

# Study finds anti-piracy messages backfire, especially for men

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Hack attack. Wikipedia, CC BY-SA

Threatening messages aimed to prevent digital piracy have the opposite effect if you're a man, a new study from the University of Portsmouth has found. According to the research, women tend to respond positively

to this kind of messaging, but men typically increase their piracy behaviors by 18%.

The study is [published](#) in the *Journal of Business Ethics*.

Digital piracy occurs when copyrighted content is accessed from an unlicensed source, such as BitTorrent, stream-rippers or cyberlockers. It poses a significant challenge to creative economies worldwide, costing industries billions annually.

This paper studies how effective anti-piracy messages are as a deterrent, examining the change in TV and film piracy intentions among 962 adults compared with their past behavior.

Lead author, Kate Whitman, from the University of Portsmouth's Centre for Cybercrime and Economic Crime, said, "We know already there are lots of gender differences in piracy as men tend to pirate more than women—they think it's more acceptable and low-risk. But what we wanted to look at in this research is whether the messages to tackle piracy had a different effect on men and women.

"We delved into the interplay between gender, attitudes towards piracy and reactions to anti-piracy messages. And what we found is that when it comes to fighting piracy, one size definitely doesn't fit all."

The three messages examined in the study were verbatim copies of three real-world anti-piracy campaigns. Two of the campaigns used threatening messages to try to combat piracy and the third was educational in tone.

Whitman added, "A threatening message might emphasize the legal ramifications, the risk of prosecution or the risk of computer viruses, whereas educational messages tend to try and educate the consumer on

the moral and economic damage of piracy."

One of the threatening messages was from crime reduction charity, Crimestoppers, which focused on the individual's risk of computer viruses, identity fraud, money and data theft and hacking.

The other message was based on a campaign by the French government, which used a "three strike" process, whereby infringers were given two written warnings before their [internet access](#) was terminated.

The educational message was taken from the campaign "Get It Right from a Genuine Site," which focuses on the cost to the economy and to the individual creative people, and signposts consumers away from piracy sites and towards legal platforms such as Spotify or Netflix.

The study found that one threatening message influences women to reduce their piracy intentions by over 50%, but men increase their piracy behaviors. The educational messages had no effect on either men or women.

"The research shows that anti-piracy messages can inadvertently increase piracy, which is a phenomenon known as psychological reactance," explained Whitman. "From an evolutionary psychology point of view, men have a stronger reaction to their freedom being threatened and therefore they do the opposite."

Moreover, the study found that participants with the most favorable attitudes towards piracy demonstrated the most polarized changes in piracy intentions—the threatening messages increased their piracy even more.

The paper says the findings carry significant practical implications for policymakers, content creators, and anti-piracy advocates. By

understanding how gender and attitudes influence reactions to anti-piracy messages, stakeholders can refine their strategies to effectively combat [digital piracy](#) while avoiding unintended consequences.

Whitman concluded, "This study shows that men and women process threatening messages differently. There is clearly a need for a tailored approach in anti-piracy messaging, but if messages can't be accurately targeted to specific genders, they're best avoided because they might send piracy soaring."

**More information:** Kate Whitman et al, Psychological Reactance to Anti-Piracy Messages explained by Gender and Attitudes, *Journal of Business Ethics* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10551-023-05597-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05597-5)

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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