A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Media Multitasking in American and Malaysian College Students

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ABSTRACT

Asian societies have adopted electronic media in equal measure to western societies. Media use, its impacts and correlates have been examined in western and some Asian societies, but this study is unique in examining Malaysian students’ use of media. Malaysian and American college students reported their electronic media use, reading activities and patterns of multitasking with media while studying. They also were administered an academic distractibility questionnaire and a standard self-report measure of impulsiveness. Results indicated that Malaysians reported more electronic media use than Americans as well as more multitasking with media and multitasking while studying. For both Malaysians and Americans, students who reported using social networking while studying scored higher on measures of distractibility and impulsiveness. A more complex pattern of results for other types of media use and reading are described.

Keywords: College Students, Distractibility, Malaysia, Media Use, Multitasking

INTRODUCTION

Media consumption has expanded throughout the world and mobile phone use is inexpensive and common in many Asian countries (The Economist, 2010). Recent statistics show that the number of Internet users in Asia is the largest worldwide, approximately 33% greater than in North America, and growth in Asia since 2000 is over 840% compared to 150% in North America during the same period of time (Internet World Stats, n. d.). Individuals in Asia Pacific (e.g., Indonesia, Philippines, and Singapore) used mobile video more than those in America or Europe (Nielsen, 2012). While 85-91% of Americans surveyed reported owning a cell phone compared to 55% of Indonesians, Indonesians who did own a phone regularly made...
cell phone calls at a level equal to Americans (both 96%) and surpassed Americans in sending text messages (96% vs. 67-81%) (Duggan, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2012). Furthermore, more people in Asia Pacific owned or intended to buy a smartphone and were willing to use cell phones for transactions compared to consumers in North America (Nielsen, 2012). Smartphone users in China and South Korea tend to use their phones more for maintaining social relations by text messaging, emailing, instant messaging (IMing), and social networking rather than mobile shopping, banking, or streaming online music (Nielsen, 2013).

Young people worldwide are very active users of modern electronic media and devices. The Pew Research Center (2012) reported that young people aged 18-29 years in the United States, Europe and Asia were more likely to access the Internet on their mobile phones, use their cell phones for texting, taking pictures or videos, and use social networking compared to older people (50 +). Lin, Cheong, Kim and Jung (2010) conducted a cross-cultural assessment of Asian youths’ use of computers and the Internet. They compared students (aged 12-17 years) in Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, Taipei, and Tokyo on the frequency of Internet use and frequency of specific online activities (e.g., chatting). Results indicated that over 90% of students in all five Asian cities were users of the Internet and had access to the Internet at home. Similarly, over 80% of all students used mobile phones. In Singapore, nearly all teens reported using a computer and the Internet, had Internet access at home, and were mobile phone users. Forty-eight percent reported using the Internet 5-7 days per week.

Most research on media use has been conducted with Western populations. Research on the impact of Internet and media use in Asia has focused mostly on participants in East Asia, (e.g., Korea, China, and Japan) with little research involving Malaysian participants despite survey data indicating that Malaysian students accessed various forms of electronic media as frequently as Japanese and Singaporean students and slightly more than South Korean students (Ratnasingam & Ellis, 2011). Malaysia is one of the fastest growing Asian economies and has fully embraced mobile technology. Furthermore, Malaysians are heavy users of multimedia technology. According to English language newspapers in Malaysia, in 2007 the number of text or short messaging service (SMS) messages sent in Malaysia increased 43% from 7.4 billion to 11.7 billion in one year and in 2008, Malaysia ranked sixth in the world for SMS volume, with about 50 billion SMSes (Need To Adapt, 2008). From 2008-2012, people between the ages of 20-29 were the largest group of cell phone users. In 2012, 26% of cell phone users had smartphones, approximately 32% who owned smartphones were students, and 70% of smartphone users accessed the Internet through their smartphones (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2012). The 2011 Nielsen report found that 53% of their Malaysian sample reported using the Internet every day, 77% reported owning a desk top computer, 97% owned a mobile phone, and 73% used the mobile phone to access the Internet (Nielsen, 2011). The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2008) reported that the average home Internet user spent 12 hours on the Internet per week and approximately 48% reported using the Internet eight or more hours per week. The vast majority of users reported using the Internet to get information and to communicate by text. Fifty-eight percent reported using IM and among those who do, 95% report they do so to communicate with friends and family.

MEDIA USE AND MULTITASKING

The use of electronic media has been associated with multitasking, that is, engaging in multiple activities simultaneously. In the United States, survey research has found high levels of media multitasking among college and high school students (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, Zickuhr, 2010; Moreno, Jelenchick, Koff, Eikoff, Diermyer, & Christakis, 2012). Self-report and experi-
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