

Emailing during Zoom meetings? New research shows benefits of multicommunication at work, in the classroom

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Multicommuting can be most beneficial when people can balance their divided attention and effectively manage the expectations of whoever they are communicating with, according to new research co-conducted at Binghamton University, State University of New York. Credit: Rawpixel Ltd. / CC BY 2.0

In today's digital age, the need for multicomputing has increased as people frequently juggle different communication tasks using multiple devices. While that occasionally means your attention could be diverted from one task or another, new research including faculty from Binghamton University, State University of New York examines how multicomputing could benefit the workplace or classroom, as long as it's used properly.

The paper is [published](#) in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*.

Multicomputing can be most beneficial when people are able to balance their divided [attention](#) and effectively manage the expectations of whoever they are communicating with, said Assistant Professor Jinglu Jiang, who conducted the research.

"On the surface, it's easy to place a negative connotation on multicomputing. But we need to focus on how people manage their multicomputing rather than the behavior itself," Jiang said. "Not everyone can be a 'Superman' at this, but if you're messaging with a colleague to get some information that could be useful while you're in the middle of a meeting, that could make your contribution to the meeting more effective."

Previous research has shown how multicomputing, such as using [social media](#) or texting during another conversation, could be distracting, especially in classroom or business settings. Studies also have shown that multicomputing not only impairs task performance but also leads to unfavorable social judgments against the multicomputor, causing them to be perceived as uncivil and unprofessional.

But Jiang's research reveals that multicomputing may not always pose a hindrance when it is directly related to a person's primary task or

objective.

When performed properly, Jiang said, multicomunicators can harness information acquired from secondary conversations to enhance their primary task, bolstering a person's contributions to a meeting and minimizing delays. This is especially true when the two media involved in the multicomunication can complement each other.

For example, if a person is listening to a lecture or discussion while reading related content on a separate screen, that can prove more effective than attempting to read from two separate screens simultaneously.

"Let's say you're listening to your teachers and looking at some materials on the side, even if it's social media. That can work as long as those materials have some content related to what's being taught in the class," Jiang said. "In my own classes, I'll talk about how websites like Amazon work, so the students will naturally want to look at the website's design themselves during the lecture. They're listening and learning something using their own perspective."

Jiang's research also shows that it matters who you're communicating with, particularly when it comes to leveraging the information a person gains through side conversations. Effective management of communication partners' expectations means ensuring that they are aware of and comfortable with the multicomunicating approach.

In most business or classroom settings, this can involve setting clear boundaries and explaining the purpose behind the multicomunication. Jiang said multicomunication will become more beneficial when everyone is "on the same page" and has realistic expectations of what it can accomplish.

Managers coordinating a meeting, Jiang said, must know when it's necessary to disrupt multicommuting. They could address it by clarifying to employees when it might not be acceptable or by giving examples of when it would be useful or allowed.

Jiang's research also points out that further study of this topic could help shed light on how multicommuting could influence brainstorming, negotiation, influencing and relationship formation.

"Properly managing this behavior at the individual and team levels makes the difference between multicommuting as a distraction and multicommuting as an asset," she said.

More information: Jinglu Jiang et al, Toward a multilevel framework of multicommuting: Insights from a systematic review, *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chbr.2023.100349](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2023.100349)

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