

IS MEDIA MULTITASKING A GOOD REMEDY TO AVOID ADVERTISING? THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA MULTITASKING HABIT ON AD AVOIDANCE BEHAVIORS MEDIATED BY PERCEIVED ADVERTISING CLUTTER AND ADVERTISING SKEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT

An online survey (N=687) explored to what extent advertising skepticism and advertising clutter mediate the effect of media multitasking on ad avoidance behavior. Media multitasking was not found to affect advertising avoidance directly. It did so through two mediators: advertising skepticism and perceived advertising clutter. Heavy media multitaskers were less skeptical of advertising than light multitaskers and reported lower levels of advertising avoidance. Heavy media multitaskers also were more likely to perceive that there is too much advertising in media and report greater advertising avoidance. The mediating effect of perceived clutter was significantly stronger than the mediating effect of advertising skepticism.

Keywords: media multitasking, advertising avoidance, advertising skepticism, perceived advertising clutter

INTRODUCTION

Young adults all over the world increasingly multitask with media, meaning that they use multiple media concurrently, or use media combined with non-media activities [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Media multitasking effects have been extensively investigated in academic literature over the past three decades [3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12]. Although most of these studies emerged in education and technology domains, some documented the effects of multitasking in the area of advertising and persuasion [13, 14, 15, 16].

Media multitasking habits and effects are growing along with the diversity of media channels and devices, so advertising practitioners increasingly use multiple platforms and multiple screens in their campaigns to reach larger audiences with greater frequency and convey promotional messages more effectively [17, 18, 19]. Several years ago, Nielsen and National Association of Advertisers focused on how individuals use multiple digital screens, such as television, phone, and laptop computer, at the same time and predicted that spending on cross-platform, multi-screen advertising would double by 2016 [18]. Simmons Market Research, along with other marketing research companies, records how individuals use multiple media at the same time or combine media with other activities (e.g., radio listening in a vehicle)

[20]. Nine out of 10 American marketing professionals reported that multi-screen advertising would be a very important promotional tool in the near future [17].

Development of new information and communication technologies has allowed advertising professionals to communicate with their audiences more efficiently, but it also has provided audiences with opportunities to escape mediated commercial content by switching attention from one medium, device, or screen to another. In the present study, we explore the relationships among media multitasking, perceptions of advertising, and advertising avoidance behaviors. In a survey (N=687), we examine whether multitasking with multiple media affects ad avoidance behaviors and to what extent advertising skepticism and advertising clutter mediate such relationship (Figure 1).

It is unlikely that media multitasking behavior will diminish. If anything, it might increase as new “smart” technologies (smart watches, smart refrigerators, etc.) are more widely adopted. Given the large efforts and expenditures that advertisers devote to reaching consumers via a variety of media types, platforms, and vehicles, and given the proliferation of methods consumers now have to avoid those messages, it is increasingly important to understand the factors that lead to avoidance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The habit of media multitasking

The term “media multitasking” refers to using one medium either (1) concurrently with other media, or (2) during nonmedia activities [2]. While media multitasking can occur on a single device [21, 22] or as a combination of media and non-media activities [5, 23], most often communication scholars conceptualize it as using multiple media at the same time [4, 24].

Multitasking among media users may be associated with negative advertising outcomes. Having multiple media to “play with,” individuals can easily shift from one device to another to avoid undesired contents such as advertising. Speck and Elliott (1997a) suggested that overwhelming amount of advertising in a medium might drive consumers to consider using alternative media [25]. We predict:

H1: Heavy media multitaskers will show a greater tendency for advertising avoidance behaviors than light media multitaskers.

Media multitasking, information processing, and persuasion

Media multitasking has been shown to be positively associated with superficial information processing, where individuals skim through a large number of messages instead of focusing in depth on one. Ophir, Wagner and Nass (2009) found that heavy multitaskers were worse at performing cognitive tests that demanded focus and task switching. They suggested that differences in cognitive ability may lead individuals to choose different strategies in using media and processing mediated contents. The researchers also speculated that heavy media multitaskers were more prone to explore new stimuli in the environment while light media multitaskers were more likely to process a narrower range of stimuli in depth [25]. Superficial information processing among heavy media multitasks may result in positive persuasion outcomes, as multitasking impairs comprehension and the ability to counterargue [14, 16].

The ability to counterargue is closely linked to the concept of advertising skepticism, where a greater level of persuasion resistance (counterarguing) is associated with higher levels of advertising

skepticism [26]. In the present study, we suggest that media multitaskers, due to adopting exploratory information processing style and frequent distractions that hinder counterarguing, would be less skeptical of advertising.

Advertising skepticism

Skepticism is the precursor to disbelief, a context-specific cognitive response. In the sense of marketplace skepticism, it is a component of consumer socialization, a tool consumers are trained to use when managing persuasion attempts [26, 27]. Within the context of media multitasking, researchers have devoted little attention to the role of skepticism.

H2: Heavy media multitaskers will show lower levels of skepticism toward advertising than light media multitaskers.

Advertising clutter

The ratio of advertising to non-advertising content in media is called advertising clutter [25, 28, 29]. In the present study, we propose that heavy media multitaskers are exposed to a greater amount of advertising content than light media multitaskers due to the fact that they use multiple media in a given period of time. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Heavy media multitaskers, compared to light media multitaskers, will indicate greater levels of perceived advertising clutter.

Advertising avoidance

One negative outcome that has been found to result from advertising skepticism and advertising clutter, at least from the advertiser's point of view, is for consumers to avoid or ignore advertising messages. This reaction is not unique to digital advertising. Rather, advertising avoidance has been the focus of research for decades. Several studies in the 1980s and 1990s explored strategies that consumers engage in to remove advertising messages from their focus [31, 32, 33]. Speck and Elliott (1997b) found that perceptions about advertising (interesting, useful, believable, excessive, annoying, wastes my time) predicted ad avoidance [34]. These perceptions encompass dimensions of advertising skepticism, i.e., believability and usefulness. In addition, in another study noted previously, Speck and Elliott (1997a) found a positive relationship between perceived advertising clutter and advertising avoidance [25].

H4: Advertising skepticism will be a positive predictor of advertising avoidance.

H5: Perceived advertising clutter will be a positive predictor of advertising avoidance.

Model summary

The model tested in the present study is a parallel mediation model [35] where the effect of media multitasking on ad avoidance is mediated by advertising skepticism on one hand, and advertising clutter on the other hand (Figure 1). The model tests for the direct effect of media multitasking on ad avoidance (c' path) and for two types of indirect (mediating) effects. The first indirect effect is of media multitasking on ad avoidance through advertising skepticism (a_1b_1). The second indirect effect is of media multitasking on ad avoidance through advertising clutter (a_2b_2).

METHOD

To test our hypotheses and the proposed model of media multitasking's effect on ad avoidance, a cross-sectional online survey was administered among college students at a Midwestern university in the United States ($N=687$). The sample included 58.7% female participants and 41.2% male participants; fewer than 1% reported being transgender. The average age was 21 ($SD=1.49$). Seventy-two percent of participants reported being Caucasian/White. The second largest ethnicity/race group reported was Asian (16%). Eighty-four percent of respondents were native English speakers.

Measures

Media multitasking was measured using the media multitasking index (MMI) that was adjusted for six media (television, audio (radio and other audio devices), print media, and devices that allow Internet access: laptop/desktop computer, tablet computer, and mobile phone). For each of the six media types, participants reported how often they used it concurrently with other media. The media multitasking index (MMI) for simultaneous use of screens was calculated as the sum of proportions of multitasking hours to the total hours spent with screen devices [24].

Advertising skepticism (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$) was measured with the use of nine 7-point items from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree" (e.g., "Advertising is generally truthful") [26]. The scale was later reversed for easier interpretation of the results.

Advertising clutter (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$) was measured with the use of three 7-point items from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree" [25, 36]. Respondents were asked if they found advertising in different types of media "excessive", if there was "too much" advertising, and whether each specific medium was "exclusively an advertising" medium.

Advertising avoidance was measured with 13 items based on Speck and Elliott (1997b) and adjusted for the purposes of present study [34]. Advertising avoidance behaviors were diverse and related to different media: print, television, audio, and Internet. All behaviors, regardless of media class, referred to ways of aiming to minimize or eliminate ad exposure. The items were used to calculate a single index of advertising avoidance (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

Four *control variables* were age, gender, English as the native language, and media ownership.

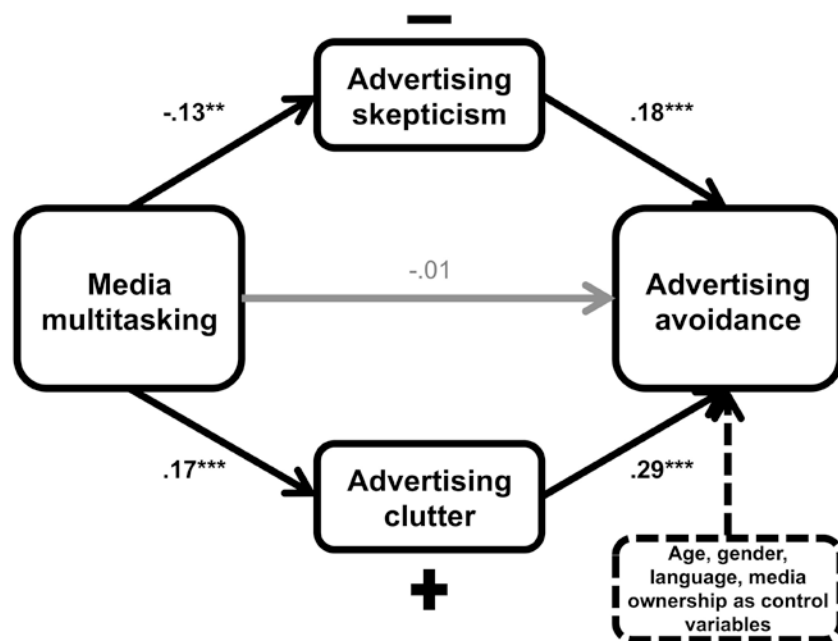
RESULTS

The model accounted for 19% of the variance in advertising avoidance as an outcome variable ($R = .44$, $R^2 = .19$, $F(7,575) = 19.75$, $p < .001$). H1 predicted that heavy media multitaskers would be more likely to avoid advertising than light media multitaskers (c' -path). The direct effect of media multitasking on advertising avoidance was not significant ($B = -.01$, $SE = .05$, $t = -.26$, $p = .792$, $CI_{LL-UL}^1 = -.1022 - .0780$). H1 was not supported. This means that advertising avoidance behaviors did not directly depend on respondents' heavy or light habit of multitasking with several media. H2 predicted that heavier media multitaskers would show lower levels of skepticism toward advertising (a_1 -path). The effect of media multitasking on advertising skepticism was significant ($B = -.13$, $SE = .05$, $t = -2.56$, $p = .0106$, $CI_{LL-UL} = -.2287 - .0303$). Heavy media multitaskers tended to be less skeptical (more trusting) of advertising

¹ CI = confidence interval; LL = lower level; UL = upper level (confidence interval should not include 0)

than light media multitaskers. H2 was supported. H3 stated that heavier media multitaskers would show higher levels of perceived advertising clutter (a₂-path). Multitasking positively predicted advertising clutter ($B=.17, SE=.05, t=3.57, p<.001, CI_{LL-UL}=.0750 - .2583$), where heavier media multitaskers were more likely to perceive advertising in media as excessive than light multitaskers. The statistical test was significant. H3 was supported. H4 posited that advertising skepticism would be a positive predictor of advertising avoidance (b₁-path). As hypothesized, advertising skepticism significantly predicted advertising avoidance behaviors ($B = .18, SE = .04, t = 4.67, p < .001, CI_{LL-UL} = .1013 - .2480$). The more skeptical respondents were toward advertising, the greater were their reported advertising avoidance behaviors. H4 was supported. H5 posited that advertising clutter would be a positive predictor of advertising avoidance (b₂-path). The result was significant: ($B = .29, SE = .04, t = 7.27, p < .001, CI_{LL-UL} = .2146 - .3735$). The more respondents thought that advertising in media was excessive, the more likely they were to engage in advertising avoiding behaviors. H5 was supported. See Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. MEDIATION MODEL OF MEDIA MULTITASKING EFFECTS ON AD AVOIDANCE



Indirect effects

Both indirect effects that were hypothesized were found to be significant. The indirect effect of media multitasking on ad avoidance through advertising skepticism (a₁b₁) was significant ($B = -.02, SE = .01, CI_{LL-UL} = -.0484 - -.0049$). Media multitasking affected advertising avoidance through advertising skepticism such that heavier multitaskers were less skeptical of advertising and, thus, less likely to avoid ads. The indirect effect of media multitasking on ad avoidance through advertising clutter (a₂b₂) was also significant ($B = .05, SE = .02, CI_{LL-UL} = .0194 - .0866$). The more respondents multitasked with screen devices, the more they thought there was too much advertising in media. This resulted in greater reported advertising avoidance behaviors. The two mediating effects were significantly different from each other: $B = -.07, SE = .02, CI_{LL-UL} = -.1135 - -.0373$, where the effect of clutter ($B = .05$) was stronger than the effect of advertising skepticism ($B = .02$).

DISCUSSION

The results described above offer an initial view of the relationship between the use of multiple media and advertising avoidance. We found no significant direct effect of media multitasking on advertising avoidance. Advertising skepticism was found to be a significant negative mediator of media multitasking effects on the dependent variable. Lower levels of advertising skepticism associated with heavy media multitasking reduced advertising avoidance. This finding stands in line with previous research that suggests a positive link between media multitasking and persuasion. Advertising has long suffered from consumer skepticism, thereby limiting its inherent efficacy. An important finding of this study suggests that advertisers may, in fact, benefit from the growing popularity of media multitasking. As consumers become heavy multitaskers, it appears their skepticism of advertising will diminish, which opens the door to enhanced ad efficacy. However, while the negative link between media multitasking and advertising skepticism may be perceived as a positive result by advertising academics and professionals, this finding should be interpreted and discussed carefully.

Another finding is related to media multitasking increasing perceived advertising clutter. Perceived advertising clutter contributed to higher chances of ad elimination. The novelty of the present study stems from exploring the link between perceived advertising clutter and media multitasking and their “cumulative” effect on ad avoidance behaviors. While media multitasking “weakened” respondents’ cognitive defenses and led to lower advertising skepticism and intentions to avoid advertising, this media use habit increased perceived advertising clutter and, as a result, increased the ad avoidance tendency. The finding suggests that multiplying the exposure to media content, including advertising, in a given period of time may further reinforce the belief that there is too much advertising in media.

This study has a number of limitations related to the operationalization of advertising avoidance, the correlational nature of survey research, and the nature of the sample. While the measure of advertising avoidance included possible ad eliminating behaviors, it did not account for switching from one medium to another. We only studied how the habit of media multitasking is associated with advertising avoidance behaviors, but we did not ask our respondents whether they switched from one medium to another to avoid advertising. Also, while cause-effect links among variables were established on the theoretical level in the present study, the survey method does not allow testing which variables lead to changes in other variables. Finally, the sample in our study was a convenience sample of college students. Younger adults are more likely to engage in media multitasking and might be less likely to think critically of advertising messages.

No one disputes the likelihood of continued technological evolution and innovation, adding to the variety of devices and device capabilities for both today’s and tomorrow’s consumers. With no anticipated reduction in multitasking behavior, both marketers and scholars are motivated to better understand how this proliferation of screens changes consumer behavior. This study is the first to offer a comprehensive exploration of media multitasking and its effects on advertising avoidance. We examined the traditional concepts of advertising skepticism and perceived advertising clutter as both direct predictors of avoidance and as paths through which multitasking affects ad avoidance behavior. The results of this study change the way we think about the relationship between combined media use and advertising and provide a foundation for further research to advance theory as well as to assist marketers trying to reach an increasingly distracted audience.

References available upon request from the author(s).