



“Do you have a link?”: The effects of piracy and online streaming services on the sharing practices of television content

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ABSTRACT

The television medium continues to experience major disruptions from the advent of online streaming services. These video-on-demand (VOD) streaming services have afforded consumers with far greater agency and control over its consumption. These technologies have also enabled pirated content to flourish which remains a constant within the television medium ecosystem. Many studies have explored the effects of VOD services and its impact on how people watch television. There is also much work focused on how pirated content is damaging the industry or how people justify their consumption of pirated content. This paper will instead focus on how the use of VOD services has greatly changed the way users share television content, especially with pirated content and the growing trend of sharing VOD accounts. Today, the sharing of content is no longer limited to physical media formats such as VHS and DVD but has expanded to the sharing of VOD accounts and pirated content links. These two developments afford and engender novel ways in which contemporary consumers consume and share content. The findings from interviews with 30 participants in Malaysia and Singapore demonstrate that the sharing of content has evolved into the sharing of access with the emergence of new types of media sharers—media users who consume content for free, purely by sharing with social contacts.

Keywords: ***media studies, online streaming, media sharing, media piracy***

INTRODUCTION

According to a poll conducted by Reuters in mid-2017 (Richwine & Toonkel, 2017), one in five adults stream television shows using an account from someone who does not live with them. One of the reasons cited for this phenomenon was that the number of subscription-based video on demand (SVOD) services was so numerous that subscribing to each and every one of them would be too costly. The practice of sharing SVOD services with people outside a household is well-known to streaming service providers but is generally accepted as cutting them off merely pushes them towards pirated content instead.

Indeed, streaming service providers fully understand that their main competition comes from pirated content and not the traditional television medium. Essentially, SVOD services are doing what pirated content has been doing for the last few decades; providing media users the freedom to watch television shows whenever and wherever they want. Previously, pirated content was often inaccessible to the average television viewer who was less tech-savvy. In the last decade, however, the same technologies used to support SVOD services has also led to pirated-based VOD services (PVOD) that provide a similar type of access as SVOD services, but without requiring payment. This has become more pronounced in the last few years as the use of legitimate platforms such as YouTube and Facebook to host pirated content grew rapidly (Spangler, 2017; Williams, 2017). This escalated to the extent that media companies started pressuring these platform owners to take more active steps to minimise the proliferation of pirated content on these platforms (Spangler, 2017; Williams, 2017).

The introduction of DVD box sets in the late 1990s freed media users from being bound to broadcast schedules and allowed them the freedom to watch their favourite television shows (Kompore, 2006). This development caused a disruption by breaking the monopoly of access that broadcast television held. Similarly today, online streaming has disrupted the industry by providing on-demand services with a simple access fee. Media users can now pay for immediate and direct access rather than cable subscriptions that are still bound by schedules or physical media formats that are cumbersome.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the sharing of media accounts was the next step in media sharing as a result of these new technologies. Where previously the sharing was physical in nature, sitting in a couch to watch cable, home video systems (VHS) or DVDs together, media users now share access instead. With SVOD services, it is the sharing of usernames and passwords; whereas for PVOD, it is the sharing of pirated links and digital files. But how prevalent are these practices and how different are they from the sharing practices of physical media?

Based on interviews with 30 media users in Malaysia and Singapore, this paper seeks to explore the many ways in which content is shared through the use of pirated content and online streaming accounts. Findings reveal new types of media users such as media lenders, media borrowers, and media users who never pay for any media (freeloaders) as a result of this new practice of sharing access (rather than physical/digital media). This paper will also explore the implications of these practices of sharing, and how they can affect media users and what this means to media owners. Can SVOD systems incorporate sharing to improve the media user experience?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, the television has held the position as the focal point for family members within the same household. Families would often own one or two sets, located in a mutually accessible location for all members. The rise of SVOD services has shifted media users to their own personal devices and are no longer reliant on a centrally located television; everyone can watch on their own and in privacy if they so desire (Vanattenhoven & Geerts, 2015; McNally & Harrington, 2017).

Before the advent of VOD services, the consumption of television content was centred on broadcast schedules. This was disrupted by the introduction of VHS that allowed media users to record broadcasts and watch at their own leisure and later, the introduction of DVD box sets which packaged whole seasons of television shows (Kompere, 2006). Both VHS and box sets enabled media users to share television content and gave them direct control over how they consumed it; they can watch it whenever they want and share it with whomever.

The social aspect of the television medium is an important and often undervalued characteristic. Unlike other entertainment media, this medium is often free and does not require any purchase or payment as it is usually provided by the government or paid advertisements. As such, the value of the television medium is never clear-cut. According to Newman (2012), its true value lies in its place within the popular culture. Newman states that television content gains value through increased viewership, regardless through legal or pirated means; the more people are invested or talk about a show, the more “value” the show gets. *Game of Thrones*, for the past few years, has been considered the “most pirated television show” and this reflects its overall popularity among television viewers and its value within the popular culture (Fuentes, 2017). In this regard, pirated television content contributes and supports this value rather than merely denying profits to media corporations. Therefore, there appears to be an intrinsic social aspect of the television medium that is heavily incorporated into its value.

Piracy is also an important feature in navigating the global broadcast licensing regime which heavily restricts access to content between countries. In his study on Taiwan television viewers who switched from broadcast television to VOD services, Tse (2016) found that the social aspects of television viewing were maintained when viewers arranged to watch programmes privately at home, but concurrently with their friends online. This practice can be seen amongst family members and friends who are separated geographically; media users in Taiwan lack access to foreign media while those abroad have difficulty accessing Taiwanese media. Thus, PVOD services function as a bridge that enables this form of concurrent viewing whereby media users can watch and discuss shows together. Without PVOD services, media users face constraints in watching the same shows with others in different parts of the world due to legal and technical issues related to geoblocking and global licensing.

In contemporary piracy studies, practices of media sharing and media piracy are often conflated under the umbrella term “file-sharing” (Belk, 2014). This has its roots in peer-to-peer (P2P) pirated services like Napster and BitTorrent that provide pirated content among users. However, the usage of these services is not equated as active content sharing as it is performed passively and automatically. Instead of explicitly sharing specific files with specific people, the user uploads shared content which is then hosted or managed by the service provider. Essentially, users would consider loaning a hard drive that is loaded with movie files to someone as an active act of sharing but not seeding a movie file on their BitTorrent account.

Thus, while sharing does take place, it cannot be equated to traditional forms of sharing which are more explicit and directed.

These P2P services revolve around the sharing of digital files, files that are stored on physical storage, necessitating the need to be downloaded before they can be consumed. Another study by LaRose, Lai, Lange, Love, and Wu (2005) found that most users who do use P2P services do not consider it as akin to sharing. Contemporary media users are now moving on to embrace online streaming which also includes PVOD. PVOD has evolved over the years and media users can now access it through YouTube, Facebook and for the less tech-savvy, one can purchase "Kodi boxes" that can automatically stream pirated content (Spangler, 2017; Williams, 2017; Barrett, 2017). Just as media consumption is shifting from traditional broadcast and physical media ownership to online VOD access, similar changes are taking place with pirated content. Consequently, users will be exposed to new ways of consuming media content and understanding its distribution.

One of the primary affordances of digital media is that information can be disseminated both easily and effectively just by sharing links. In a study examining the online habits of urban Malaysian youths, it was found that while not many engaged in the act of forwarding or sharing news content, they generally understood that it was both an easy and reliable way to pass important information amongst their social circles (Nge, Wilson, Leong, & Ngerng, 2012). As such, this inherent mechanism of digital media should also afford easier sharing of television content via the sharing of links such as PVOD links.

In her critical analysis of how sharing is perceived, Kennedy (2016) highlighted that sharing within the network economy is vastly different as digital sharing is near limitless whereas creative products are still finite. As old forms of examining sharing such as commodity exchange and gift-giving are insufficient to explain contemporary practices of sharing, a more thorough examination is needed to understand how sharing takes place based on present-day media sharing practices. In particular, she finds that more work is needed to understand how the different forms of media sharing (economy, distribution, and social intensity) have differing effects on content consumption and how they influence one another.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on 30 in-depth interviews with media users in Malaysia and Singapore as part of a larger study on digital media consumption. Malaysia and Singapore are two countries with high piracy rates, consume a large amount of foreign-produced media content, and have SVOD services available (International Intellectual Property Alliance, 2012; International Intellectual Property Alliance, 2014). According to International Intellectual Property Alliance (IIPA), Malaysia has less stringent controls over piracy and physical pirated content is more easily accessible as compared to Singapore which has virtually eradicated it. As these two countries consume media content from the US, UK, East and South Asia, local media users may encounter difficulties in accessing these content from legal SVOD services and may turn to PVOD services instead. The participants of the study were all above 21 years of age and were regular consumers of television content. They were recruited from a combination of convenience (open call on Facebook) and snowball sampling (ie. asking current participants to recruit their friends and family). Each participant was screened for suitability of the study based on how often they watched television (at least once a week) and when was the last time they

did (within the last 6 months). The interviews were conducted between November 2016 and May 2017.

The interviews were loosely structured around an interview guide with a series of questions regarding how participants watch television (and their use of pirated content), their consumption habits and how do they discuss television media content with their friends and family. As these interviews were exploratory in nature, a theme regarding the way participants shared and consumed media with their family members emerged. The practices of sharing seem to be through both illegal (pirated content) and informal (sharing of media accounts) means. (The list of questions can be found at this link: <http://goo.gl/4hK7T9>).

The interviews were analysed using an open coding scheme based on how participants consumed television content with others and their sharing practices. After each interview was transcribed and anonymised (the names used in this paper are all pseudonyms), quotes and themes based on media consumption, piracy, social usage and how they use and share content were derived. After the first set of codes was produced, a discussion with another member of the project was held to validate the relevance of these codes and possible themes. Any relevant codes were grouped together to form larger themes and formulated to get a better view of the ecology of sharing amongst contemporary media users of television content.

FINDINGS

The study resulted in 30 interviews (14 male, 12 Malaysian) with individuals from Malaysia and Singapore. The interviews were conducted either in person, in a public space or through video call. Each interview lasted anywhere between 20 to 90 minutes depending on the participant. This was to ensure that the participants became comfortable in talking about their use of pirated content and media habits. As such, the interviews would often include general discussions about television content to help the participants have a better idea of the questions being asked and think more carefully about their media consumption. The youngest participant was 22 and the oldest participant was 74 years of age. The demographic information of the participants can be found at this link: <http://bit.ly/2FDBUF5>.

The participants were involved in the sharing of their media, either as lenders or borrowers of physical media, files or accounts. I found that through the use of online streaming services and pirated content, media users are able to share more television content with each other. Since they are no longer limited to physical media, media users can simply share login information for Netflix accounts, send links to PVOD sites, and “borrow” easily without restricting access to the original owners. Essentially, their sharing refers to access rather than any discreet physical or digital form of media and therefore, different rules apply. Through these new forms of media access, sharing appears to have become easier and more common. The breakdown of sharing practices by participant is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of participants based on their sharing practice

Sharing practice	Participants
Media lenders	14
Media borrowers	13
Both lender and borrower	6
Freeloaders	4
Recommend sharing	12
Sharing media with family	15
Share SVOD account	10
Share pirated media files	12
Share links	7

MEDIA LENDERS

Media lenders are media users who share their media with others. 14 participants confirmed that they had shared physical media content such as DVDs or digital files, media accounts that allow others to access media content, or pirated media links and files that they know of. Many of these participants then highlighted that they rarely share physical media or files anymore and instead, tend to share links or SVOD accounts more. Despite the simplistic nature of these sharing practices, there were both interesting reasons for doing so and arbitrary rules governing these practices.

Sharing as a form of recommending

Ana is in her mid-20s and is a marketing executive in a start-up in Singapore. She watches television content every day on her computer and consumes mostly American and Korean drama series. Her choice of consumption is often through pirated streaming (sites that host Korean programmes) and download sites (Bittorrent). Several times over the interview, she highlighted a few instances where her friends would recommend shows to her to watch, either by loaning their Netflix accounts to her or by sending her pirated links to specific Korean dramas. Most of her content consumption comes from these recommendations:

“Usually it’s from my friend's recommendation [...] for example: Korean dramas. If my friends recommend a Korean drama to me, they’ll send me a link [and] where I can stream it from. If not, there’s this other recommendation from a friend, to watch [a] US series. My consumption of these kind of drama series is from recommendation, so they’ll usually have their preferred ones then I’ll just get through whichever their preferred one is and then I stream from there.”

So, while Ana is not a media lender, she receives advice on which shows to watch based on her friends' (who are media lenders) recommendations and pirated links, which Ana can use to start watching. Ana stated that this is good for her as she considers herself not tech-savvy and in general asks others for pirated links. She considers the links sent to her are somewhat safe as her friends have probably used them. For pirated media links that come from lenders, there is an implicit assumption for the borrower that the lenders have tried it themselves and it works as intended. To a certain degree, media lenders serve as a security or gatekeeper who assures media borrowers that these pirated content are safe for use.

Sharing of media as a form of recommendation is not unique to Ana as at least 12 other participants have both lent or borrowed media on this basis. Participant Sanjeev noted that when he was younger, he would often burn pirated movies onto DVDs and give them away to friends to let "people enjoy the same experiences" that he enjoyed. This may seem very altruistic but building on Newman's idea that the true value of television is in its cultural value, the simple act of recommending television shows to others can be seen as a subtle way to increase its cultural value as more people watch and talk about specific shows.

SVOD services also fulfil this purpose as the sharing of media accounts can often facilitate the process. While some SVOD services like Netflix impose limits to the number of devices (maximum 4) that can stream its content simultaneously, those limits still allow for limited sharing between one or two other individuals if needed. As a result, Ana also receives recommendations from friends who loan her their Netflix account so that she can watch specific shows. Another participant Affendi, shares access to his Crunchyroll account, a SVOD service primarily for Japanese anime, as a way to recommend shows to friends whom he feels will like these shows. He recounted one example:

"When Jojo's Bizarre adventure first came out, [my friends and I] were fans of the manga. So I passed [my friend] the account and then I passed another friend the account, which was more of a, 'this show is pretty good, I think you might like it and you can watch it here if you want.'"

When Ana is offered the use of someone's Netflix account, she "uses it sparingly" as she claims that she does not want to abuse this privilege. Affendi noted the same thing when he shares his Crunchyroll account and claimed that there is an implicit understanding in that the sharing of these accounts is temporary and there is some etiquette involved (i.e. do not use it beyond the show that was recommended or to use it for extensive periods).

Temporary sharing

Affendi, who is in his early 30s and has lived in Singapore ever since his parents migrated from South Asia, has actively shared his media accounts with others on a temporary basis. He often shares his login details with friends to introduce them to shows that he either recommends or they might have an interest to try out. So, when he does provide them with the login details, they would often watch just a couple of episodes and then find the rest on their own. He clarified that, "the basic assumption is that for this kind of sharing you're not gonna continue using it forever."

This type of sharing was rather uncommon among the participants and the only other person who practiced it was Ana. In this regard, it was mostly self-imposed by herself as she did not want to take advantage of her friend's generosity. With other participants who shared

login details for Netflix or other SVOD services, they often did so very carelessly, often ignoring or forgetting to revoke access later on. Another participant, Mary noted that she still used the Netflix account from her ex-boyfriend and continues to do so because he has not cancelled it.

Sharing costs

Rahmat is an IT programmer in his 30s and is based in Malaysia. When Netflix was launched globally in January 2016, he was curious to try it but hesitant to pay the fee on his own. As a result, he decided to share a single Netflix subscription with a friend from college and two other work colleagues. Subscribing to the most expensive plan, they each pay RM9 (USD2) for the monthly fee of RM54 (USD12). As Rahmat watches Netflix alone and on a single device, he felt that extra account slots were not needed and that this was well worth the money. He also stated that he would not hesitate to share a subscription with friends if another SVOD service catches his attention and has relaxed limits on shared accounts. Rahmat recounted how he decided to share the cost of a Netflix account:

"I think because initially, it's just me and 1 other guy that wanted to subscribe to it, but then we were looking at the packages and then we thought we only need 1 profile. So, there's no point to getting the 1 with the lower quality output, so we thought maybe we can just get 2 other people, and then they were okay about it."

On top of saving money by splitting the cost, this approach also allows him to access High Definition (HD) streaming that is made available for higher subscription tiers. Netflix's (and other SVOD services) rationale for allowing multiple users to share an account is attributed to the sharing of a single account among family members of the same household (Epstein, 2016). Most of the participants share their Netflix account in similar fashion. Rahmat is the only one who actively split the costs of maintaining the account with non-family members. While Netflix does not condone this sort of use of their accounts, they do not restrict it either, something which Rahmat is grateful for. In contrast, another participant, Lee, who actively shares a Crunchyroll account with others, does not split the payment between them equally. Instead, one person pays for the subscription fee and the rest repay in kind either through paid meals or drinks.

Recycling media

Feng and Gloria are two middle-class Malaysians, in their 60s, who have varying viewing habits. Feng is more interested in watching live sports while Gloria prefers watching Hong Kong dramas. Due to their age and lack of familiarity with modern technology, they generally purchase DVDs (both legal and pirated, depending on availability) for movies and TV shows. Gloria, being retired and having a lot of free time, has an insatiable appetite for these HK drama series. She purchases the latest releases from her local pirated DVD vendor, who often informs her of the latest drama releases (each containing several episodes from various concurrently running series).

Interestingly, after Gloria has finished watching each DVD, she immediately starts passing around the DVDs among her friends who have the same interests instead of discarding or keeping them. Her circle of friends do same with their own DVD purchases. After making

the rounds though, Gloria then takes whatever DVDs that she has and then sends them to her sister who lives in Singapore. She condenses this entire life cycle of her DVD purchases here:

“I buy, then [I] finish watching, then I will watch again and then we'll recycle with a few friends, and at the end I'll send it back to Singapore. [Be]cause Singapore [doesn't] have [pirated DVDs].”

Gloria's use of the term “recycle” is interesting as she feels that by sharing the media that she watches, she is providing them with new life and enabling the people that she cares about enjoy the same experiences that she has had. While physical piracy is largely becoming obsolete with the growing use of PVOD, there are still a lot of older, less tech-savvy media users that make use of it, and often in strikingly pro-social ways.

Sending media to family across borders is not unique to Gloria. Affendi is another participant who does something similar. As he has family back in South Asia, where their Internet quality is not as good, whenever any relatives visit him in Singapore, they often make requests for specific media content. Affendi obliges and would download high-quality pirated videos and place them on USB thumb drives to be brought back by these relatives. This type of sharing is mostly supported by pirated content as Affendi only needs time to download these media rather than money to acquire them. Apart from Gloria and Affendi, there was only one other participant who engaged in this form of cross-border sharing of pirated content with family.

Sharing media with family

Most of the participants articulated consuming television content with members of their family in one way or another. Some stated that they would watch the same shows while others would assist family members in acquiring media content to watch. A total of 15 participants admitted to acquiring media content for family members either through pirated or legal means. Rozie, who lives in Singapore with her son, claimed that her son is responsible for providing her with access to television content that she wanted to watch. Her son provides her access to television content through both PVOD and SVOD services. She only used the former for a short period of time as she was frustrated with the quality and instead settled on purchasing television shows on iTunes. In both cases, her son was the one who did all the legwork like researching and looking for these services while Rozie would merely state the shows she wanted to watch and paid for them. She said, “I'll ask him if it's available and he'll tell me how much it costs. It depends on how much I wanna watch it.” Nine of the participants admitted that their child help them acquire access to media whereby their child would provide or share a Netflix account, download pirated content or buy them content that they wanted to watch.

Media borrowers

Of the 30 participants, 13 had at some point borrowed or requested for media content from others. Some of these transactions were active requests from the borrowers themselves or they were offers from friends. In sharing media streaming accounts and pirated content, the lenders rarely revoked access, so borrowers often used them indefinitely. Given the growing number of media lenders, several new types of media borrowers who take advantage of this arrangement and actively engage in accessing content for free or freeloading emerge.

Devaluation of television media

Inevitably, the easy access to television content, both legally (sharing of media accounts) and illegally (sharing of pirated media files and links), convinced nine of the participants that there was no need to pay for any content including subscription fees for cable TV or SVOD services. Citing the immense availability of content on various PVID sites and legitimate sites like YouTube and Google together with the large number of friends willing to offer them access to Netflix accounts, these media users admitted that they did not see a reason to pay for content.

One participant, Mei, who is a Singaporean graduate student in her 20s, has never paid for any television content she has consumed. She regularly watches television content on PVID sites and her father pays for a family Netflix subscription plan, which she uses. While studying in the US before, a friend loaned her a Netflix account there. The way she explains the exchange generally hints at a lack of concern about the value of television content:

“Yeah, like when I was in the States, my friend I think one of his friends shared her Netflix account with him and he shared it with me, so I think they had no limit of devices back then. So, I was like okay, sure.”

This example suggests that accounts are shared so openly and without concern over who actually uses it leading media users to believe that media accounts are freely available if you know the right people. Unlike the earlier participant Ana who practiced restraint in using someone else's Netflix account, Mei has no reservations about using the account that was offered to her since it is free. While both participants are provided free access to media content, Ana still recognizes its value whereas Mei openly uses without restrictions which establishes her worldview that media content should be free. While this does not represent the full picture of media account sharing, it does illustrate that media users adopt different approaches to sharing accounts and these actions are governed by the individual's own internal sense of media value; in this case, Ana respects the value of media while Mei believes it should be free.

Mei went on to confess that “I don't really like paying for things” which through the course of the interview referred to films, music and video games. For Netflix, she did admit that she would only ever pay if the price was “low enough”. The example she provided for this was a Spotify subscription plan she shares with a friend which only costs her SGD 4 (USD 3) a month.

Mei also accepts pirated content that is offered by her friends as she lacks the volition to seek out on her own. She recounted the sequence of events that took place when she wanted to watch the HBO series *Westworld*:

“I don't [think] I tried that hard to find, I just checked if it was on Netflix [be]cause I couldn't really be bothered to find something, but then I was just talking to her about TV shows, and she said I should watch *Westworld*, so I was like okay. Then she offered to lend it to me”

In this case, Mei only searched in Netflix which she has free access to before giving up. In the end, she only watched it after being offered by a friend. Without paying a single cent, Mei is able to access a large variety of television content both through a family account and friends. Mei therefore engages in the active consumption of media content afforded by social connections and informal pirated content. Mei is not a unique case as several other participants

do the same and this reflects a growing trend among younger media users who grow up in an environment where content can be acquired at virtually no cost which in turn affects their own personal valuation of media in general.

Aggressive freeloading

In contrast to Mei, a passive freeloader who only consumes when the opportunity arises, another participant Loong, takes a more active and aggressive approach to watching television content without paying.

In his 30s with two kids in Malaysia, Loong lacks the time and money to really indulge in entertainment. With limited time, he heavily consumes pirated content (mostly YouTube and Facebook), but does not have the time and energy to learn how to access other types of pirated content. As a result, he relies on his childhood friends for help. He often makes demands of his friends to provide him with pirated content. They oblige him either by passing him hard drives full of pirated content (some which are recorded from cable) or just loaning him SVOD accounts to watch live sports. When asked about whether his friends request payment or anything in return, he just shrugged it off and stated that these are his childhood friends and they would do anything for each other.

Freeloaders in social groups are not wholly uncommon among the participants. Ana and Mei are two examples of such freeloaders. In the interviews, other participants expressed how they would deal with freeloaders within their social circles. Lina, who often helped others get pirated content stated that older people would often treat her meals while with younger people, she would just enjoy feeling “hip” for being able to find pirated content easily. Another participant Wan, shared that there is an active media freeloader in his group, who often borrows from others but never offers anything himself. He says the group just accepts his behaviour as they have been friends for a long time.

Despite the heavy reliance on friends, Loong still pays for content if it is more convenient for him. He talked about an experience where he opted to pay for a full season of a show instead of waiting for a pirated copy from his friend:

“At that time, I was watching [*Grey’s Anatomy*] until season 5, and up to season 5 I was watching it either online or I borrowed somebody's hard drive and at one point, I got my friend to record it on Astro and give me the whole s***, and probably season 7, I'm not sure, so I've been waiting for this, my friend I told him to record, and shit it's here [in this shop]. It's cheap. I might as well get it and watch the whole thing. That's the only reason why I bought that season.”

Loong expressed in his interview that he had no qualms about consuming pirated content, but he would not hesitate to pay if it was affordable and more convenient for him to acquire. When asked about why he did not consider Netflix, he thought that it was quite expensive, but when I informed him about the monthly fee, he thought that it was not as expensive as he thought and that perhaps he may try it. Loong's ignorance of Netflix's subscription fee was not uncommon among the participants as most participants who heavily consumed pirated content, often did not know about the finer details of SVOD services such as pricing structure or the content offered. For these media users, they are comfortable just consuming pirated content and had no reason to even explore legal media services.

Borrowing as a gateway to subscribing

There are some benefits to these practices of sharing. Rani, a Malaysian in her mid-20s, highlighted that the only reason she has a Netflix subscription, is due to the generosity of her best friend who loaned a Netflix account to her. She noted:

"It's so much easier, especially with Netflix, when [my best friend] first recommended it, it was really overwhelming 'cause there's so many different things and stuff like that so having her recommend it as compared to me just going in and just making like 'OK let me check this out' or look at all these kinda thing. The only reason I got into Netflix was because of her."

While Netflix does offer a free 30-day trial, some of the participants are still hesitant to give it a try. Some cited the fear of charging to their credit card or forgetting to cancel their subscription if they did not like it. Rani herself admitted she was hesitant to provide her credit card details, even for a free trial. Were it not for her best friend, she would have probably never tried the service. Several participants mentioned that at some point, they were provided by a friend access to Netflix and in some cases, resulted in them choosing to subscribe later on.

Rani made the decision to get her own Netflix account rather quickly and therefore was able to start using the service's own recommendations based on her viewing activity. Another participant, Mira, a Singaporean in her late 20s, was using her sister's Netflix account in Australia. However, when the service was launched in Singapore with a much reduced number of shows compared to the Australian version, she realized that she could not transfer her viewing activity to the new account. The viewing activity which lists shows that she has watched, shows that she is following, and recommended shows based on what she has watched, remain on her sister's account and are not transferable in any way to any new account. As a result, she continues to "pirate" her sister's account. Both these cases illustrate problems with sharing SVOD accounts as the longer someone uses someone else's account, the more tied they are to that account and therefore have less incentive to start an own account of their own.

CONCLUSION

The generational shift in consuming audio-visual content as a result of online streaming and piracy has greatly affected the way media users consume their media content. As television shows or movies are no longer needed in physical formats for consumption, its sharing now involves the sharing of its accessibility; being able to watch what they want when they want using subscribed or pirated services. As a result, the practice of sharing content is no longer limited to the exchange of physical media, but exchange of access; access in the form of paid streaming accounts or pirated media links. While both piracy and content sharing fall under the same spectrum of extra-legal media consumption as they are not afforded by current intellectual property (IP) regulations, the latter is more acceptable due to its connotations to physical sharing.

A prominent trend among the younger participants in the study is the general devaluation of entertainment media. Citing the continued persistence of pirated content, its growing presence on legitimate sites like Google and YouTube, and the shift from ownership to access, these media users exhibit a certain degree of apathy towards the value of media. They

are unwilling or are unconcerned with paying or supporting content creators. There is an entire generation that is growing up not understanding the differences between pirated and legal content which may in turn muddle the overall value of entertainment media. Further research is prudent to explore how the sharing of SVODs and PVODs can affect how individuals place value on their media content as this study was only able to reveal small glimpses.

As television viewing habits have shifted as a result of the growing use of online streaming services, so too will the sharing of its content. No longer restricted to the sharing of media content in the form of physical DVDs or digital files, sharing now involves the sharing of access. This has resulted in new ways for media users to act as borrowers and lenders which enables new benefits such as recommendations and cost saving. Freeloading has also become more viable as both legal and illegal content can be shared with ease.

Ever since the advent of VHS, the television media industry has warily viewed sharing at the consumer level as undercutting their own profit but perhaps, this is a very short-sighted view of the bigger picture. As was revealed by some of these interviews, these practices of sharing can support higher viewership of television media content and in some cases, lead to more subscribers of SVOD services.

At present, sharing is either prohibited or only allowed by media distributors or SVOD service providers. The practice of sharing SVOD accounts is only allowed because it is the only semi-legal way to share content among friends and family. Further, media users share their accounts to entice others to start watching the same shows that they watch. Currently, most media platforms and SVOD service providers do not offer any service to support this need and perhaps that is something worth considering. The media industry and SVOD service providers should therefore consider integrating sharing into their business model which can both serve as a gateway for new customers or motivating existing customers to be more invested in a specific service. This strategy is especially important given the rising number of SVOD service providers, including Disney which is starting its own streaming service soon.

In some sense, despite the growing integration of social media into our daily lives, SVOD services seem almost isolated in incorporating social features. Television content consumption revolves very heavily around discussions in social spaces as evidenced by people keeping abreast with the latest plot twists of the newest and most popular television shows. Sadly, SVOD services lack features that support the idea of sharing and talking about shows with others. While these services support the sharing of accounts, it is a passive form of support rather than active which makes the use of these services feel even more isolated. From the interviews, I find that sharing can have positive effects on content consumption and not just in providing access but also improving subscriptions of legal SVOD services.

The sharing of access emerged from the use of SVOD services and as these services evolve, so too will the practices of sharing. Due to these new emerging practices, both SVOD service providers and government legislators should re-evaluate existing IP rights on the distribution and consumption of content by consumers. Additionally, these new types of media users should be studied further to understand the implications of an ever-evolving media landscape that is being shaped by online streaming services, both legal and pirated.

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