

“I WAS RIPPED OFF”: EXAMINING THE DISCOURSE OF CONSUMER ENTITLEMENT IN COMMERCIAL CONTRACT CHEATING

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When students outsource an assessment task to a commercial essay mill in order to contract cheat, they run many risks, from experiencing the consequences of academic misconduct to purchasing an essay truly worthy of a resounding fail. As Sutherland-Smith and Dullaghan (2019) note, “You don’t always get what you pay for” (p. 1). For many academic staff, contract cheating is an egregious breach of academic integrity and violation of the norms of the academic community (Bretag et al., 2018). However, in a commercialised world of higher education where learning is perceived as transactional (Lines, 2016), students may view the outsourcing of assessment to a third party as a decision borne of utility where the ends justify the means.

In this study I consider the nature of feedback and complaints found on essay mill review sites through a purposeful harvesting of posts. The comments, indicating disappointment with the quality of material provided by commercial companies, do not acknowledge a violation of academic integrity, instead focussing on the breach of contractual understanding between the customer and the commercial operators tasked with preparing their assessment.

However, it should be noted that many, if not most, of the reviews posted on essay mill review websites are not genuine (Dawson, 2020). Companies frequently self-post positive reviews to attract customers, and flood competitors’ sites with negative reviews. Even so, when the potential cheater, undertaking a diligent investigation of the ‘best’ contract cheating sites, encounters these reviews they are immersed in a discourse of consumer entitlement.

The language used by websites, reviews and ‘complaints’ clearly embraces the discourse of commerce

(Kaktiņš, 2018), however it is worth noting the additional overlay of a legal argument:

In the case of buying a paper, it’s a “victimless” situation because the professional writer agrees to turn over the paper’s full ownership rights to the customer who orders them, making the customer the “original author”. (<https://www.ihatewritingessays.com/safe-essay-services#legal>)

This implies that the commissioned author voluntarily and legally hands over intellectual copyright and ownership of material to the buyer, so that a student could be persuaded to absolve themselves from any guilt associated with theft or unauthorised use of text and ideas. This spurious argument conveniently feeds into the issue that students do not necessarily understand, or share with the academic community an understanding of, the meaning of plagiarism (Gullifer and Tyson, 2014).

When essay mills advertise that their products are ‘plagiarism free’, citing percentages as remarkable as 101% (essaymills.com), the emphasis on percentages resonates with the myth that the text similarity index number is the final arbiter of plagiarism (Weber-Wulff, 2019). In many ways technology has facilitated the depersonalisation of plagiarism. From the anonymised keystrokes of copy and paste to the remote and commercial transaction of contract cheating, the actual meaning of plagiarism as the unacknowledged use of another person’s words, artifacts and ideas has been obfuscated. In our approach to inculcating the norms of academic integrity, including a shared understanding of plagiarism, we need to acknowledge that students are being immersed in an explicit discourse of consumer entitlement by the industry of contract cheating.

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