Myths, beliefs, and attitudes towards music piracy

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Myths, Beliefs, and Attitudes towards Music Piracy: Findings from Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

Background

Claims from industry bodies that music piracy harms the music industry tend to centre on the economic losses incurred from illegally sourcing copyrighted works, despite no readily observable evidence to support this. Individuals on either end of the debate who consider music piracy to be *good* or *bad* appear to demonstrate *confirmation bias*, favouring information which supports their beliefs. Where these beliefs come from remains largely unknown. A key theory stemming from criminology which has been widely used in relation to digital piracy is Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralisation: the theory offers a framework in which to interpret the varied justifications individuals put forward to rationalise or neutralise their actions, in this case engagement in music piracy. The specific techniques are: *denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of condemners*, and *appeals to higher loyalties*. Research to date using this theory broadly reveals that music piracy is perceived as a victimless crime, lending to frequent use of 'denial' techniques.

Aims

This paper aims to advance knowledge on what beliefs and attitudes individuals engaging in music piracy hold and where they come from. Accordingly, qualitative methodology was utilised. In doing so, the research addresses a notable gap in the literature.

Method

Study One adopted online ethnographic observation, monitoring online discourse in three settings: Twitter, YouTube, and forums. Specifically, it sought to observe the various justifications people forward to rationalise engagement in music piracy in accordance with Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralisation. Content analysis was used in a directed manner, given an existing coding scheme existed in the form of the techniques present in the theory used.

Study Two involved semi-structured interviews with four participants (two males and two females, aged 23 to 26), and aimed to complement and expand on the first study by more broadly exploring how music piracy fits within everyday music listening practices, including a consideration of the live music sector. Thematic analysis was used, in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

Study One.

Study One found ample evidence of the techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) and, like the rest of the literature to date, an emphasis on the 'denial' techniques'. The *denial of injury* technique was notable, with many participants remarking on how rich musicians are and that music piracy cannot be affecting them negatively. For example:

Same way I just don't buy rap albums to listen to a guy tell me how many cars his buying and how he's throwing bills at strippers

The information put forward from participants did not appear to be designed to convince others but to reinforce their own beliefs; where they came from however, was unclear.

A new technique was also put forward: *denial of motives*. Many participants forwarded idealised notions of what it is like to be a musician and that it is a labour of love, of sorts; to want to be paid for creating music was viewed with skepticism. This rejects the commercial realities of being a musician.

I would be proud to see my album on #piratebay You can pay to be on itunes, you're only on pirate bay if people want your music

Importantly, those individuals engaging in music piracy were not found to share common beliefs and attitudes. In fact, a substantial volume of the activity on YouTube concerned self-confessed pirates exposing the rationalisation techniques of fellow pirates.

Again, as someone who pirates, NO, it's not sharing, it's fucking stealing. Don't pretend it's not. It's just stealing from rich people

One of the most striking (and unforeseen) observations during data collection was that users of all three online platforms discussed piracy behaviours so openly. Crucially, given many of the exchanges related to the protection of identities online, it cannot be inferred that participants were oblivious to their presence online as anonymous. Rather, it appears that the perception of being caught is so low that they simply did not worry about any negative consequences – one

participant on YouTube reasoned that the chances of being caught are lower than that of being struck by lightning.

Additionally, participants were noted as frequently sharing links to pro-piracy news items and exchanging tips about overcoming technical circumventions to make piracy more difficult.

Hi, does anyone know or can anyone provide a list of mirrors that will help overcome the recently anounced Pirate Bay block in the UK?

Ultimately, findings supported Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory and corroborate Holt & Copes' (2009) observation that sub-cultural piracy knowledge is efficiently exchanged online. It was also shown that a variety of beliefs are prevalent amongst the sample explored and that these are often contradictory. Beyond uncovering rich data, this highlights the need for researchers to cease considering 'pirates' as one unified group: this important conclusion acts as a gentle reminder of how piracy operates in the real world and that academics ought to observe it in a more naturalistic manner, free from prejudice.

Study Two

Study Two identified three themes: *the role of digital music in everyday life; music piracy practices*; and *the live music experience and its relationship to music piracy*.

In terms of the first theme, *the role of digital music in everyday life*, interviewees revealed a multitude of different methods for listening to music, with different types of music-listening serving different functions. Subscription services were found to be particularly popular with all participants universally agreeing that they represent excellent value for money. With regards to music piracy, the price of music was argued by interviewees as a major driver in opting not to pay for music. Much discussion was utilitarian in nature, evaluating the different pros and cons of different recorded music formats, focused around cost.

Would 100% still go out and buy a CD rather than an mp3, because you then have the option of ripping it to mp3 and putting it on your i-Pod… Unless digital distribution got much cheaper (M, 24)

In the second theme, *music piracy practices*, participants echoed the sentiments from Study One concerning musicians' perceived wealth as a means to justify music piracy. However, distinctions were made between so-called 'smaller' bands and more successful ones where it was considered *wrong* to pirate music from upcoming bands. A conflict was evident when interviewees themselves introduced the moral dimension of music piracy and carefully reviewed the implications of their actions. One interviewee, for example, noted that:

Downloading illegally from artists who are a bit smaller, who are struggling to fill out some club or are playing really, really small tents at festivals, I think... I don't know, I can't be morally bothered that much, because I still do it (M, 24)

Where Spotify was observed as motivating legal purchases, music piracy was noted as similarly aiding music discovery for another.

In the third theme, *the live music experience and its relationship to music piracy*, interviewees revealed a variety of motivations behind choosing on whether or not go to a live concert. The social dimension of live music attendance was clear from interviewees. Additionally, money was less of an issue with live music than recorded music, despite live music having never been more expensive or with recorded music never having been cheaper. Discussing one concert which involved considerable travel and accommodation costs, one interviewee explained:

I just took it straight out of my savings, because I'm just like, I did not care about money. That was an experience (F, 26)

Ultimately, live music was found to satisfy different desires than recorded music and that when possible, interviewees would attend live concerts. There was also a general consensus that live music attendance is necessary to support your favourite artists live.

All participants discussed their behaviours openly and matter-of-factly, lending to their belief that music piracy was simply a matter of routine and was 'victimless'. Participants did not express any concern for being caught or punished for engaging in music piracy. This mirrors Study One.

Conclusions

The results of the studies offered unique insights into the decision-making of those engaged in music piracy, as well as highlighting the very different approaches to paying for recorded music and live music. Methodologically, the results confirm the usefulness of qualitative methods with individuals engaging in music piracy more than willing to simply talk about their attitudes and behaviours, generating rich and unexpected data in the process. Only with more research will the true origins of piracy attitudes be uncovered, but the current research defines an important starting point: so-called music pirates do not all share the same beliefs and attitudes.

Keywords
Music piracy, music industry, digital music, musical identities, qualitative.

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