to behaviors such as using two or more media simultaneously or engaging in some other activity while using a medium (Foehr, 2006; Jeong & Fishbein, 2007). The Middletown Media Studies in the U.S. (Holmes, Papper, Popovich, & Bloxham, 2006; Papper, Holmes, & Popovich, 2004) have documented that more than 90% of audiences multitask when they use the media and that more than half of the time one spends with the media involves multitasking. Multitasking is a global trend rather than a culture specific behavior. For example, in Korea, Kang (2011) found that more than 80% of media users multitask. Also, in Korea, about 66% (Korea Communications Commission, 2013) own a smartphone mobile device that allows users to watch videos as well as search the Internet. These days, media users are situated in an environment in which they can constantly multitask while they travel, read newspapers, or watch television.

In addition to descriptive research on multitasking, much research has examined the effects of multitasking and found that multitasking inhibits information processing because it distracts audiences' attention (Bolls & Muehling, 2007; Hembrooke & Gay, 2003; Jeong & Hwang, 2012; Jeong, Hwang, & Fishbein, 2010;

Pool, Koolstra, & van der Voort, 2003; Voorveld, 2011; Zhang, Jeong, & Fishbein, 2010). Although multitasking generally reduces media effects, it may enhance media effects by facilitating information seeking if it involves the use of the Internet (Collins, 2008; Zigmond & Stipp, 2010). In other words, whether multitasking inhibits or facilitates information process could depend on the type of multitasking one engages in, which could be predicted by different motives for multitasking. Although users frequently engage in TV-print media multitasking as well as TV-Internet multitasking, the motives behind these different types of multitasking could be different. According to the uses and gratifications approach, motives predict uses, gratifications, and effects (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), thus, understanding the motives for multitasking can help explain why different types of multitasking lead to differential effects.

Although much research has examined the effects of multitasking, relatively little research focused on the antecedents or motives that guide multitasking behaviors. Jeong and Fishbein (2007) examined some media factors such as ownership and psychological factors such as sensation seeking that predict multitasking, and Zhang and Zhang (2012) study examined the grantification factors related to computer-based multitasking. However, little research examined the motives for multitasking across various types of media (e.g., TV, Internet, print media, and audio media) and types of content (e.g., news, entertainment, and advertising). Based on the uses and gratifications model, this study examines

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the major motives for multitasking and how the motives differ for general multitasking, medium-specific multitasking, and content-specific multitasking.

2. Motives for multitasking

Uses and gratifications (U&G) theory is a useful theoretical framework to understand the relationship between psychological motives and multitasking behaviors. The theory proposes that "there are social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the media, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in need gratifications and other consequences" (Katz et al., 1974, p. 20). The theory is particularly useful for understanding the motives underlying the uses of various media, such as television, the Internet, and online games.

Uses and gratifications research has identified various motives for using media, which differ by the type of medium. For example, the key motives for television were information/learning, entertainment, companionship, escape, and habit (Rubin, 1983) or information, entertainment, escape, relaxation, status enhancement, and pass time (Conway & Rubin, 1991). For Internet use, the key motives were information seeking, entertainment, interpersonal utility, convenience, pass time (Lou, Chea, & Chen, 2011; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000) or information seeking, diversion (e.g., feel entertained), monetary compensation (e.g., find bargains on products and services), aesthetic experience (e.g., find new features), personal status, virtual community (e.g., find companionship), and relationship maintenance (Song, LaRose, Lin, & Eastin, 2004). In addition, Ferguson and Perse (2000) examined the functional similarities for television and the Internet and have identified social information, entertainment, relaxation-escape, and pass time as the television-related web motives. There are some common factors related to media use identified in this line of research, which include information, entertainment/enjoyment, and habitual factors (for both television and the Internet), and social interaction motives (for the Internet).

The motives for media use mentioned above may explain the motives for multitasking as well. Based on a focus group interview, Bardhi, Rohm, and Sultan (2010) have identified various benefits of multitasking, which are consistent with the aforementioned motives. According to Bardhi et al., multitaskers perceive that (a) they have greater control over their media consumption experience (control), (b) they can process information efficiently when the media content available through each medium is related (efficiency), (c) they can enjoy the multitasking experience by engaging in multiple media stimuli (engagement), and (d) they can be easily connected to others through multitasking (assimilation).

One of the motives for multitasking is perceived efficiency. Although much research has found that multitasking has deleterious effects on information processing (Bolls & Muehling, 2007; Hembrooke & Gay, 2003; Jeong & Hwang, 2012; Jeong et al., 2010; Pool et al., 2003; Voorveld, 2011; Zhang et al., 2010), some audiences tend to believe that multitasking is beneficial. For example, Wober (1992) examined children's perceptions regarding television use while doing their homework and found that children believed that background television helps them to concentrate and work efficiently. Similarly in Patton, Stinard, and Routh's (1983) study, children believed background radio to be beneficial while doing math homework. Zhang and Zhang (2012) has suggested gratifications of convenience-efficiency needs as a predictor of work-related multitasking with computers.

Another motive that guides multitasking behaviors may be enjoyment. Previous research suggests that multitasking can meet an individual's need for stimulation by making one engage in multiple activities. For example, Jeong and Fishbein (2007) found that

sensation seeking is related to multitasking in that high sensation seekers multitask more frequently than low sensation seekers. Sensation seeking refers to one's tendency to seek varied, novel, and complex sensations (Zuckerman, 1994). High sensation seekers have a greater need for arousal and stimulation, and multitasking involves a more varied and complex media experience than single medium use. Thus, multitasking is likely to be performed, particularly among high sensation seekers, because it is perceived to be fun and enjoyable.

Finally, multitasking may be habitual. Rubin (1984) has suggested that television viewing may a ritualized behavior as well as instrumental. Although some television viewers have an instrumental goal, such as learning or parasocial interaction, others are exposed to television simply as a habit. Previous research suggests that those who use a medium as a habit use it as a routine or to simply pass time (Rubin, 1979, 1983). Similarly, some audiences may multitask without specific goals such as information seeking, social interaction, or enjoyment.

3. Motives by type of multitasking

Motives for multitasking may vary across specific types of multitasking. For example, multitasking based on traditional media such as print media or television might be predicted by motives such as perceived efficiency, enjoyment, or habit. However, multitasking that involves the use of new media such as the Internet or mobile media can be explained by additional motives such as information seeking or social interaction in addition to the common motives for multitasking.

Information seeking or social interaction could be important motives for Internet multitasking and mobile multitasking. Previous research on Internet uses and gratifications has identified information seeking as well as social interaction as important motives for using the Internet (Lou et al., 2011; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Song et al., 2004). Thus, the motives for engaging in Internet-based multitasking or mobile-based multitasking may be informational or social. Some researchers (Collins, 2008; Zigmond & Stipp, 2010) have raised the possibility that multitasking can facilitate information search, particularly if multitasking involves Internet use. This is because television viewers or newspaper readers may search additional information if they are multitasking with the Internet. Using Google search queries data, Zigmond and Stipp (2010) found that search queries for a particular product increased when an advertisement for the product was shown on TV.

Internet-based multitasking and mobile multiasking may facilitate social interaction and information exchange while using the medium. Past research has shown that watching television with others (i.e., coviewing) is a common behavior among viewers, which accounts for more than half of the time one spends with television (Jeong & Fishbein, 2007; Lee & Lee, 1995; McDonald, 1986; Mora, Ho, & Krider, 2011). Coviewing behaviors have been observed for rented video (Winn, 2009) as well as Youtube videos (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). Willingness to engage in social interaction with friends and family members, such as receiving information from them and expressing one's opinions to them could be an important motive for multitasking. Recently the Internet allows media users to engage in multitasking that involves the exchange of information with distant others. For example, while viewing television, viewers can constantly interact with others through instant messaging and social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. For example, consumers exchange opinions about products during or after exposure to advertising (Petrescu & Korgaonkar, 2011; Tuten, 2008). Zhang and Zhang (2012) have suggested social interaction such as using a chat room or IMing as an