



## The relation between media multitasking, intensity of use, and well-being in a sample of ethnically diverse emerging adults



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### ABSTRACT

There is substantial evidence that media multitasking and intense digital media use may be associated with poor psychological well-being among youth. At the same time the evidence about these associations is inconsistent, and it appears that youth characteristics such as social anxiety and narcissism may play a moderating role in the relation between aspects of digital media use and well-being. This study examined media multitasking and intensity of technology use as predictors of affect and self-esteem as well as the moderating role of social anxiety and narcissism in the relation between multitasking, intensity of use and affect and self-esteem. Data were collected via a cross-sectional study of ethnically diverse emerging adults. The results showed that a higher percent of time spent media multitasking predicted lower self-esteem and higher negative affect. Significant interaction effects were found between multitasking and social anxiety on self-esteem and between multitasking and narcissism on positive affect. That is, at high levels of social anxiety, individuals with high levels of multitasking reported higher self-esteem than those with low levels of multitasking. Moreover, at high levels of narcissism those with high levels of multitasking reported increased positive affect when compared to those with low levels of multitasking. Our findings suggest that intense digital media use may be problematic for some youth's psychological well-being, but also beneficial for other youth.

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In recent years, media have become deeply enmeshed in college students' lives (Davila et al., 2012; Perrin, 2015). Adolescence and emerging adulthood are critical transitional periods when well-being may be threatened (Arnett, 2000; Steinberg, 2008) and concerns have been raised about the relation between youth's digital media use and well-being (van der Schuur, Baumgartner, Sumter, & Valkenburg, 2015). This is exacerbated by the increasingly problematic aspects of digital media use among youth such as multitasking with media (Becker, Alzahabi, & Hopwood, 2013) and excessive or intense use (Adiele & Olatokun, 2014; Banjanin, Banjanin, Dimitrijevic, & Pantic, 2015; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Many studies with varying designs, methodologies, and measures have demonstrated that intense young people's digital media use or media multitasking is linked with diminished psychological well-being (Coyne et al., 2015; Primack, Swanier,

Georgiopoulos, Land, & Fine, 2009; Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015; Walther, Morgenstern, & Hanewinkel, 2012). Shapira et al. (2003) suggest that the distress associated with digital media use is worthy of additional attention. Specifically, they suggest that clients struggling with intense digital media use may present with comorbidity and therefore it is essential to determine if the use is related to other mental health issues. For example, youth struggling with social anxiety may turn to digital media as a coping mechanism. Given these speculations, underlying mental health issues like anxiety may moderate the relation between media multitasking and psychological well-being. Another important issue is that digital media use among youth often entails crowd-sourced generation of materials and participation within a public space, with high levels of peer interaction, feedback, and even validation. Although peer interaction is important during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Steinberg, 2008), nonetheless researchers have suggested that these new forums may foster personality traits such as narcissism, and that narcissistic qualities or even narcissistic disorders may relate to youths' digital media use (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Oltmanns, Emery, & Taylor, 2006).

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In this paper, we examined the relation between media multitasking, intense digital media, and psychological well-being among emerging adults in college. Throughout this article the terms “adolescents” and emerging adults are conceptually combined into the term “youth” for a few reasons. First, they are both considered to be critical transitional phases in an individual's life. Second, individuals in both stages are likely to exhibit media multitasking and intense use behaviors. Third, the extant literature on digital media use among adolescents and emerging adults is largely nascent; there is simply not enough information on either group alone, to some degree we must generalize findings from one group to another. Additionally, as individual-level characteristics may play a role in the relation between digital media use and well-being, the moderating roles of social anxiety and narcissism were also studied. An important contribution of this paper is that these questions were examined among an ethnically diverse sample.

### 1. Media multitasking, intense digital media use, and psychological well-being

Multitasking is a complex phenomenon and includes media multitasking (i.e., the simultaneous use of multiple media such as television, computers, and cell phones), screen-based multitasking (i.e., the simultaneous use of multiple windows or applications on the same screen), and the concurrent use of a digital media (i.e., texting) while having a face-to-face interaction (Tran, Carrillo, & Subrahmanyam, 2013). However, the traditional notion of multitasking suggests that one engages in two tasks simultaneously, but in reality it is often rapid task switching. This is supported by the idea that people are not capable of multitasking in the strictest sense (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). Multitasking can only exist when one of the tasks is automatic and does not require cognitive processing (i.e., listening to music).

Much of the research on media multitasking and heavy use has focused on cognition and learning (Subrahmanyam et al., 2013), these findings are relevant to other mental health issues (Giedd, 2012; Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009). There are indications that the cognitive issues associated with media multitasking, such as the inability to filter out information or distractions (Ophir et al., 2009), may predict and maintain internalizing symptoms (Bar-Haim, Lamy, Pergamin, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van Ijzendoorn, 2007). Abend and Bar-Haim (2013) posit that cognitive theories of anxiety show that biases specific to information-processing are critical in the origination and preservation of anxiety. Therefore, Becker et al. (2013) proposed that since media multitasking is associated with poor attentional control, which is related to psychological well-being, media multitasking may be a unique risk factor for poor psychological outcomes. Several studies on emerging adults have demonstrated that various forms of multitasking are indeed associated with issues such as internalizing symptoms (Becker et al., 2013; Reinecke et al., 2016) and attenuated attention (Ralph, Thomson, Cheyne, & Smilek, 2014). Another study, using a cross-sectional sample of German Internet users between 14 and 85 years, found that media multitasking was positively related to distress and depression (Reinecke et al., 2016).

Like multitasking, intense or excessive media use is a complex phenomenon, and has been conceptualized in various ways including Internet or gaming addiction (Adiele & Olatokun, 2014), spending many hours a day using digital media (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015), feeling dependent on digital tools, use to the degree that it interferes with various aspects of daily functioning (Weigle, 2014), and using digital media in many different locations/settings (Austin & Totaro, 2011). As such, there has been a lack of consensus among researchers on how one should capture or measure intense use. Nevertheless, intense digital media use among youth,

measured in many different fashions, is associated poor outcomes like depression (Primack et al., 2009; Romer, Bagdasarov, & More, 2013), anxiety (Rosen, Whaling, Rab, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013), loneliness (Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011), poor family functioning (Chng, Li, Liao, & Khoo, 2015), aggressive behavior (Lim et al., 2015), as well as psychological distress and suicidal ideation (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015). For instance, Romer et al. (2013) completed a longitudinal study on 719 youth aged 14–24 over two time points, and found that heavy digital media use (e.g., both gaming and the Internet), defined as engaging in these media more than 4 h a day, was predictive of depressive symptomology and social withdrawal.

### 2. Media multitasking, intense digital media use, and affect

Affect is described as the experience of feeling emotions (Hogg, Abrams & Martin, 2010) and prior research has operationalized it in terms of positive and negative components. Although the extant literature has not examined the relation between multitasking or intense use and affect, there appears to be a relation between general digital media use and affect. Kross et al. (2013) explored how Facebook use was related to affect among emerging adults via a daily diary study, and found that social media use predicted declines in positive affect. They also found that loneliness was predictive of social media use. The relationship reported may be bi-directional in that loneliness predicts social media use, but such use then leaves the youth with impoverished affect and feeling lonelier. Verduyn et al. (2015) completed an experimental as well as a field study and found that using Facebook passively (i.e., just consuming content) led to declines in affective well-being. The present study aims to reduce the dearth of research in this area by examining the relation between multitasking, intense digital media use, and affect, as well as the factors (e.g., social anxiety and narcissism) that may moderate these relations.

### 3. Media multitasking, intense digital media use, and self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to individuals' subjective evaluation of their own worth, and is often used as a measure of subjective well-being (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). As no research on the relation between media multitasking and self-esteem was found, findings that concern self-esteem, intense use, and general digital media use are examined. One large cross-sectional study on youth and adults found that compulsive social media use, conceptualized via traditional addiction qualities like withdrawal and tolerance, was related to lower self-esteem (Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2016). Hawi and Samaha (2016) found that social media addiction, also conceptualized within a traditional addiction framework, was associated with reduced self-esteem. Neira, Corey, and Barber (2014) found that female youths who used social media were more likely to have worse self-esteem than their same-sex peers who did not use social media. Using a social compensation framework, some researchers have argued that those with low self-esteem would benefit from using tools like social media since they are more likely to be introverted as well as lonely, and therefore may lack necessary offline social skills (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009; Leary & MacDonald, 2003; Smahel, Brown, & Blinka, 2012). Forest and Wood (2012) completed a cross-sectional study on emerging adults and found that although Facebook was an appealing medium for those with low self-esteem, the negative nature of their posts left them unable to reap the social rewards. Although evidence indicates intense use is correlated with diminished self-esteem, the relation between media multitasking and self-esteem is not established. Likewise, the role of moderating

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