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You don't always get what you pay for: User experiences of engaging with contract cheating sites

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ABSTRACT

Contract cheating sites advertise that they provide high quality, undetectable, bespoke work delivered in a timely manner to students purchasing their assignments. This paper tests contract cheating sites' promises about the products they sell. We built on previous reported research examining contract cheating sites' persuasive features which were mapped into three major dimensions. In this study, we explore how those dimensions are realised in practice. By purchasing 54 assignments from 18 different contract cheating sites across a range of disciplines, we found contract cheating sites' promises flawed. Many sites do not deliver assignments on time, or at all; they provide variable quality assignments (including fail grade work), and do not necessarily respond rapidly to user queries. When markers graded work, 52% of cheated tasks failed to meet the university pass standard. Furthermore, many contract cheating sites retain the right to share personal details with third parties under their privacy clauses and require levels of personal identification that leave users vulnerable. Students need to be aware that contract cheating sites' slick advertising is not necessarily borne out in reality. Universities can draw on this study's findings for student awareness and deterrence campaigns pointing out the risks of using contract cheating sites.

KEYWORDS

contract cheating;
purchasing assignments;
student awareness;
assessment; persuasiveness

Introduction

Contract cheating is an issue of global concern because students who have not undertaken the assessment tasks that test knowledge and skills may be awarded degrees in which they have not learned the requisite knowledge or attained essential skills. Whether classified separately as contract cheating or seen as a serious form of plagiarism within university policies, higher education regulatory bodies in Australia and the United Kingdom have expressed concern about quality assurance issues where students have contract cheated. This is because students may have gained credentials fraudulently (Quality Assurance Agency 2016, 2017, 2018; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency 2016, 2017). It is not only the higher education and employment sectors that are concerned about contract cheating. Considerable social mistrust in universities' quality assurance mechanisms can result if there is a perception that universities are allowing students to graduate without having completed assessment tasks themselves (Loussikian 2015; Smith 2015; Visentin 2015). Therefore, the global phenomenon of contract cheating is of mounting concern within higher education landscapes.

Several studies have probed various aspects of this new threat to academic integrity. The purpose of this paper is to share insights from a study conducted at a large Australian university that examined whether the promises made by contract cheating websites are actually delivered. Our aim was to probe the conduct of contract cheating sites in delivering products, and to explore any potential risk to students who may engage with these websites.

We asked the following questions:

1. To what extent are contract cheating sites' claims about quality and timely delivery of assessment products realised?
2. What do sites' terms of use and privacy policies guarantee users?
3. What can we learn about the reality of dealing with contract cheating sites?

Ethical considerations

Clearly an important consideration in undertaking this research was the fundamental ethical dilemma of purchasing contract cheated papers, thereby supporting businesses the research team believe to be morally repugnant. The research team had lengthy debates about alternative ways to examine the transactional process of contract cheating over the course of three different studies on contract cheating (see Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2018a, 2018b). Finally, we agreed that to really understand students' experiences of dealing with cheating websites, we needed to put ourselves in the position of purchasing assignments ourselves. This was not a palatable decision, but we believe this approach places us in a more informed position to counter the harm done by cheating websites. By experiencing contract cheating websites' practices first-hand, we are able to unmask their promises and pitfalls. As Medway, Roper and Gilooly (2018) said, when purchasing contract cheated papers:

Examining a transactional process that is legal but potentially leads to fraudulent student activity down the line, also falls into an established practice of employing covert observation to research human and organisational behaviours and actions of questionable and debateable morality. (2018, 400)

We agreed that an overt or open approach to the 18 contract cheating sites we tested would have been unlikely to succeed or yield us the same experience as to a student user which was crucial in this study. This project was approved by the relevant university ethics committee as low risk research. It is important to note that whilst this study explored the researchers' experience of purchasing contract cheated papers, the assignments purchased formed part of two larger research studies. Those studies tested the abilities of sessional markers to detect contract cheating, reported elsewhere (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2018a; 2018b).

Literature review

Contract cheating was first examined as a phenomenon in 2007 by Lancaster and Clarke. They reported student use of one site, RentAcode. They defined contract cheating as situations in which students paid a third party to undertake assessments on their behalf which the students then submitted for credit as their own work. Much work has been done to explore this new threat to academic integrity since then. Studies have examined various aspects of the phenomenon itself: students self-reported contract cheating behaviours (Curtis and Clare 2017; Bretag et al. 2018), staff views on students' contract cheating (Harper et al. 2018) and contract cheating writers reporting why they write for these sites (Tomar 2012; Sivasubramaniam et al. 2016).

Other studies explore whether contract cheated assignments can be detected by markers or university staff (Malesky, Baley and Crow 2016; Wolverson 2016; Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2018a; 2018b). Further studies examined ways in which universities might mitigate against contract cheating, such as short assignment deadlines (Wallace and Newton 2014) and redesign in

Table 1. Contract Cheating Sites Persuasiveness Dimensions and Features, from Rowland et al. (2018, 659).

Dimensions	Features
Informativeness	Services described
	Services listed
	Order button
	Contact us
	Terms of use
Credibility	Assurance – quality writers
	Assurance – quality work
	Assurance – price
	Assurance – payment security
	Privacy policy
Involvement	Testimonials
	Personal account
	Feedback
	Live chat
	24/7 support
	Social network

assessment (Baird and Clare 2017, Rogerson 2017). In 2012, Walker and Townley conducted a review of the literature but focused on ways institutions might counter contract cheating. They postulated that students may move from plagiarism to contract cheating because contract cheating websites are easy to use and accessible. In 2018, Rowland et al. tested that notion. They examined the persuasive elements of 11 contract cheating websites to see how students might be induced to purchase assessment tasks. Our study builds on this work.

Theoretical framework

Rowland et al. (2018) proposed a persuasiveness framework that they distilled from earlier research on the dimensions and features of websites’ persuasiveness in the hotel industry. Persuasiveness is defined as ‘a destination Web site’s ability to evoke favourable impressions toward the site’ (Kim and Fesenmaier 2008, 5) and its ability to ‘influence the attitudes of web-site users’ (Díaz and Koutra 2013, 339). Initially six dimensions of persuasiveness were identified: informativeness; usability; credibility; inspiration; involvement; reciprocity (Kim and Fesenmaier 2008). Rowland et al. (2018) applied these dimensions to explore the ways that contract cheating websites might persuade or influence the attitudes of students visiting or using them. They found a number of features relating to ‘credibility’ and ‘involvement’ that commonly appeared on contract cheating websites which were not apparent in the earlier hotel studies (Table 1). Rowland et al. (2018) concluded that these additional features may ‘help convince the user that the site is trustworthy, and that they will be able to purchase satisfactory materials in a confidential manner’ (658), because cheating sites offer a ‘just-in-time’ service’ (659). Our study empirically tests all persuasiveness features identified by Rowland et al. (2018) by engaging with contract cheating websites to purchase assignments.

Method

This is an exploratory study undertaken at an Australian public university, with a student population of 58,000 and a large online-based student presence. Rowland et al. (2018) began with 47 contract cheating websites obtained by Google searches, which they reduced to 11 websites. We accessed a centrally held list of 50 known contract cheating sites that students at Deakin University had used in the past two years. We then used the following inclusion criteria, which reduced sites from 50 to 18. Sites in our study must offer:

Table 2. Contract cheating sites mapped onto Rowland et al.'s (2018) persuasiveness framework.

	All	Aussie	Australian	Australian	Brookvale	Buy	Cool	Custom	Do My	Essay	Expert	Grade	My	OZ	Superior	Top	Write
	Australian	Writer	Essay	Writings	Writers	Assignment	Essay	Writings	Assignment	Kitchen	Essay	Miners	Help	Essay	Writers	Quality	My
	Essays					Service	Essay				Roo	Help	Assignment	Essay	Essay	Assignment	Class
																	Essay
Informativeness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Services described	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Services listed	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Order button	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Contact us	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Terms of use	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Credibility	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assurance – quality writers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assurance – quality work	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assurance – price	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assurance – payment security	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Privacy policy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Testimonials	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Involvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Personal account	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Feedback	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Live chat	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24/7 support	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social network+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

+ we did not test social network, to protect author Dullaghan's identity.

1. PayPal or direct credit card payment for simplicity of payment tracking. This is the most likely way students would pay for services (as opposed to bank or credit transfers)
2. bespoke written assignments, not generic off-the-shelf products or notes for sale
3. assignments in the disciplines we required: business, health and science - sites offering assignments in only one discipline were excluded
4. Australian-specific content - as site locations are difficult to ascertain, we used the following inclusion criteria:
 - a. an Australian-based website (e.g. www.sitename.com.au),
 - b. claim to be Australian by site name or homepage, or
 - c. provide an Australian contact phone number
5. personal user accounts
6. independent operation, as several sites had different website names and addresses but were identical sites

We approached all 18 sites and placed orders for a variety of assessment tasks for undergraduate studies in business, health and science. Assessment tasks included two practical laboratory reports (biology and psychology), two health policy briefs, a fact-sheet, a research article and a business marketing plan. The written assessment tasks ranged from 825-2000 words. To reflect the student experience, both 'standard' and 'premium' quality work was purchased. A total of 14 'premium' assignments (at an average cost of \$178.95AUD) and 40 standard assignments (at an average cost of \$134.65AUD) were purchased. 'Premium' quality included: work completed by a 'top 10' writer, a plagiarism report, proofread by an in-house editor and 'VIP' customer service. For each unit we purchased between two and four 'premium' quality tasks. A variety of turnaround times were requested, from 6 hours ($n = 1$) to 9 days ($n = 1$).

We wanted to test how persuasive the three dimensions of 'informativeness', 'credibility' and 'involvement' were in reality for contract cheating sites. [Table 1](#) summarises Rowland et al.'s (2018) dimensions and features.

We tested these persuasiveness features by ordering assignments based on genuine assignment task requirements. Excel records were kept for each persuasive feature tested and a list of all tested items were mapped onto Rowland et al.'s (2018) persuasiveness features and dimensions framework by researcher Dullaghan. Researcher Sutherland-Smith independently cross-mapped items as a means of inter-rater reliability. The presence or absence of a particular persuasive feature is represented with ticks and blanks in [Table 2](#).

Results

Informativeness

This dimension contains features providing users with site information.

Services described/listed

Each website homepage outlines the services offered in terms of assignments for purchase. We tested sites to see whether the promise from all 18 websites that 'any type of assignment' could be provided was true. This was not the case as 22% provided work that did not meet assignment requirements or requests.

One site accepted our order and payment but then contacted us through the user personal account to inform us that the subject area was not the site's speciality and that the site could not complete the work. This is despite the website's homepage claim that it could provide work on the specific subject area. The site cancelled the order and provided a full refund. We subsequently avoided using that site again.

In other cases, sites did not provide the kind of assessment task specified. One assignment required a two page fact-sheet. This was difficult to order using the drop-down box ordering system used by all 18 sites. Our only options were ordering a '2-page essay' or a '2-slide presentation'. Although we included express instructions to produce two pages only, websites returned ten or twelve slide presentations, which were largely irrelevant to the task set. The product purchased required considerable reworking to meet assessment requirements.

Order button

The order button took users to the ordering system which was remarkably similar on 8 of the 18 sites. Ordering contract cheated work is relatively easy although time-consuming. Users enter their personal details and the details of the assignment product desired. As options are chosen, the total price is updated. Once the main details are entered, users can add extra services for additional cost, such as employing a 'top 10' writer or paying for 'VIP' support. Users can upload additional documents, such as assessment guidelines or specific task requirements at any time.

After the order has been submitted and/or paid, our experience is that all contract cheating sites contact users by email, phone, SMS and personal account message to upsell their services. Sites displayed varying degrees of persistence. In one instance, researcher Dullaghan changed the mobile phone number listed on the personal account to stop continuous phone calls and SMSs from one website trying to convince him to pay for various upgrades.

Users select the academic level of the work required whether high school, undergraduate or postgraduate. On some sites, even those purporting to be Australian-based, such as EssayRoo, the academic levels available for selection are clearly US-specific, as 'sophomore' and 'freshman' are not terms used in Australia. This indicates the site is unlikely to be based in Australia.

Contact us

All sites provided contact details, such as generic email addresses, a messaging system and live chat, as well as a US or UK phone number. Some sites ($n=6$) provided an Australian phone number. Live chat was a pop-up feature, appearing when users browse the homepage. We used the contact details for all sites to ascertain their location as well as conversing with the site after ordering. We only tested contact features when a personal account could be created. The contact process varied across sites. Some sites ($n=6$) used a personal online message system within a user's account to send messages. This was easy to use and responses were usually received within 24 hours. Other sites ($n=5$) used email for queries, which was somewhat slower. Some sites ($n=7$) were only contactable by using an online message form, which was cumbersome, with slow response times.

Terms of use

These are typically available by clicking links on each website homepage. Terms, along with payment and privacy policies, were checked for each site. Most of the 18 websites' terms were similar and state that the site provides work for reference and not submission. Sites disclaim any responsibility for the consequences of students submitting their work to an institution and make no guarantees about anything other than the standard of the product sold.

Terms are usually easy to find and relatively clear. They favour the business over the consumer, for example, non-refundable orders (Australian Essays) and Oz Essays reserve the right to contact the user's institution with the user's personal and order details should a 'chargeback' facility be used for claiming back payment.

Credibility

This dimension captures the sites' efforts to gain a user's trust. The features detail the sites' assurances about the quality of its services, products and the honesty of its pricing policy. Sites provide 'testimonials' claiming to support its credibility. All sites provide privacy policies, which have some unwelcome surprises for naïve users.

Assurance – quality writers

All sites claim to have quality writers but when ordering a user can pay more to procure a 'premium', 'platinum' or 'top 10' writer. Our experience is that paying more for 'premium' quality work did not result in higher quality product. In some cases, users can request the same writer who has worked on their previous orders. We did not use this option, but information on various sites suggest that this costs more.

Assurance – quality work

Contract cheating websites make assurances about the quality of the work they provide. They also offer higher quality services if users are able or willing to pay more money. We found that there were differences in website assurances about the quality of assignments provided and the actual product delivered.

Some purchased work (15%) was so unsatisfactory that we requested the work be revised. Revision was mostly necessary because assignment guidelines or instructions were not followed and would not satisfy assignment requirements. For example, one science unit's assessment task was a laboratory report. The laboratory results were provided to 12 different sites, however two sites failed to include the actual results tables or images required by the task. In both cases the sites were asked to revise the work to meet task requirements. Revised work was delivered within 24 hours, at no additional cost. However, no website would commit to a timeline to revise work, which meant it may be returned later than the submission date.

Many sites employ a standard template to provide purchased products, ignoring specific requests or instructions from the user to use a given template. In our study, a health unit used a government department template for an essay-type task; of the six sites paid to undertake this assignment, only three used the template we supplied ($n = 50\%$). Furthermore, where we gave specific instructions that one assignment be limited to two pages (as the assignment required), one site delivered a twelve page report.

'Premium' quality work

We ordered 14 'premium' quality assignments from seven different contract cheating companies. 'Premium' quality assignments were requested in five different tasks – two laboratory reports, one policy brief, one research essay and one marketing essay. We also requested and paid for additional proof-reading services and advanced plagiarism checking in two tasks. Our purpose was to see whether the work was really of higher quality when marked by discipline-specific markers, who were already marking genuine student work for that task. Although we have reported what markers learned about detecting contract cheated work in other studies (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2018a; 2018b), we have not hitherto discussed the quality/price difference of 'premium' quality compared to 'standard' quality assignments.

Overall 'premium' or 'platinum' quality work appeared to be little different to 'standard' quality work. The 'premium' quality work still contained language errors as well as content that was off topic or did not answer the set task. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the total cost of each paper against



Figure 1. Cost vs quality for purchased work.

the quality of the work in terms of final marks gained. Figure 1 shows there is a lack of correlation between the price paid and the quality of work supplied. The 'premium' quality work cost, on average, up to \$45AUD more than 'standard' quality work, while the average mark given to the 'premium' quality work was only 4% higher than marks for the 'standard' quality work. There were also six pieces of 'premium' quality work from five different sites that failed to meet the university pass mark of 50%. The assurances of higher quality work by paying 'premium' rates are not borne out in our testing. It appears users don't always get what they pay for.

One site claimed that premium writers are specialists in a topic and discipline, 'You will never have a person without a background in physics writing a paper on thermodynamics. Every writer assigned to our clients' papers has experience and academic expertise in the subjects they write on'. However, the site feedback for a particular writer we investigated, indicated that he completed quality work in sociology, movies/theatre studies, political science, ethics, philosophy and marketing. It is hard to imagine that one writer possesses a requisite degree of expertise over such a diverse range of disciplines.

Assurance – on-time delivery

Twelve sites assure on-time delivery and six sites do not explicitly make such guarantees. We experienced late delivery of work on three occasions. In addition, those sites ignored all our requests for progress reports. One site left a message several days after the user deadline passed claiming that the work would be delivered in five hours. It was not. The assignment was eventually delivered one week later. The same site also delivered a separate order eight days late. Three sites were unable to meet user deadlines and sites requested extensions. Site-requested extensions varied from 24 hours to three days. One site requested, and was granted, a two day extension but delivered the assignment a further two days late, with no explanation. This finding is critical, as students should be aware that not all sites deliver what they promise, or when they promise to do so.

Assurance – price

Pricing and costs are relatively clear and consistent across sites, yet always more expensive than outlined on the homepage. The initial price quoted is per page and can vary depending on the details the user chooses such as single or double spacing, undergraduate or postgraduate, assessment type and deadline. Typically, the price quoted is for a one page double-spaced undergraduate essay due in 10 days, with no extras included. Hence, the homepage price is always the lowest possible and in reality most users will probably have to pay more to meet assignment requirements. We found the average price for contracted work across the 54 undergraduate tasks was \$156AUD. Most tasks ($n = 17$) were seven-page products (1925 words). For the 54 tasks ordered, the average word length was 1425 words. Contract cheating sites claim that they are affordable and provide work from \$15-\$20AUD. This was not our experience. Many sites, even those purporting to be Australian, charge in US dollars. Consequently, users will pay more than the quoted price once credit card fees, international bank transaction charges and fluctuating daily exchange rates are added.

Assurance – payment security

Many sites claim secure payment systems, displaying logos of various payment security companies, PayPal and major credit card operators. Many sites also display a '100% Money Back Guarantee' claim. We experienced problems with three sites over payment security.

For one site, payment was made successfully for the first order, but not the second. The site submitted an invoice to PayPal rather than using the standard PayPal express checkout. PayPal refused the payment and suggested linking a bank account. We cancelled the order, however the site's user account failed to register cancellation and showed 'payment pending'. We submitted queries to the site but those queries remain unanswered to this day. The assignment was ordered on 9 November 2016.

PayPal refused to pay for two other sites and the sites would not accept credit card payment. Consequently, the orders were cancelled and the sites not used. PayPal provided no reason for refusing the payment. As with any website, it is a case of 'buyer beware' in terms of payment and access to credit card information.

Privacy policy

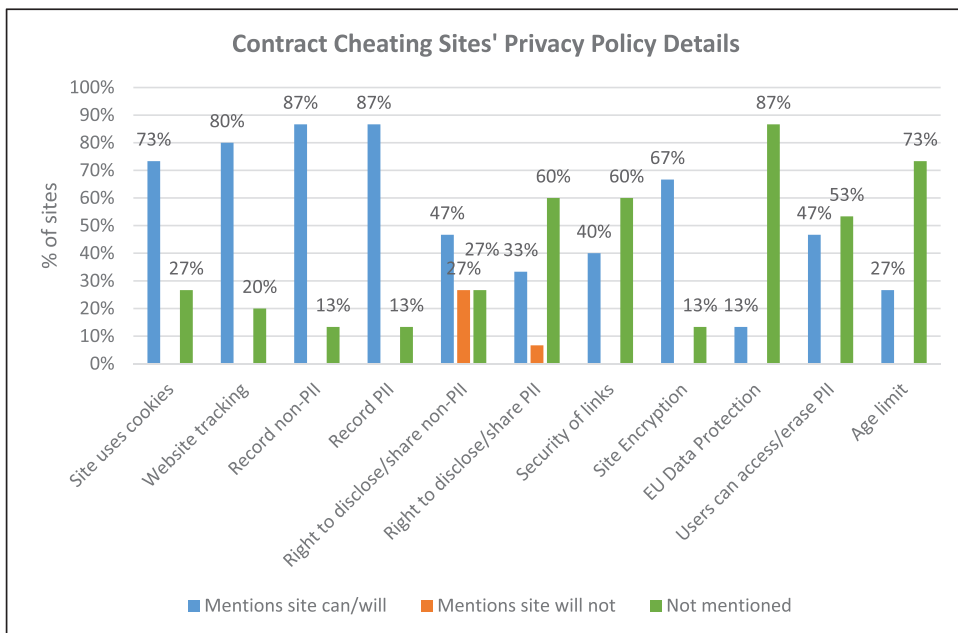
Internet privacy is a crucial factor for many users, and contract cheating sites have not ignored this issue, although users should be extremely concerned about the extent of the information many sites can share.

There was a privacy policy on 88% of contract cheating sites tested, usually in small print at the bottom of the homepage. Policies varied in length from a few paragraphs to several pages. However, many policies contained common clauses. All sites collect user data, both personally identifiable information (PII) and non-personally identifiable information (non-PII). Sites place cookies on a user's computer to record how users navigate sites and record users' personal information. Users need to be aware that some sites can and will share information with third parties. Some sites may not disclose what they do with personal information and whether a user's personal details remain confidential or private. The common themes emerging from our analysis in sites' privacy policies are shown in Table 3.

Figure 2 depicts the common themes from Table 3 tested against the 18 contract cheating sites. As illustrated, most sites use cookies (73%), track users' navigation (80%) and record both PII and non-PII (87%). Almost half the sites tested disclose that they can and/or will share users' PII (47%). Interestingly, 27% state they will not share a user's PII, whilst 27% are silent. Only 13%

Table 3. Common privacy policy clauses on contract cheating websites.

Clause	Explanation
Site uses cookies	Sites place cookies on a user's computer.
Website tracking	Statistics track how a user navigates the website, how often and how long users remain on pages, called the user's 'clickstream'.
Record non-PII	Sites record data such as browsers used, geolocation.
Record PII	Sites record all the user's personal data: name, email address, phone number, birthdate, credit card number, demographics.
Right to disclose/share non-PII	Sites retain the right to disclose non-PII to anyone.
Right to disclose/share PII	Sites retain the right to disclose PII to anyone.
Security of links	Sites' links to third-party sites are not guaranteed to be safe or secure.
Site encryption	Sites use encryption to enhance the security of information.
EU Data Protection	The EU Data Protection Act is mentioned, plus contact details for the Data Protection Officer.
Users can access/erase PII	Users can contact the site to check, change and erase any PII the site holds about them.
Age limit	Sites can only be used by people over a certain age (usually 13 years old).

**Figure 2.** Contract cheating sites' privacy policy details.

of sites mentioned the EU Data Regulations, possibly those sites based in EU countries (European Union 2018).

Contract cheating sites claim they collect personal information in order to provide service and customer support, maintain the website and for marketing purposes. However, given that 47% of sites we tested can or will pass on users' personal details to third parties, users should bear in mind the legal maxim 'let the buyer beware'. Students must understand that once any website has their personal details, they may have lost control of how, when and where their personal information is distributed or used.

Testimonials

Thirteen (76%) of the 18 sites we tested provided between 3-50+ testimonials. We analysed up to 50 testimonials per site. Testimonials are purportedly from users providing site feedback. All sites located testimonials on the homepage, but users accessed them in different ways, whether

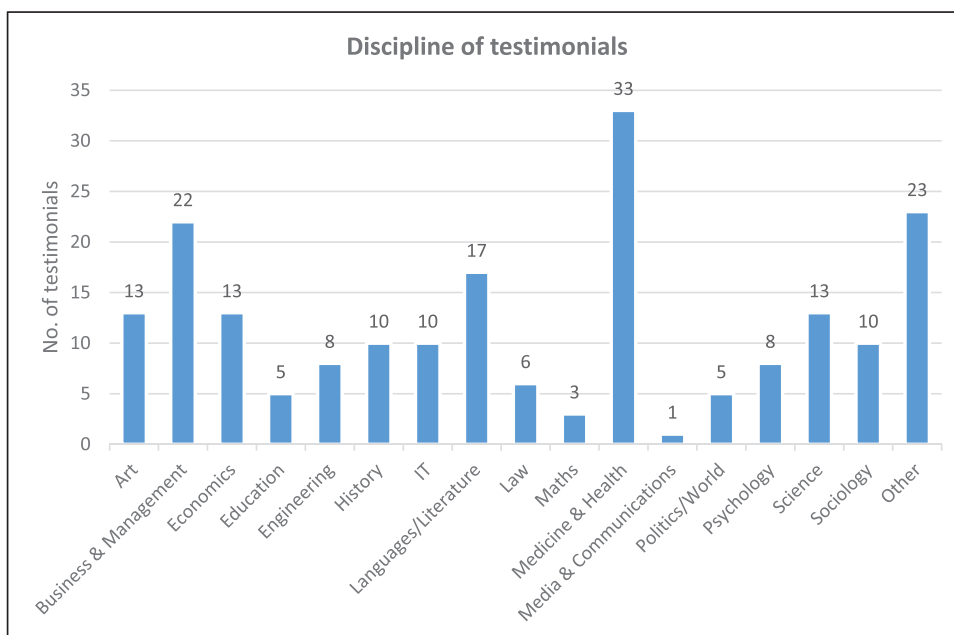


Figure 3. Discipline breakdown of contract cheating testimonials.

continuously scrolling ($n=5$), clicking on scrolling testimonials ($n=3$), clicking on a homepage link ($n=3$) or static testimonials fixed to the homepage ($n=2$). Some contract cheating sites provide the testimonial's country of origin. Most were from the USA (81%); Australia (43%); the UK (9%); China (4%) and other (17%). The international spread is interesting, given that our study focused on sites that claimed to be located in Australia and were purportedly for the Australian-based student market. Seven contract cheating sites provided the discipline for each testimonial (Figure 3). The largest group ($n=33$) were from medicine and health, which included medicine, nutrition, nursing, veterinary studies, sport and pharmacology. Business and management were the second highest group represented ($n=22$).

Some contract cheating sites provided a testimonial star rating out of five ($n=6$) and a few provided testimonial profile photographs ($n=4$). Only two sites displayed testimonials that contained negative comments which were largely about grammar and spelling errors. Some testimonials indicate repeat users. One example from Custom Essays notes:

I am your loyal customer. Special thanks to Deaneuf, my personal writer! Polisci is not my passion, but I just want to get my degree and be done. Thanks to you and Josie, I will not only graduate in a year, but will also do it with a pretty high GPA. (Customer ID 14549, Political Science)

Another testimonial reads: 'My subject became boring after 3 months, so my thanks to you for taking it off my hands' (Lani Tipu, China, Theology and Religious Studies, Australian Writers). Another states, 'I couldn't finish any of my dissertation, so I was happy to let you guys do it. You did a bang tidy job and I have recommended you to my friends' (David William, Australia, International Business and Marketing, Australian Writers).

Involvement

We tested various features such as personal accounts, feedback and live chat which allow users to communicate with the website and/or its writers. Sites may have offered social network involvement, but this was not tested as we wished to protect researcher Dullaghan's identity.

Personal account

A personal account was set up on each contract cheating site to facilitate buying and managing orders. This account allows users to login, track orders, keep records of communication with sites and their writers, as well as upload information, access draft and final assignment versions, request changes and provide feedback. Whilst most sites provided secure login, some did not and could be considered non-secure.

Although the order and payment stage of a user's first order was straightforward, many sites employed an 'account verification' system. This usually requires the user to send photo identification images (e.g. driving licence, passport). Contract cheating sites claim that this is for the user's own protection to prevent fraudulent credit card use. Some sites also inform users that if there is credit card fraud that government departments will be informed. Furthermore, if users engage in a 'charge back', they give up all rights to the purchased work and the company will determine whether any part of the purchased work was used. This includes 'contacting your school officials and/or posting your full details along with the completed project online'. This stance appears inconsistent with contract cheating sites' claims of user privacy protection.

As part of our project protocol we refused to provide photo identification or credit card images. If sites refused to verify our user account, we cancelled the order. Sites provided a full refund. Account verification was a significant privacy issue and resulted in us being unable to use two of the sites originally selected. We thought it quite suspicious for websites to require user identification images in addition to credit card details. Other academic online ordering services, such as Amazon.com, do not require photo identification. During this project, researcher Sutherland-Smith was informed anecdotally of situations where students have been blackmailed by contract cheating sites threatening to reveal their identity to the university unless these students pay additional money to companies to maintain their silence.

Feedback

Almost all sites request feedback on the work provided. Sites employ a myriad of techniques: mini-surveys, star ratings, comment boxes, testimonials and email. Typically, we provided feedback where it was easy to do so, such as star ratings. Interestingly, some sites pre-fill star ratings with 5 stars and comments such as '*great work, fast and good!*' which users can merely click to send, without any thought at all.

Live chat

All sites offer Live chat. Usually a 'pop-up' window appears on the site's homepage asking the user if they need help placing orders. We did not use live chat as often as email or personal account messaging support, but we used it on two sites to solve payment verification issues. Live chat provided fast solutions to these issues.

24 /7 Support

All sites claim to provide full support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and we used this feature extensively to: respond to writers, grant deadline extension requests, query order progress and resolve payment issues. 24/7 support is provided by email through the user personal account and all sites were relatively responsive, although we noted sites often ignored messages when orders were delayed but quickly responded over payment issues. In some cases, the support team emailed requests to writers, and in others the writer directly emailed requests. However,

24/7 support was via a central email address, so different people responded each time, which made continuity difficult to maintain.

Users can pay extra for 'VIP Support' which provides real-time communication with a site's 'service representative'. However, we saw no advantage in purchasing VIP support, with the existing live chat, 24/7 support and personal account messaging available. We experienced considerable difficulties with some sites' 24/7 support around late work or assignments that were paid for but never received. Although discussed in the 'credibility' section, it should be noted that despite multiple requests to the 24/7 support teams at two sites, we received no responses at all.

Discussion

Our study indicates that purchasing work from contract cheating sites can be a risky investment of time and money, as you may not get what you paid for; you may get nothing at all. Student-users may also encounter a range of issues in terms of support and privacy. We encountered issues with 83% of the 54 individual orders we placed with 18 contract cheating websites. We also encountered problems in all three broad dimensions identified by Rowland et al. (2018).

Informativeness. We found all websites outline their services in glowing terms, but some do not deliver the promises made, which is not apparent until after payment. Some sites failed to meet set deadlines, failed to produce all parts of the assignment or produced assignments that did not adhere to our assignment specifications.

Credibility: Sites guarantee quality work, quality writers and value for money. However this study found that 30% of orders contained poor quality work, missing sections, failed to meet user specifications or were late and/or required revision. In addition, 52% of purchased work failed to reach the requisite pass mark. Student-users run the risk of purchasing work, only to fail the assessment anyway. Our analysis shows users are wasting their money on 'premium' quality orders as there is little increase in the marks awarded from 'standard' quality work.

Websites also make assurances about security of payment. However, some sites do not provide secure logins, and users may have little control over the use of their personal payment data, and may end up paying extra fees.

Involvement: The greatest concern was many sites' requirement for photo identification. By supplying personal information including passports, driver's licences, visas, names, addresses, phone numbers and contact details, contract cheating sites can marry this information to their built-in tracking of a user's site navigation and create a very detailed portrait of each user. This places student-users in vulnerable situations, particularly given many sites retain the right to share or disclose users' personal information with any third party. Additionally, we found some sites repeatedly contact users to pressure them to purchase further assignments or upgrade their orders. Students need to be warned that this form of aggressive marketing may occur if they use contract cheating sites.

Conclusion

We undertook this research project to test the claims that contract cheating sites make about the quality of their work, their responsiveness, the value for money of their services and abilities to deliver on their website promises. Using the framework of persuasiveness developed by Rowland et al. (2018), we found that the rhetoric of contract cheating sites' promises did not live up to the reality of delivery. Some contract cheating sites do not deliver assignments on time, many do not deliver the quality of work promised or they deliver assignments that are inappropriate to the task requested. It is critically important to know exactly what contract cheating sites do deliver because the higher education sector can employ such data to increase student

awareness of the risks involved in engaging with contract cheating sites. Students can be explicitly warned that these sites do not necessarily provide the services and standard of work that they claim.

In addition, our findings that sites retain personal and credit card details, which some sites declare they can and will share with third parties, should alarm any potential user. Students need to be aware of the inherent long term risks involved in having their personal data in such hands. We support showing students why it is important to act with honesty, ethics and integrity in their academic work and to avoid contract cheating. However, for those students who are tempted or naïvely drawn in by the promises of contract cheating websites, this study illustrates the benefits of raising awareness of the risks, as you don't always get what you pay for.

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