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Multitasking Behavior and Perceptions of Academic Performance in University Business Students in Mexico during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The current study measures the influence of multitasking behavior and self-efficacy for self-regulated learning (SESRL) on perceptions of academic performance and views in university students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico. 264 university students fulfilled an online questionnaire. It was observed that multitasking behavior negatively influences SESRL (-0.203), while SESRL showed a positive influence of 0.537 on perceptions of academic performance, and multitasking behavior had an influence of -0.097 on the perception of academic performance. Cronbach's alpha and Average Variance Extracted values were 0.809 and 0.577 (multitasking behavior), 0.819 and 0.626 (SESRL), 0.873 and 0.725 (perceptions of academic performance), respectively. The results of the bootstrapping test showed that the path coefficients were significant. The study outcomes can support new plans in universities to ensure the best academic outcomes. Our study showed evidence of the COVID-19 impact on education behavior. This study's novelty is based on using the partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique to evaluate these variables.

KEYWORDS

Multitasking behavior; COVID-19; Mexico; self-efficacy for self-regulated learning; academic performance; online class; pandemic; Peru

1 Introduction

The role of companies is to create new products and services for the customers; however, good training is essential to ensure a high performance [1–4], monitoring of basic needs [5–9], promote sustainability [10–16] and human willingness [17–19]. The education activity is one of the most important in creating better societies [20,21], being important to promote the creation of new jobs as entrepreneurs [22]. However, since the final of December of 2019, everything has been modified. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the world in different ways and sectors. In this way, companies [23–26], tourism and



hospitality activities [27–29], prices [30,31], health care professionals [32–45], and people [46–52] were affected. In the education area, the pandemic created different barriers [53] and interests in the learners [54] and changed the way to teach and learn [55–60]. More specifically, the pandemic changed the way the classes were taught and different activities related to the subjects, such as doing group work virtually among the students and the mentoring of the teacher in those same virtual environments [61], generating different levels of satisfaction between students [62]. The new model of education forced universities to switch from traditional face-to-face classroom learning to virtual classes quickly, in some cases even in a matter of days [63]. This unplanned event has speeded up the technology adaptation into a pedagogical model. Even educational institutions that refused to implement online programs before COVID-19 had to adapt to the new situation and start using digital devices for educational purposes.

Digital technology can provide valuable learning opportunities and benefits to students [63,64]; however, adaptive mindsets are needed for effective learning processes. Online learning involves more commitment, self-discipline, and self-management than during face-to-face classes. Technological devices offer students many distractions, such as texting, gaming, browsing the Internet, social media, and phone calls [65,66]. While in the traditional physical classrooms, instructors may have control over student behavior, this task becomes much more challenging to apply in online classes. Online learning also involves different teaching strategies [67] to capture students' attention. Lecturers should motivate students to participate actively in the class and encourage them to interact with other participants [64]. Students without an instructor's physical supervision and who become bored in the classroom may be more likely to use their technological devices and multitask more during online classes than face-to-face courses [67]. Multitasking behavior may affect learner's outcome [68,69], and lower participation and engagement in a course may result in more unsatisfactory academic performance [69–74]. This article examines the issue of students' multitasking activities during online lectures and how those actions affect their learning outcome in Mexico. For this reason, the objective of this study is to evaluate the influence of multitasking behavior through self-efficacy for self-regulated learning (SESRL) on perceptions of academic performance (PAP) in business students in Mexico during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused students and teachers to be connected technologically many hours a day to fulfill their learning responsibilities. According to Daniel [75], this change in education due to the pandemic has generated that institutions prepare as best as possible for virtual education by using computer systems such as BlackBoard [76], Google Meet [77], Zoom [78], and others for online classes. On the other hand, social isolation has generated mental distress and pressure on students and parents, which caused the simplification of certain processes, adjustment of study plans, re-evaluation of schedules and forms of delivery for tasks [79]. Another significant change in this virtual adaptation process has been the evaluations, which were modified due to social isolation to be carried out from home in real-time in many cases [79]. This modified the traditional pedagogical model since universities faced an extreme challenge for which they were not prepared to face in the short term, and only resilience capacity has allowed for some to adjust faster and more efficient than others [80]. Those careers in which learning requires practical applications *in situ* have been the ones to face the most difficulties in education during the pandemic. A clear example of this is medical students who need to contact patients for their learning [81,82]. Due to this need for practical knowledge and the impossibility of having patients available, various institutions implemented simulators that have partially alleviated student learning [83].

Due to the pandemic physical isolation was the main preventive measure implemented worldwide to avoid the contagion [51,84,85], which caused multiple lifestyle changes in people. Many people have experienced anxiety and mental distress [26,41,44] because of the death of family and friends [86–90]. Disinformation [91], fake news and anti-vaccine comments [92,93] have caused people to self-medicate,

use of medicinal plants [94], other alternative treatments [95] and affect their willingness to get vaccinated [96]. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many aspects in people's lives and accentuated work-home conflict, which can lead to an increase in the incidence of technostress [53].

The use of technology in universities' learning processes started years ago [97] with various educational benefits for teachers and students [98]. However, it also has been observed to reduce engagement, interaction and bidirectional debate, compared to traditional classroom teaching [99]. The percentage of daily internet daily usage by university students significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic [100], and progressively increased the use of social networks to post information about their classes and access virtual learning platforms [101]. However, the extended social networks' use overload has been reported to overlap with their academic responsibilities leading to technostress [53]. On a previous study we have reported how communication overload, social overload and technostress lead to exhaustion that ultimately affect academic performance in university students [53]. Furthermore, it has been reported that technostress affects the quality of sleep [102] and academic performance of university students [103,104].

Multitasking can be defined as the simultaneous execution of several activities in a specific period [105]. For the current study, multitasking in the learning arena means that the student executes several activities unrelated to the class during its face-to-face online class. Currently, due to technology and the pandemic where life is associated with the Internet connection; media multitasking has surged as the circumstance when the use of two or more digital tools occur at the same time, such as listening to a virtual class while chatting or while sending emails [106]. Multitasking in students generates different impacts on their perceptions of academic performance (PAP). On the one hand, multitasking produces better PAP, which could become a distractor that leads to lower student performance. In this way, there is evidence of the relationship between multitasking, mediated by self-efficacy for self-regulated learning (SESRL), to academic outcomes. Faced with this multitasking, which is inevitable in these times of high connectivity, it has been proposed that SESRL can reduce the negative impact to promote the students' beliefs in their capacities to carry out their academic responsibilities [107]. In this way, Johnson et al. [108] have shown that the SESRL of e-learners is directly related to e-learning outcomes. Simmering et al. [109] showed that SESRL is positively related to online learning, and that it serves as a potential mediator of PAP [110].

Likewise, on a previous study half of the people surveyed stated that better performance could be achieved using mobile phones since it allows students to access information in different academic and social areas [48]. However, the rest indicated that the use of mobile phones creates distractions, which can decrease their PAP [48]. On the other hand, media multitasking has been reported to have a negative impact on students' PAP [111,112]. For instance, it has been reported that the use of telephones in class negatively affects PAP because its use exceeds more than 25% of the duration of lectures, and distractions occur every 3–4 min for more than a minute affecting their attention span [66]. Another study evaluated the disconnection time related to media multitasking and the intention to read, and it was found that there was a higher intention to read when there was a high and constant disconnection rate from media multitasking [113]. Mental wandering rates have also been assessed observing that they remain stable regardless of media multitasking and a lower PAP [113]. Also, le Roux et al. [114] reported that the study area influences the relationship between multitasking and PAP. Jamet et al. [115] identified that multitasking behavior has a negative impact on the memorization of the content of courses, but no significant effects were found on comprehension. Also, it was evidenced that students who used laptops had a multitasking behavior both through multimedia and social media, generating a negative impact on PAP [115].

Additionally, Law et al. [116] reported a negative impacts in the learning of students who multitasked while faced with new information, suggesting that multitasking negatively impacts cognitive control processes. Similarly, through a Pearson correlation, Uzun et al. [117] indicated a significant weak

negative relationship between academic performance and preferences for multitasking, the use of media and technology, but not with the control of self-regulation. Also, Karim et al. [118] found that Facebook has a negative influence on PAP. Similarly, Spence et al. [119] reported that people who use social networks such as Instagram during class or social settings reduce their retention capacity to the exposed information. Likewise, the use of electronic devices during class has been reported to negatively impacting students' test scores; however, it does not diminish the understanding of the topics covered in class [120]. Also, multitasking has been reported to negatively affect students' performance in different aspects, such as their grade averages, test performance, reading comprehension, self-regulation, efficiency during studying for tests, and interfering with their attention and memory [72].

Because students have the perception that multitasking decreases their grades, students with higher grades tend to pay more attention during classes and perform less multitasking [121]. Larkin et al. [122] indicated that many students relate to their mobile phones as they prepare themselves to intentionally have or not external distractions while studying. On the other hand, it has been reported that a higher level of multitasking generates poor academic performance, possibly due to a decrease in executive functions and greater impulsivity, which were associated with a higher level of multitasking and low PAP [123]. Another study found that multitasking with mobile phones is not necessarily related to PAP, but that the level of participation in the classroom was more relevant for PAP [124]. Regardless of this, it has been proposed that students should avoid interruptions caused by notifications from their phones while they are studying [125]. Also, to effectively use social networks as a learning tool in the classroom, activities must be designed that link the learning objectives with social networks [126]. Likewise, to generate a decrease in university students' media multitasking, it is helpful to carry out a self-management strategy based on antecedents [127]. Even promoting online activities is perceived as an essential tool for learning since a study indicated that its application promoted behavior linked to the task that was being developed [128]. In terms of online courses, the application of short modules is recommended so that it is not associated with counterproductive practices related to multitasking and technology [129]. On the other hand, in terms of multitasking differences in face-to-face and online classes, it was evidenced that multitasking occurs more frequently during virtual courses than face-to-face courses, and that both modalities have different predictors for multitasking [67].

2.1 Research Model

SESRL is proposed as a mediating variable. Fig. 1 shows the influences between the variables. It is relevant to see the positive and negative influences proposed in the model.

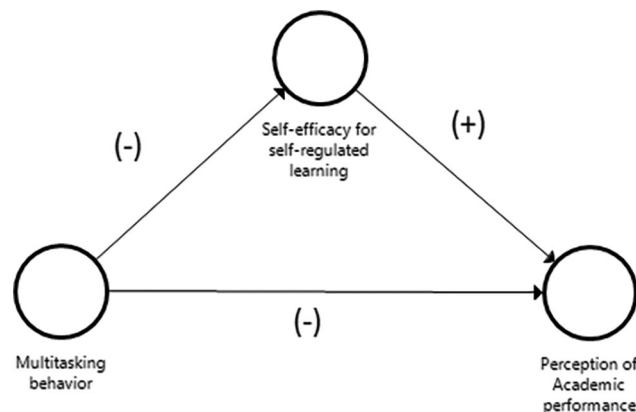


Figure 1: Research model

2.2 Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Multitasking behavior has a negative effect on SESRL.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The SESRL has a positive effect on PAP.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Multitasking behavior has a negative effect on PAP.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sample

The total number of respondents was 264 students. The mean of years of the surveyed students was 26 (SD = 38.94). The information was collected from students of business-related careers in Mexico using an electronic survey between June 05 and July 08, 2020.

3.2 Instrument and Data Collection

The data collection was made using an online questionnaire in Google Forms distributed to students by email and personal chats between June 05 and July 08, 2020. The questionnaire includes items based on the instrument used by Alghamdi et al. [110], Zimmerman et al. [130], and Yu et al. [131] to evaluate multitasking, SESRL, and PAP. The variables were evaluated by a 5-point Likert scale. The original items were translated and adapted linguistically. Education experts checked the first version of the online questionnaire, which was uploaded to Google Forms. The authors followed international requirements for research ethics. The participants received the following information: “The online questionnaire is for scientific purposes. If after you start answering the questions, you do not want to continue for different reasons, feel free to stop”.

3.3 Analysis of Data

Variance based partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to evaluate the data collected using the software SmartPLS version 3.3.3. PLS-SEM is used when the distribution of the data collected is non-normal, and it needs a non-parametric analysis, as in this study. Additionally, PLS-SEM shows the R^2 values and verifies the significance of the model. Also, the reliability of each indicator and the internal consistency of subscales were analyzed. Then, the Fornell–Larcker criterion [132,133] was used to verify the discriminant validity. The bootstrapping technique was used to evaluate if the model was significant [133,134].

4 Results

4.1 Reliability

The Cronbach’s Alpha values were higher than 0.5, the expected minimum in the exploratory analysis [133] (see Table 1).

Table 1: Analysis of internal consistency for reliability

Scales	Items	Cronbach’s Alpha values	Range of Items values
Multitasking behavior	5	0.792	0.577–0.809
SESRL	7	0.842	0.626–0.819
Perception of academic performance	4	0.816	0.725–0.873

Sample: 264 questionnaires to university students.

4.2 Validation with SEM-PLS

Table 2 shows the coefficients of reliability by SEM PLS. The outcomes confirmed the reliability of the questionnaire.

Table 2: Scale-items validation

Scales	Factorial weight	Composite reliability	Average extracted variance
Multitasking (When I am in online classes,)		0.836	0.509
..... I communicate through social networks (P1)	0.483		
..... I watch TV or videos (P2)	0.803		
..... I see non-academic topics on the Internet (P3)	0.704		
..... I play video games (P4)	0.861		
..... I chat with friends (P5)	0.495		
Self-efficacy for self-regulated learning (SESRL) (I can.....)		0.881	0.516
..... study when there are other interesting things to do (P6)	0.657		
..... concentrate on university subjects (P7)	0.773		
..... plan my university work (P8)	0.625		
..... organize my university work (P9)	0.650		
..... arrange a place to study without distractions (P10)	0.819		
..... motivate me to do university work (P11)	0.739		
..... participate in class discussions (P12)	0.744		
Perceptions of academic performance (PAP)		0.877	0.643
I am confident about the adequacy of my academic skills and abilities (P13)	0.719		
I feel competent conducting my course assignments (P14)	0.834		
I have learned how to successfully perform my coursework in an efficient manner (P15)	0.875		
I have performed academically as well as I anticipated I would (P16)	0.768		

Sample: 264 questionnaires to university students.

4.3 Discriminant Validity Using SEM-PLS

The discriminant validity was calculated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion [132,133]. Table 3 shows the fulfillment of this criterion in all the subscales.

Table 3: Discriminant validity by the Fornell-Larcker criterion

Scales	PAP	Multitasking behavior	SESRL
PAP	0.802		
Multitasking behavior	-0.170	0.713	
SESRL	0.556	-0.197	0.718

Sample: 264 questionnaires to university students.

4.4 Bootstrapping

The calculation was carried out, indicating that it was to be carried out 5000 times in the software. The values were found significant with a p -value < 0.01 (Table 4).

Table 4: Significance of trajectory coefficients (beta)

Scales	Original sample	Mean sample	Standard deviation	t -statistic	p -value
Multitasking behavior \rightarrow SESRL	-0.203	-0.211	0.072	2.551*	0.006**
SESRL \rightarrow PAP	0.537	0.543	0.045	10.228*	0.000**
Multitasking behavior \rightarrow PAP	-0.097	-0.091	0.066	5.443	0.000**

Note: *Bootstrapping (5,000 times).
 **Statistically significant.

The outcomes confirmed that multitasking behavior through SESRL influences perception of academic performance (Fig. 2).

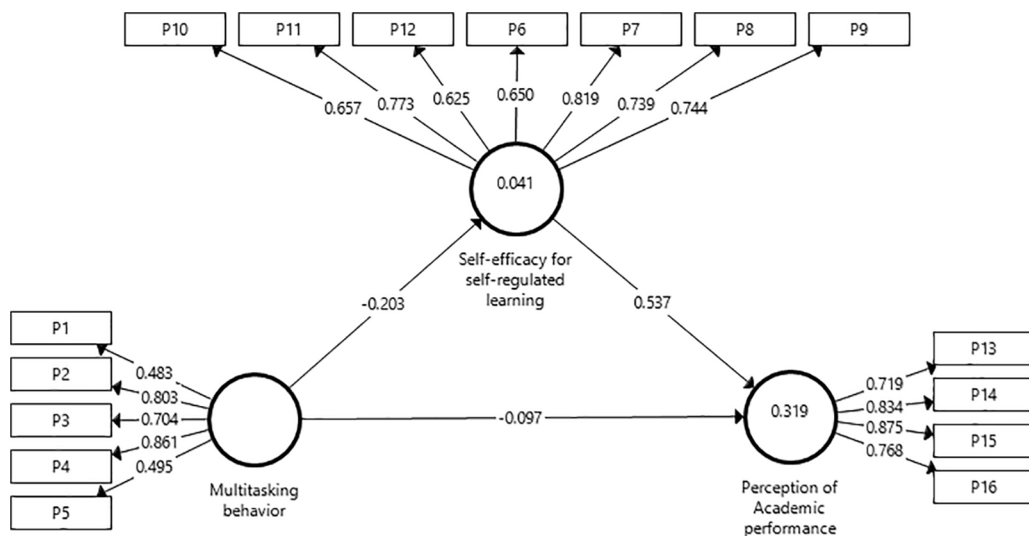


Figure 2: Research model evaluated

4.5 Test of Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The multitasking behavior has a negative effect on SESRL

The multitasking behavior has an effect of -0.203 in SESRL. In other words, as multitasking behavior increased, SESRL decreased and vice versa. Also, the multitasking behavior explains 4.1% of SESRL.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The SESRL has a positive effect on PAP

The SESRL has an effect of 0.537 in PAP. In other words, as SESRL increased, PAP increased and vice versa.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Multitasking has a negative effect on PAP

Multitasking has an effect of -0.097 in PAP. Also, multitasking behavior and SESRL explain 31.9% of the PAP.

5 Discussion

This research has the objective to test a model in business university students in Mexico, establishing the link between multitasking, SESRL, and PAP, as well as its validity and discriminant reliability. The survey outcome results were found to be reliable, valid, and statistically relevant. The scales showed reliability and validity and can be used in the following studies in Latin American countries and Spain. A very relevant aspect of the study was linked to emphasizing the distraction factors found during online classes, which coincide with other studies, with their different contents: the use of smartphones [66,122,127,135,136] and social networks [113,116,117,126,127], which correlate with the effect that multitasking behavior has on the PAP of students [67,114,117,118,120,126,137].

It is important to comment about SESRL variance explained by multitasking. According to the bootstrapping analysis, the inverse relationship between multitasking is significant; However, the low percentage of SESRL variance by multitasking could be explained because the existence of other factors such as the stimulus of the university that allows the student to be empowered and to develop their activities. Another influence could also be given by the support of their parents to ensure that the student successfully carry out their academic tasks. Another influence can also come from the social support from their fellow students to make them feel that they can fulfill their academic responsibilities. It is recommended to incorporate these factors so that SESRL can be explained in more detail in future studies.

The present study's contribution lies in having measured these variables during the COVID-19 pandemic when there was a higher use of social networks, and that the obligation of greater Internet connection could have consequences on academic performance. Because the COVID-19 pandemic still causes classes to remain virtual, the observed influence continues, making it very relevant to re-measure these variables when classes are resumed face-to-face and even hybrid classes (virtual and face-to-face) are started. Finally, the versatility of the student's activities should not be confused with the distraction generated by the use of the Internet during synchronous online classes. Knowing the effect of multitasking activity on PAP helps educational institutions promote multiple student activities without neglecting classes in real-time.

The evidence serves to generate changes in the education system in universities. For the development of daily classes, the connection times are now longer, which leads to mental fatigue, and it can be explained that students to cope with said fatigue can alternate with activities that allow them to stay animated. This situation generated in students serves as the basis for active pauses every so often in virtual synchronous classes. It is also possible to evaluate how convenient it is for the 3-hour face-to-face classes to fully be converted to synchronous virtuality.

5.1 Practical Implications

Education at all levels, especially in universities, has changed, but these changes were not programmed, and in many cases, they were not controlled. Almost 2 years after observing the results obtained in the 100% implementation of virtual education, studies like this must be considered to generate effective strategies that help students and teachers obtain the best knowledge and skills and best teaching techniques in the virtual world. A crowdsourcing process is needed [138–140] where the participation of each actor is required to formulate the same educational strategic plan to help the operational management of universities. The accrediting institutions that had scheduled visits to the universities canceled the scheduled visits because of the pandemic and have transferred the accreditation process to virtuality [141]. The authorities of the universities must be ready to adapt very quickly to the virtual process to obtain or renew their certifications and accreditations based on changes done since the pandemic started. Furthermore, they need to evaluate the barriers and enablers [142], and the projection to return to face-to-face classes [143], which most likely be a hybrid with online classes and with different challenges related to multitasking.

5.2 Limitations and Future Direction

Due to COVID-19 pandemic social isolation in Mexico was required during the collection time. Thus, the research was done by an online survey, which was not controlled, and the respondents could have varied their responses. The multitasking behavior can be valuable to perform many activities simultaneously; however, this benefit can change when other learning processes are involved. More research is needed based on this instrument to see the changes generated in the use of the Internet by students, the increase or decrease of multitasking, and its subsequent influence on academic performance.

6 Conclusions

The results obtained must be analyzed to evaluate the development of support strategies to students in the universities to achieve efficient use of the Internet during synchronous online classes, ultimately generating an impact on the perception of student performance. With almost 2 years of the pandemic, virtual education has been the only way education has continued to develop worldwide. Although in some places the face-to-face classes are progressively been implemented, online education continues to be an essential part of the teaching-learning processes, so the impact that has been evidenced by multitasking behavior should be evaluated in educational institutions to create efficient strategies that help reduce the impact on the academic performance of students.

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