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Unveiling the Ethical Dilemmas of Digital Piracy: A Comprehensive Exploration of Motivations, Attitudes, and Behaviors

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Abstract: Driven by several elements, including the unwillingness to pay for material, the spread of subscription services, and the profitability of illegal activity, digital piracy has grown to be a common problem in the contemporary world. Along with financial damages for businesses and content creators, this phenomenon has legal repercussions for individuals involved in piracy and cybersecurity issues. The effective fight against digital piracy depends on an awareness of the drivers and hazards connected with this illegal activity. With an eye towards a thorough knowledge of this intricate problem, in this study, the focus centers on the reasons, attitudes, and actions behind digital piracy. Through examining how people defend their behavior in particular situations, in this study, the aim is to clarify the ethical issues and decision-making procedures related to piracy—even among otherwise law-abiding people. Combining a variety of the relevant literature and ideas, including situation ethics theory, in this study, we seek to provide insights for legislators, business players, and academics eager to meet the difficulties presented by digital piracy. This study adds to the continuous discussion on lessening the detrimental effects of digital piracy on content creators, businesses, and cybersecurity by looking at the underlying reasons for piracy and supporting legal access to material. Along with a dearth of research on the origins and moral questions of digital piracy, there is a lot of contradictory material. By examining the factors behind this unlawful activity, clarifying the complex dynamics involved, and offering understanding of the causes of digital piracy, this study seeks to close a significant void in the knowledge. The findings of this study will enable individuals to develop strategies for handling this prevalent issue in the digital era. Developing successful interventions that can reduce this illegal conduct and safeguard the interests of content producers, businesses, and cybersecurity overall depends on an awareness of the reasons behind digital piracy. This study advances the knowledge of the difficulties presented by this global phenomenon by investigating the ethical issues and decision-making procedures related to digital piracy.

Keywords: digital piracy; ethical dilemmas; illicit behavior

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1. Introduction

With the wide scale downloading and sharing of copyrighted information online, usually carried out by individuals who typically abide by laws, non-commercial digital piracy has experienced an unparalleled increase in the aftermath of the digital revolution (Brown and Holt 2018). Digital piracy—the unlawful copying, downloading, or sharing of protected content (Eisend 2019)—is driven by several elements. The main cause appears to be the refusal to pay for the material; some users feel that digital content ought to be freely available or that their financial situation would limit their access (Camarero et al.

2014). Furthermore, the sheer volume of subscription services and growing expenses cause users to turn to piracy to obtain wanted material (Sahni and Gupta 2019a). Additionally contributing to piracy's frequency are its profitability through advertising, contributions, and selling user data (Tomczyk 2021). Furthermore, some people who believe businesses have enough money or those driven by financial gain start piracy (Volckmann 2023). Digital piracy has important repercussions.

Studies have shown that piracy can significantly hurt the financial health of creative industries. For example, Tomczyk (2021) highlighted how piracy leads to less investment in new content and can result in job losses within these sectors. However, there is a twist to this story. Some researchers believe that piracy might also have a silver lining by increasing content exposure and driving up demand. Camarero et al. (2014) discovered that although piracy reduces direct sales, it can make content more popular. This increased popularity can translate to higher concert attendance, more merchandise sales, or even purchases of the legal versions of pirated content. This idea is backed by the concept of "sampling", where people who pirate content initially might decide to buy it legally if they find it valuable. This behavior has been noted in various digital content areas like music and video games (Volckmann 2023). Piracy websites and platforms often make money through advertising. These sites generate a lot of traffic from people looking for free content, which allows them to sell ad space at a premium. The high number of visitors is what makes these platforms profitable (Tomczyk 2021). Additionally, some piracy sites make money by selling user data. These data can be used for targeted ads or sold to third parties, adding another revenue stream for these piracy operations (Volckmann 2023).

For creators and businesses, it causes financial losses; this influences sectors like cinema, TV, music, and gaming (Eisend 2019; Tomczyk 2021). Apart from breaking copyright rules, piracy exposes users to possible assaults and distributes malware; therefore, it compromises cybersecurity standards (Sahni and Gupta 2019a). Moreover, digital piracy could have legal consequences like fines or jail (Akbulut and Dönmez 2018; Hati et al. 2020). Understanding its motivations and hazards is essential for fighting digital piracy. Though it may not completely eliminate the legal consequences, using VPNs to hide IP addresses and surf anonymously promotes piracy. VPNs are tools that help boost privacy and security by hiding a user's IP address and encrypting their internet activity. This makes it seem like the user is browsing from a private network, which is great for keeping sensitive information safe and maintaining online privacy (Kowalski 2021). An IP address is like a digital home address for your computer. It is a unique string of numbers separated by periods or colons that identifies each device on the internet. These addresses are crucial for the internet to work because they tell the network where to send data, ensuring information reaches the right place (Metev 2020). Peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, like those used by TORRENT, play a big role in digital piracy. These networks let users share files directly with each other without relying on central servers, making it harder to trace and control the distribution of pirated content. Bateman et al. (2013) discussed how P2P networks have a significant impact on the spread of digital piracy.

Although these policies greatly lower the possibility of identification, arrest, and conviction for internet piracy, they do not totally remove these hazards (Hinduja and Ingram 2009). People must be aware of the dangers connected to pirated content like malware, viruses, phishing schemes, and data theft (Sahni and Gupta 2019a). Key actions in reducing the harmful effects of digital piracy on authors, businesses, and cybersecurity include ultimately tackling the underlying causes of it and supporting legal access to materials. Although it still presents an inevitable difficulty, reducing digital piracy calls for great effort (Sahni and Gupta 2019b). Digital piracy is caused in part by attitudes towards the act, prior conduct, and motives as well as by other elements (Taylor et al. 2009; Fleming et al. 2017). The problem is exacerbated by industry's view of the value of digital material deviating greatly from that of digital consumers (Xanthidis and Aleisa 2012). Also important are rationalizations and neutralizations such as the conviction that piracy is a victimless crime (Moore and McMullan 2009). Furthermore, influencing attitudes against

digital piracy include cognitive and emotional beliefs, age, perceived importance of the issue, subjective norms, and Machiavellianism (Al-Rafee and Cronan 2006).

Studies on the antecedents or ethical features of digital piracy usually provide contradicting results (De Corte and Van Kenhove 2017; Urbonavicius et al. 2019), and the absence of complete investigation of this topic (Tomczyk 2019) emphasizes the necessity of more study. What is more, the findings are often fragmented when different studies use varying definitions, methodologies, or sample populations. This fragmentation can make it difficult to draw broad conclusions or build on previous work, as inconsistencies and contradictions may arise from study to study (Eisend 2019). By including social consensus theories and situation ethics into the analysis of digital piracy, the goal of this study is to give a thorough knowledge of the elements influencing digital piracy in the framework of context-specific events whereby even law-abiding people engage in piracy and explain why. Examining the reasons, attitudes, and behaviors connected to digital piracy helps this study to clarify the intricate processes at work and provide insights for legislators, business players, and researchers trying to tackle this ubiquitous problem. To achieve this, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What role do social consensus and peer influences play in shaping individuals' intentions to engage in digital piracy?
2. How do situational ethics and the tendency to conform moderate the relationship between social consensus and digital piracy behavior?
3. What are the mechanisms through which social consensus impacts actual digital piracy behavior?

The hypotheses developed for this study are based on the detailed literature review of studies in the relevant field in the following sections.

1.1. The Role of Social Consensus on Accepting Illegal Downloading Behavior as "Not So Much Illegal"

It is mandatory to discuss the basic differences and overlapping aspects of social consensus and social influence before our assertion with regards to the role of social consensus on accepting illegal downloading behavior as "not so much illegal". In the context of digital piracy, social consensus plays a pivotal role in influencing individual behavior (Cho et al. 2015). Social consensus refers to the collective agreement within a community regarding the acceptability and prevalence of piracy. When a strong social consensus exists, it normalizes digital piracy, making it appear as a standard and accepted practice (Yu 2013). This normalization can significantly reduce the perceived moral and legal risks and even the feeling of significant guilt or fear associated with piracy (Al-Rafee and Cronan 2006), as individuals align their behaviors with the group norms. Studies have shown that social norms, both injunctive (what should be done) and descriptive (what is commonly done), shape individuals' attitudes and behaviors towards piracy (Cho et al. 2015). For instance, if peers and influential figures within one's social network engage in and condone piracy, it reinforces the behavior and makes it more likely for others to participate (Rybina 2011). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in environments where digital piracy is culturally accepted and widespread, further embedding it as a normative behavior. Nevertheless, according to the digital piracy literature, both have an influence on digital piracy. For example, social influences (Lowry et al. 2017; Eisend 2019) play a significant role in the normalization and habituation of piracy behaviors. Positive influences might include peers who endorse piracy, while negative influences could be those advocating against it (Lowry et al. 2017).

Situational ethics holds that rather than following universal moral guidelines, most ethical conduct relies on the particular context of a situation, therefore permitting flexibility and adaptability to particular conditions (Stoudenmire 1976). Situational ethics is fundamentally based on the agape love, or unconditional love, which puts the welfare of people above rigorous obedience to laws; therefore, it produces ethical actions that advance the most loving and helpful results (Black 1984). This paradigm rejects both legalism (strict rule

compliance) and antinomianism (rejection of all rules), proposing instead an intermediate route where principles guide acts but are not binding if they contradict with the necessities of the context (Dupré 1967). Because it considers the complexity and intricacies of real-life events, providing a customized approach to ethical problems and making it relevant in many circumstances, it is sometimes seen more practical and realistic (McCabe 1992). LaBeff et al. (1990) claimed that individuals may participate in a utilitarian calculation, thinking that the goals justify the means, where activities judged incorrect in most instances could be thought acceptable if the conclusion is considered right. They stated that the situation defines what is right or wrong and specifies the principles directing and assessing action. Sykes and Matza (1957) contributed to this argument by stating that people may rationalize aberrant behavior in a way that is acceptable to them, but not to society or the judicial system. They contested the theory that people merely justify their aberrant behavior in order to avoid responsibility. Instead, they indicated that these rationalizations may precede the aberrant action, neutralizing disapproval from internalized standards and the impulse to comply with others in the social milieu. Within this paradigm, two fundamental notions arise that impact human behavior, conditional morality and a diminished sense of danger. In this context, two key ideas emerge that influence how people behave, conditional morality and a diminished sense of danger. Conditional morality means that what is considered ethical can change depending on the situation, based on what society accepts (Walker and Lovat 2022). This leads to ethical behavior that depends on the circumstances. On the other hand, when people see others downloading content without facing any consequences (Paek and Hove 2017), they might start to think that the risks, like downloading a virus or facing legal trouble, are not that serious. This lowered sense of danger makes people more likely to engage in illegal downloading or sharing. However, it is important to note that this does not make the act any less wrong; it just makes the risks seem less threatening.

In the case of digital piracy, situational ethics might be a "softener", meaning that rather than making ethical judgements absolute, the particular circumstances impact them somewhat. This idea suggests that those who may not usually participate in such events could defend their behavior under the cover of social conventions, logic, and "It's acceptable because it's a common practice here". This practice may lessen moral limits and increases people's inclination for digital piracy.

1.2. Social Consensus Theory

According to the social consensus hypothesis, shared beliefs—whether positive or negative—form morality (Jones 1991). Social consensus is the general view of acceptability in relation to piracy. Peer pressure and the perceived significant frequency of piracy might force people to participate in piracy to escape social marginalization. Moreover, in some civilizations, a tolerant attitude towards piracy might help to explain the increasing pirate rates. Digital piracy has major effects that affect individuals legally as well as financial losses for the creative sectors. Fighting piracy calls for a varied strategy encompassing legal action, education, technical innovations, and easily available pricing policies. Developing sensible plans to fight piracy and promote a culture that respects intellectual property rights depends on an awareness of how society views affect individual action.

The scholarly research shows that society's expectations about piracy differ from personal ethical judgement. Bateman et al. (2013) distinguished between formal ethics, which accept the frequency of online piracy, and ideal ethics, which view it as improper. This paradox shows a propensity to base personal ethical judgement on social standards and lessens the impact of negative moral assessments on behavior. This is consistent with Moores and Chang's (2006) study on software piracy, which implied that people may rationalize infringement when judgement is dubious owing to timing constraints or insufficient knowledge of the consequences. Similarly, Sahni and Gupta (2019a) contended that those who engage in piracy might not always be consciously aware of their involvement and that their reasons for doing so go beyond mere convenience or financial ones. Deter-

rence theory—which includes fear of legal consequences—does not significantly influence opinions about piracy in various nations such as Indonesia (Hati et al. 2020) and Turkey (Akbulut and Dönmez 2018; Karahan and Kayabaşi 2019). These results imply that ethical decision-making on piracy significantly depends on societal impressions. In particular, in relation to illicit downloading, Yam et al. (2014) proposed that the cognitive resources required for ethical decision-making are influenced by social consensus. A culture that accepts illicit downloading might affect intent and conduct; therefore, it may serve as a sort of moral offset (Serenko 2022). While some people's intention to download illegally is lowered by the normalization of downloading, others' fear of missing out (FOMO) raises the intention. Fear of missing out, or FOMO, is the anxiety that something exciting or interesting might be happening elsewhere, often triggered by social media posts. When it comes to digital piracy, FOMO can push people to download pirated content so they do not miss out on popular trends and media (Tomczyk and Selmanagic-Lizde 2018).

The acceptance of digital piracy varies across different cultures and societies. For instance, social influences play a big part in how normal and common piracy behaviors become in places where such activities are more tolerated (Lowry et al. 2017; Eisend 2019). Positive influences could include friends who support piracy, while negative influences might be those who speak out against it (Lowry et al. 2017). This complicated interaction between personal opinions and social expectations emphasizes the subtle character of ethical decision-making on piracy.

The model of our study is demonstrated in Figure 1.

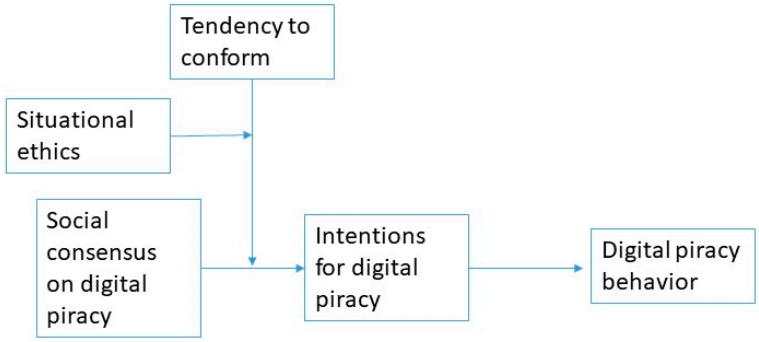


Figure 1. The study model.

1.3. Hypothesis Development

1.3.1. Main Effects

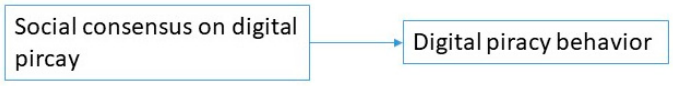
Scholarly investigations have established that the perception of social approbation significantly affects the engagement in digital piracy. The significance of normative beliefs in determining digital piracy behaviors is highlighted by these studies. These studies indicate a strong influence of social norms on digital piracy. Wang and McClung (2011) found college students are likely to engage in digital piracy when perceiving social approval for such acts. This notion is supported by LaRose et al. (2005), who linked the morality of digital piracy with its prevalence, and by Jacobs et al. (2012), who noted the impact of social norms on piracy intentions. Further studies by Sansfaçon and Amiot (2014) and Sang et al. (2015) corroborate that social norms significantly predict digital piracy intentions, with a consensus in a social group increasing the likelihood of engaging in digital piracy. Accordingly, we suggest that individuals are more likely to form intentions to commit digital piracy if they perceive a high level of consensus or acceptance of such behavior in their social environment. These findings collectively underline the predictive power of social norms and attitudes towards digital piracy. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Social consensus on digital piracy (X) will positively influence intentions to engage in digital piracy (M).*

The role of social approval in shaping digital piracy intentions is also well documented. The research by Doloswala and Dadich (2011) suggested that instead of legislative measures, engaging intellectual property owners and users may effectively change behaviors. LaRose and Kim (2007) further reinforced that perceived social consensus critically determines digital piracy behaviors. Likewise, the research by Sansfaçon and Amiot (2014) indicated that individuals are more likely to endorse digital piracy if it is normative within their social group. In this study, it is suggested that group norms play a critical role in determining behavioral intentions and the internalization of illegal behaviors. Doloswala and Dadich (2011) and Serenko (2022) argue that legislative attempts to curb digital piracy are often ineffective. Instead, policies that increase engagement between owners and users of intellectual property, thus creating social contracts, might be more successful in changing downloader behavior.

Individuals with more favorable attitudes towards piracy often develop complex moral reasoning to justify their behavior (Whitman et al. 2024). This is supported by Hashim et al. (2018), who noted that attitudes mediate the rationalization processes related to moral obligations. People with pro-piracy views likely have well-formed rationalizations that help them maintain their stance despite potentially conflicting moral cues. Accordingly, we hypothesize, based on this review, that greater levels of perceived accord or acceptability regarding digital piracy within a social group will result in greater participation in digital piracy activities. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *The social consensus on digital piracy (X) will have a positive influence on digital piracy behavior (Y).*



1.3.2. Mediation Effects

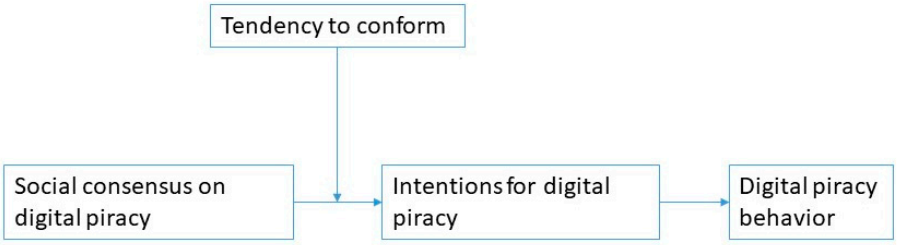
Empirical studies support the linkages between attitude, intention, and behavior as well as a direct relationship between attitude and behavior (Akbulut and Dönmez 2018; Serenko 2022; Fatoki et al. 2024). In similar vein, studies have consistently shown that intentions mediate the relationship between social consensus and digital piracy behavior. This is highlighted in the work of Sang et al. (2015), Sansfaçon and Amiot (2014), and LaRose and Kim (2007), where intentions served as a crucial intermediary between social norms and actual piracy behaviors. Wang and McClung (2012) showed that anticipated emotions and social approval collectively determined intentions to commit digital piracy, which in turn influenced digital piracy behavior. This indicates that intentions mediate the relationship between social consensus and digital piracy behavior. Based on this discussion, we assert that the effect of social consensus on digital piracy occurs through the formation of intentions to engage in such behavior, as follows:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Intentions to engage in digital piracy (M) will mediate the relationship between social consensus on digital piracy (X) and digital piracy behavior (Y).*

1.3.3. Interaction Effects

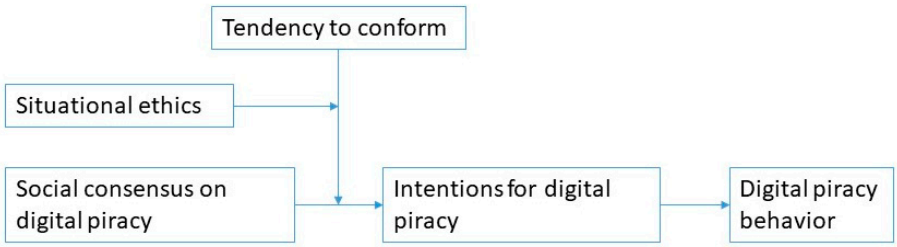
If peers and influential figures within one's social network engage in and condone piracy, it reinforces the behavior and makes it more likely for others to participate (Higgins et al. 2009). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in environments where digital piracy is culturally accepted and widespread, further embedding it as a normative behavior as discussed before (Yu 2013). The tendency to conform acts as a moderator in this context, amplifying the impact of social consensus on individual behavior. People with a high tendency to conform are more likely to adopt behaviors that are prevalent and accepted in their social groups, further perpetuating the cycle of digital piracy (Al-Rafee and Cronan 2006). Consequently, social consensus, moderated by the tendency to conform, can override individual moral objections, facilitating a culture where digital piracy is seen as acceptable and even desirable. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *The relationship between social consensus on digital piracy (X) and intentions to engage in digital piracy (M) is moderated by tendency to conform (W), such that this relationship is stronger at higher levels of tendency to conform.*



In this similar context, when situational ethics come into play, the relationship between social consensus and the intention to engage in digital piracy can also be moderated. Situational ethics refers to the ethical scrutiny or moral considerations applied to specific situations. Higher ethical scrutiny can weaken the influence of social consensus on digital piracy intentions. Individuals under higher ethical scrutiny may reconsider the morality of their actions despite prevailing social norms, leading to a reduced likelihood of engaging in piracy (Al-Rafee and Cronan 2006). Consequently, while social consensus can facilitate a culture where digital piracy is seen as acceptable, the presence of strong situational ethics can mitigate this effect, encouraging individuals to act more ethically despite the social pressures to conform. We propose that ethical considerations might buffer or reduce the impact of social consensus on illegal downloading on forming intentions to engage in illegal activities. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Situational ethics (Z) moderates the relationship between social consensus on digital piracy (X) and intentions to engage in digital piracy (M), making this relationship weaker under higher ethical scrutiny.*



2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Ethical Considerations

Piri Reis University's ethical guidelines apply in this particular case. This study received ethical approval from the University's Institutional Review Board ensuring that all procedures and protocols met the universal standard for human research. The approval number is March 2024. The participants were also well-informed about the purpose and motivation of this study, and the researcher guaranteed their confidentiality throughout. A consent form, which all participants received, included all procedures and appearances of this study and was provided to the respondent before the initiation of this study. No personal data were collected, and the answers were considered anonymous to preserve the participants' sensitivity. The survey was performed through an online platform, where IP addresses were not collected, and personal data were not needed.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Tendency to Conform Scale

The Tendency to Conform Scale, created by Goldsmith et al. (2005), measures an individual's tendency to conform to the behaviors and opinions of others. It is a psychological tool used to understand conformity within social settings. Example items include: "I adapt to the wishes of others and authority"; "I adapt to the ideas and suggestions of others"; "I have fixed and unchanging thoughts". In our study, the CFA results for the Tendency to Conform Scale indicated an adequate fit: $\chi^2(4) = 24$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.979; TLI = 0.948; RMSEA = 0.070 (90% CI: 0.0446–0.0982); SRMR = 0.0277. The factor loadings ranged from 0.3418 to 0.9669. The scale's reliability was somewhat low with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.636.

2.2.2. Social Consensus on Digital Piracy Scale

The Social Consensus on Digital Piracy Scale was developed by the authors to measure attitudes toward digital piracy. This scale includes items that assess the social acceptability and perceived justification of digital piracy behaviors. Example items include: "Minor illegal activities can be tolerated. For example, software or movies can be downloaded without payment."; "Illegal activities can be overlooked for doing good deeds. For example, I can share software or movies that I have downloaded without payment with others." The CFA for the Social Consensus on Digital Piracy Scale showed a good fit: $\chi^2(6) = 16.5$, $p = 0.011$; CFI = 0.996; TLI = 0.991; RMSEA = 0.0415 (90% CI: 0.0182–0.0660); SRMR = 0.0117. Factor loadings for the items ranged from 0.924 to 1.159, and the scale's reliability was high with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.841.

2.2.3. Situational Ethics Scale

The Situational Ethics Scale, adapted to Turkish by Yazıcı and Yazıcı (2010), is based on Forsyth's (1980) Ethics Position Questionnaire. It includes items that measure the idealism and relativism dimensions of ethical positions. Example items include: "In unclear situations, attitudes and behaviors can be changed according to the situation"; "The principle of utilitarianism is essential in ethical behavior"; "There are no fundamental and universally valid ideals, but it is essential to do what is good for the majority". In our study, the CFA for the Situational Ethics Scale demonstrated an excellent fit: $\chi^2(2) = 0.632$, $p = 0.729$; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.01; RMSEA = 0.00 (90% CI: 0.00–0.0440). The factor loadings ranged from 0.610 to 0.763, and the scale's reliability was high with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.870.

2.2.4. Digital Piracy Behavior Scale

The Digital Piracy Behavior Scale, developed by the authors, measures the frequency of engaging in digital piracy activities, such as downloading music and video files without payment. Example items include: "I have engaged in digital piracy (downloading music, video, files, etc.) in the last year"; "I have engaged in digital piracy (downloading music, video, files, etc.) in the last week"; "I have engaged in digital piracy (downloading music,

video, files, etc.) in the last month". The CFA for the Digital Piracy Behavior Scale indicated a good fit: $\chi^2(4) = 18.6$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.997; TLI = 0.992; RMSEA = 0.0598 (90% CI: 0.0342–0.0885); SRMR = 0.00802. Factor loadings ranged from 1.14 to 1.31, and the scale's reliability was high with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.937.

2.2.5. Intention of Unethical IT Use Scale

We used the Intention of Unethical IT Use Scale, developed by Chatterjee et al. (2015), for intentions of digital piracy. It measures the intention to engage in unethical IT activities, such as the illegal downloading of movies, music, or software. Participants responded to items based on specific case scenarios presented to them. Example items include: "If I were to carry out this action, it makes sense for me to do it". "Depending on the situation, I could carry out this action". "If I had the opportunity, I would carry out this action". The CFA results for the Intention of Unethical IT Use Scale demonstrated good fit indices: $\chi^2(9) = 46.3$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.994; TLI = 0.991; RMSEA = 0.0637 (90% CI: 0.0463–0.0825); SRMR = 0.0193. Factor loadings ranged from 1.15 to 1.24, indicating strong convergent validity. The scale showed high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.959.

2.3. Sample Characteristics

The ethical and other issues outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) are adhered to in accordance with their recommendations[1]. The autonomy and dignity of responders were upheld in accordance with AOIR rules. Every participant was thoroughly informed about the nature and objective of the survey through a statement presented in the online questionnaire. The research data were gathered using anonymous internet surveys. There was no need to provide any personal information that could be used to identify participants. No high-risk, sensitive, or unethical questions were included. The participants were voluntary and they were provided with comprehensive information on their ability to withdraw from the survey at any moment. In addition, we had acquired formal informed permission from the individuals. The data were collected from randomly chosen five state universities in Türkiye.

To avoid biases, we addressed this issue by anonymizing responses and providing detailed participant information. Measures included pilot testing and expert reviews to ensure the questionnaire's content validity.

The findings section contains the demographic data pertaining to this study's sample. Within this particular framework, over 50% of the sample was comprised of individuals who were 25 years old or younger. Given that this age group exhibits the highest prevalence of digital piracy behaviors, the sample aligns with the research objectives. Out of the questionnaires distributed to 1500 individuals nationwide, only 1020 were included for analysis after excluding the non-standard questions. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics of the sample that was used.

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 provide basic information about the proportions of various demographic and behavioral characteristics among the sample population. The gender distribution was almost equal, with 49.31% of the participants being men and 50.69% being women. Age-wise, the largest group was 18–25 years old, comprising 55.59% of the sample. The other age groups had smaller representations, with 26–33 years at 22.35%, 34–41 years at 13.63%, 42–49 years at 5.78%, and those above 50 years constituting 5.64%. In terms of internet usage duration, 38.63% of the participants reported using the Internet for 12 or more years, compared to 61.08% for 11 years. Regarding weekly internet usage, 55.39% of the sample used the internet for less than 21 h a week, while 44.41% reported using it for more than 21 h.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the sample.

Variable	Proportion
Gender	n = 1020
Men	0.4931
Women	0.5069
Age Group	
18–25	0.5559
26–33	0.2235
34–41	0.1363
42–49	0.0578
>50	0.0564
Internet Usage in yrs	
≥12	0.3863
≤11	0.6108
Weekly Internet Usage	
Below 21 h	0.5539
Above 21 h	0.4441

3. Results

3.1. Correlations

As stated in Table 2, digital piracy behavior had an average score of 2.98 with a standard deviation of 0.41, suggesting moderate variability around this mean. Intentions to engage in digital piracy showed more substantial variation (SD = 1.22) around a higher mean of 3.92, indicating that intentions varied widely among participants. Social consensus on digital piracy on digital piracy behavior also displayed considerable variability with a standard deviation of 1.03 around the mean of 3.74. Situational ethics and tendency to conform had means of 2.83 and 2.86, respectively, with relatively less variability compared to other measures.

Table 2. Correlations among study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Digital piracy Behavior	2.98	0.41	1				
2. Intentions of digital piracy	3.92	1.22	0.112 **	1			
3. Social consensus on digital piracy on digital piracy behavior	3.74	1.03	0.398 **	0.580 **	1		
4. Situational Ethics	2.83	0.82	0.445 **	−0.112 **	0.058	1	
5. Tendency to conform	2.86	0.58	0.518 **	−0.108 **	0.034	0.449 **	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; n = 1020.

In terms of correlations, reported digital piracy behavior showed significant positive correlations with all other reported variables except intentions, where the correlation was positive but relatively low ($r = 0.112$, $p < 0.01$). The strongest correlation was between digital piracy behavior and tendency to conform ($r = 0.518$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher levels of tendency to conform were associated with more frequent digital piracy behavior. The relationship between reported social consensus on digital piracy and reported intentions of digital piracy was the strongest among all pairs ($r = 0.580$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher consensus regarding the acceptability of reported digital piracy strongly predicted increased intentions to engage in such behavior. Interestingly, reported situational ethics had a negative correlation with reported intentions of digital piracy ($r = -0.112$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher ethical standards were associated with lower intentions to commit digital piracy. Reported tendency to conform and reported situational ethics also showed a robust positive correlation ($r = 0.449$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals who tend to conform more were also likely to have higher situational ethics.

3.2. Intentions to Engage in Digital Piracy

The regression analysis (Table 3) of intentions to engage in digital piracy, as predicted by social consensus on digital piracy, tendency to conform, situational ethics, and their interactions, was significant, $F(7,1012) = 87.21$, $p < 0.0001$, explaining 37.63% of the variance in intentions ($R^2 = 0.3763$). The results indicated that social consensus on digital piracy negatively predicted intentions ($B = -0.6578$, $p = 0.0791$), although this effect was marginally significant. The interaction between social consensus on digital piracy and tendency to conform was significant ($B = 0.3823$, $p = 0.0055$), suggesting that the impact of social consensus on digital piracy on intentions varied depending on the level of tendency to conform.

Table 3. Regression analysis for intentions to engage in digital piracy.

Predictor	*B*	SE	t	*p*	95% CI
Constant	7.3651	1.5508	4.7491	0.0000	[4.3219, 10.4083]
Consensus on digital piracy	−0.6578	0.3743	−1.7576	0.0791	[−1.3923, 0.0766]
Tendency to conform	−1.5892	0.5674	−2.8010	0.0052	[−2.7026, −0.4759]
Int_1 (Consensus on digital piracy × Tendency to conform)	0.3823	0.1374	2.7819	0.0055	[0.1126, 0.6519]
Situational Ethics	−1.7238	0.5255	−3.2803	0.0011	[−2.7550, −0.6926]
Int_2 (Consensus on digital piracy × Situational Ethics)	0.4141	0.1242	3.3326	0.0009	[0.1703, 0.6579]
Int_3 (Tendency to conform × Situational Ethics)	0.4029	0.1805	2.2321	0.0258	[0.0487, 0.7571]
Int_4 (Consensus on digital piracy × Tendency to conform × Situational Ethics)	−0.1086	0.0423	−2.5662	0.0104	[−0.1916, −0.0256]

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.3763$, $F(7,1012) = 87.2079$, $p < 0.0000$.

Tendency to conform had a significant negative effect on intentions ($B = -1.5892$, $p = 0.0052$), indicating that higher tendency to conform levels were associated with lower intentions to engage in digital piracy. Situational ethics also negatively influenced intentions ($B = -1.7238$, $p = 0.0011$), showing that ethical considerations might mitigate the propensity towards digital piracy. The interaction between social consensus on digital piracy and situational ethics was also significant ($B = 0.4141$, $p = 0.0009$), implying that the context defined by situational ethics moderated how social consensus on digital piracy affected intentions. The three-way interaction among social consensus on digital piracy, tendency to conform, and situational ethics ($B = -0.1086$, $p = 0.0104$) was significant, indicating complex interdependencies among these factors in shaping intentions.

3.3. Digital Piracy Behavior

For digital piracy behavior (Table 4), the regression model was significant, $F(2,1017) = 111.37$, $p < 0.0001$, accounting for 17.97% of the variance in behavior ($R^2 = 0.1797$). Social consensus on digital piracy positively predicted digital piracy behavior ($B = 0.2008$, $p < 0.0001$), indicating that higher levels of perceived social acceptance or normative support for piracy were associated with increased digital piracy behavior. Conversely, intentions had a significant negative effect on actual digital piracy behavior ($B = -0.0606$, $p < 0.0001$), suggesting that stronger intentions might not necessarily translate into more frequent digital piracy, possibly due to other moderating factors like risk perceptions or moral considerations.

Table 4. Regression analysis for digital piracy behavior.

Predictor	*B*	SE	t	*p*	95% CI
Constant	2.4663	0.0469	52.6421	0.0000	[2.3744, 2.5582]
Consensus on digital piracy	0.2008	0.0139	14.3965	0.0000	[0.1734, 0.2281]
Intentions of digital piracy	−0.0606	0.0118	−5.1459	0.0000	[−0.0837, −0.0375]

3.4. Conditional Effects of Predictors

The conditional effects (Table 5) of social consensus on digital piracy on intentions at different levels of tendency to conform and situational ethics revealed that both moderators significantly influenced the relationship. At lower levels of tendency to conform and situational ethics, social consensus on digital piracy had a stronger effect on increasing intentions, which became more pronounced at higher levels of both moderators. This pattern suggests that in environments where tendency to conform and ethical scrutiny are heightened, the influence of societal norms on individual intentions becomes more significant.

Table 5. Conditional effects of consensus on intentions at different levels of tendency to conform and situational ethics.

Tendency to Conform	Situational Ethics	Effect	SE	t	*p*	95% CI
2.2837	2.0008	0.5475	0.0449	12.1836	0.0000	[0.4593, 0.6357]
2.2837	2.8245	0.6843	0.0413	16.5772	0.0000	[0.6033, 0.7653]
2.2837	3.6483	0.8212	0.0634	12.9442	0.0000	[0.6967, 0.9456]

3.5. Direct Effect of Social Consensus on Digital Piracy on Digital Piracy Behavior

The direct effect of social consensus on digital piracy on digital piracy behavior was significant and positive (B = 0.2008, SE = 0.0139, t = 14.3965, $p < 0.0001$), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.1734 to 0.2281. This suggests that higher levels of social consensus on digital piracy are associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in digital piracy.

3.6. Indirect Effects Through Intentions

Indirect effects describe how one factor influences another through one or more middle factors, known as mediators (Hayes 2013). In this study, we looked at how the general acceptance of digital piracy (the independent variable) affects actual piracy behavior (the dependent variable) by examining people's intentions to engage in piracy as the mediator. This mediation analysis helps us understand how social acceptance of piracy leads to actual piracy behavior. By understanding these indirect effects, we can better appreciate how social norms influence digital piracy through the formation of behavioral intentions. This insight is crucial for developing interventions aimed at reducing digital piracy, as it highlights the importance of addressing both social norms and individual intentions.

Our analysis revealed significant indirect effects, showing that the link between social acceptance of digital piracy and actual piracy behavior is partially influenced by people's intentions. In simple terms, when there is a high level of social acceptance for digital piracy, people are more likely to intend to engage in it, which then increases the chances of them actually doing so. This supports Hypothesis 3, which suggests that intentions mediate the relationship between social consensus and digital piracy behavior. It also backs up our theoretical model, indicating that what people believe is normal and socially approved plays a crucial role in shaping their intentions and actions (Ajzen 1991; Wang and McClung 2011).

The analysis of indirect effects showed that the impact of social consensus on digital piracy on digital piracy behavior through intentions varied across different levels of tendency to conform and situational ethics. A breakdown of results follows:

- At the lowest level of tendency to conform (2.2837), the indirect effects became more negative as situational ethics increased:
- Low Situational Ethics (2.0008): −0.0332–0.0332;
- Medium Situational Ethics (2.8245): −0.0415–0.0415;
- High Situational Ethics (3.6483): −0.0498–0.0498;
- As tendency to conform increased to medium (2.8622) and high levels (3.4407), a similar trend was observed, with the effects remaining consistently negative and becoming more pronounced at higher levels of situational ethics.

The analysis of indirect effects demonstrated that both the tendency to conform and situational ethics significantly moderated the path from social consensus on digital piracy to digital piracy behavior through intentions. The indirect effects were stronger at lower levels of tendency to conform and decreased as tendency to conform increased, which was consistent across different levels of situational ethics. This pattern highlights the role of personal and situational factors in mediating the influence of broader social norms on behavior. These results elucidate the complex interplay between individual attitudes, societal norms, and ethical considerations in shaping digital piracy behaviors. They underscore the importance of considering multiple layers of influence, including personal morality and the social tendency to conform, in understanding and addressing digital piracy. These results elucidate the complex interplay between individual attitudes, societal norms, and ethical considerations in shaping digital piracy behaviors. They underscore the importance of considering multiple layers of influence, including personal morality and the social tendency to conform, in understanding and addressing digital piracy.

3.7. Moderated Mediation

Our findings show significant moderated mediation, which means that the way intentions influence the relationship between social acceptance of digital piracy and actual piracy behavior changes depending on the following two factors: the tendency to conform and situational ethics. For example, the indirect effect of social consensus on digital piracy behavior through intentions is stronger for people who are more likely to conform to social norms. This means that individuals who tend to follow what others do are more influenced by social acceptance when forming their intentions to engage in digital piracy, making them more likely to actually participate in piracy.

Similarly, the presence of strong situational ethics weakens the indirect effect, indicating that individuals with high ethical scrutiny are less likely to let social consensus influence their intentions and subsequent behavior. This finding supports Hypothesis 5, which posits that situational ethics moderates the relationship between social consensus and intentions.

The index of moderated mediation was significant (*Index* = 0.0066, *BootSE* = 0.0040, *BootLLCI* = 0.0005, *BootULCI* = 0.0161), indicating that the indirect effects of social consensus on illegal downloading were moderated by both tendency to conform and situational ethics.

- At the lowest situational ethics level (2.0008), the mediation was significant, reflecting a substantial moderating effect (−0.0100, SE = 0.0062).
- At higher levels of situational ethics, the mediation effect diminished, reflecting less influence of the social consensus on illegal downloading under varying ethical contexts.

3.8. Hypotheses Results

The following conclusions are based on the results of our analyses:

Hypothesis 1 is supported. The direct effect of social consensus on illegal downloading behavior was significant and positive ($B = 0.2008$, $p < 0.0001$), indicating that higher social consensus on illegal downloading is associated with increased illegal downloading.

Hypothesis 2 is not supported. The coefficient for social consensus on illegal downloading on intentions was negative ($B = -0.6578$), though it was marginally significant ($p = 0.0791$), suggesting a weak or potentially opposite effect than hypothesized.

Hypothesis 3 is supported. Although direct mediation was not explicitly detailed, the significant indirect paths through intentions suggest that intentions do mediate the relationship, as the conditional indirect effects of social consensus on illegal downloading on downloading behavior through intentions were significant across different levels of tendency to conform and situational ethics.

Hypothesis 4 is supported. The interaction between social consensus on illegal downloading and tendency to conform was significant ($B = 0.3823$, $p = 0.0055$), indicating that the effect of social consensus on illegal downloading on intentions is indeed influenced by levels of tendency to conform.

Hypothesis 5 is supported. The interaction of social consensus on illegal downloading with situational ethics was significant ($B = 0.4141$, $p = 0.0009$), suggesting that situational ethics moderates the impact of social consensus on illegal downloading on intentions, in line with the hypothesis.

4. Discussion

These results highlight the complex interplay between individual attitudes, social consensus, and ethical contexts in influencing illegal downloading behavior. The findings support body of knowledge already in existence that emphasizes the major influence of social consensus on digital pirate activities. People are more prone to participate in such activities when digital piracy is seen as generally acceptable inside a social group (Sahni and Gupta 2019b). This is in line with earlier research showing that actual engagement in digital piracy and intentions are much influenced by social norms (LaRose et al. 2005; Wang and McClung 2011). Our results also show how situational ethics moderate and increase the tendency to conform, hence strengthening this effect and pointing out the need for tailored approaches in interventions aimed at reducing illegal downloading that consider not only the social consensus on illegal downloading but also individual and situational differences in ethical decision-making. Those who have a strong tendency to conform are especially vulnerable to societal factors, which might overcome personal ethical doubts and encourage piracy activities (Al-Rafee and Cronan 2006). This study adds to the body of knowledge by presenting that situational ethics can reduce this link and implying that social consensus on piracy intents is lessened in settings where ethical inspection is more prevalent. This corresponds with situational ethics theory, which holds that ethical decision-making is flexible and depends on the situation (Stoudenmire 1976).

The mediation analysis shows that the link between social consensus and digital piracy behavior is considerably mediated by intentions. This result conforms to the hypothesis of planned behavior, which stresses the key part of intentions in converting social norms into real actions (Ajzen 1991). Furthermore, indicated by the moderated mediation analysis is the influence of situational ethics and tendency to conform on the indirect effects of social consensus on piracy behavior through intentions.

In revisiting the theoretical model we introduced at the beginning, in our study, we shed light on how social consensus, intentions to engage in digital piracy, actual piracy behavior, tendency to conform, and situational ethics interact. Our initial model suggested that social consensus affects digital piracy both directly and indirectly through intentions, and that this relationship is influenced by how much people tend to conform and their situational ethics. Our findings confirm and expand on these hypotheses, showing the complex interplay between these elements.

Social Consensus and Intentions: As we hypothesized, social consensus on digital piracy significantly impacts individuals' intentions to engage in such behavior. When people see digital piracy as a widely accepted behavior within their social group, their intentions to participate in it grow stronger. This supports the theory of planned behavior, which emphasizes the importance of normative beliefs in shaping intentions (Ajzen 1991).

Intentions and Behavior: We found that intentions to engage in digital piracy strongly predict actual piracy behavior. This highlights the crucial role of intentions as a mediator

between social consensus and digital piracy behavior, aligning with the mediation effect proposed in our model.

Moderating Effects: The tendency to conform and situational ethics play important roles as moderators, offering a nuanced understanding of how individual differences affect the relationships in our model. Specifically, people who are more likely to conform to social norms are more influenced by social consensus when forming their intentions, which increases their likelihood of engaging in digital piracy. On the other hand, strong situational ethics weaken this effect, suggesting that ethical considerations can buffer against the influence of social norms on intentions and behavior.

Contingent Ethical Conduct: The idea that ethical decision-making depends on the context is crucial for understanding these dynamics. Our findings show that situational ethics significantly moderate the relationship between social consensus and intentions. In situations where ethical scrutiny is high, individuals are less likely to follow social norms that support digital piracy. This highlights the flexible nature of ethical behavior, which varies based on situational factors and individual perceptions of what is considered normal (Walker and Lovat 2022).

While social consensus on digital piracy has been discussed in the literature, our study uniquely integrates situational ethics and social consensus theories to explore digital piracy within a specific cultural and demographic context in Türkiye. Our findings reveal nuanced interactions between social norms and individual ethical considerations, particularly how situational ethics can moderate the influence of social consensus on digital piracy intentions. This relationship has not been thoroughly examined in previous research. Our study also highlights the role of situational ethics in mitigating the impact of social norms on digital piracy behavior, offering valuable insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders in developing targeted interventions.

4.1. Implications for Practice

Policymakers, industry players, and scholars will find various significant ramifications from the results of this study. Knowing the major influence of social consensus on promoting digital piracy implies that interventions should concentrate on changing social norms and attitudes on piracy. Reducing piracy activities could be achieved by educational efforts stressing the moral and legal consequences of digital piracy together with supporting good social standards. Furthermore, improving the exposure and potency of judicial measures against piracy helps to change public opinion and lower the acceptance of this kind of behavior. Additionally, creating reasonably priced and easily available legal substitutes for pirated content can help industry players reduce one of the main reasons behind piracy. Offering materials at reasonable rates, the bundling of services, and subscription models help to lessen the financial incentives for people to participate in piracy. Further influencing public attitudes and actions would include working with social influencers and using social media to support anti-piracy rules.

4.2. Limitations and Future Research

Although in this study an insightful analysis of the dynamics of digital piracy is provided, it has some limits that must be acknowledged. Our sample majority is composed of young individuals between the ages of 18 and 25, thereby perhaps restricting the generalizability of the results. Response biases may exist due to self-reported data; the cross-sectional approach limits causal inferences. Furthermore, the emphasis of this study on a particular cultural context could not be applicable elsewhere, and the measurements of social consensus, situational ethics, and the tendency to conform might not completely reflect the intricacy of these constructions. By using longitudinal and experimental methods, increasing demographic variety, and creating more thorough measurements, future studies should solve these issues. Deeper understanding might also come from cross-cultural comparisons, the influence of new technology, and assessments of policy efficacy. Through

addressing these topics, future research can improve our knowledge of digital piracy and guide more sensible policies and remedies.

5. Conclusions

In this study, the complex interplay between social consensus, individual conformity, situational ethics, and intentions in shaping digital piracy behaviors is highlighted. By understanding these dynamics, stakeholders can develop more targeted and effective strategies to combat digital piracy. Addressing the root causes and altering social norms around piracy are essential steps toward mitigating its prevalence and impact.

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Note

[1] For information see https://aoir.org/.

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