The immorality of illegal downloading: The role of anticipated guilt and general emotions

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ABSTRACT

To extend previous cognition-based illegal downloading research, this project postulates that anticipated guilt, general emotions, attitudes, and norms collectively determine intentions to download digital files illegally. Our findings indicate that college students were more likely to download if they had more favorable attitudes, perceived greater social approval, and perceived more control over illegal downloading. More importantly, this study reveals that college students generally felt a low level of anticipated guilt toward illegal downloading. Anticipated guilt was a significant, negative predictor of intentions to download among those who engaged in illegal downloading in the previous 6 months, but not among those did not. General anticipated emotions predicted intentions to download among the whole sample. Both theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The use of peer-to-peer file sharing applications, such as BitComet and eMule, to download media files and software programs through the Internet has become widespread in the past decade. Unlike Napster, which was ordered to close in 2001 ("Napster is Told," 2001), downloading media files or software programs using the file-sharing applications is more difficult to regulate. According to the industry estimates, illegal digital downloading has contributed to a large share of the multi-billion-dollar loss that the music, motion picture, entertainment, and software industries incur every year (Siwek, 2007a, 2007b), although it should be acknowledged that not every illegal download mounts to the loss of revenue for these industries and that the industry estimates are questionable (McKenzie, 2009). Nevertheless, to minimize the potential economic losses, the recording and motion pictures industries have attempted to encourage legal downloading and discourage illegal file-sharing through educational marketing campaigns, providing legal and less expensive alternatives to high priced authentic copies, and waging lawsuits against various websites and individual file sharers (Motion Picture Association of America, n.d.; Recording Industry Association of America, n.d.). However, whether these measures have been successful has been questioned (Bakker, 2005; Quiring, Von Walter, & Atterer, 2008).

The problem of illegal digital downloading is not only relevant to the industries, but also interests researchers in academia. A number of recent scholarly studies have examined why Internet users, especially college students, engage in illegal file sharing (Cronan & Al-Rafee, 2008; Li & Nergadze, 2009; Phau & Ng, 2010; Quiring et al., 2008; Taylor, Ishida, & Wallace, 2009). Most of these studies examined beliefs and attitudes associated with illegal downloading with a particular focus on the economic and legal precursors and ramifications of illegal downloading. This approach largely ignores the emotional aspects of illegal file sharing. The present study is an attempt to address this gap in the literature. We derive our hypotheses from recent research demonstrating that consumer behaviors can also be guided by emotions (Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2006). Specifically, Steenhaut and Van Kenhove maintain that negative consequences of an unethical behavior will trigger negative emotions among the participants, which causes them to refrain from performing the behavior. On the other hand, obtaining a positive result may encourage individuals to perform the behavior.

The present project thus attempts to contribute to this emerging area of research by examining the influence of guilt, a moral emotion, on intentions to engage in illegal digital downloading or digital piracy. Guilt is postulated to promote a variety of ethical behaviors and motivate individuals to make amends or change unacceptable behaviors (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). The inclusion of guilt is particularly relevant to the understanding of digital piracy. Because digital piracy is termed as illegal and is regarded as a form of stealing by the recording, motion pictures, and software industries, the act or decision to engage in digital piracy may

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potentially pose an ethical dilemma to the perpetrators. The influence of guilt will be estimated after controlling for the cognitive variables (e.g., attitude, norms) specified by the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and general emotions associated with illegal downloading because previous research has found that a combination of these variables determine intentions to perform a variety of behaviors, including illegal downloading intentions and behavior (Cronan & Al-Rafee, 2008). Lastly, this project examines the moderating role of past downloading behavior on the relationship between anticipated guilt/emotions and intentions, which has not been examined in the illegal downloading context. By examining the moderating role of past behavior, this project can provide a more detailed understanding of the different influence of anticipated guilt and emotions in predicting illegal downloading intentions among those who recently downloaded and among those who never downloaded or downloaded in the more distant past, and can also contribute to the wider debate about the utility of past behavior in the theory of planned behavior model.

2. Literature review

2.1. The theory of planned behavior

The theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) is a widely used social cognition theory for behavioral prediction because it explains a large amount of variance in behaviors and intentions (Armitage & Conner, 2001). According to the conventional TPB, the immediate precedent of human behavior is intentions to perform the behavior. Intentions in turn are predicted by one's attitudes toward performing the behavior (i.e., favorable and unfavorable evaluation of performing or not performing the behavior), subjective norms (i.e., perceived social approval/disapproval for performing or not performing the behavior), and perceived behavioral control (i.e., perceived control and one's capability over performing the behavior). A substantial body of research and meta-analyses have generally confirmed the structural relationships proposed by the TPB (Ajzen, 1991; Armitage & Conner, 2001). For example, Armitage and Conner found attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control accounted for an average of 39% of the variance in intentions based on 154 studies, and that intentions and perceived behavioral control accounted for 27% of the variance in behaviors based on 63 studies.

A limited number of TPB studies have examined the psychological correlates of illegal downloading or why individuals obtain or refrain from obtaining media files through illegal file sharing. The results from these studies were generally consistent with the relationships specified by the TPB. For example, Cronan and Al-Rafee (2008) examined the factors that influenced U.S. students' intentions to pirate software and other digital media. Their study revealed that students with more favorable attitudes and higher perceived behavioral control were more likely to pirate digital media than those who had less favorable attitudes and lower perceived control, respectively. Interestingly, subjective norms did not predict intentions to pirate digital media in the future. Furthermore, Cronan and Al-Rafee revealed that moral obligations, in addition to attitudes and perceived control, influenced digital piracy intentions. Phau and Ng (2010) provided a more specific test of the influence of attitudinal components on intentions to use pirated software and revealed that social costs of software piracy and ethical beliefs predicted intentions.

2.2. Anticipated guilt and general anticipated emotions

However, research in social psychology has shown that the TPB can be further expanded and should include variables related to emotions (e.g., Wang, 2011a). Because people learn to anticipate emotional feedback, many of the TPB studies focus on anticipated emotions and found that anticipated emotions (e.g., anticipated negative emotions, anticipated regret) positively predicted intentions to perform a good behavior or to avoid the performance of a bad behavior in the future (e.g., Sandberg & Conner, 2008). There are a number of reasons why anticipated emotions are preferred to experienced emotions. Because anticipated emotions (vs. experienced emotions) usually have a longer duration (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007) and are more intense and evocative (Van Boven & Ashworth, 2007), they are more likely to guide further decision making. In addition, Baumeister et al. note that in the middle of experiencing a strong emotion (vs. not), individuals are more likely to make a suboptimal decision. On the other hand, anticipating future emotional outcomes can help individuals make better decisions to act in the future.

Of particular importance in the context of illegal digital downloading is the influence of anticipated guilt on behavioral intentions to engage in this behavior. Guilt is defined as an individual's "unpleasant emotional state associated with possible objections to his or her actions, inaction, circumstances, or intention" (Baumeister et al., 1994, p. 245). More specifically, guilt is related to one's behavior, and individuals feel guilt when their behaviors violate the commonly held moral, ethical, or religious norms. These appraisal patterns differentiate guilt from a number of other discrete emotions, such as shame, embarrassment, or regret. For example, shame is related to one's evaluation of the self and is often associated with "being small" and wanting to hide (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996, p. 1257), whereas regret usually does not involve moral reasons and often involves some unpredictability.

Because human beings tend to minimize punishments and seek rewards (Bandura, 2009) negative emotions signal that one's behaviors should be changed, and positive emotions validate the existing behaviors. Furthermore, Baumeister et al. (2007) state that emotions facilitate cognitive processing and provide feedback regarding whether a behavior should or should not be performed. That is, emotions influence human behaviors indirectly though intentions. As the consequence of feeling guilty, individuals wanted to "make up for what you've done wrong" and to "be forgiven" (Roseman et al., 1994, p. 217). For example, Wang (2011b) found that anticipated guilt acted as a mediator between ethical attitudes and intentions and that anticipated guilt was positively associated with intentions to register as organ donors and to discuss organ donation with family members. In the context of illegal downloading, Taylor et al. (2009) found that anticipated emotions were associated with motivations and intentions to engage in digital piracy in the future after controlling for the influence of the TPB variables, although it was not certain what the exact items were used to measure anticipated emotion variables in their study.

2.3. The level of anticipated guilt and general anticipated emotions associated with illegal downloading

Motion Picture Association of America (n.d.) and Recording Industry Association of America (n.d.) have waged a war against illegal file sharing based on the moral ground, equating file sharing or illegal downloading of media files with stealing and causing artists to lose money. Coyle, Gould, Gupta, and Gupta (2009) revealed that among a sample of undergraduate students in a Midwestern university in the United States, ethical considerations negatively predicted intentions to pirate music, indicating that those who downloaded would have a lower level of ethical standards and thus would have a lower level of guilt feelings than those who did not download. However, Balestrino (2007) notes that "social condemnation of digital piracy is not strongly felt" (p. 466) and that the majority of the agents and people do not oppose it. Based on a