

# Multitasking Hurts Performance but Makes You Feel Better

People aren't very good at media multitasking -- like reading a book while watching TV -- but do it anyway because it makes them feel good, a new study suggests. The findings provide clues as to why multitasking is so popular, even though many studies show it is not productive.

Researchers had college students record all of their media use and other activities for 28 days, including why they used various media sources and what they got out of it.



The findings showed that multitasking often gave the students an emotional boost, even when it hurt their cognitive functions, such as studying.

"There's this myth among some people that multitasking makes them more productive," said Zheng Wang, lead author of the study and

assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"But they seem to be misperceiving the positive feelings they get from multitasking. They are not being more productive -- they just feel more emotionally satisfied from their work."

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Take, for example, students who watched TV while reading a book. They reported feeling more emotionally satisfied than those who studied without watching TV, but also reported that they didn't achieve their cognitive goals as well, Wang said.

"They felt satisfied not because they were effective at studying, but because the addition of TV made the studying entertaining. The combination of the activities accounts for the good feelings obtained," Wang said.

Wang conducted the study with John Tchernev, a graduate student in Communication at Ohio State. Their results appear online in the *Journal of Communication* and will be published in a future print edition.

Wang said many studies done in laboratory settings have found that people show poorer performance on a variety of tasks when they try to juggle multiple media sources at the same time: for example, going from texting a friend, to reading a book, to watching an online video.

But surveys show that media multitasking is only becoming more popular. The question, Wang said, is why do people do so much multitasking if it actually impairs their performance?

To answer that question, Wang said they had to move out of the laboratory and into real life. They recruited 32 college students who agreed to carry a cellphone-like device and report on their activities three times each day for four weeks.

The participants reported on each media use (such as computer, radio, print, television, radio) and sub types (for computer use, whether they were web browsing, using social networking, etc.) They reported the type of activity, the duration, and whether any other activities were performed simultaneously (in other words, whether they were multitasking).

They also provided their motivations for each activity or combination of activities from a list of seven potential needs, including social, fun/entertainment, study/work, and habits/background noise. For each need, they reported the strength of the need on a 10-point scale, and whether those needs were met on a 4-point scale.

The results showed that participants were more likely to multitask when they reported an increase in cognitive needs (such as study or work) or habitual needs or both.

That means, for example, that the students were more likely to multitask when they needed to study (a cognitive need.)

But one of the key findings of the study is that this multitasking didn't do a very good job of satisfying their cognitive needs which actually motivate the multitasking in the first place, Wang said. That's probably because their other media use distracted them from the job of studying. However, the students reported that the multitasking was very good at meeting their emotional needs (fun/entertainment/relaxing) -- interestingly, a need they weren't even seeking to fulfill.

In addition, the results showed that habits played an important role in the use of media multitasking.

"Our findings showed that habitual needs increase media multitasking and are also gratified from multitasking," she said.

This suggests that people get used to multitasking, which makes them more likely to continue.

"We found what we call a dynamical feedback loop. If you multitask today, you're likely to do so again tomorrow, further strengthening the behavior over time," she said.

"This is worrisome because students begin to feel like they need to have the TV on or they need to continually check their text messages or computer while they do their homework. It's not helping them, but they get an emotional reward that keeps them doing it.

"It is critical that we carefully examine the long-term influence of media multitasking on how we perform on cognitive tasks."

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