

Ads effective even in the midst of multitasking, studies find

January 26 2015



Brittany Duff and co-author Sela Sar found that video ads viewed while multitasking were just as effective as when viewed alone, at least for those who process content more holistically. They also found that multitasking probably works best when you're in a good mood. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Those video ads playing in the corner of your computer screen, in the midst of your multitasking, may have more impact than you realize. They may be as effective as the ads you're really watching, such as those

during the Super Bowl, says a University of Illinois researcher.

It depends on how you perceive and process media content - whether your processing "style" is to focus more on one thing or to take it all in, according to Brittany Duff, a professor in Illinois' Charles H. Sandage Department of Advertising.

It also may depend on your mood.

Duff led two different studies on multitasking and ad recognition, each with a different group of undergraduates at a different Midwestern university. The results were recently published online in a paper for the *Journal of Advertising*.

As part of each study, participants were evaluated and categorized as being more "analytic" or "holistic" in their style of processing media. Analytic processors tend to focus on specific items, looking at them in isolation from the environment in which they're found, Duff said. Holistic processors tend to take in everything at once, or as part of a whole.

Described another way, analytic processors probably prefer quiet for getting things done, and holistic processors may need music and other distractions, Duff said.

Duff and co-author Sela Sar, also an Illinois advertising professor, found in both studies that analytic processors did better than holistic processors on ad retention when their only task was to watch a series of video [ads](#) on a [computer screen](#). When asked to split their time with a second simple task on the same computer, however, the results were dramatically different.

Analytic processors "just fall right off as soon as you make them do

something else," Duff said. They were half as effective at remembering ads.

"For holistic processors, however, it's like you did nothing to them," Duff said. They were just as effective in remembering aspects of the ads.

The first study had 56 participants and was considered more preliminary.

In the second and larger study, with 186 participants, the researchers found that even adding a third task had little effect on holistic processors.

In that same study, they also induced various participants into good and bad moods, and found that a negative mood leads to more analytic processing and a positive mood to more holistic processing.

The finding suggests that those who want to multiprocess effectively should do so in a good mood, Duff said.

The effect of processing styles has gotten little attention in research on either multitasking or advertising, Duff said, and she finds that surprising.

Instead, almost all multitasking research has come from a cognitive resource perspective, which claims that our ability to truly multitask is determined by limits on executive processing, or what our brains can handle in dealing with simultaneous tasks, Duff said. Yet most of that research has looked only at cognitive load tasks, such as texting and driving, and not more perception-oriented tasks, such as consuming media, she said.

Likewise, almost all advertising research has been done with participants

focusing on single ads, and one at a time - and yet we see potentially thousands of ads each day, and few of them with our full and direct attention, Duff said.

As a result, in much of her research, Duff said she's "not really interested in somebody who's paying full or 100-percent attention to an ad." Instead, she wants to know what's happening when they're not.

It's a particularly important question now, Duff said, because studies suggest we're consuming more media in less time through [multitasking](#).

Advertisers should be asking, "What if it's different if it's not full, direct attention on an ad?" Duff said. "What if these things don't work the same way?"

And media consumers should be thinking about the ads they think they're ignoring, but whose messages may still be getting through, Duff said. "You might be getting more out of those ads than you realize."

More information: The paper, "Seeing the Big Picture: Multitasking and Perceptual Processing Influences on Ad Recognition," is available online from the *Journal of Advertising* (access may be restricted) [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10 ... 00913367.2014.967426](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00913367.2014.967426)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Ads effective even in the midst of multitasking, studies find (2015, January 26)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2015-01-ads-effective-midst-multitasking.html>

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