

Study: To students, music piracy and shoplifting are worlds apart

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What's the difference between stealing a CD from a music store and ripping off music online? The music industry and law enforcers say that there is none: Theft is theft, whether it's physical or digital.

College students participating in a newly published study, however, said that while they were unlikely to shoplift and viewed that behavior as immoral, they were not exactly motivated to follow the laws governing [digital music](#) piracy -- a finding that underscores the difficulties of enforcing such laws and to find new ways to discourage the theft of all types of [digital content](#).

In the study by University of Nebraska-Lincoln researchers, nearly 200 undergraduates were asked to react to a hypothetical fellow student either shoplifting a CD or illegally downloading one. Students who reacted to the shoplifting scenario endorsed various motivations to obey the law -- morality, influence from family and friends, fear of getting caught and an inherent obligation to follow the law -- significantly more than those reacting to the downloading scenario.

"We examined theoretical explanations for law-abiding behavior that have been traditionally used to account for compliance, and found weaker support for these explanations when it comes to [digital piracy](#)," said Twila Wingrove, the study's lead author. "The results suggest that students perceive shoplifting and digital piracy differently, despite the fact that they are both forms of theft."

The study's data was collected in the mid-2000s, during highly publicized efforts by the [music industry](#) to deter piracy that included filing lawsuits against some offenders. In fact, fear of penalties was the traditional compliance factor that was most strongly related to participants' reporting reduced downloading behavior.

Still, while hearing about the lawsuits had some effect on students' motivations to obey downloading laws, many still saw little chance of being caught and perceived that downloading and file sharing wasn't as serious as stealing music from a store.

Why? The very nature of [music piracy](#) is likely the largest obstacle to curbing it, the authors say. There is no risk of physical harm to a victim and no physical object as a target -- making it easier to deduce that digital music theft is harming no one at all. Also, there is widespread social support for the behavior within the internet community and on college campuses.

The attitude could bleed into other industries that have digitally downloadable content, such as motion pictures, video games and online news outlets that have recently put up paywalls, the research suggests. The study hints similar enforcement problems as the music industry's could set in.

"Interestingly, while respect for legal authorities is generally found to be significantly related to compliance with the law, this relationship did not seem to exist for college students and music. It wouldn't be a stretch to speculate that a similar disconnect might exist with regard to other digitally available forms of media, like television and movies. This is an avenue that should be explored in future research," she said.

Vicky Weisz, co-author of the study, agreed: "We have much to learn about the rapidly changing digital world and the views of younger

generations about the legitimacy of the constraints on that world."

A deterrence strategy with threats of penalties and fines, as the Recording Industry Association of America undertook in early 2004 with the lawsuits, may work as a short-term fix. Whether that fear of punishment can be sustained over time, however, remains to be seen.

"We studied college students who grew up with internet access at a time when the internet was considered an access point for free information and media and when there were no convenient, popular methods to pay for online content," Wingrove said. "As more industries begin to restrict content and to streamline the purchase of content, perhaps these attitudes will shift and people will have lower expectations of entitlement, but that is a process that will likely happen very slowly."

More information: The study appears in the journal *Psychology, Crime and Law*.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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