The Implications of Self-Regulation Difference Between Heavy Versus Light Media Multitaskers For Advertising Effectiveness

Emma Beuckels, Ghent University, Belgium
Snezhanka Kazakova, Ghent University, Belgium
Verolien Cauberghe, Ghent University, Belgium
Liselot Hudders, Ghent University, Belgium
Patrick De Pelsmacker, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Past research suggests that heavy media multitaskers (HMMs) perform worse on tasks that require self-regulation compared to light media multitaskers (LMMs). Our two studies suggest that motivation rather than ability to self-regulate drives these performance differences and consequently that HMMs are more susceptible towards advertising within a media multitasking context.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024331/volumes/v45/NA-45

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Media multitasking is broadly defined as the act of consuming two or more media simultaneously, using a single or multiple media device(s) (Yeykelis, Cummings, & Reeves, 2014). Consistent to previous media multitasking research the first study of this paper predicts that engaging in multitasking behavior would deplete one self-regulatory resources. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that people differ in how often they engage in media multitasking, distinguishing heavy (HMMs) from light (LMMs) media multitaskers. Although it seems counterintuitive that people who often engage in media multitasking are more distracted by their environment and less efficient at navigating it, research suggests that HMMs have a deficit in self-regulation (Cardoso-Leite et al., 2016; Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009). Based on dual processing theories, the present paper explores whether the difference in self-regulatory resources between HMMs and LMMs is due to a lower ability (i.e., capacity to perform a task) or a lower motivation (i.e., willingness to perform a task) to optimally control their attention. The allocation of one’s attention may be driven by both external and internal factors. In some contexts, the opportunity to freely allocate one’s attention is high. Media multitasking contexts fit well into this category. In situations where perceived autonomy is high, attention allocation is not only driven by ability but also by internal factors such as goals or motivation. If attention allocation is driven by external factors, however, the free allocation of attention is limited and no longer driven by motivation. Manipulating the level of autonomy over one’s attention allocation would, therefore, allow us to determine the role of motivation to exert attentional control in driving the observed performance differences between HMMs and LMMs. If an inherently lower motivation to self-regulate indeed drives the different approach of attention allocation, HMMs would not be as motivated as LMMs to apply cognitive control over how they allocate their attention when given high autonomy over their attention allocation. Instead, they would allow distracting stimuli to interfere more. Ralph, Thomson, Cheyne, and Smilek, (2014), however, found no correlation with actual cognitive errors (long-term memory failures) in support of the premise that HMMs’ deficits do not stem from problems of inability. Therefore, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: Engaging in a multitasking compared to a non-multitasking context will deplete self-regulatory resources.

Hypothesis 2: Media multitasking frequency will have a negative effect on self-regulatory resources after engaging in multitasking with high autonomy over attention allocation. This difference will be less apparent after multitasking with low autonomy over attention allocation.

Consequently, the second study of this paper investigated whether HMMs (vs. LMMs) respond differently to advertising in a media multitasking context, due to these self-regulatory differences.
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2013, Model 8, 5,000 bootstraps; 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals), ab = .266, SE = .18, 95% LLCI = .013, 95% ULCI = .752, revealed that the effect of media multitasking frequency on purchase intentions was mediated by self-regulatory resources depending on the level of autonomy. When autonomy was high, we found a significant positive indirect effect of media multitasking frequency on purchase intentions through self-regulatory resources. On the contrary, when autonomy was low, this indirect effect was eliminated.

Summarized, our data suggests that HMMs are more depleted than LMMs under conditions of high autonomy over attention allocation, most likely because of lower motivation to exert attentional control. This proposition is further supported by the finding that, under conditions of low autonomy of attention allocation, HMMs were equally depleted compared to LMMs. The results also supported the assumption that the fewer self-regulatory resources for HMMs under conditions of high autonomy impaired their ability to resist persuasive attempts.

REFERENCES


