

Digital device overload linked to how first impressions are formed

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Beware, media multitaskers: New research from Rice University researchers has found a link between spending too much time on digital devices and how first impression are formed.

The study, "Media multitasking is associated with altered processing of incidental, irrelevant cues during person perception," will appear in an upcoming edition of *BMC Psychology*. It examines the relationship between people who use multiple [digital devices](#) at once (known as media multitaskers) and how they perceive people they have never previously met.

"As a result of smartphones, tablets and other devices being embedded in our lives, our attention is in high demand as we switch between multiple devices," said Richard Lopez, a postdoctoral research fellow at Rice and the study's lead author. "Because this form of activity is new to us, its impact on how we perceive and interact with the world and those around us is not well known. This is why we were prompted to explore this topic and conduct this study."

Indeed, the researchers found a correlation between the use of digital devices and the quality of first impressions. People who reported frequent [media multitasking](#) were more likely to be distracted by irrelevant [information](#) when making first impressions about someone they had never met, compared with those who did not engage in frequent media multitasking.

The researchers compared how 96 college students filtered out unimportant information from their physical environments while evaluating a new person. They collected self-reported information on the level of media multitasking for each student. The students were then placed in either an organized or untidy room to see how the different atmospheres might influence their opinions. Finally, the students were asked to rate the conscientiousness of somebody they were seeing for the first time on a video monitor.

The study revealed that frequent media multitaskers sitting in neat rooms were more likely to have higher opinions of people they just

encountered—rating the person shown in the video as 16 percent more conscientious –than students sitting in the same room who were not frequent media multitaskers.

"Our results suggest that media multitasking may be linked to altered person perception in surprising and unintentional ways, with media multitaskers unknowingly taking in otherwise [irrelevant information](#) from their surroundings when they observe and make judgments about other people," he said.

Lopez said that this study is a first step in finding links between [media multitasking](#) and how individuals perceive other people, and that he hopes future research will explore this topic, particularly among kids and teens.

More information: Richard B. Lopez et al. Media multitasking is associated with altered processing of incidental, irrelevant cues during person perception, *BMC Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1186/s40359-018-0256-x](#)

Provided by Rice University

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