

Social Media Enabled Contract Cheating

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Abstract

The contract cheating industry, those services and individuals who are supplying students with original work for assessment, is evolving. Contract cheating companies are using enhanced promotional techniques, including social media marketing, to encourage potential customers to avail themselves of services that breach academic integrity. Social media is proving to be integral to the success of the contract cheating industry as a whole. Social media allows contract cheating companies to recruit academic ghost writers and other staff. In addition, social media is fuelling a black market trade in ghost writer accounts for contract cheating services.

This paper examines the state of the contract cheating industry, paying particular attention to the role that social media has played in the industry's development and apparent growth. The discussion of the industry is supported by examples and case studies. These cover the end-to-end contract cheating process from when essay mills are first set up, through to when they supply services to students and when they engage with contract cheating service workers. Examples of contract cheating and social media use of specific interest to Canadian academics and scholars are included.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the future challenges posed by contract cheating. The paper is intended to enhance knowledge of the known perils of the contract cheating industry. This will enable more robust discussions on academic integrity to take place between instructors and students and for these parties to work together as academic integrity partners.

Keywords: contract cheating, contract cheating industry, academic integrity, social media, essay mills, marketing, academic ghost writing, Canada, Facebook, Twitter

Background

Contract cheating remains a threat to the integrity of the educational system in Canada and around the world. International analysis from Newton (2018) suggests that 15.7% of current university students will contract cheat at least once during their degree. A lower figure of 3.5% was estimated by Curtis and Clare (2017), who also found that 62.5% of students who contract cheated were repeat offenders. More than 50% of students have said that they would contract cheat were the right financial incentives and risk levels in place (Rigby, Burton, Balcombe, & Mulatu, 2015). Whether the real contract cheating figure

for Canada is 3.5%, 15%, 50% or somewhere in between, contract cheating still represents a major cause of concern.

The term contract cheating was originally introduced in 2006 to describe the process where a student uses a third party to complete their work for them (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006). The practice of a student paying for essays and assignments dates back further, for example Stavisky (1973) stated that what would now be known as contract cheating providers were advertising in newspapers in New York back in the 1940s and 1950s.

The operation of the contract cheating industry, the set of businesses using developed processes to make money by helping students to outsource their assessments, has been evolving at a fast pace. Key to this industry development has been the role that social media plays in supplementing the physical processes already in operation. Little has been published academically on the operation of the industry, although this paper does build upon the archive of resources that the author has published on their blog, used in presentations and circulated through social media to raise awareness.

This paper briefly reviews relevant literature to set the scene, but the focus is on a discussion of how social media is used as part of the end-to-end contract cheating process. Illustrative examples and case studies are used throughout, covering the time from when essay mills are first set up, through to the recruitment of writers and to the provision of services to students. Many examples relate to the situation in Canada, although all examples are intended to be applicable internationally, since the challenge of contract cheating transcends borders. The paper concludes with recommendations regarding how to use this information to frame future discussions about academic integrity with students.

Contract Cheating in Canada

There has been little academic work published that specifically relates to contract cheating in Canada. Despite that, all indications are that contract cheating is a problem. Even dating back to the first study specifically referring to contract cheating, Canada was identified as one of the four countries from where the most orders on a website used for contract cheating originated (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006).

Eaton and Edino (2018) noted the lack of publications. They provided a systematic review of academic integrity literature related to Canada, covering 56 sources published between 1992 and 2017, finding that over half had been published in the last six years of that time range. Although Eaton and Edino find little coverage of contract cheating in the Canadian context, they do note that Oliphant (2002) saw this as a threat in a brief professional development article, where it was referred to as *cyber-plagiarism*.

Contract Cheating Literature

The literature is beginning to recommend interventions, designed to make contract cheating more difficult for students and to disrupt the operation of the contract cheating industry. For example, Bretag et al. (2018) surveyed students in Australia and found the belief that there were opportunities to cheat as an influencing factor. Recommendations about how to think about contract cheating and redevelop assessments exist (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016). National quality assurance bodies have begun to provide advice, (e.g., Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK, 2017; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) in Australia, 2017). Sotiriadou, Logan, Daly, and Guest (2019) advocate the use of authentic assessment, with relevance to situations seen in employment and in the world outside of academia.

Commentators have begun to recommend that academic integrity education be mandated and ethical expectations discussed with students (Kong, Goh, Gussen, Turner, & Abawi, 2019). Another line of discussion, which has been found by multiple researchers, is that work produced through contract cheating may not actually be very good (Jenkins & Helmore, 2006; Lines, 2016; Sutherland-Smith & Dullaghan, 2019).

Dawson and Sutherland-Smith (2019) have noted that it is essential to train markers to detect contract cheating. They found that training increased the rate at which markers could spot contract cheating from 58% to 82%.

The contract cheating industry has been shown to be highly developed with complex business processes in place (Medway, Roper, & Gillooly, 2018; Ellis, Zucker, & Randall, 2018). Contract cheating companies are equipped to turn customer orders around quickly, often in mere hours, with access to an agile workforce (Wallace & Newton, 2014). Assignment solutions are available cheaply; students connecting directly with contract cheating writers can buy essays at a common price point of \$30 USD per 1,000 words (\$40 USD or €27 EUR) (Lancaster, 2019). To allow for international comparisons, financial figures in this paper are given in United States Dollars (\$ USD), Canadian Dollars (\$ CAD) and Euros (€ EUR). The exchange rate from 30 April 2019 has been used in all cases.

Contract cheating providers have been found to be engaging with potential customers through social media. Sivasubramaniam, Kostelidou, & Ramachandran (2016) showed how individual writers connect with students through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, bypassing essay mills. A similar situation was identified in Kazan, Russia by Rytönen (2016). Here local offices are said to openly advertise contract cheating services and business cards are given out at metro stops, with an original thesis costing €100 euros (\$150 CAD or \$112 USD). A Russian social network similar to Facebook is said to be heavily used by contract cheating providers advertising their services, including advertising by

companies and by individual writers. Amigud (2019) recognised the use of bots on social media to identify students who may wish to commit contract cheating and to generate leads. The same tactics used by legitimate businesses are being used by the contract cheating industry.

Not all of the tactics used can be considered legitimate. Contract cheating companies have been observed sending spam emails to students (Zheng & Stokel-Walker, 2018), often finding ways to bypass university filters. These emails include advertising in languages other than English to reach international students.

Social media can be used as a source for contract cheating research. Amigud and Lancaster (2019) provided a systematic analysis of the reasons given by students who expressed an interest in contract cheating on Twitter. The students were identified as ones targeted by contract cheating providers. Out of 246 identified tweets that listed reasons for cheating, they found the most common barrier to them completing their own work, expressed by 40.7% of students, was a lack of perseverance. Students said they were stressed or frustrated, finding it difficult to finish assessments they had started. The second most common reason, stated by 20.9% of students, was academic aptitude, where students found the material too difficult and said they needed help. Both of these reasons point towards agreement with an earlier recommendation from Lancaster and Clarke (2016), that academic institutions need to reconsider the design of their curriculum to ensure that students are equipped for success. Alongside this recommendation, universities need to consider the types of assessment that they use to ensure that they are fit for purpose and offer some resistance to contract cheating.

Social Media Use in the Contract Cheating Industry

The Operation of the Contract Cheating Industry

As the review of literature has suggested, the marketing methods used by the contract cheating industry are highly developed. The use of social media is key to the success of these marketing methods.

The industry extends far beyond a simple relationship between a student and a contract cheating provider. The workforce supporting the operation of contract cheating providers is key to its success. This workforce includes the writing staff, many of whom are likely to be freelance and to work remotely from the contract cheating provider, but also the whole administrative and marketing teams.

Figure 2 provides an illustration of this complex operation.

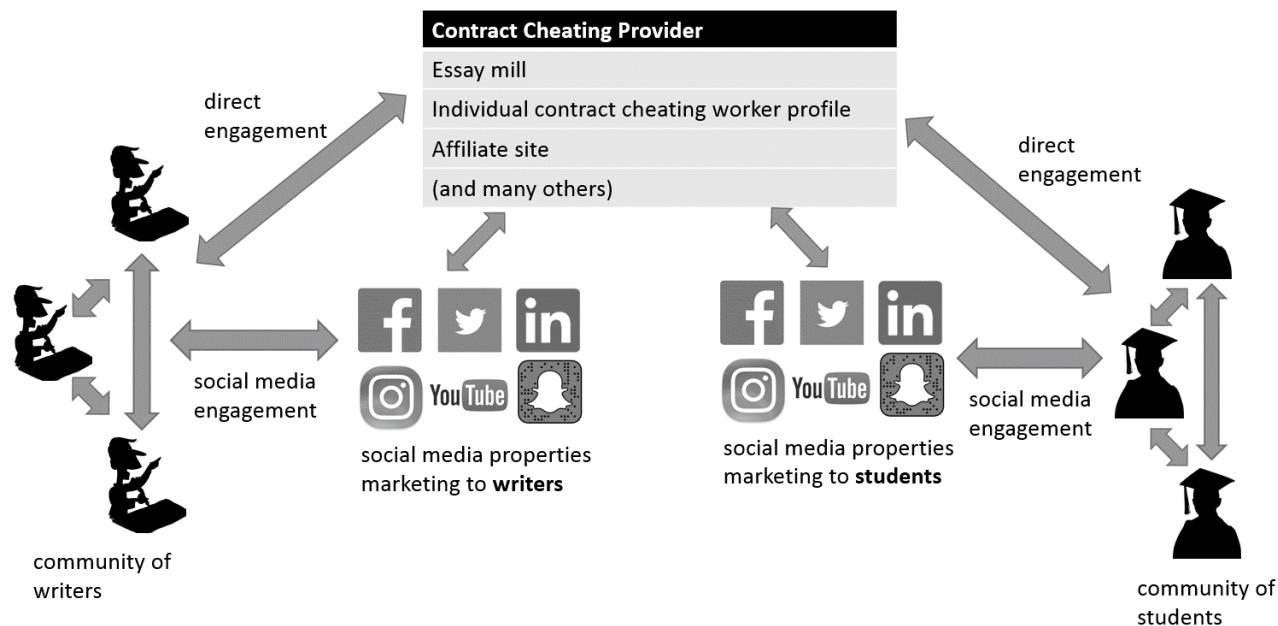


Figure 2. Contract cheating industry operations using social media.

The information given in Figure 2 is only an overview. To try and represent all the social media-enabled flows surrounding the contract cheating industry in a single diagram would be impossible. Examples of the social media service being used are shown, covering such properties as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat, but there are many other social media services. Not every provider, student or writer will be active on every such social media site.

Figure 2 shows two main groups of actors, the community of writers and the community of students. These groups may themselves interact with one another, in person or through social media. Contract cheating providers can interact with both groups, either through their student or writer facing websites, or through social media properties. In some cases, for example where a writer works for themselves as a single-person firm and is self-employed, their social media interface may be the only mechanism they have to make arrangements with potential customers. Communication may also happen offline.

Social media engagement can take several forms. A student looking to contract cheat may directly find a provider online. They may be introduced to this provider through friends. For example, when one friend is seen to “Like” a page on Facebook, this can be shown in their newsfeed and start off a viral marketing effect. Alternatively, a provider may choose to send messages directly to a student who they feel may wish to take advantage of their offer. Providers use both free and paid methods of advertising. The marketing and

economic opportunities available to the contract cheating industry stem far beyond the simple information flows presented in this paper.

The examples given in this paper focus primarily on contract cheating engagement that is visible to the public. There are private online communities used to market these services, such as Snapchat, where picture-based messages are only seen by those on a contact list and disappear after seconds. It is difficult to infiltrate such networks as a researcher and particularly challenging to do so in an ethical manner. However, there are no shortage of examples of contract cheating marketing visible to the public through social media services.

This section focuses on four sets of examples of how social media is used within the end-to-end contract cheating industry, namely:

- How contract cheating companies encourage students to use their services
- How contract cheating companies find workers using social media
- The social media enabled communities used by current and potential writers
- How companies are selling ready-made contract cheating businesses through social media

Social Media Used to Engage Students with Contract Cheating Opportunities

Social media accounts owned by essay mills are easy to find on sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Figure 3 gives an example of some such accounts found on Twitter and connected with Canada. Other accounts are localized in ways different to national level, for instance by using city names. Many accounts are used internationally and not focused towards Canada at all, but still as accessible as all others to Canadian students. Individual writers also set up accounts. In some cases, what seems to be a provider account may just be that of an affiliate, referring students to an existing provider in exchange for commission.

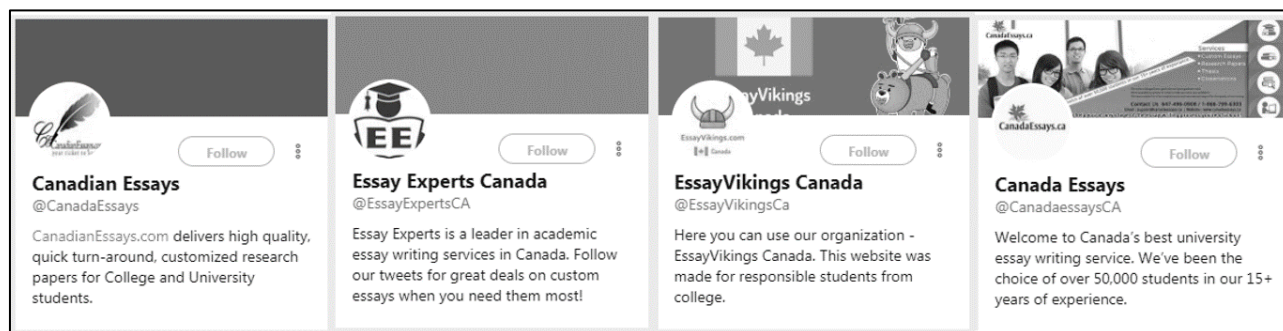


Figure 3. Example contract cheating provider accounts on Twitter.

Once social media accounts are established by contract cheating providers, they are used regularly to advertise the type of work available, promote limited time special offers and to market directly to those students who have indicated that they have an assessment due. Only some of this communication is public, as much of this can be sent through private messaging, not observable by researchers. Some providers have been observed tweeting details of all the assignments they have completed. This helps to add legitimacy that they can successfully complete work for students as well as increasing the number of long-tail keywords they match. Tweets may refer students to essay mills, to order pages, or to adverts on third party sites such as Fiverr.com.

Figure 4 shows representative examples of the style of tweets that are made by companies and writers, including one given in response to a direct request by a student to hire an essay writer. A single tweet by a student, even one expressing that they have an assignment due with no indication that they plan to cheat, can lead to them receiving 20 or more visible replies from contract cheating providers within an hour from when the tweet is made. The tweet examples show writers and services aiming to appeal to a variety of academic disciplines, as well as making it clear that they are providing original work that is free from plagiarism, thus seemingly removing the risk from a student choosing to avail of such a contract cheating service.

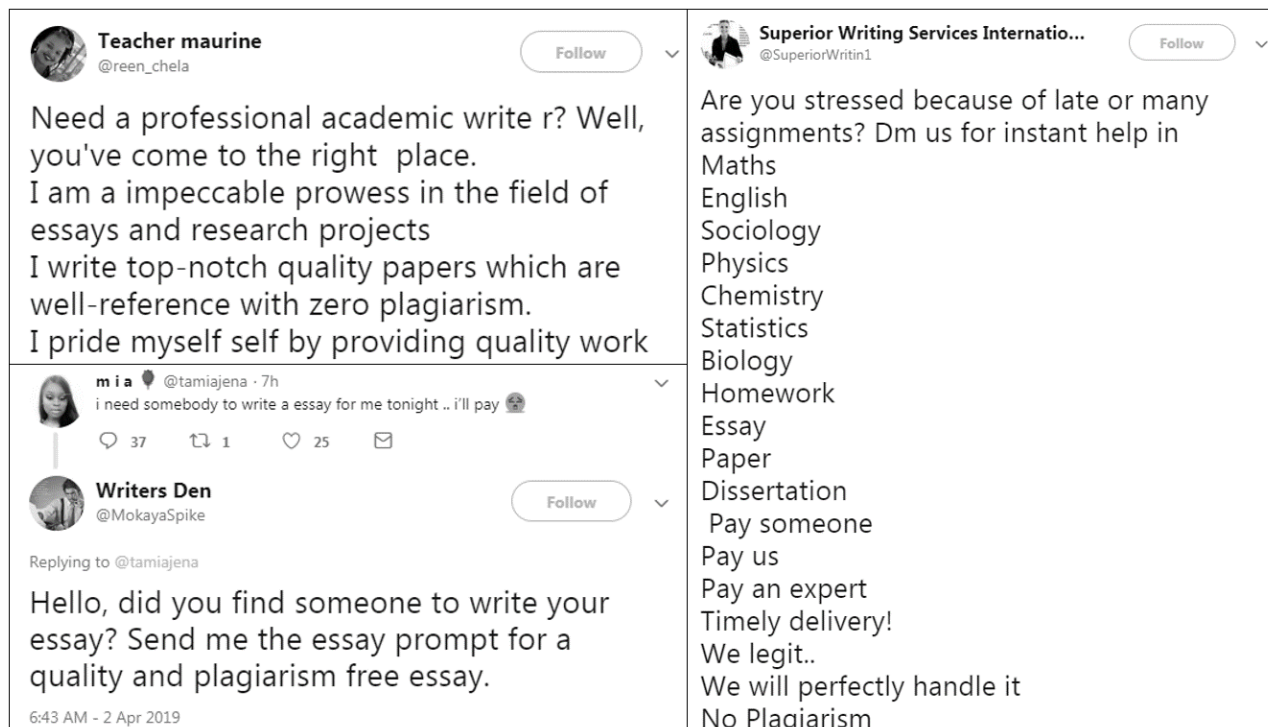


Figure 4. Example tweets made by contract cheating providers.

Contract cheating providers have been observed engaging students on otherwise legitimate sites or accounts. One such example is where providers post adverts on Facebook Pages owned by student unions. Careful monitoring of academic institution-owned pages is needed to ensure they do not accidentally allow contract cheating provider adverts to be placed on them. Such positioning on a legitimate page can make it seem as though a contract cheating provider is endorsed or supported by a university.

Some social media accounts on which contract cheating adverts are placed may not be university owned but may otherwise be frequented by students. For example, Figure 5 shows a contract cheating provider post placed on a Facebook page aimed at supporting international students in Canada. The group has over 10,000 members. Murdoch and House (2019) found that some contract cheating providers were going further, by setting up false Facebook groups and virtual communities looking as if they were university endorsed. This includes connecting with students using chat systems like WeChat and WhatsApp. Once providers had established a seemingly legitimate friendship with students, they began to market contract cheating services to those indicating that they had upcoming deadlines or were under pressure, seemingly poised to take advantage of students' lack of perseverance, as identified by Amigud and Lancaster (2019).

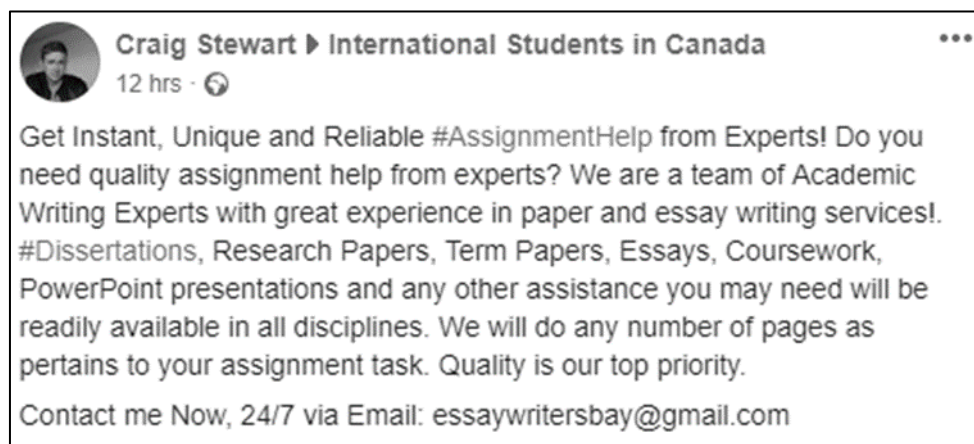


Figure 5. Contract cheating advert on legitimate Facebook group.

Social Media Used as Part of Contract Cheating Writer Recruitment

Advertising contract cheating writer jobs on social media is common. These work opportunities can be advertised on Twitter accounts and Facebook groups set up for this purpose, or in general purpose job groups. Figure 6 shows three examples of posts on a Facebook group advertising to potential academic writers in Pakistan.

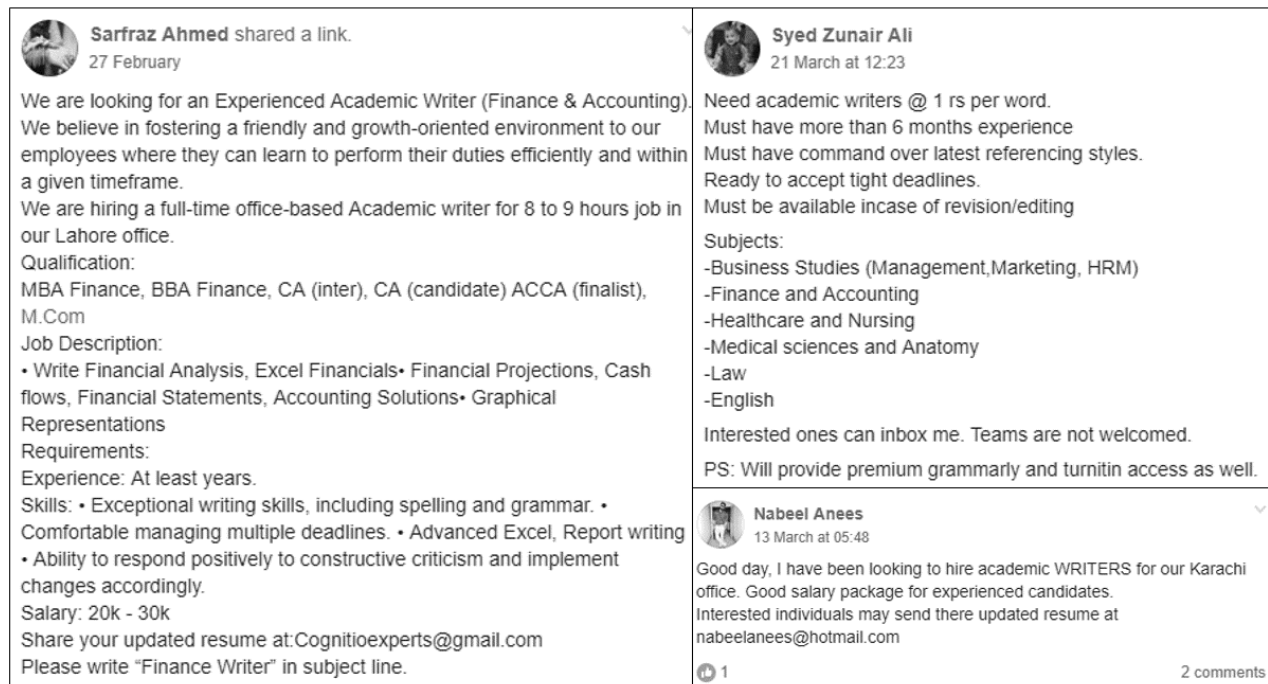


Figure 6. Example Facebook group used to recruit writers for contract cheating providers.

The rate advertised for writers familiar with the “latest referencing styles” works out at \$9.50 CAD per 1,000 words (\$7 USD or €6 EUR). But, as well as that rate of pay, access to the Turnitin software for similarity analysis is included. This allows writers to check that the original assignment solutions they have produced do not contain plagiarism before they are returned to students.

Potential workers do not only use social media to find customers, as the earlier examples in Figure 4 attest, but also to find work with contract cheating providers. Figure 7 shows two such examples. In both cases, the replies to the tweets indicated that the writers had likely been offered work through private messages.

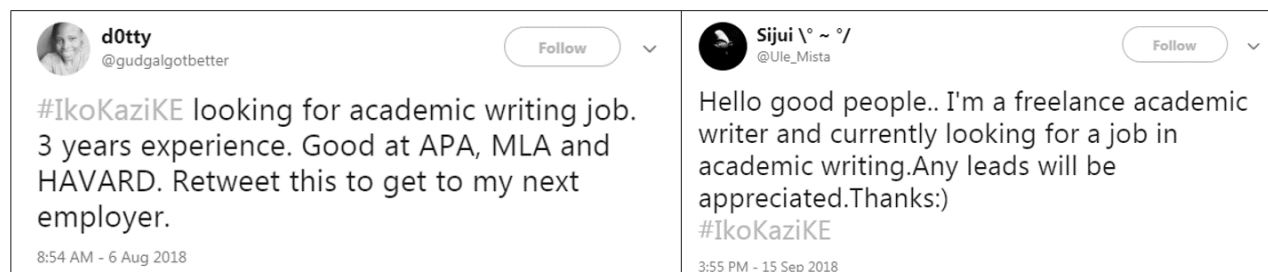


Figure 7. Tweets showing people looking for work as writers for contract cheating providers.

Social Media Communities for Writers

Various online communities exist where individuals can post jobs and writers can exchange tips, techniques and leads. The ways in which social media is used to trade accounts, whereby even a contract cheating provider themselves may be unable to verify that the person they advertise as preparing an assignment solution is actually the one doing so, are of particular interest.

Figure 8 shows examples of two posts in a Facebook group that had 5,827 members in April 2019. The group had seen 1,068 posts made in the previous 30 days. The posts show accounts for sale to allow their owners to work as writers for contract cheating sites. They are sold to people who would not otherwise qualify for accounts, perhaps due to their nationality being one for which the provider would not normally accept workers, or where the purchaser would find it hard to pass the tests of writing standard required to gain an account legitimately.

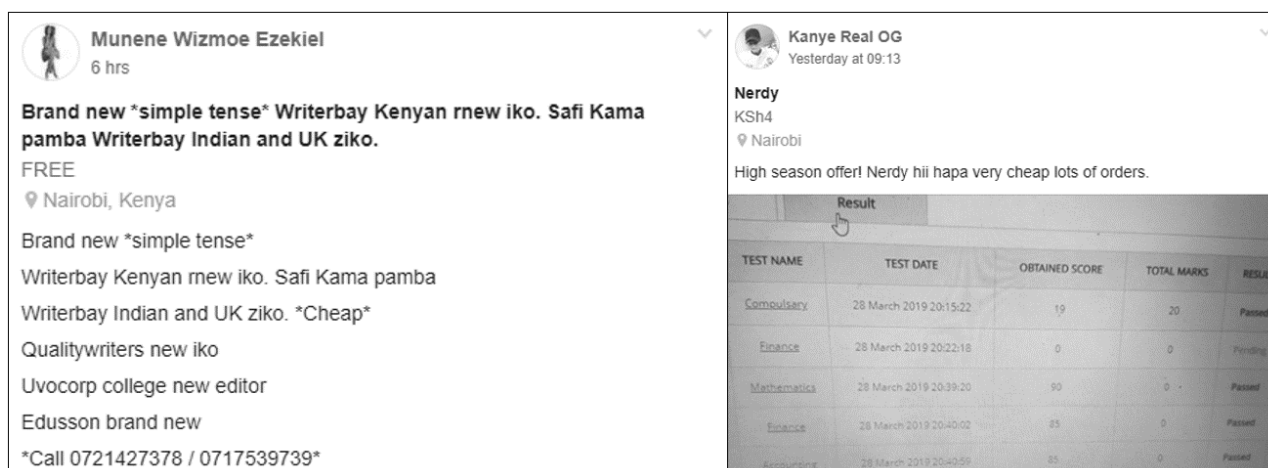


Figure 8. Facebook adverts for buying and selling contract cheating site writer accounts.

The same Facebook group shown in Figure 8 also contained adverts for work for people looking to become test takers, helping to establish new accounts that will themselves be traded and sold. Courses are also for sale in the Facebook group to show prospective workers how to pass the tests for themselves and how to get accounts working for contract cheating providers. One example course comes with free Grammarly account logins, presumably to allow writers to check their work for spelling and grammar issues. It is not clear if the free logins advertised have been legally obtained.

Ready Made Contract Cheating Services Promoted Through Social Media

The contract cheating industry is now being promoted as a “*make money online*” type opportunity. Details of how to get started are available on online marketing forums, “*blackhat*” style websites which skirt around legal and moral marketing decisions, various websites where the owners take a commission by selling this as a business opportunity and, of course, social media.

The whole financial flows around the contract cheating industry are complex. Figure 9, for example, shows a tweet promoting affiliate opportunities for people to work with a contract cheating provider. Essentially, this is multi-level marketing. The tweet is being used to recruit affiliates. If someone signs up through this link and refers customers to the contract cheating provider, they will receive between 50% and 70% of each first order from a new customer. They will also receive 30% of repeat orders. Further, they will be provided with the website template to set up what looks to a customer like the buyer is running their own essay mill, but order fulfilment will go through the company shown in Figure 9. The site is Russian, but also operates in English. The average order value is stated as being \$150 USD (\$201 CAD or €134 EUR), meaning a minimum commission of \$75 USD (\$101 CAD or €67 EUR) per student referred. This appears to be a high enough level of financial reward that it would tempt people to want to enter the provision side of the contract cheating industry. The high level of commission offered also provides evidence that the original contract cheating provider only needs a small amount of the payment to be profitable. It could also be surmised that the end-writer must only receive a fraction of the amount paid by a student. Many other contract cheating affiliate opportunities are available and promoted through social media, as this is now a common way that contract cheating services obtain their customers.



Figure 9. Tweet promoting contract cheating affiliate opportunity.

For those people who prefer to set up their own essay mill from scratch, templates to run such a site are available. Templates and scripts for both the student-facing side and writer-

facing side of a contract cheating service can be purchased. Figure 10, for example, shows a tweet advertising one such site, available for purchase for \$75 USD (\$101 CAD or €67 EUR). There are even videos promoting templates such as these available on YouTube.



Figure 10. Tweet promoting readymade contract cheating provider website.

Social media accounts can also be used simply to promote other sites as an affiliate, receiving a commission on each sale. They may appear to look like the original site and feed the traffic through. Some operate in a simpler way, for example Figure 11 shows a Twitter account that provides links to coupon codes for different contract cheating services. When a student orders an assignment solution with one of these coupon codes, the site gets paid.



Figure 11. Site using social media paid for promoting existing contract cheating providers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Through necessity, this paper has provided only a limited number of examples and case studies regarding how social media is used as part of the contract cheating industry. This is an industry that continues to evolve and find new methods to put its message across. A large number of further examples are available amongst the blog posts of the author. The academic integrity community needs to be alert to the fact that students will be directly marketed to by contract cheating providers. Although academic institutions can take

measures to reduce some of this advertising, for example by removing physical adverts placed on campus, a complete block is impossible. The industry is too sophisticated.

One recent development is of particular concern and worthy of immediate discussion with students. Contract cheating providers are infiltrating students and their network of friends, often by pretending to be one of them.

Students should be advised not to post details about their assessments on social media or engage in conversations with contract cheating services who contact them. There is evidence, for example as discussed on EssayScam (2018), that suggests that blackmailers are using social media posts to determine that a student may have contract cheated. They are then able to extort money from students under the threat of exposing them to their university.

Students need to be aware that contract cheating providers will be aggressive in their marketing to them. For providers, this marketing is big money. Providers will pay social media sites like Facebook simply to send paid adverts to people who appear to be in the student demographic. That is, they are of a typical age group, show the right level of high school education, or have a university name listed on their profile. Even if a student has no interest in cheating, they are likely to see carefully targeted adverts. Students have to realise that they shouldn't fall for these opportunities and that contract cheating companies are unlikely to be working in their best interest.

Social media can also be useful as a source for continued research into the contract cheating industry. Papers are starting to be developed using social media as a source to identify how and why students contract cheat. The data about how providers are advertising and what they are providing is available on social media for any researchers who wish to analyse it.

When academics are looking to put contract cheating interventions in place, social media can also be useful. Some contract cheating writers boast about completing assessments for students. Figure 12 shows examples of this collected from Twitter.

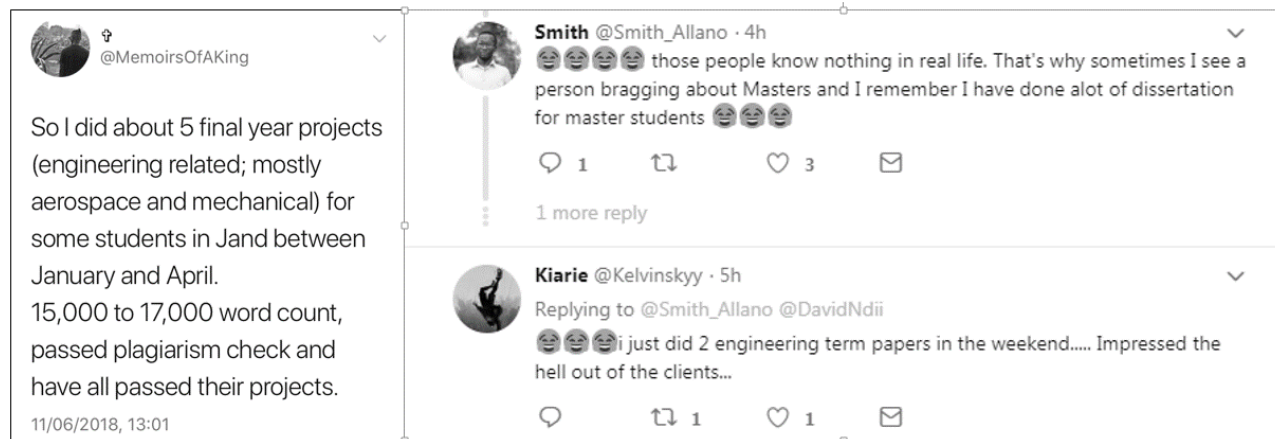


Figure 12. Examples of writers discussing contract cheating on Twitter.

As an international community, within Canada and abroad, academics need to work together with students to reduce the effectiveness of the contract cheating industry. Academics need to hold robust discussions on academic integrity with students. It is important to communicate to students that there is value in doing their own work.

Students need to be made aware that there are risks incumbent if they choose to engage with contract cheating providers. These risks include being scammed and blackmailed. Students should think carefully about their choice of social media connections. Once companies have developed a relationship with a student through social media, that student is just a message away. They are there for the company to market to forever more. Unless the right interventions are put into place now, it appears inevitable that more students will succumb to the pressures of such social media marketing.

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