



# Online, mixed, and offline media multitasking: Role of cultural, socio-demographic, and media factors



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of cultural and socio-demographic factors in predicting frequency of media multitasking behavior in three contexts based on the nature of media combination. A model was proposed to study these relationships; group-level cultural factors and socio-demographic factors were incorporated as exogenous variables, and media ownership, preference for multitasking, and frequencies of online, mixed, and offline media multitasking were included as endogenous variables. Data was collected using an online survey. Results indicated that both age and education significantly influenced online multitasking but for offline multitasking behavior, only age had a significant influence. Media ownership and one of the four group-level cultural factors predicted preference for multitasking, and preference for multitasking predicted frequency of media multitasking in all three contexts. Overall, findings highlight the role of cognitive factors as predictors of online media multitasking behavior. Findings also point towards the importance of individual's preference for multitasking in predicting media multitasking behavior across online, offline, and mixed media multitasking contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary media environments, media multitasking—seeking and performing multiple media tasks simultaneously—has emerged as a prevalent behavioral trend among younger generations. Numerous survey studies show that it has become an integral part of the lives of most young adults (e.g., Foehr, 2006; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). For instance, according to Rideout et al. (2010), 29% of total media use duration among young people involved using multiple media within the same time frame.

In 2006, Foehr (2006) found that among younger audiences, 45% of the Television (TV) viewing time and 65% of total computer use time involved multitasking with other media. Recent reports on multitasking during TV viewing suggests that the amount of multitasking may have increased at a rapid rate since 2006. A survey study among a U.S. sample by Harris Interactive (n.d.) showed that in 2014, 85% of 18–34 years old, 78% of 37–48 years old, 75% of 49–67 years old, and 73% of those 68 years or older were

doing other things while watching TV. Survey studies by Deloitte Development LLC (2015, 2016) show that at least 90% of TV viewers are multitasking while watching TV. According to Deloitte Development LLC (2016), Millennials, those in the 14–32 age group, display the highest degree of multitasking behavior during TV viewing and are involved in up to four additional activities while watching TV; Generation Xers, those in the 33–49 age group, were reported as involved in up to three additional activities and those aged 50 and above were reported to be involved in up to one additional activity while watching TV (Deloitte Development LLC, 2016). Evolutions of media, such as development of devices more adept at performing multiple media tasks simultaneously (e.g., smartphones and tablets), have also facilitated this behavior.

The increasing prevalence of media multitasking has created interest about mechanisms and factors contributing to such behavior. Many studies conducted over the last few years have explored the relationship of many such factors with media multitasking behavior. These factors include: media ownership (Jeong & Fishbein, 2007), audience/individual factors such as sensation seeking (Jeong & Fishbein, 2007), motivations for use (Kononova & Chiang, 2015), gender (Jeong & Fishbein, 2007) and age (Carrier, Cheever, Rosen, Benitez, & Chang, 2009), and message factors

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such as message relevance (Srivastava, 2013), message difficulty (Carrier et al., 2009), and message modality (Wang, Irwin, Cooper, & Srivastava, 2015; Wang et al., 2012). Media multitasking may have significant impact on almost every field of human functioning ranging from education and entertainment to driving and computer use (Meyer & Kieras, 1997; Salvucci & Taatgen, 2011; Hembrook & Gay, 2003). Some of these impacts, especially those with implications related to performance (Hembrook & Gay, 2003; Srivastava, 2013) and mental health (Pea et al., 2012) may gain more attention especially for policy making.

Despite rapid expansions of new communication technologies around the globe, research on media, culture, and communication is still in its infancy (Shuter, 2011, 2012). This study examines the reciprocal relationships between cultures and new media usage behaviors. Another objective of this study is to incorporate the diversity of environments in which media multitasking takes place while examining the relationships between media multitasking and culture. Though new communication technology may have accelerated the growth of media multitasking behavior, media multitasking is not exclusive to new media environments. According to Foehr (2006), a large number of younger audience multitask by combining tasks that involve traditional media combinations such as music and reading, and TV and music. Similarly, Rideout et al. (2010) reported that 43% of seventh to twelfth graders listened to music most of the times when using another medium, 27% read something most of the time when using another medium, and 39% watched TV most of the times while using another medium. Besides these findings that indicate a trend towards the diversity of media pairing patterns and the variation in pairing frequencies, other factors related to media access and use may also explain the differentiation between different types of media multitasking combinations. Some of such factors are related to media access issues such as digital divide (Bucy, 2000), different sets of gratifications provided by traditional and new media (Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004; Ramirez, Dimmick, Feaster, & Lin, 2008), and cognitive factors (Carrier et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2015) involved for task performances.

In our study, we propose to examine how cultural, individual, and media factors influence the frequency of media multitasking behavior(s) in offline, mixed and online media contexts. We propose a model with group-level cultural factors and socio-demographic factors as exogenous variables, and media ownership, preference for multitasking, and frequencies of online, mixed, and offline media multitasking as endogenous variables and use partial least square path modeling analysis to analyze the relationships between the variables of interest.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Media multitasking

Broadly speaking, media multitasking is the act of performing multiple media tasks simultaneously (Hembrook & Gay, 2003). More specifically, media multitasking can be defined as goal-oriented combination of multiple media tasks (Meyer & Kieras, 1997; Salvucci & Taatgen, 2011; Srivastava & David, 2013; June). Goal orientation acknowledges the role of motivation in the media multitasking process and separates the behavior from instances of forced exposure. In other words, individuals make a choice to combine a set of tasks to perform media multitasking. This is evident in media multitasking studies reporting some type of media combinations being more popular than others. For example, Carrier et al. (2009) found some combinations such as music and web surfing, e-mail and web surfing, and music and offline computer tasks, to be among the most popular as opposed to those that

include pleasure reading and web surfing, video games and texting, and surfing the web and pleasure reading, which were among the least popular combinations. They also reported variations in overall quantity of media multitasking across generations with younger generations increasingly engaging in multitasking behavior in contrast with older generations. These variations raise important questions about factors that may contribute to these variations.

### 2.2. Predictors of media multitasking

In general, there may be two types of factors that may influence media multitasking behaviors: media and audience factors (Jeong & Fishbein, 2007). Media factors may include access to media and the nature of media and media messages. Audience factors may include those based on individual differences as well as psychological and sociological processes such as personality traits and culture. Some media factors may be rooted in sociological factors related to media access. Access factors may act as bottlenecks and resulting lack of access may remove or reduce the opportunities to get involved in multitasking behaviors (Jeong & Fishbein, 2007).

In the context of Internet usage for political information seeking, Min (2010) found Internet skills to be a significant predictor of online behavior. Similarly, Courtois and Verdegem (2014) found cognitive factors such as skills and motivation to play important roles in online behaviors along with physical access. This indicates that use of Internet is not dependent only on physical access to technology but is also influenced by cognitive factors such as lack of skills, knowledge, and motivation to use the Internet, which presents additional barriers to use of Internet compared to traditional media (Courtois & Verdegem, 2014; Grabe & Kamhawi, 2004; Min, 2010; Newhagen & Bucy, 2004). These barriers may act as bottlenecks for media multitasking involving use of internet-based tasks; from the media access perspective, media multitasking involving traditional media may be more accessible than media multitasking involving Internet-based tasks.

Audience factors such as gratifications sought and received from media use may also differ between media multitasking involving Internet-based tasks and media multitasking involving traditional media. One difference is the nature of gratifications sought and the opportunities to receive those gratifications. Using the niche theory of media competition to study the competition between traditional media and Internet, Dimmick et al. (2004) found that the Internet provides more gratification opportunities than traditional media in most media contexts. Gratification opportunities are considered to be opportunities provided by a medium to seek a certain gratification. For example, the same gratification may be received from watching a show on TV and watching it through Internet-based streaming but Internet-based streaming provides more opportunities to view the content because it is not specifically restricted to a location or time point.

Media factors contributing to the nature of media multitasking such as the level of control over information flow (e.g., television vs. online video) and the combinations of similar modalities (e.g., newspaper with email) vs. different modalities (e.g., music with email), have been found to predict media multitasking behaviors (Wang et al., 2015). The influence of these factors is rooted in the propensity for individuals to utilize psychological mechanisms and task combinations that appear to be less demanding cognitively, and therefore seem to be combined more frequently. Traditional media restricts the users to one type of content. However, the Internet, as a platform, provides users access to all types of content carried by traditional media, and therefore provides more opportunities to select and combine tasks that may fulfill a wide range of gratifications. Besides, the Internet also provides scope for interactivity and fulfillment of a wide range of social and other utilities,

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