



## You don't always get what you pay for: A user's experiences of engaging with contract cheating websites

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Contract cheating and its threat to academic integrity has been the focus of a number of international studies to date. Some studies have focussed on perspectives of various stakeholders, such as: students (Bretag et al, 2018; Curtis & Vardarnega, 2017); staff (Harper et al, 2018) and those who provide contract cheated work (Sivasubramaniam 2016; Tomar, 2012). Other studies have focussed on aspects of detection (author, 2018a, 2018b; Lines, 2016; Wolverton 2016) or interventions designed to deter students from engaging in contract cheating (Baird and Clare 2017, Rogerson 2017; Walker & Townley, 2012). In 2018, Rowland et al. examined the persuasive features of 11 contract cheating websites to see how students might be influenced by contract cheating companies to engage, visit or use their services. They identified three persuasive dimensions: informativeness, credibility and involvement, which may convince students that the site is trustworthy, reliable, provides 'just-in-time' service and will protect students' privacy. Our study empirically tests the elements identified by Rowland et al. (2018) by engaging with contract cheating websites to purchase assignments and examine whether the promises made were actually delivered.

### *Ethical issues*

An important consideration in undertaking this research was the fundamental ethical dilemma of purchasing contract cheated papers, thereby supporting businesses we believe to be morally repugnant, as others have discussed (Medway et al, 2018). This was not a palatable decision, but, like many of our colleagues in allied health, we believe this approach will put us in a more informed position to counter the harm done by cheating websites. By experiencing contract cheating websites' practices first-hand, we could, and did, unmask their promises and pitfalls. We did not undertake this lightly, we debated alternatives, such as overt or open approaches, and considered we would be unlikely to succeed. We wanted experience using contract cheating websites in the same way as student users.

### *Method*

This study was conducted, with ethical approval, at a large Australian metropolitan university from 2017-2018. We tested the assurances of contract cheating companies' promises about on-time delivery of high quality, undetectable, bespoke work, respecting the privacy rights of student consumers against the dimensions and features identified by Rowland et al (2018). We asked the following research questions:

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

The authors obtained a centrally held list of 50 known contract cheating sites that students

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at our university had used in the previous two years. We adopted six inclusion criteria including elements such as: providing bespoke work in the disciplines we wanted, accepting direct payment methods and providing a personal account. This reduced the number of sites from 50 to 18.

We purchased 54 assignments from 18 different contract cheating sites, across five disciplines requesting a variety of assessment tasks. We purchased 40 standard quality pieces of work from all 18 companies across 5 disciplines and 14 premium quality assignments from 7 different sites, across 5 disciplines. Assignments ranged from 825-2,000 words and we purchased both 'standard' and 'premium' advertised products at an average cost of \$179AUD (111Euros). Excel records for each persuasive feature tested were kept and all tested items were mapped onto Rowland et al.'s (2018) framework. Author A independently cross-mapped items onto the same framework for inter-rater reliability.

### *Summary of findings*

We found that there were significant differences in contract cheating website assurances about the quality of assignments provided and the actual product delivered.

### *Quality and cost*

Our study found that 30% of orders contained poor quality work, missing sections, failure to meet user specifications, late delivery and revision requirements. Some work (15%) was so unsatisfactory that we requested that the work be revised. Twelve of the 18 sites assured on-time delivery. Three failed to deliver on time and one, in fact, delivered work up to 8 days late (despite our repeated inquiries). Three sites requested extensions to the deadline date we set and one site, even with the extended date failed to deliver on time. Students need to know that not all sites will deliver what they say they will, when they say then will. Contract cheating sites also claim they are affordable. This was not our experience. Prices quoted on the website are the lowest per page cost, with the total cost varying depending on length, spacing and whether undergraduate or postgraduate.

### *Privacy issues*

Our gravest concerns were over privacy assurances. Many sites request photo identification in addition to email, phone and other identifying information. 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. There was a privacy policy on 88% of contract cheating sites tested. **All** sites collect user data, both personally identifiable information and non-personally identifiable information. Depending on the site, users need to be aware that the site can and will disclose/share information to third parties. Almost half the sites tested state that they can and/or will share users' personally identifiable information (47%). Only 27% state they will not share a user's personally identifiable information, whilst 26% are silent on the subject. The EU Data Protection Act is only mentioned by 13% of sites, possibly those sites based in EU countries. Additionally, we found some sites repeatedly contact users to pressure them to purchase further assignments or upgrade their orders. Students need to understand that once some websites have significant personal identity details, they have lost control of how, when and where their personal information is distributed and that their identities are no longer protected.



## Conclusion

We found that many contract cheating websites do not deliver the persuasive dimensions the promise, under the framework outlined by Rowland et al. (2018). Contract cheating sites provide variable quality products (including fail grade work), do not necessarily deliver the quality paid for, may fail to deliver assignments on time and do not necessarily respond to user queries. Importantly, contract cheating sites can retain the right to share user personal details with third parties, without the explicit knowledge of the user. Additionally, when discipline-specific markers graded work, 52% of the purchased tasks failed to meet the pass standard of the subject.

This study unmasks the chasm between contract cheating sites' persuasive promises and the reality of delivery. It also exposes the pitfalls and risks for students engaging with these websites. Students need to be aware of the potential risk of: identity disclosure to third parties without their knowledge, aggressive marketing by sites to upgrade assignments and pay more as well as the potential for blackmail. Universities can draw on this study's findings to educate students around greater awareness of the risks and incorporate these findings into evidence-based deterrence campaigns around contract cheating.

**Keywords:** contract cheating, contract cheating websites, students, awareness, privacy, buying papers.

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