

For teens, multitasking makes them feel better—and worse

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Multitasking makes adolescents feel both more positively and more

negatively about the main task they're trying to accomplish, a new study finds.

But the study—which examined young people's actual multitasking behaviors over two weeks—found that only the [positive emotions](#) affected whether [young people](#) choose to combine tasks later.

For example, the study found that when adolescents combined something they had to do (like homework) with media use (such as texting with friends), they said the homework was more rewarding, stimulating or pleasant.

But they also reported feeling more negative emotions about the homework, such as finding it more difficult or tiring.

It's not particularly surprising that [media multitasking](#) would create both positive and negative emotions, said Zheng Wang, co-author of the study and professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"People experience mixed feelings about a lot of things in life," she said.

"Texting with friends while doing homework may make the homework seem more rewarding, but it may also increase a young person's stress about getting the work done."

The study found that the more positive emotions that the participants felt during multitasking, the less likely they were to multitask during subsequent activities. But negative emotions did not have any effect on later actions.

Shan Xu, now an assistant professor at Texas Tech University, led the research as a graduate student at Ohio State. The third author was Kelsey Woods, a former graduate student at Ohio State.

The research appears online in the journal *Human Communication Research* and will be published in a future print edition.

The study involved 71 adolescents aged 11 to 17 living in the Midwest. All participants reported their activities, both media-related and non-media related, three times a day for 14 days on a digital tablet device.

At each time point, they listed a main activity they were doing (such as homework or chores), and whether they were doing any media multitasking (such as texting or playing video games) at the same time.

For each main activity, they rated to what extent they felt seven [emotional responses](#) (three positive and four negative).

Results showed that the teens in the study were media multitasking about 40 percent of the time that they were doing other activities.

Both positive and negative emotions initially increased when participants said they were multitasking, Wang said. But the longer they were working at any main task and multitasking, the less they felt these negative and positive emotions.

"After a certain amount of time, it may take too much mental energy to process emotional information while trying to complete a task, so the [emotional](#) impact of multitasking is attenuated," Wang said.

Since research has established that multitasking can hurt performance, the question is why adolescents (and others) do it.

The fact that the positive emotions that the teens felt about the main task during multitasking was linked to less subsequent multitasking—but negative emotions were not—was intriguing, Wang said.

"It implies that probably adolescents are not trying to use multitasking to manage their negative feelings toward the main task—what they were really trying to do is to make the main task, such as [homework](#) or chores, a little more rewarding," she said.

"It suggests that adolescents may be less likely to multitask if they already find their tasks rewarding. Efforts by teachers to make lectures more interactive and efforts by parents to engage children in activities that offer opportunities to play, explore and learn all should help reduce multitasking."

But it is concerning that the increased [negative feelings](#) teens had when they were multitasking didn't reduce their use of the strategy.

The negative emotions should signal to them that multitasking isn't working well and that they should concentrate more on the main [task](#) to get it done, Wang said.

"We need to find out more about why the [negative emotions](#) aren't decreasing multitasking."

More information: Shan Xu et al, Multitasking and Dual Motivational Systems: A Dynamic Longitudinal Study, *Human Communication Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/hcr/hqz009](https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqz009)

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