An Exploratory Study of Media Multitasking Practices and Experiences Among Young Consumers

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Increasingly we consume media simultaneously in multitasking situations, however, research continues to study media consumption in singular, non-interactive contexts. This exploratory study examines media multitasking behavior and experiences among college students through analysis of qualitative interviews and collages with 64 undergraduate students. The paper attempts to provide an understanding of media consumption among Generation Y and the drivers to such media multitasking behavior. The findings illustrate positive and negative consequences of simultaneous media consumption and ways that young consumers cope with the vast array of media available. The findings explore the issue of engagement across multiple media platforms in a simultaneous consumption setting and suggest implications to both theory and practice.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
An increasingly important line of inquiry in consumer behavior is the study of the ways consumers multitask across multiple forms of media in a simultaneous fashion (Piliut and Schultz 2005). Simultaneous media consumption, which we call media multitasking, is a phenomenon born from the plethora of media and communications platforms available and easily accessible to consumers, especially among young consumers. The media landscape and delivery system itself has changed dramatically in recent times. Contemporary media employs multitasking formats, such as television newscasts displaying multiple messages on one screen, enabling viewers to access several different news items simultaneously. Further, consumers are no longer passive media spectators, but interact with media in co-production settings, such as seen with consumer-generated advertisements or text-message voting for a favorite singer in television shows such as American Idol.

However, marketing research continues to examine media consumption and treat marketing communication issues under a sequential, traditional marketing communication model where the consumer is a passive receiver of one type of media at one time. This study represents a first attempt to examine the phenomenon of media multitasking and its implications for marketing communication concepts and strategy.

Media multitasking, the simultaneous consumption of multiple media platforms seems to be the norm, especially among young Gen Y consumers who have grown up amidst today’s vast media landscape. According to a nation-wide survey study reported by Time magazine, Americans aged 8 to 18 not only consume the greatest amount of media, but through electronic media they can compress 8.5 hours worth of media time a day into a 6.5 hour time period through simultaneous consumption (Wallis 2006). This study attempts to a) examine media multitasking behavior among young consumers and b) provide an understanding of their motivations, experiences, and coping with media multitasking.

The study of multitasking has primarily been the domain of cognitive psychology, concluding that multitasking threatens consumers’ task effectiveness, learning and well being. However, the cognitive perspective ignores the socialization aspect of behavior. Mick and Fournier (1998) illustrate the ways individuals attempt to cope with the ubiquity of technology. Consumers may also develop specific skills with which to manage and even automate performance involving multiple tasks (Kanter and Ackerman 1996). In some instances, consumers may be more effective while multitasking when they are able use technology to complement or supplement other media (Sinan, Brynjolfsson, and Alstyne 2007; Jenkins 2006). For example, consumers may seek to complement and add depth to their media experience by searching for results of a sporting event online while they are simultaneously watching the event on television. Therefore, consumers may adopt multitasking strategies in order to increase comprehension and effectiveness in the consumption of online and offline media. Highly practiced skills, such as sequential or simultaneous multitasking across sources of media, may be developed as strategies to deal or cope with vast amounts of media communications sources or outlets (Sinan, Brynjolfsson, and Alstyne 2007). In what he refers to as the participatory culture, Jenkins (2006) also suggests that because of the rise in access to digital media, particularly among the youth market, multitasking and attention should not be viewed as an “either, or” proposition, given that the nature of attention to media among young consumers has changed to that of continuous partial attention. In other words, consumers born and raised during the Internet era are perhaps becoming more skilled at navigating between and effectively managing multiple sources of information and media content.

The goal of the study is to examine the experience of media multitasking from the perspective of the young Gen Y consumer. Therefore, we selected as a purposeful sample for the study 64 undergraduate students at a university in the northeastern U.S. The students were also screened on their media consumption to insure that they continuously participate in media multitasking. As this is an exploratory study, a qualitative approach was taken. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and collages developed to portray their media consumption.

We found that media multitasking is a normal activity in students’ lives driven by a) the ease of accessibility and the interactive nature of contemporary media; and b) the participatory culture in which they live. For Gen Y, work, leisure, socialization, and personal self-development are closely related with exposure to various media and communications technologies. We found that most media multitasking evolved around the offline (television) and the online (computers). Consistent with past research, our findings suggest that television is typically consumed as a background media, whereas online sources (e.g., the Internet) act as foreground media characterized by discrete burst of engagement and attention. Two types of media multitasking behaviors emerged that differ in terms of the role of the consumer as either active participant or passive victim, as well as in terms of the individual’s level of attention and engagement. The first type of media multitasking behavior involves strategic switching between various media platforms. The second type of multitasking is a passive mode of behavior, characterized by the individual constantly tuning in and out various media with the goal of simply being “always on”.

Media multitasking is considered by our informants as paradoxical. Our data suggests that the multitasking experience parallels a subset of consumer paradoxes of technology developed by Mick and Fournier (1998): efficient/inefficient, connectivity/isolation, and freedom/enslavement. To cope with these paradoxes consumers develop various coping strategies (Mick and Fournier 1999) from restriction of media usage to the refinement of personal media consumption practices. The majority of our informants claimed that, while they were aware of personal issues and challenges associated with their media consumption, they have become effective multitaskers as a result of their active participation as consumers of contemporary media and the associated role of media as a socialization agent within the youth participatory culture. Based on these findings the paper provides implication for theory and practice.