



A normative approach to reducing illegal music downloading: The persuasive effects of normative message framing [☆]



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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the persuasive effects of message framing on reactions to norms-based campaign messages designed to reduce the prevalence of illegal music downloading behaviors. Two hundred thirty-seven participants ($N = 237$) were randomly exposed to one of four written messages on illegal music downloading. Results indicate that positively worded descriptive messages promoting paid online music services were more influential than negatively worded descriptive messages designed to prevent illegal music downloading behaviors. However, the hypothesis that presenting positively worded descriptive and negatively worded injunctive messages together would produce more positive reactions and less psychological reactance than presenting each alone was rejected. The findings have theoretical and practical implications for anti-music piracy campaigns.

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1. Introduction

Music piracy is regarded as one of the greatest obstacles to the advancement of the music industry. A recent piracy report (2012) by the [Recording Industry Association of America \[RIAA\]](http://riaa.com) estimates that U.S. music industry revenue has dropped 53%, from U.S. \$ 14.6 billion in 1999 to \$ 7.0 billion in 2011, and an estimated 30 billion songs were illegally downloaded on the Internet in 2009. Previous literature indicates new technologies (e.g., digital compression, peer-to-peer networks, CD-ROMs), and the increasing pervasiveness of the Internet and broadband connection have served to accelerate music piracy rates ([Bhattacharjee et al., 2003](#); [Chiou et al., 2005](#); [Ki et al., 2006](#)). Recent attempts by several music companies to decrease widespread music piracy activities have focused on legislation, secure standards, and educational campaigns directed at music pirates. Music companies have also attempted to prevent people from engaging in illegal music downloading behavior not only by implementing technological protection, such as software encryption and digital fingerprinting, but also by enforcing legal protection through lawsuits targeted at heavy users of peer-to-peer networks.

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Recent findings on music piracy indicate that these considerable efforts have failed to change downloaders' misperceptions and attitudes toward music piracy and, most importantly, individuals have shown no plans to discontinue illegal downloading. For example, according to the [International Federation of the Phonographic Industry \[IFPI\] report \(2009\)](#), approximately 95% of music downloaded online is unauthorized. In addition, several studies find that college students generally consider downloading music on the Internet as socially and ethically acceptable ([Ingram and Hinduja, 2008](#); [Sherman, 2001](#); [Siegfried, 2004](#)). Thus, the problem of music piracy is compounded by the realization that individuals see little wrong with their actions. In response to these challenging findings, the RIAA has attempted to focus more on educational campaigns that are designed to correct widespread misconceptions about music downloading behavior and the design of persuasive messages to discourage music downloading. However, it remains unclear what types of messages, if any, might affect individuals' attitudes toward music piracy and how individuals might process these campaign messages.

Research on music piracy has been conducted from various academic disciplines such as economics ([Liebowitz, 2003](#); [Peitz and Waelbroeck, 2004](#)), consumer ethics ([Bhattacharjee et al., 2003](#); [Chiou et al., 2005](#)), law ([Feldman and Nadler, 2005](#); [Schultz, 2006](#)), and communication ([LaRose and Kim, 2007](#); [Ki et al., 2006](#)) as downloading includes a variety of social concerns and academic interests. For example, some studies have examined whether the emergence of new music technologies influences individuals' traditional music consumption behavior ([Jones and Lenhart, 2004](#); [Molteni and Ordanini, 2003](#)), while other studies focus on why individuals engage in the illegal activity ([Chiou et al., 2005](#); [LaRose and Kim, 2007](#)). To date, however, very few studies have taken a normative approach in explaining and predicting how social norms affect individuals' decision-making to engage in the illegal music downloading behavior.

Given that downloading music files is a relatively new and controversial form of media consumption behavior ([LaRose and Kim, 2007](#)), a promising line of investigation for researchers in the area of communication is to explore the processes of how social norms influence individuals' perceptions and decision-making to engage in the illegal music downloading behavior. In addition, recent social norm scholars have proposed that a norm-based approach may be applied to a range of other behaviors (e.g., alcohol consumption, littering) in attempts to explain how descriptive and injunctive norms influence human behavior ([Lapinski and Rimal, 2005](#); [Schultz et al., 2007](#)). Following this recommendation, the current study attempts to apply norm-based theories and approaches to illegal music downloading consumption behavior. More specifically, the present study aims to explore the persuasive effects of message framing on reactions to norms-based campaign messages designed to reduce the prevalence of downloading behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. Copyright laws versus social norms in the context of music downloading

Numerous empirical studies on tax compliance emphasize the importance of interactions between social norms and law enforcement, suggesting social norms may encourage, discourage, or reinforce compliance with existing laws ([Coleman, 1997](#); [Lederman, 2003](#); [Wenzel, 2004](#)). For example, a study by [Coleman \(1997\)](#) shows how social norms can encourage taxpayers' compliance. In an experimental study, the Minnesota Department of Revenue sent a random sample of taxpayers a letter that included the message that the majority of people correctly report and voluntarily pay their income taxes. When compared to the control group without the letter, it was found that taxpayers who received the letter paid taxes at a higher rate. The finding supports that a normative message has a positive effect on tax compliance. In contrast, perceived social norms can discourage compliance with the law. Several studies indicate that people who perceive tax cheating as widespread among their peers and important others are more likely to cheat on taxes, compared to those who perceive the prevalence of most others' compliance ([Lederman, 2003](#); [Wenzel, 2004](#)).

Previous literature on music piracy illustrates that the current social norms regarding music downloading have developed in opposition to existing copyright laws ([Wingrove et al., 2010](#)). In other words, there is a considerable gap between the legal rule and the social norm. In order to fill the gap and move social norms toward the law, music companies and organizations have focused on several deterrence strategies targeting heavy downloaders. For example, the RIAA has currently sued more than 3,400 heavy downloaders in the United States ([Depoorter et al., 2005](#)). However, recent studies indicate that severe enforcement efforts for reducing the prevalence of downloading may be counterproductive when many people perceive general disobedience in the law ([Depoorter et al., 2005](#); [Feldman and Nadler, 2005](#); [Schultz, 2006](#)).

Two recent studies provide evidence that deterrence strategies may be an ineffective method to reduce widespread music piracy activities. [Levin et al. \(2007\)](#) examined the persuasive effects of two deterrence strategies that the music industry has used: (1) fear or threat appeals and (2) attributions of harm. They found that even though the high level of threat appeals were more effective than the low level of threat appeals in lowering intentions to download in the future, the effects of fear appeals did not appear to affect heavy downloaders. In addition, it was found that the attribution of a harm deterrence strategy (e.g., stressing the negative consequences for artists and the music industry) did not have any significant impact on downloading intentions.

[Depoorter and Vanneste \(2005\)](#) examined the effects of copyright enforcement on college students' downloading perceptions. They found that there were differences in reactions to enforcement efforts between (high) downloaders and non-downloaders. In particular, when the low level of severity messages were presented, there were no significant differences in attitudes toward the enforcement between heavy downloaders and non-downloaders, whereas heavy downloaders

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