



Exploring low-cost contract cheating provision enabled through micro-outsourcing web sites

Thomas LANCASTER
Imperial College London, United Kingdom

Contract cheating, originally defined by Clarke and Lancaster (2006), is the concerning behaviour where a student uses a third party to complete their assessed work for them. Much of the quantitative analysis of contract cheating has focused on publicly advertised requests by students to have work completed for them. Such public requests seem to have declined in number, perhaps because students are wary of being detected. Students wanting to commit academic misconduct are now moving on to connect with providers through different means.

Although many recommendations now exist regarding how contract cheating can be addressed, for instance in QAA (2017) or Lancaster and Clarke (2015), some major challenges for addressing contract cheating remain. These include the increasing number of ways in which contract cheating providers, those companies who complete the work on a student's behalf, connect with students. Information about how providers operate is necessary to understand how students interact with them, why they buy assignments from contract cheating sites and what measures can be put into place to counteract this.

This presentation will focus on two data sets collected from the micro-outsourcing site Fiverr.com. Fiverr.com is an online marketplace which connects together providers and customers. One feature of Fiverr.com is that providers can advertise individual services that they offer. These services are known as Gigs and each are priced at a minimum of \$5 USD.

Although many of the providers and Gigs on Fiverr.com have legitimacy to them, this service has also been observed as providing contract cheating opportunities to students. Unlike traditional essay mills, many of the providers on Fiverr.com are individual writers. They use the site to connect directly with students, rather than having orders go through a third party. This also means that they keep the money paid to them (minus Fiverr.com commissions) and are able to offer essay writing services at a cost that is lower than traditional essay mills.

The methodology behind this study involved the collected of two data sets of information from Fiverr.com. One data set was collected in June 2016 and information about this data set has already been reported (Lancaster, 2018). A further data set was collected in October 2018. This second data set is being explored for the first time. Both data sets were collected manually. A detailed description of the methodology is given in Lancaster (2018).

Specifically, Fiverr.com was searched for Gigs advertising using the search term "write essay". The information relating to the Gig and the provider behind the Gig was examined, taking into account the fact that some providers may advertise contract cheating services under more than one Gig. Gigs were only considered in scope if a minimum of one review for that Gig had been received during the past month, indicating that this was an actively

trading provider.

Data collected included information about the Gigs, including the pricing information, the advertising methods and number of reviews. It also included information about the providers, such as their stated credentials and advertised location.

A comparison of the June 2016 and October 2018 data sets indicates that the way in which Fiverr.com was being used by providers to support contract cheating had changed.

Table 1 presents a high level overview of observations from the two data sets.

Data Set	June 2016	October 2018
Number of active unique providers offering services under the “write essays” search term	93	197
Mean pricing per 1,000 words, assuming all essays were 2,000 words long	31.73	5.73
Total number of orders from active unique providers (based on number of reviews)	4294	1137
Most popular stated location of providers	Kenya (30.11% of providers)	Kenya (38.07% of providers)

Table 1. Contract Cheating Providers on Fiverr.com

The presentation will discuss issues raised from further analysis of this data. Some observations that may be of interest include:

- An increasing number of providers are active in the contract cheating space on Fiverr.com. This has also seen a reduction in advertised pricing.
- The majority of providers are from Kenya. In the latest data set, this is closely followed by providers from Pakistan.
- Most contract cheating Gigs on Fiverr.com no longer remain active for very long. In the October 2018 data set, 669 out of the 1137 essays produced (58.83%) were dated within the past month.
- There is a high turnover of Fiverr.com accounts offering contract cheating services. Only 2 accounts that were operational offering these services in June 2016 were still operational in October 2018.

These changes may indicate that contract cheating providers on Fiverr.com are regularly creating new accounts or new Gigs, which means that their previous feedback is no longer visible.

Taking the figure of 669 reviewed Gigs per month as accurate (this is likely to be an underestimate as not every customer leaves reviews) and assuming a typical essay order is for 2000 words, the data indicates total provider revenue of \$7,667 USD per month (or \$92,001 USD per year). This is not unsubstantial and demonstrates the large amount of money spent on contract cheating through non-traditional services, particularly considering that Fiverr.com is only one of many micro-outsourcing sites that can be used for contract cheating in this way.



The data analysed that contract cheating is a major problem and not one that exists solely in essay mills and through other services that are already well discussed in the academic literature. The reality is that these services are being used by students. Providers can connect with students using new and alternative methods. Many providers can be seen to operate individually and hence undercut the pricing of traditional providers, making them seem more affordable by the typical student.

The intention of this presentation is not to restate all the good advice that already exists for higher education teachers and institutions that are looking to address contract cheating. It remains that the case that teachers should remain vigilant, set assessments that are difficult to outsource and require the student to engage locally. But with low-cost providers directly marketing to students, it may be that more powerful action is needed. Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, are exploring methods to make advertising contract cheating services illegal. It may be necessary to work to require micro-outsourcing services such as Fiverr.com to voluntarily block contract cheating services from trading through them.

The difficult and challenging conversations regarding the importance of academic integrity need to be had. Students need to be made aware that their tutors are aware of contract cheating services and the changes taking place in that industry. Many people would argue that contract cheating has reached its current high levels, with potentially up to 15% of all students worldwide taking part (Newton, 2018), precisely because the early warning signs about the growth of contract cheating were ignored. The presentation will conclude by considering how educational providers can adapt to the continually changing contract cheating marketplace.

Keywords: contract cheating, micro-outsourcing, fiverr.com, academic ghostwriters.

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