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Piracy: Trouble in the Digital Sea

Writing Process

When I was assigned this research project, I brainstormed, and shortly after, I took my ideas to the Write Place. I decided to write about piracy and found several sources using the library's catalog. I met with my professor to understand her comments on my paper and had 3 drafts, including my original rough draft, my peer-edited rough draft, and the final draft after I met with my professor and edited my own paper.

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Piracy: Trouble in the Digital Sea

Over the past few decades, digital piracy has become a growing issue in the world. This problem is especially propagated by the rise of the Internet and online sources for music. In addition, personal aspects like attitude and personality contribute to the growth of piracy. Some people believe that piracy persists because people do not want to pay for content, when actually the main reason it remains is convenience. Convenient access, peer pressure and personality, streaming services, and cultural attitudes influence music fans to illegally pirate material.

One of the main factors leading to piracy is convenience. Most would assume that illegal content appeals to people because it is free. However, because of the low costs of music and streaming services, “it is expected that prices no longer represent a relevant factor explaining piracy” (Borja and Dieringer 87). Instead, people claim that pirating content has become a habit, or that it is more convenient to download it illegally than wait for it to come out on music streaming sites (Demasi). Furthermore, many music artists do not support these streaming services, so their music is not available on several legal services. This makes it more difficult for consumers to find all the music they want from one source. Also, with the popularity of the Internet and growth in technology, digital piracy has become easier to access. Borja and Dieringer said that those who were “comfortable with technology and online activity [were] more likely to pirate music” (92). Since the culture as a whole has relied more and more on

technology, it makes sense that digital piracy has increased, because people are more proficient at using the Internet and it is readily available for them to use.

In addition, aspects regarding who a person is and with whom they surround themselves, including personality and peer pressure, heavily influence their use of illegal content. According to Borja and Dieringer, “young consumers tend to imitate the behavior of their close social groups” (86). Peers may not directly encourage their friends to pirate, but because the illegal activity relates to personality, it has an effect, especially on friend groups with similar personalities. This may cause certain people to pirate, even if they were not prone to it, simply because they are influenced by their peers’ actions. Also, since piracy is a “fundamentally social activity,” the attitude towards it is different from other types of theft (Brown and MacDonald 55). Combining these two thoughts, Peace, Al-Rafee, et al. stated that “individuals are prone to emulate the illicit act of music piracy if they belong to social groups that perceive rewards higher than the risks associated with the illicit act” (qtd. in Borja and Dieringer). This supports the assertion that personality and peer pressure cause people to be more prone to digital piracy.

Recently, music-streaming services have become more popular, and although many would assume that they would decrease piracy, the services actually complement it and increase illegal downloading. A study by Borja and Dieringer compared these streaming services to piracy (87). They found that the main difference between streaming and piracy was not the price, because with streaming services each song is only \$0.007, but instead the ownership (Borja and Dieringer 87). With streaming services, consumers “rent” the songs, whereas those who pirate technically own them, but could also suffer legal consequences as a result. If a person ends the paid streaming service, they do not own the music anymore. This discourages some people from paying for streaming services because they want to own their music. In addition, other people

use the free streaming services to find music they like, but then illegally download it afterwards so they have ownership of the music. Several studies discovered a pattern in which the popular artists on Spotify were those whose music was pirated more often (Borja and Dieringer 87). In fact, Borja and Dieringer concluded that “music streaming increases the likelihood of piracy by about 11%, thus, providing evidence of the complementary feature between streaming and piracy” (87). Therefore, the growth of streaming services has directly affected piracy, causing it to expand.

Due to the fact that it has become more commonplace, digital piracy has also become more socially acceptable than it was in the past, and the cultural attitudes regarding piracy only make the issue worse. The theory of planned behavior coincides with this statement, and Ajzen suggests that “an attitude towards a particular behavior, in conjunction with subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, shape an individual’s intentions to perform this behavior” (qtd. in Brown and MacDonald). This means that whether a person pirates or not is determined by both their view of piracy and the pressure of the culture’s view in his or her everyday life. In addition to pressure from their peers, society as a whole influences many to believe that piracy is not an offensive crime to commit. In fact, Huang found that “music piracy is perceived as a socially accepted and low moral activity that is attractive to imitate” because of its general connotation of being a trivial matter (qtd. in Borja and Dieringer).

Digital piracy has become so inundated in the culture that “young populations tend to be unaware of the legal penalties and technical costs of piracy, or simply believe they will not face any consequences from piracy” (Borja and Dieringer 86). This perpetuates the issue because the majority of those who pirate do not ever witness any negative repercussions first-hand, and in their minds, the reward of free, accessible music trumps the infinitesimal risk of getting caught.

Although this is the main attitude people direct towards digital piracy, another view incorporates their opinion of the music industry. Many consumers do not think that their piracy has a huge effect on the industry or they do not care that it does. Some people are oblivious to the impact of their pirating, but others specifically pirate because they believe “artists and the music industry [are] exploiting consumers by forcing them to purchase an entire CD with many poor-quality songs, just to have access to a single track (qtd. in Borja and Dieringer). Whether from oblivion or vengefulness, the attitudes towards the music industry allow digital piracy to remain socially acceptable.

The anti-piracy campaigns have not been successful because they address the wrong aspects of piracy, and Wikstrom addresses how “perhaps the single most enduring effect of [the] initiatives has been a negative impact on the reputation of the music industry” (qtd. in Brown and MacDonald 18). One example of how unsuccessful they have been is a method called the Streisand effect, where instead of music, “white noise or a loop of a small portion of a track” plays, which does not prevent consumers from piracy, but only frustrates them (qtd. in Brown and MacDonald). In fact, Brown and MacDonald discovered that “negative incentives are only a strong deterrent for certain consumers but can actually increase the propensity to pirate for others (54). Frustrating or threatening punishment on those who pirate illegal content does not successfully solve the problem.

Instead of agitating the consumers, campaigns should focus on the predictive factors of piracy. They should try to meet “the demands of consumers rather than attempt to isolate them” (Brown and MacDonald 62). At this point, the music industry is doing the exact opposite. According to Bishop, “the major labels were cited for using pressure tactics against music retailers to keep the cost of CDs higher than necessary” (101). The record labels raise the CD

prices because of their greed and wonder why piracy is such a big issue, but raising the price will only make the problem worse. In addition, Bishop claims that the music industry has not been as honest as they could have been (105). He says the industry has made money from piracy because they are paid 2 percent from the production of CD-Rs, and predicts this will not stop, even if piracy does (105). Instead of focusing on the money, they should focus on the reasons why people pirate to effectively combat illegal downloading. One example is to make streaming services more convenient for consumers so they do not turn to pirating. Also, the campaigns should advertise parts of the music industry that are rising, like live music (Brown and MacDonald 62). The people in charge of record labels should not be greedy. Brown and MacDonald suggested that “future research should investigate the changing preferences for music consumption more broadly and the mediating role music piracy plays on music discovery and subsequent live concert attendance” (62).

All of the factors mentioned above, including convenience, peer pressure and personality, streaming services, and cultural attitudes lead consumers to increase the amount of content they pirate. The music industry today does not fully understand piracy and thus cannot combat it correctly. If they can focus on what is working in the music industry instead of trying to stifle piracy altogether, the reasons people pirate will decrease, and as a result, piracy will subside as well.

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