

CONTRACT CHEATING INCIDENTS IN SCHOOLS AND TERTIARY LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN THE UAE FROM A SOCIAL LENS

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KEY WORDS

contract cheating, essay mills, social license to operate, social marketing, unwholesome demand and transformatory Consumer Research (TCR)

Contract cheating has been on the rise globally among college and university students and dismally also among research scholars (contract cheating benefactors-CCBs) due to various factors such as the proliferation of websites and social media usage (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), ease of conducting commerce online (Vasic, Kilibarda and Kaurin, 2019), globalization of education sector (Gupta, 2017) and other unexplored reasons. Given the onset of COVID19 pandemic, recent publications have also pointed to the drastic jump in the use of such services by CCBs (Mckie, 2020; Lancaster and Cotarlan, 2021), the aggressive marketing by the essay mills (contract cheating service providers-CCSP) and the resulting growth of contract cheating (Beecham, 2018).

The challenge of understanding why the CCBs use CCSPs is perhaps rooted in the concept of Social License to Operate (SLO), defined as “the perceptions of local stakeholders that a project, a company, or an industry that operates in a given area or region is socially acceptable or legitimate” (Raufflet et al., 2013, p.1). Strong pressure from education industry on governments in certain countries to ban essay mills (McKie, 2018) suggest the removal of SLO for contract cheating.

The challenge then becomes understanding why students and researchers (CCBs) continue to use CCSPs when it might seem obviously wrong and detested. At the same time, it is also crucial to understand the reasons behind why some of the students and researchers are not resorting to contract cheating (contract cheating avoiders – CCAs).

Studies have shown that there could be some latent drivers behind contract cheating behaviour such as time-management issues, fear of poor performance, lack of prior knowledge and others (Khan, 2014). Given this moot point, the current authors posit that a deeper investigation is called for. Such an analysis comes within the fold of an important area of consumer behaviour, ‘transformatory consumer research’ (TCR). TCR is a “movement...that seeks to encourage, support and publicize research that benefits consumer welfare and quality of life for all beings affected by consumption across the world” (Glen et al. (2012), in TACR, 2021).

The proposed exploratory and review study derives its inspiration from a TCR perspective (Davis and Ozanne, 2019), trying to adopt an interpretivist approach of exploring the factors that drive the CCBs towards the unwholesome demand for contract cheating generated by CCSPs (Scauso, 2020).

Using Khan et al (2020)’s positioning of contract cheating as a social issue, the present authors look at contract cheating from a social lens. Unwholesome demand is one where the “consumers may be attracted to products that have undesirable social consequences” (Kotler et al, 2012, p9), a demand where the consumer “badly wants the product but shouldn’t desire or take the decision to buy it... such as alcohol, cigarette, pirated movies, games” (Lapaas, 2019). Social issues such as video game addiction, social media addiction or substance addiction have been recognised as addictive and compulsive disorders by researchers (Griffiths, 2014; Ramesh and Igor,

2016; Hull, 2020) and can have dire effects, such as on physical health (Ayenigbara, 2018; Grinspoon, 2020), mental health (Walton, 2017), academic performance (Azizi, Soroush and Khatony, 2019) and even climate crisis (Gordon, 2020). The present authors posit contract cheating as leading to an unwholesome demand and an addictive behaviour. However, this study does not talk about any addictive behaviour other than contract cheating.

Contract cheating unlike other academic dishonesty exercises, is a bought service (at an affordable price and hence easily amenable for repurchase). Hence contract cheating throws a greater opportunity to be repurchased later period when the CCBs can buy the same at different levels of their education path ranging from school to tertiary education and beyond, thus paving way for an addictive consumption and dependence.

Apter's new theory of psychological reversals (1982) talk about the crucial aspects of addictive behaviors including the phenomenon of relapse, psychological dependence, and the experience of loss of control, all of which apply for contract cheating.

Becker (1992) notes that addiction may possibly be a strong habit, and further indicates that if a habit is beneficial for an individual, it indicates that present consumption raises future utility. The first ill-gotten benefit from contract cheating raises the

possibility of the services being used again. Addictive consumption, for that matter, is an offshoot of an existing culture collapsing in an emerging free-market society (Alexander, 2012). Thus, contract cheating can be posited as an aspect of addictive consumption.

This way of viewing contract cheating can help understand the drivers and ramifications of such an addiction on the CCB and may also explain why CCAs have stayed away from the same. Addiction to contract cheating can have further ramifications such as impact on institution's reputation, question on student knowledge, revoking of degrees and more (Rigby et al, 2015). Contract cheating may lead to a 'treasure hunt effect', a term coined by the present authors, to define the 'ripple effect' of such an addictive behaviour, where the ill-gotten success from the first contract cheating effort can very well go beyond one assessment or one classroom to feature in the student's education career, ultimately into workplace.

In conclusion, all activities that come under SLO cannot be deemed an outright ethical practice. Seeing from a social lens, contract cheating has unfortunately been passed on as given the SLO and needs a deeper introspection. This study explores the drivers behind those who resort to contract cheating and those who don't, thus shedding more light on the same.

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