Perceptions of social norms surrounding digital piracy: The effect of social projection and communication exposure on injunctive and descriptive social norms

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A B S T R A C T

Using a national sample of 620 Internet users in the US, this study examined the extent to which social projection, communication exposure, and an interaction between the two, influenced individuals' perceptions about two subordinate types of social norms surrounding digital piracy: injunctive norms and descriptive norms. In line with the social projection model, individuals made social estimates about others' piracy attitudes and behaviors anchoring on their own personal attitudes and behavior. However, frequent communication exposure reduced the degree to which they relied on this egocentric thought process. In addition, the two-way interaction was contingent on another condition (perceiver's own piracy behavior) indicating that communication exposure had differing implications for pirates and non-pirates. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Digital piracy, or obtaining unauthorized copyrighted materials via peer-to-peer sharing networks and websites, is a controversial issue. On the one hand, digital piracy represents novel ways of media distribution and media consumption, such as remix cultures and sampling (Bounie, Bourreau, & Waelbroeck, 2005). On the other hand, it also entails moral dilemmas and illegitimate media use to the extent that it involves copyright infringement (Larose & Kim, 2007) and thereby imposes a threat to the software and media industries (Yoon, 2011). Recording industry analysts report that approximately 28% of Internet users around the globe access unauthorized content on a monthly basis (IFPI, 2012). Similarly, 57% of Internet users worldwide admit to pirating software, resulting in reported annual losses of $63.4 billion (Business Software Alliance, 2012). Although strong support for intellectual property exists in principle (71%), most digital pirates are not motivated to change their present behavior (Business Software Alliance, 2012).

Previous studies about digital piracy have revealed that perceptions of positive social norms are a key reason for the pervasiveness of this behavior in society. Even when moral intensity and risk judgment about digital piracy are high, many still engage in this behavior because they perceive it to be prevalent or even

normative (Nandedkar & Midha, 2012; Yu, 2012). Likewise, several studies have demonstrated that digital piracy behavior is positively associated with various types of social norms perceptions such as the perceived prevalence of piracy (Chung & Cho, 2009; Jacobs, Heuvelman, Tan, & Peters, 2012; Yu, 2012), social pressure (Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Peace, Galletta, & Thong, 2003), social approval (Wang & McClung, 2011), and peer pressure (Lau, 2006).

This study is motivated by the following gap in previous digital piracy literature. Though many studies have confirmed the significant impact of social norms on digital piracy behavior, surprisingly little is known about the underlying mechanisms central to normative influences: that is, how people generate their social norms perceptions about digital piracy. People often overestimate the prevalence of behavior or interpret social norms in a self-serving way, reinforcing their unhealthy, unethical, or otherwise deviant behavior (Vandello, Ransom, Hettinger, & Askew, 2009). It is therefore imperative to examine how social norms perceptions regarding digital piracy are constructed through different theoretical mechanisms or sources.

To do this, this study employs the social projection model (Krueger, 2007; Ross & Sicoly, 1979), communication models of social norms (e.g., Lapinski & Rimal, 2005), and a focus theory of normative conduct (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990) as theoretical frameworks. Using a national sample of 620 Internet users in the US, the present study empirically examines the extent to which social projection, communication exposure, and an interaction

between the two, influence individuals' perceptions about social norms surrounding digital piracy. Particularly, we focus on the interaction between social projection and communication processes in order to illuminate how social estimates based on egocentric thought processes (i.e., social projection) and social learning (i.e., communication exposure) compete with or reinforce each other.

To the best of our knowledge, no prior research has examined the origins of social norms perceptions regarding digital piracy. This study thus aims to make novel contributions by specifying the processes through which people make inferences about the normative environment surrounding piracy behavior. Doing so will also help practitioners develop better strategies for addressing important social factors that contribute to digital piracy.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

The following section will review the present study's theoretical background and related empirical work. In summary, social norms research (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990) distinguishes between two distinct types of social norms: descriptive norms and injunctive norms. Drawing on the social projection model (Krueger, 2007; Ross & Sicoly, 1979) and communication models of social norms (e.g., Lapinski & Rimal, 2005), we explore the ways in which projections based on personal dispositions (i.e., social projection) and social estimates based on other-referent information (i.e., communication exposure) influence perceptions of injunctive norms and descriptive norms regarding digital piracy. Fig. 1 visually summarizes the conceptual framework of this study.[1] Detailed discussions about the theoretical frameworks and research hypotheses are presented below.

2.1. Social norms and digital piracy

Researchers have conceptualized social norms in several different ways, most commonly as subjective norms, injunctive norms, and descriptive norms (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Cialdini et al., 1990; Park & Smith, 2007). While subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressure on an individual to perform or not to perform a given behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), descriptive and injunctive norms indicate perceptions of others' attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, the former refers to the perceived prevalence of a given behavior (i.e., "what others do"), while the latter indicates the perceived prevalence of positive/negative attitudes toward the behavior (i.e., "what others approve or disapprove of") (Cialdini et al., 1990). In this study, we focus on descriptive and injunctive norms because they indicate perceptions of others' attitudes and behaviors, and are thus central to the formation of social norms perceptions (Cialdini, 2003).[2]

Social norms influence human actions through various processes. Social norms motivate behavior by promising social rewards or sanctions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Maloney, Lapinski, & Neuberger,

2013) as well as by providing evidence to probable adaptive action (Cialdini, 2003; Cialdini et al., 1990). According to a focus theory of normative conduct (Cialdini et al., 1990), people are likely to engage in an action when they perceive it to be socially approved by many others (i.e., injunctive norms) and prevalent in society (i.e., descriptive norms). Although the perceived prevalence of behavior among others is closely linked to the perception of the extent to which others approve of it, descriptive and injunctive norms are thought to be distinct types because there are situations in which they do not align (Cialdini et al., 1990; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Park & Smith, 2007). This is particularly plausible in the context of digital piracy, where people may perceive the behavior in question to be socially unacceptable yet prevalent in society.

Numerous studies have shown that social norms have a significant impact on human actions, including unhealthy or illegal behavior (Linos & Kawachi, 2012; Rivis & Sheeran, 2003). Injunctive norms positively influence smoking cessation (van den Putte, Yzer, & Brunsting, 2005) and reduce adolescent substance use (Elek, Miller-Day, & Hecht, 2006). However, descriptive norms significantly contribute to variance in behavioral intent beyond injunctive norms in various contexts, such as positively predicting the intention to use drugs (McMillan & Conner, 2003).

Several studies have examined the effects of descriptive and injunctive norms on digital piracy. Descriptive norms, or the belief that downloading behavior is prevalent, results in stronger tendencies to engage in illegal downloading of movies (Jacobs et al., 2012; Yu, 2012). Descriptive norms also have an indirect impact on music downloading via deficient self-regulation, thus individuals who are unable to control their downloading behavior are be more likely to refer to their perceptions of prevalence of digital piracy to justify their own actions (LaRose & Kim, 2007). The role of injunctive norms has been tested using a related concept, subjective norms. Specifically, the perception that significant others disapprove of downloading behavior results in lower downloading intentions and more negative attitudes toward piracy (Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Peace et al., 2003; Yoon, 2011). Similarly, strong social consensus among individuals that other people consider digital piracy to be unethical is positively related to the recognition that digital piracy is an ethical issue (Bateman, Valentine, & Rittenburg, 2013). On the other hand, if individuals perceive others' attitudes toward piracy to be favorable, they are more likely to have positive attitudes toward piracy themselves as well as higher levels of intentions to engage in digital piracy (Morton & Koufteros, 2008).

2.2. Social norms perceptions

Taken together, past work suggests that perceptions of social norms significantly influence digital piracy behavior. As noted earlier, relatively little is known about the first step involved in normative influences: how people make social estimates about others' attitudes and behavior regarding digital piracy. In this study, we focus on the origins of normative influences by examining the extent to which social projection and communication exposure influence social norms perceptions.

2.3. Social projection model

The social projection model suggests that people use a judgmental heuristic that allows them to make quick predictions about others anchoring on their own attitudes and behavior (Krueger, 2007; Krueger & Chen, 2014; Ross & Sicoly, 1979). People consistently exhibit an egocentric perceptual bias—the tendency to project that most people act and believe as they do (Krueger & Stanke, 2001). As people project their own positions onto the wider community, social projection leads to a belief that their personal attitudes and behaviors are normal, common, and shared by the

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[1] Note that we did not utilize structural equation modeling (SEM) approach in this study since some variables in the conceptual model were assessed by single-item scales, which are not appropriate for SEM (Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994). Given that this study examines several interaction effects simultaneously, we believe that a moderated regression analysis is more appropriate for this study than SEM.

[2] It is worthwhile to note that social norms researchers have debated whether injunctive and subjective norms are interchangeable concepts. Some have used them interchangeably (e.g., Rimal & Real, 2005), while others have argued that they are conceptually and empirically distinct constructs (Park & Smith, 2007). Most researchers agree, however, that they are interrelated concepts as they both focus on others' attitudes toward a behavior. Given that subjective norms narrowly focus on perceived social pressures or dictates from specific others (i.e., 'important' others), injunctive norms were deemed more appropriate for this study as they involve a relatively larger and more equivocal target group and are therefore more subject to social projection or communication effects.