Malware Threats Can Be An Effective Anti-Piracy Strategy, Research Suggests

November 30, 2023 by **Ernesto Van der Sar**

Most people know that they shouldn't stream or download pirated content. However, legal and moral arguments are often insufficient to deter prospective pirates. In recent years anti-piracy campaigns have started to focus on malware and other security threats instead. New research suggests that may be quite effective.

Over the years, we've witnessed dozens of anti-piracy campaigns. Initially, these pointed out that piracy is illegal and immoral, hoping to change people's views.

"Don't Copy That Floppy" and "You Wouldn't Steal a Car" are prime examples of these early attempts. While these campaigns captured the interest of a broad public, mostly for amusement purposes, they did little to stop piracy.

In recent years the tone of anti-piracy campaigns has changed. Instead of focusing on legal aspects and financial losses, they now place emphasis on pirates themselves being at risk, by associating piracy with ransomware, credit card theft, and other evils.

Just in the past month, two public service announcement campaigns were launched, both with a strong focus on security threats. In addition to rightsholders, these campaigns include State Attorneys General and the U.S. Government's IPR Center, each adding extra weight to the messaging.

Is Cyber Hygiene a Remedy to IPTV Infringement?

Anti-piracy groups must have a good reason to focus on security issues instead of copyright law. Perhaps the former is more effective?

A new *preprint* paper titled "Is cyber hygiene a remedy to IPTV infringement?" suggests that this could indeed be the case.

With this study, researchers from the University of Oxford, Bournemouth University and Hamad bin Khalifa University researched how psychological factors, including risk-taking and security behaviors, impact people's tendency to use shady IPTV services. Put differently, what determines whether people are more likely to use 'risky' piracy services?

After completing several questionnaires, the UK-based respondents were presented with a mockup of an IPTV service. There were several mockup versions, ranging from a clean interface to ones with popups, even spy- or ransomware. For each version, respondents had to rate the perceived risk level, and their risk-taking inclination.

The resulting scores allow the researchers to see how much risk people are willing to take, with the built-in assumption that unlicensed 'pirate' streaming services generally have more risky signs.

Internet Addicted Pirates with Psychopath Personalities

The researchers hypothesized that people who score higher on Internet addiction traits tend to be less reluctant to use risky piracy services. The same should apply to people with dark personalities, which is a combination of the personality traits narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

The results of the study, which have yet to be peer-reviewed, are in line these predictions. They suggest that people who score higher on Internet addiction and dark personality traits are more likely to see risky streaming platforms as less problematic.

[Vasilis Katos](), Computer Science Professor at Bournemouth University, informs TorrentFreak that this is both good and bad news for anti-piracy advocates. Previous research has shown that dark personality traits are relatively fixed and hard to change, but digital addiction can be addressed.
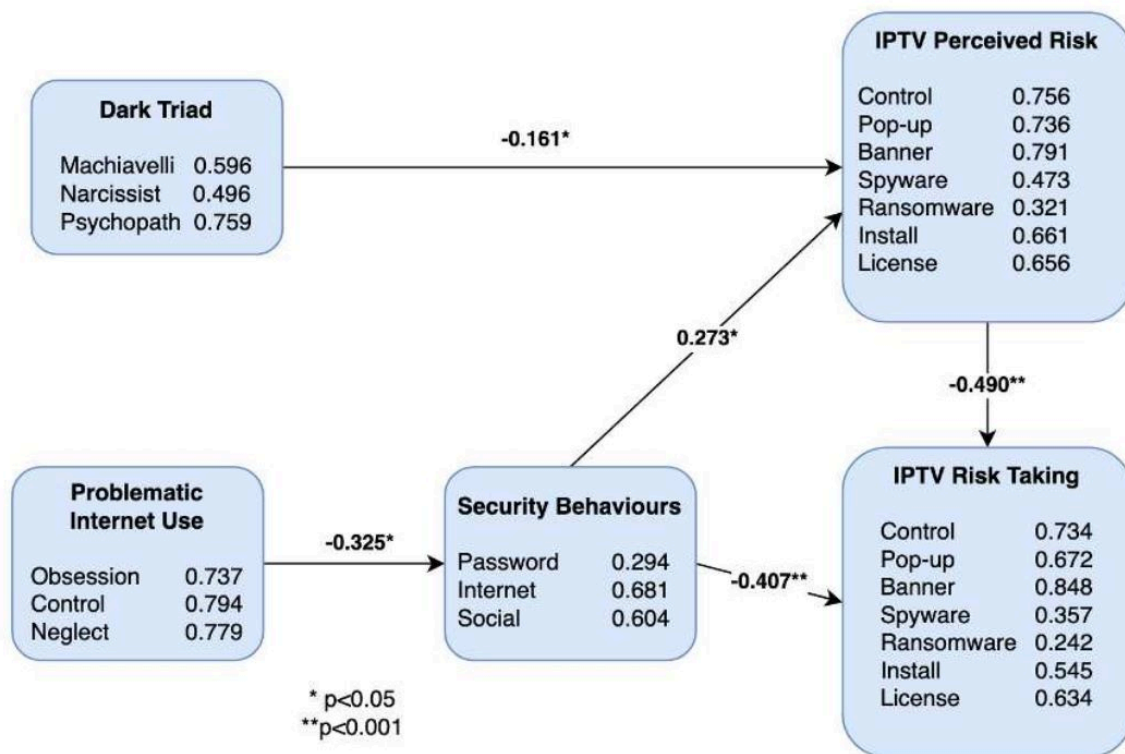
"Our findings show that people's propensity to risk taking – in our case viewing AV content with a risk of getting infected by malware – is dependent on two main aspects: one's dark personality traits and the degree of digital addiction."

"The former is considered pretty constant and stable over time, as the dark personality traits have genetical and biological components, therefore less prone to change. For digital addiction, however, we accept that there are interventions where people can adopt in order to heal," Katos says.

Cybersecurity Behavior

There is an important caveat, as the researchers note that addressing Internet addiction might not only affect online piracy, but also legal consumption. After all, binge-watching on official streaming platforms is also a form of addiction.

A more straightforward option to deter pirates lies in the online security realm. The findings indicate that people's cybersecurity practices and behaviors, could mediate the link between digital addiction and risky IPTV viewing.

Dark Triad
Machiavelli 0.596
Narcissist 0.496
Psychopath 0.759

-0.161*

IPTV Perceived Risk
Control 0.756
Pop-up 0.736
Banner 0.791
Spyware 0.473
Ransomware 0.321
Install 0.661
License 0.656

0.273*

-0.490**

Problematic Internet Use
Obsession 0.737
Control 0.794
Neglect 0.779

-0.325*

Security Behaviours
Password 0.294
Internet 0.681
Social 0.604

-0.407**

IPTV Risk Taking
Control 0.734
Pop-up 0.672
Banner 0.848
Spyware 0.357
Ransomware 0.242
Install 0.545
License 0.634

* p<0.05
**p<0.001

This mediating effect suggests that when people are warned or educated about the risk of malware, fraud, and other evils on pirate sites, they might be less likely to use these services.

"[I]n order to reduce the likelihood of someone consuming illegal IPTV content, we can address their digital addiction and/or improve their cybersecurity behaviour and hygiene," Katos notes.

Piracy Genes?

Put differently, the anti-piracy campaigns that focus on security awareness aspects, which we have seen pop up repeatedly in recent years, could be an effective strategy; perhaps even more effective than legal threats.

That said, the researchers stress that piracy is a complex issue that no single measure can solve. People who are born with dark personalities, particularly the psychopathy trait, may be genetically predisposed to take more risks online.

No matter how many malware threats there are, some people are simply willing to take the risk; just like there will always be people who step in to launch new piracy services. It might be in their genes, apparently.

"[A]lthough these [security-focused] campaigns could contribute to the decrease of risky IPTV viewing practices, they will not eliminate the problem, as there is always the portion of the population that are risk takers and perhaps seek thrills, as part of their psyche," Katos concludes.

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A copy of the preprint article covering the research in detail is available below. The results have not yet been peer-reviewed and should be interpreted as such.

Shah R, Cemiloglu D, Yucel C, Ali R, Katos V. [Is cyber hygiene a remedy to IPTV infringement? A study of online streaming behaviours and cybersecurity practices](). Research Square; 2023.

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