The Consumer Who Knew Too Much: Online Movie Piracy By Young Adults

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The purpose of this study is to investigate possible moderators – action related knowledge, price perception and perceived effort- to explain why young adults engage in movie piracy behavior even though they find it unethical. Young adults (N=490) especially engaged in movie piracy when they possess action-related knowledge and when price perception and perceived effort of legal alternatives was high. Interestingly, young adults engaged in movie piracy, despite their perceptions of unethicalness of movie piracy, if they possess action-related knowledge but not if they perceive legal alternatives as too expensive.

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In uncovering the creative process through which ‘auto-orientalism’ (Mazarella 2003; Said 1978) is employed, I argue that extant theorization based on the post-colonial framework has overemphasized the ‘orientalist’ discourse and has failed to comprehend two other significant features embedded in Indian advertising texts. First, building on Foucault’s (1978) conceptualization of representation and power, I show that a subversive discourse of ‘orientalism’ is an important part of comprehending the relationship between advertising and otherness in India. In this discourse of ‘occidentalism’, the west is interpreted as profane, impure, and perfidious. My dialectical interpretation of self-orientalism and occidentalism helps in overcoming the passivity imparted to a post-colonial society. The reinforcement and subversion of the local-global/East-West hierarchy in Indian advertising contribute to a richer understanding of cultural processes in a post-colonial setting that have been elided in extant interpretation. Second, my research shows that Indian advertising cannot be sufficiently situated within the post-colonial framework. Here, I argue that the privilege imparted to the colonial encounter in the post-colonial framework ignores the cultural elements that have emerged from other possible historical processes (Ahmad 1992). In particular, I highlight the role of social class in Indian advertising that has emerged from the society’s experience of capitalism. I show that the class hierarchy is reinforced through representations that emerge from advertisers who belong to the social and economic elite of the society. I draw upon Bourdieu’s (1984) conceptualization of habitus to analyze the role of creative personnel in the production of these class-based representations. Finally, I apply a critical perspective to advertising and understand its functioning as part of the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/1998; Jhally 1987). I critique this ideological role and see it as a ramification of, and further catalyst to, hegemony, globalization, and the maintenance and exploitation of cultural difference and hierarchy.

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Online movie piracy or the unauthorized, unpaid downloading of movies from the internet, is beginning to grow as internet connections become faster. Moreover, the anonymity of internet lowers the perception of illegality of unethical behavior, clearing the road for online unethical behavior (Freestone and Mitchell 2004). Research has demonstrated that consumers do not perceive the movie industry as a victim of movie piracy (especially because of the high prices charged at the box office) and hence, do not perceive the unethicalness of movie piracy (Freestone and Mitchell 2004). Consequently, all over the world, anti-movie piracy campaigns are developed to communicate that movie piracy is wrong. It is assumed that communicating the unethicalness of this illegal activity will decrease actual piracy behavior. However, ethical research shows that consumers engage in illegal behaviors, even though they perceive them as unethical (Sinha and Mandel 2008; Easley 2005). A lot of social psychological and consumer research has already shown that the link between attitudes or beliefs and behavior most often is not that straightforward and depends on several attitudinal, contextual, and personal variables that moderate this relation (for a meta-analysis see Glasman and Albarracin 2006; Kraus 1995).
The purpose of this study is to look at some of the variables that could explain why consumers engage in movie piracy behavior even though they find it unethical. More specifically, action related knowledge, price perception and perceived effort for the legal alternative were investigated.

Because stronger attitudes, lead to more consistent behaviors (e.g. Fabrigar et al. 2006), we can expect that higher perceptions of unethicalness will lead to less movie piracy. Obviously, limited knowledge of how to pirate a movie, will also lead to less movie piracy, even though movie piracy is perceived as an ethical alternative. Action related knowledge is a necessary condition for behavior (Frey et al. 2006). Fabrigar et al. (2006) already found that subjects who possess less relevant knowledge display less attitude-consistent behavior. The question remains however, if consumers who possess action related knowledge will engage in movie piracy despite unethical perceptions of movie piracy. Action related knowledge could explain why so many consumers engage in movie piracy, even though they know it is unethical.

Furthermore, we argue that consumers, who perceive the legal alternative as too expensive, will engage in movie piracy even though they consider this an unethical activity. High price perception decreases intentions to engage in an activity (Chiang and Dholakia 2003). Consequently, consumers could feel they are allowed to engage in an unethical activity because they have a good excuse: the legal alternative is too expensive. Consumers can diminish perceived guilt for inappropriate behavior by using neutralization techniques like condemning the condemners (e.g. the corporation deserves the mistreatment because he previously engaged in some form of misbehavior—i.e. charging too much) (Strutton et al. 1994).

Finally, high perceived effort for the legal alternative will lead to less consistent behavior. In other words, subjects who perceive movie piracy as unethical could engage in movie piracy if they perceive effort necessary for the legal alternative is too high. If a subject is not willing to spend time and energy for the legal alternative (e.g. going to the movie theatre), positive attitudes will not lead to behavior (Dik and Aarts, 2007).

In order to test our hypotheses, a total of 490 young adults between 18 and 22 years old completed an online questionnaire. Participants were asked six attitudinal questions on their attitude towards movie piracy on a 7-point Likert scale (α=.85). Furthermore, ethical perceptions of movie piracy were measured using 4 items (ethical, appropriate, permitted, proper) (α=.89). Next, young adults indicate their action related knowledge (cfr. Roehm and Sternthal 2001), price perceptions and willingness to engage in effort for legal alternatives (cfr. Voss et al. 1998) on 7-point Likert scales. Finally, young adults were asked to indicate how much movie piracy they engage in (cfr. Cronin et al. 2000).

Significant main effects were found for ethical perception (F(1,458)=33,26, p<.01), knowledge (F(1,458)=510,301, p<.01), price perception (F(1,458)=2,87, p<.1) and willingness to engage in effort for a legal alternative (F(1,458)=10,58, p<.01). Young adults especially engaged in movie piracy when they perceive this activity as ethical, knew how to perform this behavior, and when price perception and perceived effort for legal alternatives was high. Significant interaction effects were found between ethical perception and knowledge (F(1,458)=8,33, p<.01) and ethical perception and price perception (F(1,458)=5,76, p<.05). Ethical perception determined behavior when behavioral knowledge was low: young adults, who did not really know how to pirate movies, engaged more in movie piracy when they perceived it as an ethical (versus unethical) activity. However, for knowledgeable young adults, ethical perception did not matter: they engaged in illegal movie piracy, regardless of their ethical perceptions. Furthermore, price perceptions of legal alternatives did not influence behavior differently for young adults who find movie piracy unethical. These ‘ethical’ young adults did not pirate movies a lot even if they perceived the legal alternatives as too expensive. On the contrary, ‘unethical’ consumers who find movie piracy ethical will engage more in movie piracy if they perceive legal alternatives as too expensive. We did not find an interaction effect between perceived effort and ethical perception. Young adults will engage more in movie piracy when they perceive the effort for the legal alternative as too high, regardless of their ethical perceptions. Possibly, perceived effort is rated relatively low in general (M=3,88, SD=1,09) to make young adults use this as an ‘neutralization’ to engage in unethical behavior.

Our results show that knowledge, price perception and willingness to perform effort influence movie piracy. Interestingly, it seems like young adults will engage in an illegal activity like movie piracy, despite their perceptions of unethicalness of movie piracy, if they know how to do it but not if they perceive legal alternatives as too expensive.

References
Team Purchase: Consumer Empowerment through Collective Actions
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Literature on consumer culture theory has illuminated the re-enchantment of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). In contrast, the acquisition phase of purchasing is largely viewed as an individual decision-making process or an act framed by family traditions (Epp and Price 2008; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). In this paper, we examine the phenomenon of team purchase as a collective act that is initiated and organized by groups of consumers in urban China (Areddy 2006). Through this ethnographic inquiry, we show how Chinese consumers have challenged the conventional market system and manipulated it to their own ends without necessarily aiming to escape the market as their counterparts in Western societies (see Kozinets 2002).

Team purchase is a consumer-organized collective activity gaining momentum just recently in urban China (Arredy 2006). It starts on the Internet, usually in chat rooms and discussion forums, where like-minded consumers devise plans to buy branded consumer products in large quantities at lower prices. They then show up en masse at stores to demand discounts and more benefits. They usually defeat the merchants with their collective haggling. In addition to obtaining better pricing, they gain a sense of power and pride.

Team buyers unite to confront merchants. They defy the conventional retailer-buyer structure and demand concessions. By functioning as a team, they acquire negotiating power. The larger the team, the greater the discount they demand, knowing that sellers can make up their profits on larger volume. Instead of engaging in one-on-one negotiations, buyers collectively pressure the seller. The seller becomes an inferior in this face-to-face negotiation and often bends to consumers’ demands. In other cases, consumers depend on the organizers—usually the Internet initiators—to reach deals with merchants. They save time and effort and rely on the savvy and pugnacity of other buyers to make deals for them. The team leaders are responsible for contacting the seller, negotiating the deals, and organizing other buyers to participate in the transaction. They may even take responsibility post-purchase if fellow buyers encounter problems with the products. In return, team leaders may receive a greater discount or a gift from the seller.

Team purchase is increasingly popular in China where multiple websites service consumers nationwide and numerous discussion forums facilitate discussions among interested people locally. With domestic market becoming increasingly complex, Chinese consumers have become more knowledgeable and self-protective than ever before. They have realized that individual effort is less effective than collective actions in the marketplace. Chinese consumers now apply the popular political ideology “solidarity is strength” and form groups to confront merchants. Collective acts are especially beneficial because consumer rights have yet to be effectively protected. When laws and regulations lack adequate enforcement, consumers use collective power to demand benefits and protection. The Internet serves as an important tool to organize people with similar concerns and interests. Consumers create alliances and act in unison against more dominant powers in the marketplace.

As an explorative study, we conducted depth-interviews with team buyers and merchants in four Chinese metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen from June to August 2007. Our interviews started with grand tour questions that were followed by probing questions for meanings and experiences of team purchase (McCracken 1988). The interviews lasted from thirty minutes to one hour. They were conducted in Chinese and then transcribed and analyzed. We plan to participate in team purchases and collect more ethnographic data this summer. Through an iterative process (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Spiggle 1994), initial analysis has generated rich insights about the phenomenon. We have found that there exist distinctive differences between team purchase and other kinds of purchases such as Internet purchase, direct sale or wholesale. Participants employ a wide variety of strategies to ease transactions and reduce risks. Trust between buyers and merchants as well as between buyers and organizers emerges as an important issue. Organizer plays multiple roles as a negotiator, expert (or Prosumer, see Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007), buyer, and a distributor. Interestingly, some buyers maintain their ties with team members by engaging in more team purchases and organizing activities afterward. For them, group purchases initiate consumption communities not necessarily based on brand (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

Although it has been recognized that consumers produce, acquire, and consume in form of communities (Beli and Costa 1998; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and that they protest against commercialization by engaging in consumer activism (Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004), it is unclear how consumers collectively make purchase decisions and how they formulate a transient group to challenge the established orders in the marketplace. By studying team purchase, we explore the dynamics between consumers and merchants and examine how consumers collectively co-opt market offerings (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). We show the benefits, risks, rules and rituals of team purchase as compared to individual purchase. This research will also shed light on the discussions of strategies for consumer empowerment.