Indifferent Behaviour of Young Digital Content Consumers –An Interview Study

Veikko Halttunen[1], Markus Makkonen[2] and Lauri Frank[3]

Department of Computer Science and Information Systems, University of Jyväskylä,
P.O. Box 35, FI-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland
[1] *veikko.halttunen@jyu.fi,* [2]*markus.makkonen@jyu.fi,*
[3]*lauri.frank@jyu.fi*

Abstract: **Digital piracy has been a proliferating problem during the last ten years. New technological innovations in the areas of telecommunication and social media have provided a myriad of opportunities to use digital content illegally. Unauthorized use of music and videos that can be downloaded or directly streamed from the Internet has changed the traditional forms of piracy like duplicating software or burning music CDs. The Internet provides almost endless resources of illegal digital contents that can be acquired easily, rapidly and with a low risk to be caught. Explanations and solutions for the piracy problems have especially been sought from two directions: (1) technology (e.g. P2P, DRM) and (2) the ethics of consumer behaviour. In this paper, we provide an interview study that explores the ethical thinking and actual behaviour of digital content consumers. The study consisted of fourteen interviews. All interviewees were young adults (19-31 years), seven of them were male and seven female. The study reveals incoherence in the interviewees' ethical thinking and indifference in their actual behaviour. Given that ethical behaviour is assumed to be correlated with ethical attitudes and thinking, we argue that there is a chance to improve consumers' ethical behaviour by increasing their ethical consciousness. This potential should also be capitalized since fighting digital piracy requires multiple actions of which improved ethical consciousness is one.**

Keywords: consumer behaviour, digital content, ethics, piracy.

I. Introduction

Digital piracy is a complex problem and its causes and consequences form a broad field of study [1]. Although the actual impacts of digital piracy on the content industries are controversial, e.g. [2] vs. [3], [4], and may vary from industry to industry [5], it is obvious that piracy is an issue that requires much attention in the future. With respect to music industry, for example, piracy has been regarded as the greatest threat [6].

Digital piracy has been widely seen as a result of the easiness by which copying and sharing files, especially on the Internet, can be done, e.g. [7]. Peer-to-peer (P2P) networks which emerged in the end of the last millennium made illegal file sharing very effective [8]. Another major piracy problem can be expected if individuals start to use P2P networks for sharing printed products like books in an electronic form [1].

Piracy has been widely studied in the contexts of software, e.g. [9], [10], and music, e.g. [11]-[14]. Digital piracy at a more general level has been studied by Hill [1], for example.

The findings on factors affecting piracy are not always parallel. Although pirating is generally assumed to belong to younger people's activities, e.g. [15], some studies, e.g. [14], show that ethical awareness tends to decrease by aging. This finding combined with another proposition that moral intention leads to moral actions [16], seems conflicting. If young people were ethically more aware then they should apparently pirate less than older people. However, they tend to pirate more. Lysonski and Durvasula [11] explain this with the fact that there is a gap between ethical thinking and behavior (compare with [14], [16]).

In general, a fertile ground for piracy can be found when people either do not feel guilty when pirating or find pirating – even though when considered illegal - ethically acceptable. When the illegal behaviour is not ethically doomed and at the same time pirating is technologically easy, it is hard to find means against piracy. Besides technological and ethical explanations, economic arguments for piracy can be easily found. Concerning digital products, for example, low prices mean a lot to consumers [12], [17]. This favours the use of illegal contents that tend to be free of charge.

While fighting digital piracy seems to be difficult, some constructive suggestions can be found among research literature. These include, for example, business models that better accommodate consumers' expectations [6], [18]. Battachharjee et al. [19] note that a piracy reduction strategy should be different from revenue-maximizing strategy which indicates that content providers should not solely concentrate on increasing revenues. Shoham et al. [16] argue that piracy should be marketed as unethical. This is an important point since to many consumers 'illegal' does not mean same as 'unethical'. Because music piracy, for example, may lead to serious ethical consequences, the government and marketers should also promote group consensus within the society on the issues of music piracy behaviour [6]. In addition to these consumer-oriented approaches, some researchers have called for public policy and enforcement of intellectual property protection [5], for example.

Digital piracy research can be categorized into the schools of ethics, information systems, economics and legal issues [10]. Since the primary target of our study is to comprehensively discover the ethical thinking and behaviour of the consumers, our analysis combines all these four aspects. Hence, we attempt to explain consumer ethics in a field where information systems form the technological ground, economics explains a major part of consumers' preferences, and where juridical issues tend to be very complicated and open to interpretations from the consumers' point of view.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. In the next chapter, we present the objectives and methods of our study in detail. In chapter 3 we provide the major findings of the empirical study. In chapter 4 we discuss the results of the study and compare them with earlier research. Finally, conclusions are provided in chapter 5.

II. Objectives and Methodology

Although quite a lot is known about consumers' behaviour and ethical thinking in the context of using digital contents in an illegal way, research findings seem to be partially conflicting as presented above. One explanation to this could be the fact that certain key concepts, like 'illegal', 'unauthorized', 'immoral', and 'unethical' not only mean different things but they are also used unsystematically. Another explanation, a very natural one, is that a consumer's thinking and behaviour are not always conscious, nor are they coherent. For example, when the opportunity to pirate is appealing enough, the consumer can explain the illegal choice with ethical arguments although basically it would be against the consumer's ethics. This kind "technique", which helps people to insulate themselves from self-blame, is called neutralization [20]. We suppose that the more unconscious or incoherent the ethics, the more room there is for neutralization and, therefore, the easier it is to slip to illegal behaviour.

When analysing piracy issues it is necessary to estimate what the corresponding legal acquisition channels are and how they work from the consumers' point of view. Apparently, few studies of digital piracy take into account the rapid development of social media and the consequent changes in consumer behaviour, for example.

We suppose that only few people are dedicated pirates. Rather, a majority of people are indifferent to the sources where they can obtain the interesting digital content. In our opinion, using illegal acquisition channels can result from this indifference.

In this study our objective was to have a comprehensive picture of consumers' ethical thinking and behaviour, and the relationship between these two. Using this picture, we aimed to gain a deep understanding of the complex issue of using digital content illegally.

The research was carried out as an interview study. The interviews were performed as open discussions based on a number of themes (i.e. *Usage of computers and the Internet; Usage of the Internet for acquiring products; Usage, acquisition and sharing of digital contents; Communality and social media; Recommending digital contents and rewarding for it; Piracy; Free comments*). The themes were typically discussed in the same order, although minor deviations from this order were also accepted when it was more fluent from the interviewee's point of view. The themes covered intentionally aspects of both illegal and legal content. In addition, general aspects to online shopping were also covered. The aim was to capture the diversity of consumer behaviour and thinking. Besides this study, part of the themes is dealt with in more detail in another study [21].

The invitations to participate in the study were sent to two student organizations. The intended number of seven females and seven males was attained very quickly, and there was also an opportunity to select the interviewees to cover the targeted age range evenly (the interviewees were 19-31 years old). During the interview, the interviewee was informed first about the themes and procedure of the interview. The discussions mostly followed the structure of the beforehand prepared set of questions, though the interviews were encouraged to present their ideas in their own ways and in such an order they felt comfortable. A typical interview took about one and a quarter hour.

The interviews were recorded and they were also transcribed for the relevant parts. In the analysis the answers were classified into four large categories: (1) what were seen as reasons for digital piracy and indifferent use of copyrighted digital material, (2) what kind behaviour was considered illegal/unethical by the interviewees, (3) what were the interviewees' attitudes towards piracy, and (4) what could be the means to fight digital piracy. After this, the individual answers of each category were analyzed first. Then the answers to each category were grouped into two subgroups: females and males. Next, a summary of each category was made, and finally, the cross-analysis of each interviewee's answers to all questions was conducted. The results of the analysis are presented in the next chapter.

III. Major Findings

In this chapter we provide the findings regarding both actual use of and attitudes towards using different sources of digital content. When necessary to refer to an individual interviewee's views, comments or statements, it is done by using the following codes: F is the symbol for female interviewees and M for male interviewees. Since seven females and seven males were included in the study the codes are F1…F7 and M1…M7, respectively.

A. Prevalence and causes of indifferent use of copyright protected digital contents

In this consideration, peer-to-peer (P2P) networks have a special role[1]. Although they are not illegal as such, they are a main source of illegal digital content, e.g. see [22]. Consumers who use P2P networks for acquiring digital material are often careless of the possible legal restrictions of such material. In other words, they are not concerned whether or not their actions are legal. Many of them might consider their behaviour from either a legal or an ethical viewpoint but this seems to have no real effect on their behaviour.

In our study all interviewees except one had used P2P

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[1] Copying CDs, DVDs or other types of digital media were also considered but they had a minor status in this study

networks for acquiring digital content (music being the primary type of content). Although the current use of P2P networks was not inquired in detail, it was found that 9 persons still used P2P networks for acquiring digital content, to at least some extent. However, only 6 (2 female and 4 male) of 14 used them actively to get their digital material.

The most common type of digital content used by the interviewees was music. Actually, all interviewees consumed digital music to at least some extent. Music was ever more often acquired by using Spotify[2]. As one can see in the frequency table (Figure 1), the use of Spotify seemed to diminish the use of P2P networks[3]. The qualitative analysis revealed that several persons who had started to use Spotify had since abandoned the usage of P2P networks.

Other digital contents consumed by the interviewees were videos, at the second place, and games, at the third place. For a few interviewees, videos or games were the primary digital contents that were acquired from the Internet.
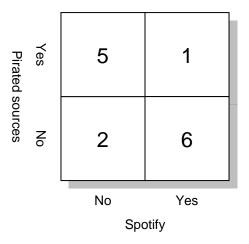

Figure 1: Usage of Spotify and pirated sources.

When asked about reasons for using P2P networks, the following three issues were prevailing among the answers. First, getting the material for free was most frequently mentioned as the primary reason. The next two reasons were the easiness of acquisition and use, and the wide selection of music available. In general, the male users of P2P networks gave more arguments for their behaviour than their female counterparts. All active male users mentioned that the primary reason for using P2P networks was that the material was free, but they also mentioned the easiness of access to the digital content and the wide scope of material available on the Internet.

Concerning "it costs nothing" as a main stimulus to use P2P networks, M5, for example, put it: "Man is weak when the price is low", meaning that, at least in his case, he could overcome the feelings of guilt when the material he wanted was free of charge. However, he also thought that the illegal or indifferent use would diminish if it were more difficult and the risks to get caught higher.

Although only one male interviewee mentioned that the primary reason for the spread of the P2P networks could be the fact that the commercial counterparts are so awkward, several other interviewees could obviously have endorsed this opinion if it had been asked. This can be concluded from the answers given later on during the interviews ("Means to fight digital piracy").

B. What is believed or considered to be legally or ethically right or wrong

In general, it seemed to be quite unclear to most interviewees what is legally right or wrong. Usually, people knew something about copyright laws, but the knowledge was often inaccurate and confused by (1) the fact that there are different national versions of copyright laws and (2) purposeful ethical interpretations. Most interviewees understood that using P2P networks to acquire copyright protected material is legally wrong. Although the interviewees had different ideas about the illegality of using vs. distributing such material, it was quite clear to most of them that when downloading material by using a P2P network one always acts as a distributor, too. Thus, the majority of the interviewees were actually aware of the illegality of such use of P2P networks.

On the ethical side, there were, however, different stances. Although most interviewees did not want to distribute the downloaded material further, they did not see sharing it with friends, for example, as any major wrongdoing either. Professional-like delivery and distribution of copyright protected material was, instead, widely doomed. The most common ethical argument for "small scale piracy" was that the music industry was so grasping. So, it can be stated that "Robin Hoodism" received sympathy to at least some extent, whereas piracy as an economic crime was denied. The further the discussion went, the more obvious it became that legal alternatives would be preferred to illegal ones, if both of them worked equally well and user friendly (compare with the Spotify example presented in Figure 1). Money, of course, has a prominent role at least when younger consumers are in question.

When comparing female interviewees' opinions to their male counterparts, it can be noticed that women were more explicitly against piracy than men who might have said that they "would not become sleepless" (M5) or "would not feel guilty" (M6) because of using digital material illegally, nor did they find digital piracy a very bad thing (M7). Some male interviewees also bound the immorality of piracy to the aspects of economy: M2, for example, found piracy quite acceptable if someone (the interviewee actually referred to media mogul Rupert Murdoch as an example) had too a dominant role on the market and the pricing of products was therefore incorrect. M3, instead, approached the issue from a different perspective when he said that pirating high value products (like large programs) is more condemnable compared to the piracy of products with lower development costs.

Of the female interviewees five (F2–F6) was clearly against piracy although they did find some positive impacts of piracy, too (like increasing the visibility of unknown artists). The

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[2] Spotify is a service that provides free and legal access to extensive library of music. Besides Spotify Free there are also chargeable Spotify products available.

[3] Note the small sample due to which statistical significance cannot be calculated

remaining two (F1 and F7) had vacillating attitudes towards piracy. It seemed that F1 had not formed her stance yet, whereas F7 was feeling more comfortable being on the pirate side, although she simultaneously recognized the wrongness of large scale piracy. Despite condemning piracy quite explicitly several female interviewees hurried to say that they, nevertheless, did not want to moralise. It is an interesting question, why this footnote was uttered. One reason might be the fact that piracy is so wide-spread that moralising it does not help anything. The interviewees might also have the feeling that moralising would not be possible without self-criticism at the same time. This, in turn, would not have been psychologically easy.

C. Means to fight digital piracy

In general, the interviewees considered piracy as a harmless, easy, and extremely cheap way to get digital content. The risk to get caught is low, no specific skills are needed, and acquisition is possible without logging in, a credit card etc. Security risks were not considered high either, although viruses and other malware occupied some.

From what is said above, it could be inferred that if pirating would be more difficult, its popularity could decrease. However, only a few interviewees believed that forcing alone could solve the problem of piracy. Monitoring and controlling illegal use of digital contents were mentioned by some interviewees as a way to fight digital piracy but they also regarded DRM (Digital Rights Management) and similar systems as a supplementary means only. Furthermore, DRM systems were widely resisted by many other interviewees. They were quite openly considered rather as a cause to piracy than a tool to inhibit it. Forcing was seen as a necessary means against "big fishes" who could not be affected by "soft means" like education, which was suggested by many interviewees to be a potential means in fighting digital piracy. Many interviewees also believed that by improving the properties of legal alternatives to acquire digital material, the use of illegal sources would decrease. According to them the prices of commercial products and services should be lower and the services should be simpler and easier to use.

When asked whether a levy or a tax-like common charge for using the Internet would help to solve the problem of digital piracy (i.e. more legal content financed in this way would be available to everyone), the opinions basically fell into two categories: (1) some of the interviewees did not believe in, or could not tolerate, such a solution at all, while (2) the rest found it an interesting alternative that, however, should be very accurately allocated (i.e. everyone should not have to pay for everything). Altogether, the idea of a solution based on a levy did gain only little support.

D. Coherence of interviewees' thinking and behaviour

It was interesting to notice how much inconsistencies the interviewees' thinking and behaviour included. A primary cause for this might be that the legal issues were confused with the ethical ones. For example, behaviour that was known illegal was accepted and adopted, because it was seen ethically justified. In the sector of digital music this kind of "Robin Hoodism" is, however, based on questionable arguments since it often means "robbing from someone and giving to self" due to which the prices for paying consumers can rise resulting in

inequity among consumers. The interviewees actually had no clear idea who was robbed, although some of them strongly criticized "the grasping music industry". Rather few had thought the situation from the viewpoints of average artists or of the fellow consumers who pay for the content. Furthermore, when the impacts of piracy on artists' living were considered, the interviewees found more benefits than drawbacks.

It can be concluded that a typical, young consumer of digital content often acts like a pirate but wants see her-/himself more like Robin Hood. This gives a good reason to assume that a typical consumer would like, deep inside, to behave ethically right. Therefore, (s)he tends to pursue ethical justification for illegal behavior. The attempt to calm down bad conscience from behaving illegally (i.e. neutralization discussed earlier in this paper) could be seen as a sign of incomplete ethical consciousness. A majority of the interviewees, especially the male ones, denied feeling guilty about the illegal use of digital content. Nevertheless, both their argumentation and their quick change from using P2P networks to using the Spotify service show that legal issues had not been neglected by the interviewees.

It can be asked what happens when the large masses of young generations get used to illegal sources of digital contents. How easy is it to change their behaviour to the legal side, if everything has been cheap, quick and convenient on the illegal side? Nonetheless, in the interviewees' mind legal products have their strengths, too. A majority of the interviewees presented such strengths. For example, thirteen interviewees found CDs having so many positive features that they did not like to totally dispense with them[4].

The interviewees' overall attitudes towards a levy or common charge for using digital contents were surprising. It was supposed that such a solution would gain some support as a fair-to-everyone system. However, it was widely seen as very unfair. Also in case in which the levy alternative was presented by the interviewers as very similar to the monthly charged version of Spotify and limited to the actual users of digital content, it was quite strongly resisted. Thus, it seems that at least young consumers resist all kinds of strict systems and they demand freedom of choice. It can be assumed that if this study had been extended to cover older generations, the results would have been different.

IV. Discussion

Although our empirical data is based on a limited number of interviews providing, thus, too little material for generalizations, interesting findings can be highlighted.

First, indifferent attitudes towards using illegal digital content seem to be very common among young consumers. This is not a surprise. Some previous studies have suggested the same thing, e.g. [11]. Explanations can be many. At a very basic level, the indifference could be linked to the psychological method called neutralization (see [20] and [23]) that gives an individual an opportunity to feel less guilty in a situation where people normally would have such feelings. Of the neutralization techniques (Denial of responsibility; Denial of injury; Denial of victim; Contemnation of the contemners; Appeal to higher loyalties), denial of injury ("no harm

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[4] Here it is necessary to be remarked that the main reason for having CDs was the consumers' desire of physical products.

caused") was obviously the most utilized explanation among the interviewees of our study. However, all the other neutralization techniques seem to be similarly relevant. Therefore, we propose that there is a good reason to study this explanation model more carefully in the context of using digital content illegally.

When ethically or legally wrong action is done, there is normally a strong enough stimulus for this behavior. Our findings support the view that the price of digital content is a main factor affecting the extent of piracy among young consumers (compare with [19]). However, price alone cannot explain the phenomenon of the wide-spread infringement of copyright. Easiness to obtain the wanted material without actual risks to be caught (also noted by Hill [1], and Al-Rafee and Cronan [17]), and wide range of contents available on the Internet were the two other main arguments for using digital content illegally. These findings are also in line with earlier research that has argued for lowering the prices and extending the selection of legal digital content [12].

In respect to price, our study supports the view that at least very low prices (e.g. small monthly charge for unlimited use) could allure pirating consumers to the legal side. The change from using P2P networks to using Spotify to acquire digital music may indicate this trend. It is, however, uncertain how eager consumers would be to pay for using Spotify. At the moment all Spotify users in our sample were using the advertisement supported version of Spotify. Although relatively few of the interviewees explicitly resisted the chargeable version of the service, it is not automatic that the chargeable version would have similar success to what the free one has had. Two questions need to be considered in the future. First, are consumers that are used to get products for free ready to pay for the same products even if the price is low? Second, what is the pricing system that would be preferred by consumers?

Chiou et al. [6] call for improving the quality of legal digital content. In our sample, quality did not emerge as a key factor for the consumers. The quality of digital music and videos seems to be generally good enough, and in cases where the quality really matters, the consumers still tend to choose the physical counterpart of the product. Nevertheless, improving the quality of the digital products would be highly beneficial when the primary factors (price, ease of acquisition and use, and extensive selection etc.) are sound first.

Although most interviewees had feelings that digital piracy is legally and often ethically wrong, a major part of them had pirated. As we have presented above, one explanation could be found from the theory of neutralization. However, it seems that the indifferent behavior of young consumers can also result from the fact that ethics truly is fuzzy to many young adults. They have some ideas of what is wrong and what is right, but they, excluding some exceptions, are quite reluctant to bother themselves with legal and ethical issues when using digital content over the Internet. Furthermore, some of them also tend to have a weird interpretation of "Robin Hoodism", according to which it is right to rob from the wealthy music industry and give to oneself (this can be explained by the neutralization technique "Contemnation of the contemners", for example). So, illegal behaviour is tried to be justified by ethical arguments that are, nevertheless, quite egoistic (see [16]).

If education of ethical thinking is considered as a means to fight digital piracy, it is necessary to ask how this education should be performed. It is also necessary to ask whether younger generations that have often been accused of "easy life" are more selfish in their ethics, meaning that their ethics is different from older generations. Furthermore, it would be interesting to find out whether or not the pirating consumers consider that they are not only robbing from the music industry but also from the paying consumers. This "free-rider problem" is relevant to all products that can be considered as public goods (see [24]).

Although ethics pursue the truth of what is right and wrong, the implementation of it is always biased by the actual context of time and place. This "man is always deficient" limitation should not lead to a giving up mentality. Instead, despite its complexity ethics should be a great resource in building societies for the coming generations. Ethics cannot be taught and adopted in one night. Therefore, it should be a long term strategy that is imbedded in all parts of the societal development.

V. Conclusions

In this paper we have presented an interview study through which we aimed to gain information on digital content consumers' ethical thinking and behaviour. In total, fourteen young consumers (7 female and 7 male) were interviewed. The themes covered both legal and illegal aspects of consuming digital contents.

The primary target of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of consumers' ethical thinking and its possible consequences on actual behaviour. We believe that our study has brought out issues that can be used, for example, as a starting point for building hypotheses for further studies. In the future, it would be necessary to gather more information on how different pricing mechanisms, improved ease of acquisition and use, and a wide selection of digital material, for example, affect the consumers' attitudes and, furthermore, actual behaviour in respect to legal commercial acquisition channels. It is also necessary to find sound theoretical models that could explain the indifferent behavior of consumers. The neutralization theory is one candidate for this purpose.

The main limitation of our study is related to the size of the sample. Fourteen interviews do not provide very much material for generalizations. However, as we noted above, our study was conducted to bring out relevant issues for further studies rather than testing some hypotheses.

Acknowledgment

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Author Biographies

Veikko Halttunen is a researcher at the University of Jyväskylä. Previously, he has worked as the deputy director of the Information Technology Research Institute, as an associate/assistant professor at the University of Jyväskylä and as a researcher at the Technical Research Centre of Finland. He received his M.Sc. (Computer Science) and Ph.Lic. (Information Systems) degrees from the University of Jyväskylä in 1988 and 1997, respectively. His research interests include information systems planning, information systems strategies, information architectures, information modeling, and consumer behaviour in the context of digital content.

Markus Makkonen is a researcher at the University of Jyväskylä. He received his M.Sc. in Information Systems from the University of Jyväskylä in 2006 and he is currently preparing his Ph.D. thesis. His research interests include electronic commerce, business models and consumer behaviour, especially in the context of digital contents.

Lauri Frank, Dr. (Econ), is senior assistant in electronic business with the department of Computer Science and Information Systems at the University of Jyväskylä. He also holds an Adjunct Professorship at the School of Business at the Lappeenranta University of Technology in the field of Technology Research. His research interests include the diffusion and management of technological information and communications (ICT) innovations, the evolution of telecom operator software markets, and the uptake of the information society. Within these research areas, he has been involved in several research projects in various roles.