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"Piracy is not theft!" Is it just students who think so? ☆

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ABSTRACT

A fair share of studies analyzing "online piracy" are based on easily accessible student samples. However, it has been argued that the youths tend to have more lax social and ethical norms concerning both property rights and online behavior. In this study we present the results of a vignette experiment, i.e. a scenario survey where responders are asked to provide an ethical judgment on different forms of unauthorized acquisition of a full season of a popular TV series described in a number of hypothetical stories. The survey is conducted both on a student sample and on a sample of individuals who openly endorse protection of intellectual property rights for cultural goods. In this way we can investigate the possibly limited external validity of studies relying solely on the student samples. The vignette experiment concerned ethical evaluation of unauthorized acquisition of cultural content in both virtual and real context and was focused on six dimensions previously identified as relevant to the ethical judgment. Surprisingly, we found that the rules for the ethical judgment do not differ between our samples, suggesting that the social norms on "online piracy" follow similar patterns in student and in other populations. Findings from studies relying on ethical or moral judgments of students may thus be valid in a much broader population.

1. Introduction

Experimental research in social sciences often turns to college students as subjects. This is quite natural, as they are readily available at the campus, willing to participate when rewarded with modest monetary compensation and accustomed to following written instructions. However, the debate as to what extent the findings observed in this "narrow base" of subjects can be generalized to other social groups is nearly as old as the widespread use of undergraduates itself. For one, students may be relatively susceptible to current social influence and rely more on deliberation, see Sears (1986). By contrast, they may be less likely to follow established norms or own life experience than other adults.

These differences should not matter much if the treatment effect is homogeneous in the entire population; this, however, cannot be taken for granted. Druckman and Kam (2011) address this issue through Monte-Carlo simulations, showing that if interactions between characteristics of the student population (e.g. younger age, more preferable educational background of the household, lower household pressure to enter labor market, etc.) and the treatment effect are not very strong, mean sample effect is a good indicator of the mean population effect. Thus, possibly heterogeneous treatment effects do not necessarily prohibit identification on a student sample.

Despite this corollary, some studies find opposite conclusions for students and the general population. This is particularly visible in the case of experimental political science, see Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, and Collier (2008) (various chapters). Yet, these results may stem from a variety of issues. Notably, a misrepresentation of contextual reality may be more relevant than the specificity of the subject pool. This has been rigorously tested by Peterson (2001) in a meta-regression of nearly one million observations in underlying studies from various fields of social sciences. They do identify multiple differences between student- and non-student samples, but no clear pattern emerges from these differences. In economics, Charness, Frechette, and Kagel (2004) find no systematic differences in a review of experimental studies comparing students with professionals.

Research on "online piracy" is no exception to a general tendency of relying on students. This is true regardless of location, as testified by examples from China (Bai and Waldfogel, 2012), France (Bounie, Bourreau, and Waelbroeck, 2007; Bounie, Waelbroeck, and Bourreau, 2006), Japan (Tanaka, 2004), or the US (Rob and Waldfogel, 2004, 2007; Waldfogel, 2009, 2010). Such an approach is often justified

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by the fact that youth has been recognized to constitute majority of unauthorized downloaders and uploaders.[1] Yet, acquiring content online may be an area particularly unfit for relying on student samples. First, youth social norms concerning online behaviors and acquiring cultural content online are believed to be substantially more lax than the general social norm. In the Gallup Poll (2003) survey 83% of young people said that downloading music for free was morally acceptable. Second, students tend to be more financially constrained than self-financing young adults, which may reduce their propensity to purchase cultural goods. Third, pupils and students may more easily conform with the social norm they observe among friends and colleagues. Indeed, Gunter (2009) and Cox and Collins (2010) show that students who have more friends involved in music, software and movie privacy are significantly more likely to engage in "piracy" as well. Finally, the ethics literature suggests that older individuals have higher ethical standards than younger individuals (Al-Rafee and Cronan, 2006; Ford and Richardson, 1994). These and similar findings implicitly motivate the contention that students are more prone to commit "online piracy", which limits the external validity of studies that use them, as argued by e.g., Smith and Telang (2012).

The view that students are systematically different and thus cannot be treated as an adequate representation for the population in general is far from universal. Gupta, Gould, and Pola (2004) and Al-Rafee and Cronan (2006) emphasize that social pressure is an important driver of opting into the (paid) authorized market and out of (unpaid) unauthorized acquisition in a study based on a student sample. Also Gopal et al. (2004) find that raising awareness of legal and economic consequences of "online piracy" among students can inhibit pursuing such activities.

Given the lack of consensus in the literature, the objective of this paper is to shed more light on the size of the bias implied by using students in experiments concerning online piracy. Do the results of the studies concerning "online piracy" bear limited generalizability to other social groups because of relying on students?

We address these questions with a vignette experiment, i.e. a scenario survey, where responders are asked to provide ethical judgment on different forms of unauthorized acquisition of a full season of a popular TV series described in a number of hypothetical stories. The situations included in our set of stories to be evaluated were described by six policy-relevant dimensions of ethical decision making, allowing to evaluate which characteristics of cultural goods acquisition make a difference in ethical evaluation. These dimensions were: physicality of the deed, availability of alternatives, protection breach, uploading, loss to the victim and its identity. Vignette experiments are often used when eliciting justification for moral judgment, especially with reference to controversial choices (see e.g. Steinert and Lepping, 2009 on violence in patient–doctor relationships, Abbey, 2002 on alcohol-related sexual abuse, and Rettinger, Jordan, and Peschiera, 2004 on classroom cheating). However, we are not aware of any study that would be able to compare explicitly traditional theft to 'online piracy' of the same product.

Vignette experiments require a conceptual anchor for the surveyees, in order to facilitate actual comparability of the stories. It is thus advisable to eliminate object-related differences between the stories. Changing the cultural good between the stories could potentially affect the responders' judgments, while our study focused on the aspects of the deed itself, and not the type of content under consideration. Consequently, we needed to choose one single type of cultural content to be the topic in the stories. We have considered games, movies, music and e-books and eventually decided to work with stories featuring TV series. This choice was motivated by three major reasons. First, for our stories to be credible and tangible (rather than abstract), we had to refer to a popular type of content. Second, TV series encompass various business models seen in other goods as well, e.g. a TV series can be bought on a DVD (analogous to a music CD), bought as digital files (analogous to e-books) or streamed online (with or without advertisements, analogous to music or games) as well as watched at a zero marginal cost on television (analogous to movies, radio broadcast music, etc.). Third, the prices of TV series may vary widely, allowing us to present the responders with different scenarios of availability.

Our methodology focuses on eliciting the role of the six dimensions rather than providing a measurement of the ethical judgment itself. Therefore, we believe that our findings can more readily generalize to other cultural goods. Indeed, while it is likely that the type of cultural content would affect the harshness of the ethical judgment, it should not affect the relative contributions of the described deed's aspects. For these reasons and for the sake of brevity, in the remainder of the paper we refer to "online piracy" in general.

The designed vignette experiment was implemented on two samples of subjects. The first consisted of students subscribed to an experimental subject pool at the University of Warsaw. The second pool of subjects comprised individuals who publicly endorse intellectual property rights protection. Our assumption was that if there is a difference in the individual and social norms of downloading and sharing unauthorized cultural content, it would be most strongly visible when comparing the group well documented to engage in "online piracy" (students) to a group most strongly engaged in enforcing intellectual property rights (IPR). Clearly, the ethical judgment and its components for the rest of the population should fit in between these two extremes. Thus, this paper targets to compare judgments of stories by students and a group openly endorsing IPRs and decompose the components of this judgment into the six policy-relevant dimensions. We find that indeed average ethical judgment is somewhat less strict among the students but both the individual and social norms on "online piracy" do not effectively differ between the student and intellectual property-conscious group, i.e. the role of the respective dimensions is the same in both groups.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we describe our methodology and the design. Second, we move to our data. Results are discussed in Section 3. We conclude the paper with recommendations for studies devoted to analyzing "online piracy".

2. Methodology

To address our research questions we constructed a set of 18 stories, each of which described a situation of acquiring a full season of a popular TV series (a direct translation of the stories is available in Appendix A). The design of these stories – vignettes – conveys the six dimensions of ethical decision making, which were identified as most relevant in the context of "online piracy" in previous research. We discuss the design in Subsection 2.1 and the two responder groups in Subsection 2.2. In order to compare and evaluate the differences in ethical and social norms between the students and individuals who publicly endorse IPR protection we divided both groups between three treatment scenarios, described in Subsection 2.3. All responders were informed that the survey is anonymous and that no inference would have been made based on individual data.

2.1. Design

The stories described how a hypothetical colleague Johnny obtained a full season of TV series and asked subjects for an ethical valuation of each of his actions. Each of the stories described access that was unauthorized although not necessarily illegal (for example, it is legal in Poland to download files, while it is illegal to share them).

The stories were based on six dimensions identified by previous research and the public debate on "online piracy". A full discussion

[1] Indeed, almost half of the responders to the Pirate Bay users' survey were between 18 and 24 year old (see Svensson, Larsson, and de Kaminski, 2014).