

Streaming Platforms vs. Digital Piracy:

**A qualitative study on when young adults search for alternatives to stream movies or
series online**

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Abstract

Aim: Streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney+, or Amazon Prime have become a common way to watch movies and series online, and so has their common enemy Digital Piracy (DP). As streaming platforms have recently been developing and appearing, there is a lack of research on what drives people to subscribe and pay for these services when there are free options available. Thus, the goal of this study is to gain insights into what makes it worth it for young people to subscribe to a streaming service instead of using piracy. **Methods:** To gain deeper insights, a qualitative research method in the form of in total of 15 semi-structured interviews was conducted. During the interviews, participants were asked questions related to their experience streaming movies or series online. The sample consisted of six men and nine women aged between 18 and 28 years ($M = 23.13$). Participants were invited through convenience sampling method. After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and analyzed following the constant comparison method. **Results:** The results showed that availability issues are a reason for young adults to look for alternatives. One of the results showed that young adults see VPN services as a complement to legal streaming platforms as well as an alternative to digital piracy when movies or series are not available. The second result was that there is a new approach to peer-to-peer networks (P2P) where these are evolving to less anonymous networks in the form of sharing accounts on streaming services or group chats with strangers when looking for movies or series that are not available.

Conclusion: Streaming platforms are seen as a first choice, but when there are movies, series, or languages that are not available, young adults decide to look for alternatives.

Introduction

Some decades ago, people used to look for entertainment in concerts or theatres. Then, with the emergence of movies, cinema became an occasional and special entertainment option. As these entertainment industries and the technologies by which these were offered digitalized and evolved, so has one of their biggest threats: Piracy (Sardanelli, Vollero, Siano, & Bottoni, 2019). When engaging in piracy, people seek the most convenient, easy, accessible, and cheaper option to download or stream content (Cox & Collins, 2014; Nhan, Bowen, & Bartula, 2020; Phau, Teah, & Liang, 2016). This is usually provided through Peer-to-peer networks (P2P), which emerge from individuals sharing content through forums or websites with other people. In the case of piracy, the content, such as music, movies, games, etc., is downloaded and shared illegally (Burmester, Eggers, Clement, & Protska, 2016; Sardanelli et al., 2019; Taylor, Ishida, & Wallace, 2009). Consequently, media industries are challenged and suffer not only great economic but also customer losses (Burmester et al., 2016; Cox & Collins, 2014; Phau et al., 2016; Riekkinen, 2018; Sardanelli et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2009; Yar, 2005). Hence, piracy has become a popular alternative for many and represents a major threat to the entertainment industry.

With the appearance of piracy, studies have been conducted to understand the intentions and behavior of people who use piracy. However, piracy has spread throughout all kinds of entertainment industries, and in the beginning, it was more prominent in the music industry. For this reason, so far, when looking into piracy, there has been more focus on music piracy (Cox & Collins, 2014; Phau et al., 2016). Some researchers noticed that often piracy in music is compared to movie piracy, or sometimes there is no differentiation between the two (Jacobs, Heuvelman, Tan, & Peters, 2012; Nhan et al., 2020). One similarity that both industries do share relating to piracy is that both are normally shared through P2P networks, though music piracy has declined with the appearance of music streaming services

(Riekkinen, 2018). As follows, it appears that there has been limited research on movie piracy and even less concerning the new appearing streaming platforms.

On the one hand, piracy related to movies is important because it creates pressure on the markets. So, although piracy is illegal and a threat, there seems to be a positive side to it or also other alternatives. Since piracy has been present for a long period now, there have been studies that have recognized that companies can benefit from this practice as it works as word-of-mouth and can, in some cases, turn unlicensed users into paying customers (Burmester et al., 2016; Fetscherin, 2005; Phau et al., 2016; Sardanelli et al., 2019). In like manner, the alternative developed where individuals decide to use a combination of legal streaming platforms and piracy. To illustrate, a person might decide to pirate first and then pay for the content or have a subscription to one streaming platform and pirate movies that are not offered on that platform (Nhan et al., 2020; Sardanelli et al., 2019). Another alternative that has shown a decrease in piracy is the path that has followed the music industry, in which platforms include so-called 'ad-supported' content or also the option of paying and lending certain movies as it is in platforms such as YouTube or Google Play (Burmester et al., 2016; Gupta, 2021; Phau et al., 2016).

On the other hand, new consumption patterns are appearing. Nowadays, streaming services have become the main source of entertainment and a legal alternative to piracy. Streaming platform services, also referred to as Subscription Video on Demand (SvoD) or over-the-top (OTT) services, have introduced a new entertainment consumption pattern which is often called binge-watching, mostly used by younger generations (Kim, Hwang, Kim, & Kim, 2017; McKenzie, Crosby, Cox, & Collins, 2019; Nhan et al., 2020; Riekkinen, 2018; Sardanelli et al., 2019). As these services develop, starting from one of the biggest streaming platforms, Netflix, and continuing with Amazon Prime, Disney+, Crunchyroll, Paramount+, Hulu, etc., they offer an appealing alternative to piracy as they are "of high-

quality, reliable, and relatively inexpensive.” (Nhan et al., 2020). What is more is that since the arrival of this alternative, studies have shown that on one side, there has been a decline in movie piracy (Lu, Rajavi, & Dinner, 2021; Makin & Bowers, 2021; McKenzie et al., 2019; Nhan et al., 2020; Sardanelli et al., 2019). However, on the other side, piracy has not disappeared and keeps being an issue that nowadays seems to derive from other concepts (Makin & Bowers, 2021; Nhan et al., 2020; Riekkinen, 2018). Thus, there seems to be a lack of research relating to video streaming platforms in relation to piracy and the reasons that contribute to individuals continuing to pirate video content despite the availability of these platforms.

Hence, this paper aims to gain more insight into the reasons that drive people to use piracy in the age where streaming platforms provide a convenient alternative. The research question that is being followed is:

RQ: When do young adults find alternatives to digital piracy instead of using streaming platforms?

To have a clear image of the research, in the next section, theory was reviewed, and the most salient concepts that relate to streaming platforms and piracy are defined and presented. Here, it includes the specification of piracy to digital piracy first and then four of the most apparent reasons as to why people decide to pirate or use streaming platforms according to literature, including perceived risks, economic worth, peer-to-peer networks, and availability in location and language. Afterward, the methodology of this research is presented, and finally, the results and the discussion.

Theoretical Framework

Digital Piracy

Piracy has been present and studied for decades. Accordingly, this construct has multiple dimensions and specifications and appears in many sectors. Nevertheless, when looking into piracy related to media, researchers are in their majority consistent in their definition of Digital Piracy (DP). It can be defined, according to Phau et al. (2016), as: "the unauthorized copying and distribution via the internet (P2P networks, pirate servers, illegal websites, and hacked computers) of intellectual property, such as movies, music, games, and software.". Although Phau et al.'s (2016) definition relates to the construct of *Internet piracy* and other researchers such as Burmester et al. (2016) refer to this construct as "unlicensed usage," many articles tend to use the construct of *digital piracy* and their definition remains similar to the one cited above (Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Arli & Tjiptono, 2016; Jacobs et al., 2012; Nhan et al., 2020; Sardanelli et al., 2019). Hence, this paper will adhere to the above-mentioned definition of digital piracy as the unlicensed copying, downloading, and distribution of music, movies, series, games, or software, which is done through Peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, pirate servers, and illegal websites.

Perceived risks

As mentioned in the introduction, digital piracy represents a danger. And so, a factor that has been crucial to the development of digital piracy is perceived risks. This concept can be defined as: "*perceived risk* is the degree to which individuals believe engaging in piracy is risky or fraught with uncertain negative outcomes or costs." (Lowry, Zhang, Wu, 2017). Here, some negative outcomes or negative thoughts that have been found are piracy being illegal, getting a computer virus, personal risks, and the fear or experience of being caught and fined by the law (Lowry et al., 2017; Nhan et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, as mentioned above, a variety of studies have confirmed that perceived risks or the lack of them are vital for digital piracy. Digital piracy is not seen as a crime, and consequently, people do not see it as something harmful, nor do they believe they will get caught (Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Nhan et al., 2020; Phau et al., 2016). Eventually, DP has evolved to the point where it is seen as acceptable and normal, especially among students, but also in some countries (Arli & Tjiptono, 2016; Phau et al., 2016). And so perceived risks have shown to be present in some individuals, but in the majority, this is something that people lack concerning digital piracy and therefore has led to piracy being seen as normal.

Economic worth

To continue with the next important concept that leads people to use either digital piracy or streaming platforms is economic worth. This factor has shown to be one of the, if not the most, salient reason for individuals to pirate content. And the importance of this is due to three reasons. Firstly, in various studies, it became clear that one of the “greatest incentives for piracy” (Cox & Collins, 2014) is the economic aspect, as individuals tend to prefer options that involve saving money (Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Cox & Collins, 2014; Jacobs et al., 2012; Lowry et al., 2017; Nhan et al., 2020; Phau et al., 2016; Sardanelli et al., 2019; Yar, 2005). In the same way, this aspect is often related to an individual’s income as well as their location. It has become obvious that there is a difference in piracy between developing and developed countries where for individuals living in the first group, the economic factor matters more than for the ones in the second group (Arli & Tjiptono, 2016; Cox & Collins, 2014; Phau et al., 2016; Yar, 2005). Consequently, digital piracy has more appeal in developing countries where the income is lower and therefore leads to people preferring or not being able to buy legitimate options.

However, while income has shown to be important in the decision to pirate digital content, nowadays, this seems to be losing relevance. In a more recent study, Nhan et al.

(2020) compared two groups with different incomes in Indonesia and found that students attending a private university pirated more than students in public universities, which demonstrates that despite having a presumed higher income, this does not disrupt the individuals' preference to save money.

The second reason why *economic worth* is important is related to streaming platforms. There has been evidence that the low price of these platforms has been appealing and did show a decrease in digital piracy (Makin & Bowers, 2021; Nhan et al., 2020; Sardanelli et al., 2019). Nevertheless, streaming platforms are still more expensive than digital piracy and have brought other concepts, such as *availability, culture, convenience, or impatience*, to light (Maskin & Bowers, 2021; Nhan et al., 2020).

The final reason is that people often consider the worth of their purchase. Accordingly, they base their decision to buy or pay for something, in this case, a streaming platform's subscription, when the services included align with their preferences and thus are worth paying for. In other words, if a streaming platform does not provide sufficient content of the interest of an individual, this can lead to him/her looking for cheaper alternatives, such as digital piracy, that do offer the content they prefer.

Thus, economic worth is a crucial reason when dealing with digital piracy. However, this reason alone is not sufficient. Instead, other reasons should be considered, such as peer-to-peer networks, as people find innovative forms of sharing content and location. This leads to the question of what other alternatives could be associated with economic worth and, thus, why people would pay for streaming platforms.

Peer-to-peer networks

Moving over, Peer-to-peer (P2P) networks have had a major influence on digital piracy, especially in the music sector. As known, piracy is a threat that has become more widespread with the appearance of the internet and the networks known as *peer-to-peer* networks. This

concept is characterized by the action of downloading files illegally, which are then shared through websites or forums for others to stream or download. These networks became prominent by sharing music files, but over time other networks related to movies, series, games, etc., have been established (Burmester et al., 2016; Cox & Collins, 2014; Jacobs et al., 2012; Nhan et al., 2020; Riekkinen, 2018; Sardanelli et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2009). In their paper, Nhan et al. (2020), on one side, compare P2P between music and movies and state that the availability of these networks as well as the time it takes for movies to be available digitally, leads to a higher likelihood of people engaging in P2P. This has also been described as an incentive for piracy in Cox and Collins's (2014) article. Additionally, even though P2P networks have been mainly related to the music sector since free or 'ad-supported' legal music platforms have been introduced and offer files of better quality, it seems that P2P networks have been weakened in that industry (Burmester et al., 2016).

On the other hand, Nhan et al. (2020) also relate peer-to-peer networks to movie streaming services and how these also had a diminishing effect on P2P. However, since these streaming services evolved, it also has P2P "from file downloads to a very lucrative video streaming business where unauthorized sites that host and stream pirated movies make hundreds of millions in ad revenue." (Nhan et al., 2020). Furthermore, often P2P networks are not seen as a risk or as harmful to artists as it is (Cox & Collins, 2014). Thus, it can be said that peer-to-peer networks are crucial to the spreading of digital piracy and are still present, evolving, and pose a danger to people's willingness to use streaming services.

Additionally, nowadays, streaming platforms offer premium services where accounts can be shared with a limited number of people, usually family and friends, by sharing the login details, creating thus a newer form of P2P networks. And, since this kind of P2P network is becoming more popular, it is questionable if, in the future, the action of sharing accounts could develop into a new kind of P2P network related to piracy.

Availability in Location and Language

In the previous sections, location has been mentioned and connected to *economic worth*. However, with the appearance of new streaming platforms and globalization, location seems to become more important concerning digital piracy. To clarify the importance of this reason, it can be related to the social norm, local regulations about risk, and availability. First, since DP has been present for a long time, and in some countries more apparent, views on digital piracy as well as restrictions or laws, differ from one country to another (Makin & Bowers, 2021; Arli & Tjiptono, 2016). In their paper, Al-Rafee and Cronan (2006) utilized the theory of planned behavior in relation to digital piracy. There, they discovered that the variable of subjective norm, which refers to the perception of what most people in a person's environment think about certain behavior, was the strongest to affect the attitude of individuals. Therefore, depending on the *location*, social norms are different, which leads to some countries engaging more in DP than others (Phau et al., 2016).

Similarly, the second aspect within this reason concerns the personal aspect of individuals, more specifically, their attitude towards their actions, such as using digital piracy. Various studies have confirmed that attitude is crucial when looking into the intention or the actual behavior of a person. Here, the attitude of an individual can be influenced by their own evaluation of the degree to which he/she will be affected by his/her action. This is also closely related to their risk perception, as well as the perception of how the action is seen in their country or closer environment (Arli & Tjiptono, 2016; Phau et al., 2016; Sardanelli et al., 2019).

The third aspect involves the emergence of newer reasons influencing the use of DP due to digitalization and globalization. As internet access has increased globally, streaming platforms, similar to Netflix have started to appear, and with the rising competition between them, these platforms have expanded worldwide (Kim et al., 2017; Makin & Bowers, 2021).

While these platforms have had an impact and have changed media consumption, decreasing digital piracy to some extent, other reasons seem to be emerging that nudge people into engaging in DP, such as the lack of *availability* of certain contents according to the location or the limited language options that are provided on the platforms (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Kim et al., 2017; Makin & Bowers, 2021; Nhan et al., 2020; Phau et al., 2016). *Availability* seems to have different dimensions and be dependent on certain aspects.

Firstly, is that over time, most streaming platforms have adapted their content according to the countries' overall preferences. But due to globalization, people are more exposed to the tendencies or content of other countries. Additionally, many countries have multicultural citizens who might tend to have different preferences for content and languages. In their paper, Nhan et al. (2020) state that for some participants, "piracy activity was necessary to supplement content that was unavailable on legal streaming services, such as ones that were not found on the Netflix catalog and movies that were still playing in theaters." This was also stated in Phau et al.'s (2016) paper in the context of Australia.

The next aspect of *availability* can be connected to Nhan et al.'s (2020) quote since not only the location determines the availability of the content. Streaming platforms have their own selection of movies or series, which leads to consumers having to subscribe and pay for more platforms depending on their content preferences. Consequently, and as mentioned in 'economic worth,' individuals have to make decisions as to what platforms offer the most content fitting their preferences and thus weigh the worth of their spending with the content provided. This, in turn, leads to people using legal streaming services for some content in combination with digital piracy for content that is not worth paying for a whole subscription or a certain purchase fee (Nhan et al., 2020; Sardanelli et al., 2019). Hence, the *availability* of certain movies or series, as well as of the languages, depends on the location or the Streaming platform's media library and seems to be an important reason nowadays for

people to use DP. This, in turn, leaves the question of which aspects related to the availability in location and language might lead people to choose streaming platforms.

Overall, the literature shows that the four reasons presented in this section are influential for people to look for alternatives to piracy or streaming platforms. This is why, for this study, these were used and further explored to be able to answer the research question as presented in the introduction.

Methods

Research Design

Previous studies concerning digital piracy or streaming platforms usually used quantitative methods together with theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, Neutralization Theory, or also Deterrence Theory (Al-Rafee and Cronan, 2006; Arli & Tjiptono, 2016; Jacobs et al., 2012; Phau et al., 2016; Riekkinen, 2018; Sardanelli et al., 2019). These studies provide meaningful findings about people's intentions to behave towards piracy or streaming platforms. However, as streaming platforms are a more recent 'phenomenon,' there is not much research relating to both DP and streaming platforms.

This is why for this research, a qualitative method in the form of semi structured-interviews was chosen. Additionally, since the research question of this study is exploratory in nature, a qualitative method appeared to be more suitable. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the aim was to explore whether the previously defined reasons affect people's decision to use streaming platforms over DP or if alternative reasons come to light. What is more is that semi-structured interviews provide the possibility to include open questions for the participants to describe their experiences in more detail and to probe interviewees when more information might be necessary (Boeije, 2010).

Finally, since there was a possibility that participants might feel a bit uncomfortable talking about digital piracy, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a research method to be more private and personal and allow for the participants to be open about their experiences, especially since the focus lied not only on DP but also on streaming platforms.

Sample

For this study, a convenience sampling method was utilized. Participants were recruited by personal invitation as well as through word-of-mouth. Since this study focuses on streaming movies or series and young adults, the eligibility criteria were first that the participants should have to some extent, experience with streaming movies or series online in general; however, this was not a fixed requirement. Secondly, the participants should have been between 18 to 30 years old. Nevertheless, this study also aimed at gathering a variation of experiences and possibilities of personal backgrounds, such as the cultural background. This is why other common demographics, such as gender or occupation, were not considered for the sample selection. Accordingly, this study consisted of 15 participants in total, aged between 18 and 28 years ($M = 23.13$, $SD = 3.16$) and with different nationalities. As for gender, six of the participants identify as male, and the remaining nine identify as female (see Table 1). The setting of the interviews was mainly online. Hence, the interview setting depended on the preference of participants and the possibilities, as most participants lived in different countries and were not able to meet in person. Consequently, one interview was conducted offline in a study area of the University, and the remaining 14 interviews were conducted online via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or WhatsApp.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality
1	21	female	USA
2	24	female	Bolivia
3	23	female	Germany
4	26	female	Bolivia
5	27	male	Netherlands
6	22	female	Indonesia
7	26	male	Austria
8	18	male	Bolivia
9	21	female	Australia
10	28	male	Netherlands
11	22	male	Vietnam
12	27	female	Switzerland
13	21	female	Vietnam
14	23	female	South Korea
15	18	male	Germany

Procedure*Pre-Tests*

To evaluate the quality of the interview questions and how participants would understand them, two pre-tests were conducted. Both participants were also recruited through convenience sampling. After an introduction about the research and its purpose, as well as asking for consent to participate in the pre-test, participants were asked the questions prepared (see Appendix A). When finalizing each pre-test interview, the participants were asked for small feedback on how they experienced the interview flow and questions. From the feedback as well as self-reflection from the researcher, two main improvements were identified. Firstly, some of the questions appeared to be repetitive or confusing for the

participants. Secondly, one of the participants did not feel very comfortable talking about piracy. As a result of this, some questions were simplified or changed completely, and an additional paragraph was added to the introduction to sympathize with the participants about piracy being a sensitive topic and also to emphasize that everything said in the interview was only going to be used for research purposes.

Research instrument

In order to have a structure for the interviews and to avoid possible missing data, an interview guide for the researcher was created as the research instrument. The guide consisted of an introduction section, a questions section, and finally, a small conclusion. As for the questions, the four reasons defined and presented in the theory section, namely *perceived risks*, *economic worth*, *peer-to-peer networks*, and *availability in location and language*, were converted into topics. Then, based on the theory and the aim of this research, around five questions per topic were formulated. For each topic, questions related to streaming platforms, as well as questions related to Digital Piracy, were included to be able to compare better. To be more specific, regarding the topic of perceived risks, questions such as "Have you ever felt some kind of risk when using piracy?" were formulated. Then, for economic worth, questions related to the costs associated with streaming platforms and how these are perceived by each individual were asked. For the concept of the peer-to-peer network, participants were asked about their experience using such networks and, if possible, to describe their own network when wanting to stream movie or series content. Here, questions related to sharing accounts with other people or also about downloading or streaming content from pirated websites were formulated. As for the last aspect, availability in location and language, questions such as: "How is piracy seen in your close environment like family and friends?", "Do you have any experience concerning the availability of content or language options in streaming platforms due to a location?" were asked. Here, as it is a newer reason, it was of interest to know if

people decide to use piracy due to the lack of availability of content or languages in certain locations. Finally, interviewees were asked what other factors might be influential for them to decide to use streaming platforms instead of piracy. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Interview procedure

Moving over to the procedure of this study, key details and methods used to collect the data and interact with the participants will be described. As mentioned in the ‘sample’ section, the interviews were conducted online and offline due to geographical constraints or participants’ preferences. The duration of the interviews varied, with the shortest being about 11 minutes and the longest being 32 minutes long. Finally, all interviews were recorded using a digital medium such as a mobile phone or built-in recording through Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Around five interview questions relating to each reason, as presented in the theory section, were prepared before the interview, and sensitive data such as name or personal details were not collected to maintain confidentiality. Only age and nationality were considered since it was part of the eligibility criteria and since one of the reasons involved location. Then, before starting with the interview, rapport was built, an introduction about the purpose of the study was given, and, after informing the participant about their right to withdraw from the study at any point, verbal consent to take part in the study was discussed with each participant. If the participant consented to take part and being recorded, the interview proceeded.

After the introduction, participants were asked the prepared questions. Firstly, participants were asked to talk in general about their experience when they stream movies or series so that they could feel more familiar with the topic. Then, the formulated questions about perceived risks, economic worth, P2P networks, and availability in location and

language were asked. Following the nature of semi-structured interviews, participants were asked the predetermined questions, but they were also encouraged to express themselves freely or to elaborate on points if they wished to do so. Adding to this, probing questions were added to gather more knowledge when necessary. To conclude, participants were asked if they had additional remarks or reasons to add that might be interesting to the study. After that, they were thanked for their participation, and contact details of the researcher were given in case they had additional questions about the study. The interviews were audio recorded, saved, and three interviews were transcribed verbatim, whereas the rest were transcribed by summarizing the participant's answers.

Data Analysis

After all interviews were conducted and transcribed, the data was utilized for analysis. The analysis was done via Atlas.ti and following abductive analysis by Timmermans and Tavory (2012). In the beginning, while transcribing the audio files, the private data of the participants was anonymized or deleted. During the transcription process, surprising outcomes or useful quotes relating to the concepts, as explained before, were identified to answer the research question of this study. For reliability, the method of constant comparison was used, where data was compared and checked with other data as well as checked with the theoretical concepts. Developed concepts were then reviewed with fresh data. Furthermore, different perspectives were considered when interpreting the data, in line with abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Finally, to see if the emerging results seemed reasonable, the researcher explained these to some acquaintances, following thus a peer debriefing process which showed to be positive overall, meaning that the debriefers also understood the results in a similar manner as the researcher.

Results

In the following, the results of this study will be presented. Each result will be described by first introducing the problem that underlies the result. Then, the result itself will be explained, and finally, a brief relation to the theory will be presented.

VPN service as an alternative to Digital Piracy

One of the concepts of interest in this study was related to the availability or accessibility of movies or series, as well as language options, on streaming platforms and how these differ depending on location. On this topic, all participants expressed that they do have, in one way or another, experience with certain movies or series not being accessible or available to them. Here, about 13 of the 15 participants associated this experience due to their location. As an example, participant five had an experience where he started watching a series in one country, and when he traveled, he noticed that the series was not available any more on the streaming platform. Similarly, some participants are interested in content from other cultures which are not available to them in their location. In this context, participant six stated:

I mainly watch Asian shows, so Anime and Japanese and Korean Dramas. And I know that some streaming platforms are starting to have them, but it's not- again, it's limited in those streaming platforms. And, even for some Western TV shows and movies, not all streaming platforms have them, and some even get, you know, discontinued or pulled from the platform.

Hence, not having access to certain movies or series does discourage participants from having streaming platforms and leads to them looking for alternatives such as piracy.

One alternative that was mentioned by seven Interviewees was the use of a VPN service. VPN, short for "virtual private network," is a service that allows people to navigate online, hiding their IP address. In recent years this service, especially one of its functions in which people can access other countries' networks, has started to gain more attention. One way in which this function is used is with streaming platforms. Since streaming platforms have a limited catalog of movies and series, depending on the licenses they obtain for each location, people use VPN services to access content that is offered on streaming platforms in other locations. In this study, the seven participants mentioned the use of VPN services where they either heard about them from friends or currently pay for one themselves. On this matter, participant nine said the following:

I think it is a bit better for me nowadays because I use a VPN. It is a paid VPN, but it definitely allows more accessibility to a lot of movies that are maybe not available in my area, like a lot of things that are available in the US, in France, India, and Korea. It sort of widens my horizons. So, nowadays, instead of -um- like, if I don't find something on Netflix straight away, instead of going directly to an illegal site, I go to my VPN and check different locations to see if it's available. To try and get the legal way of watching it.

As described by participant nine, and which was also mentioned by other participants, using a VPN service is seen as a legal alternative when looking for movies or series that are not available in their location. Adding to this, participant nine emphasized that the VPN allows her "to access the whole database rather than just a small portion of it." Likewise, participant

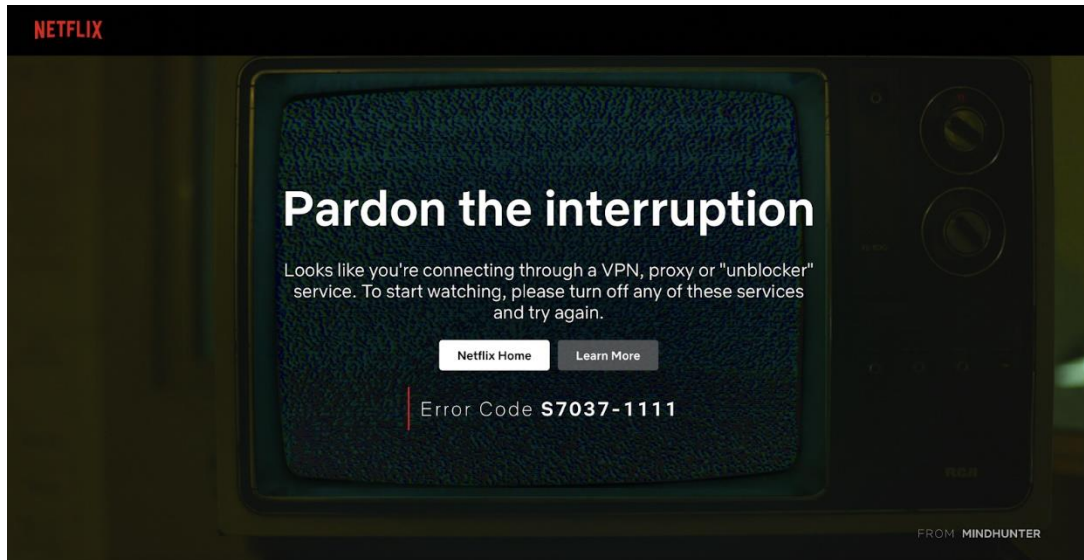
10 stated that “there really isn’t that much content [in his location]. So, I would say if I did not have the VPN, I would not find the price worth it.”.

Moreover, also related to availability in location and language, the two before-mentioned participants expressed that another reason they use a VPN service is to have more language options since they enjoy watching movies or series in languages that are not available in their location. Three participants related the use of a VPN service to *perceived risks* of piracy. To illustrate, when participant one was explaining how she does not feel at risk when using piracy in her location as it is not controlled, she said that “if [she] thought [piracy] was an issue, there are so many VPNs available that [she is] not really worried.”. As for Participant 10, on the same subject, he stated that he would not feel at risk if he pirated in a country where piracy is more controlled because the VPN service would provide him with "security." This implies then that VPN services are also used for piracy and to avoid the risks that they have in some locations. To summarize this part, the use of VPN services is seen as a complement to legal streaming platforms and even an alternative to piracy as it provides 'safe' access to more content and language options.

However, it is not clear if the use of VPN services is more on the illegal or legal side. Netflix, for example, does not allow its customers to use VPN services to change their location to access other databases. According to the ‘Terms of Use’ of Netflix, when having a subscription, a person should only access the content that is offered and licensed in their location. Consequently, when using a VPN service and Netflix detects it, it sends a message (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Netflix message detecting the use of VPN



And so, it can be said that VPN services can be compared to DP since both of them seem to not be accepted by streaming platforms. This was also noticed by Participant 10, who said:

Nowadays, I don't actually pirate that much because I feel like with VPN, which the use of a VPN is kind of in a grey zone, some would consider it piracy, but it's debatable, so I would say with VPN and, for example, Netflix I feel like I have enough on offer to watch. So, I don't pirate anymore.

To conclude, VPN services are seen as an alternative to digital piracy. And the decision to select this alternative depends on the availability of content in different locations or of language options or to feel safe from possible risks. Yet, this alternative is in a 'grey area' as it is not accepted by legal platforms but also not completely considered piracy.

Sharing accounts and groups as peer-to-peer networks

In the theory section of this paper, P2P networks were introduced as these are known for spreading the use of piracy. When streaming movies or series online on a pirated website, the people who upload the content, as well as the users, normally keep their identity anonymous. Especially for the users, it is possible to visit these websites in an 'Incognito mode.' Hence, people who engage in these P2P networks do not have any relation to each other. However, over the years, P2P networks have evolved and have, in some aspects, become more personal. For instance, one form of P2P network that has become popular nowadays is sharing accounts on streaming platforms with family but also friends. This new way of P2P sharing is shown by participant three, who explains:

One of my friends, she owns the whole account, and she pays for everything. And then, we have like those four different accounts like the smiley faces where you can click on, and I have one of them. I also share it with my mum.

In this study, all 15 participants have experience sharing accounts on streaming platforms. Some used to or now share accounts only with their family, others share them only with friends, and others, such as participant three, share with both. Yet, two participants currently do not share their accounts on a streaming platform with others. Here, participant 12 stated that she does not like sharing accounts since she prefers to have her account to herself. In general, it can be said that sharing accounts is a common practice nowadays that can be compared to P2P networks.

Nonetheless, sharing accounts is not the only way P2P networks have evolved. Piracy is still present, and in order to stream it, there still are P2P networks that enable the use of

piracy. Indeed, eight participants talked about them or their friends sharing links to each other to pirated websites. As an explanation, some of these participants said that they usually share these links for certain movies or series. Also, they might share such links to be able to watch a series at the same time. However, one participant described the following when she is looking for certain movies or series:

And then, there are some, like, if you go on Telegram or whatever, there are -um- they created group chats with a wide variety of people, and then they just send you files download for movies that you want to use.

What can be derived from this quote, then, is that there is a not-too-anonymous nor too personal connection that can be used to be able to watch movies or series. By creating groups on communication platforms such as the one mentioned, Telegram, another kind of P2P network is created. It is not anonymous but in a closed community with limited access.

Furthermore, it became clear that the use of P2P networks is related to the aspect of availability of content or language options. When looking for something, usually a person might want to try finding a solution by themselves first, and if they cannot find it, they ask others for help. This behavior was also present when talking to the participants of this study. Most of them do look for alternatives when they do not find certain movies or series on the platform they own. And the process to search for that movie seems to be looking at first the streaming platform and, if they own it, also using the VPN service. Then, if the movie or series is not available or the language is not available, participants either look for pirated websites or, in the case of some participants, they just give up on searching for the movie. Finally, when the movie is not available anywhere, they ask other people. This can be friends,

family, or strangers on group chats. When asked about the availability of content and language options on streaming platforms in her location, participant one said:

I think at first, Netflix had a bit of a monopoly on like other language films and shows, and lately, it's been divided again between other streaming services. So it is a bit harder to find certain titles. So, because of that, I have been using -um- like a Discord group that you can request certain shows and things, and they will send you like a file to watch, or they'll send you towards a website or something. And then, that's for more like East Asian stuff, material, and then for Indian; there's like specific websites I can use to access.

Therefore, while P2P networks do continue to be present in an anonymous manner, they also have evolved, first, to closer and more direct connections in the form of sharing accounts on streaming platforms with family or friends. Here, either one person pays for the whole subscription and shares the login details with the people he/she wants to share the account with, or the costs are split equally. So, the login details might be shared, for example, in a private chat or even in person, where the people sharing accounts know each other. Second, P2P networks have evolved by sharing links through group chats in which people do not know each other from before and thus are strangers to each other. Also, participants have their own process of looking for movies or series when they are not available on streaming platforms. And so, the aspect of availability of content and language leads participants to reach out to P2P networks.

Discussion

After having presented the research and the results, the research question stated at the beginning of this paper can be answered. This research aimed to answer the research question: “When do young adults find alternatives to digital piracy instead of using streaming platforms?”. To accomplish that, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed. There are two main results of the interviews, which are, firstly, the use of VPN services and, secondly, new manners to engage in P2P networks. In the following, the results, as well as practical implications and limitations, will be discussed.

To begin, streaming platforms have proved to have become popular among young adults, and yet they are not enough reason for people to stop using DP or to look for other alternatives. In the theory section of this paper, four reasons were presented and applied as topics for the questions in the interviews as these were the most salient in literature for when individuals decide to pirate or use a streaming platform. While these reasons do still play their part in the decision, the reasons that were thought to be the most salient incentives to use piracy, such as economic worth, were not a crucial part of the results in this study (Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Cox & Collins, 2014; Jacobs et al., 2012; Lowry et al., 2017; Nhan et al., 2020; Phau et al., 2016; Sardanelli et al., 2019; Yar, 2005).

Moving over, as mentioned in the results, all participants in this study did have experience with streaming platforms. So, streaming platforms appear to be usually the first choice for many young adults when they want to stream a movie or series. However, there is one aspect that was identified in the theoretical framework as a newer reason to use DP, which is the *availability* of languages or movies, or series (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Kim et al., 2017; Makin & Bowers, 2021; Nhan et al., 2020; Phau et al., 2016). In this study, this has been confirmed. The availability of content or languages is the main reason why young adults

look for alternatives to stream movies or series and can even influence their choice to subscribe to a streaming platform.

Indeed, the first result of this study is highly associated with the aspect of availability in location and language but also showed to have a small connection to perceived risks, as described in theory. On the one hand, it was explained that individuals look for alternatives to supplement content that is not available on streaming platforms (Nhan et al., 2020; Phau et al., 2016; Sardanelli et al., 2019). As can be seen in the results, the participants in this study also expressed their need to look for alternatives due to the same reason as well as due to the new platforms appearing and hence content scattering between platforms. However, this result presents an alternative to watching movies or series online, which is the use of VPN services. This has strong practical implications. As the use of these services is still in a 'grey area' where at the moment, it raises more questions than resolves since it is not piracy, but streaming platforms seem to not accept these services either.

On the other hand, in the results section, two participants mentioned the use of VPN services in line with the aspect of perceived risks. In theory, this aspect is presented as the main reason for people to pirate, as they do not perceive any risks when using piracy. And in this study, VPN services were related to a "safer" feeling when using these services as it could be an 'escape' from the risks associated with digital piracy in their location. Hence, VPN services seem to be used not only with streaming platforms but also for piracy to avoid risks. Nevertheless, this first finding also shows that overall young adults do prefer streaming platforms over piracy. They consider VPN services to be a legal supplement to streaming platforms and use this alternative before thinking of pirating content, even though this has practical implications about the legality of using VPN.

The second result was related to Peer-to-peer networks and had strong theoretical implications. It was of interest to know if there were new forms of P2P networks that young

adults might have as alternatives for digital piracy or that could prevent them in their choice of subscribing to streaming platforms. In the theory, P2P networks were said to be diminishing in some aspects but evolving in others (Burmester et al., 2016; Nhan et al., 2020). This study also confirmed this since P2P networks have evolved to be less anonymous networks where people share accounts on streaming platforms or share links in groups on communication platforms. As for the reason why individuals engage in these P2P networks, again, the aspect of availability, which was seen as a reason to use piracy in theory, came to light in the findings (Cox & Collins, 2014; Nhan et al., 2020). Thus, this result presents a new approach to P2P networks. Firstly, as a very personal connection where the people in one household or friends share the login details of the platform and have their personal arrangements on the payment. Secondly, as a more distant relation with strangers in a group chat, who might have similar interests but they do not know each other personally. And so, P2P networks are still present, and while they still facilitate the spread of digital piracy in an anonymous manner and this second way is also a new alternative to facilitate the use of DP, what is changing is that these networks are becoming more personal. These more personal connections and the availability of new forums in communication platforms such as Telegram leads young adults to look for these networks to be able to watch movies or series that they like.

To summarize, the aspect of availability is the main reason for young adults to look for alternatives when this is lacking in movies or series on the streaming platform they own. Even though DP is still an alternative and continues to be spread through P2P networks, VPN has appeared as an alternative that, for now, is considered a safe addition to streaming platforms to be able to have more content available. So, the research question of this paper can be answered as young adults do see streaming platforms as a first choice over piracy, but whenever they do not have certain language options or movies or series available to them,

they recure to other alternatives such as the use of VPNs or reaching out through these new forms of P2P networks.

Limitations and future research

One of the limitations of this study is that since the participants of this study were invited through a convenience sampling method, future researchers are advised to use other sampling methods to have a more diverse and representative sample. Adding to this, as this study was focused on and therefore consisted of young adults, conducting this study or similar studies with different groups of participants, such as adults or senior individuals, could provide different perspectives. Also, in this study, it was of interest to have some diversity for the participant's location or nationality which is why there were no specific eligibility criteria, and thus the generalizability can be questionable due to different demographics. So again, specifying to certain groups or even to a country or continent is recommended to gain different specific insights in relation to those locations. What could be of interest as well is conducting research on groups of the population concerning income, as having a group with different incomes could provide different insights as well. Finally, streaming platforms have gained more attention and are developing recently, so literature relating to them was rather new and scarce, especially in relation to DP. Thus, in the future, more literature can be used as well as focusing on specific streaming platforms could be interesting.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to gain more insight into the experiences of young adults finding alternatives to watch a movie or a series online at a time when streaming platforms have become popular, and DP is still present. The results demonstrate that VPN services are becoming more prominent and are seen as an alternative to digital piracy. People pay for these services to access other countries' databases in streaming platforms because of the limited availability of content and/or language options or to feel safe and avoid possible risks

of piracy in their location. But, the use of VPN services is debatable and a 'grey area' as they are not considered piracy but are not accepted by streaming platforms either. What is more, is that the results showed a new approach to peer-to-peer networks. People are connecting more nowadays and creating closer and less anonymous networks. While there are still networks that facilitate the use of digital piracy completely anonymously, group chats with unknown people are created on communication platforms where links to pirated websites are shared less anonymously. The second new approach to P2P networks is the sharing of accounts on streaming platforms. Here, the ones sharing accounts have a close relationship with family or friends and thus are not anonymous as well as they are legal. Finally, in this paper, four reasons were presented, from previous research, as to why young people might choose piracy or a streaming platform. However, one of these reasons that were identified that leads to searching for alternatives is the availability of content offered as well as language options. This was confirmed in this research. The interviews in this study revealed that due to the lack of availability, young people search for alternatives like VPN services or P2P networks.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Introduction:

Good morning/afternoon/evening, and thank you very much for joining this interview. My name is Sophie Isabella Baudach Fernández, and I am currently working on my Bachelor's thesis, which is why this interview is part of the research for it. Now, first of all, I would like to inform you that the data gathered from this will be anonymized and deleted once the research is over. Also, if you would like to withdraw from the interview at any point, you are allowed to do so. Having this in mind, I would now like to ask you for your consent to participate in and to record this interview. Would that be fine for you?

Thank you. To start, this study is about streaming platforms and digital piracy. So, during this interview, I would like to ask you some questions related to your experiences streaming movies or series online. The interview will take approximately 15 to 30 minutes. *Also, I would like to add here that I am aware that piracy might be a sensitive topic, but this is a safe space so you can express yourself freely, as this will only be used for research purposes.

*(General questions/ starting questions)

In general, do you watch movies or series frequently?

Do you have some experience with piracy? (piracy = unlicensed copying, downloading, streaming, and distribution of movies or series through websites)

1. Perceived risks/threats:

- Do you think piracy is risky? (What are your thoughts on piracy?)
- What are for you the risks of using piracy?

- Have you ever felt some kind of risk when using piracy?
- How likely do you think you (or in general a person) could be affected by the risks of piracy?
- Have you ever felt concerned about the risks of piracy?

2. Economic worth:

- Which streaming services do you pay for?
- How important are streaming services' costs for you?
- Do you consider streaming costs to be expensive?
- When you plan to subscribe to a streaming platform, what do you take into consideration before paying for it?
- Would you consider the costs to be a (main) reason for you to use piracy?

3. Peer-to-peer networks:

- How (or when) have you started to use piracy?*
- Do you usually download or stream pirated movies or series?
- Have you ever downloaded or streamed a movie or series from a pirated website and shared it with others? Or vice versa?
- When do you decide to use pirated platforms instead of streaming platforms?
- Do you currently, or did you at some moment, share accounts with others for streaming movies or series?
- When sharing accounts, what arrangements do you have with the people you share with?
 - (Do you think it is common to share accounts?)*

4. Location/Culture/Language

- How is piracy seen in your close environment, like family and friends?
- How popular do you think streaming platforms are where you live?
- What is your impression of the content offered/availability on streaming platforms where you live?
- Do you have any experience concerning the availability of content or language options in streaming platforms due to location?
- Would you consider that the availability of content or languages in your location influences you to use piracy?

(Final remarks)

To finalize, do you have other reasons to choose streaming platforms (or alternatives) over piracy?

(do you think your use of piracy has decreased over the years for streaming?)*

Do you have anything to add?

Thank you for your time and your participation. If you have any questions or remarks, or you would like to know more about the results of this study, you can contact me through this email: s.i.baudachfernandez@student.utwente.nl

* included or edited after pre-tests.

Appendix B

Search log

Date	Source	Search string (databases) or search method (other sources)	Total hits	Remarks
28.03.2023	Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("media piracy" OR "plagiarism" OR "piracy") AND ("Choice" OR "decision*") AND ("streaming platforms" OR "movies" OR "series" OR "Netflix" OR "Disney+" OR "audio-visual"))	56	To start, I identified around 15 sources. Wrote down new concepts that might be interesting and noticed that "plagiarism" or "series" leads to irrelevant publications
06.04.2023	Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("media piracy" OR "piracy*") AND ("Choice" OR "decision*" OR "reason*" OR "influence") AND ("streaming platforms" OR "movies" OR "series" OR "Netflix" OR "Disney+" OR "audio-visual"))	85	More suitable articles were found, saved about five relevant sources that seemed to be fitting. Did snowballing of some articles and found more useful articles.

15.04.2023	Google Scholar	entertainment media piracy in the streaming age	27.100 results	Looked at some articles, but it was not the direction I was aiming for.
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