

2021

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[10.28945/4757](https://doi.org/10.28945/4757)

Kelly, A., & Stevenson, K. J. (2021). Students pay the price: Doctoral candidates are targeted by contract cheating websites. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 16, 363-377. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4757>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
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STUDENTS PAY THE PRICE: DOCTORAL CANDIDATES ARE TARGETED BY CONTRACT CHEATING WEBSITES

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This paper analyses the textual features of contract cheating websites that offer thesis writing services for doctoral students and considers implications for practice.
Background	Contract cheating is an increasing challenge for higher education institutions, governments and societies worldwide. However, relatively little is known about the prevalence of online thesis writing services and the ways in which these companies attract doctoral students as customers.
Methodology	This study has a three-step textual analysis methodological approach: firstly, identifying contract cheating websites that target doctoral students; secondly, applying a top-down thematic approach to the literature to identify potential vulnerabilities; and, thirdly, using these themes in a textual analysis to interrogate the language used on these websites.
Contribution	Much of the current research into contract cheating has focused on coursework students. This study builds on the small sub-field of scholarship that has investigated contract cheating in a research writing context, and in contradistinction to previous studies, analyses the persuasive language features used by online contract cheating websites in the context of commonly reported doctoral student challenges. This is a novel approach not yet explored in the literature.
Findings	The analysis reveals that contract cheating websites include specific language to appeal to doctoral students' vulnerabilities across four common themes: 'balancing work and personal life', 'the complexity of doctoral academic writing', 'self-efficacy' and 'academic career progression'.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The themes present in this study highlight the critical role thesis supervisors can play in supporting doctoral students' thesis writing progression, as well as the value of peer learning groups in building self-efficacy. The limited research liter-

Accepting Editor Norma J. Turner | Received: January 28, 2021 | Revised: April 2, 2021 | Accepted: April 28, 2021.

Cite as: Kelly, A., & Stevenson, K. J. (2021). Students pay the price: Doctoral candidates are targeted by contract cheating websites. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 16, 363-377. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4757>

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ature into contract cheating in a doctoral context also suggests a need for increased training and awareness-raising programs for supervisors, thesis examiners and new graduate students.

Recommendations for Researchers	Future studies that further investigate the prevalence of these themes across a broader scope of websites and countries will provide greater insights into the extent to which these websites are a global threat to vulnerable doctoral students.
Impact on Society	The paper provides a foundation for researchers and graduate schools to raise greater awareness of contract cheating amongst doctoral students and, in so doing, combats the reputational risks it can have on universities and the potential safety risks for the general public.
Future Research	Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with doctoral students and supervisors that explore their awareness of contract cheating for thesis writing and their ability to identify research writing that has been completed by a third-party.
Keywords	contract cheating, academic integrity, doctoral students

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral writing is one of the most demanding forms of academic communication, and students enrolled in such programs often face serious challenges in completing their respective theses. These challenges can be primarily due to the writing process (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Huerta et al., 2017) or additional life pressures such as family and work commitments (Castelló et al., 2017; McAlpine et al., 2012). These demands occur alongside the increasing prevalence of online contract cheating websites that offer the provision of doctoral theses for a fee, which subsequently compromises the integrity of degrees awarded and the reputation of higher education institutions (Bretag et al., 2019; Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019; Thomas & Scott, 2016). The persuasive language used by these websites is intentionally written to attract potential customers who are writing a thesis and these services direct their appeals to struggling doctoral students.

While much of the current research into contract cheating has focused on coursework students, there is a growing body of literature that investigates the relationship between this serious type of academic misconduct and the doctoral student experience. The purpose of this article is to share insights from a small study into the language features of contract cheating websites offering doctoral writing services, building upon studies that have previously explored these topics (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2015; Rowland et al., 2018). This article considers Rowland et al.'s (2018, p. 654) concept of the vulnerable student for whom the term 'vulnerable' means that a student is "facing extenuating circumstances that make cheating appear to be less distasteful than other outcomes that may eventuate". This paper also acknowledges Rowland et al.'s (2018, p. 658) concept of six dimension of persuasiveness found in contract cheating websites – informativeness, usability, credibility, inspiration, involvement, and reciprocity – and, whilst the study does not categorise the persuasiveness of textual material found on websites online, it does investigate the persuasive language targeting particular potential areas of vulnerability experienced by doctoral candidates. Through a textual analysis approach, it offers a new perspective in considering the impact of contract cheating websites in a doctoral research context.

This study has a three-step approach to analysing doctoral writing contract cheating websites: firstly, identifying contract cheating websites that target doctoral students using a modified version of Rowland et al.'s (2018) website scoring criteria; secondly, applying a top-down thematic approach to the literature (Urquhart, 2013) to identify potential vulnerabilities; and, thirdly, using these themes in a textual analysis (Fairclough, 2010) to interrogate the language used on these websites. Through these

systematic internet searches and qualitative textual analyses of website content, this paper sets out to address the research question: what persuasive language features on these websites target the distinct vulnerabilities of doctoral students? The analysis reveals that contract cheating websites include specific language to appeal to vulnerable doctoral students using four common themes: balancing work and personal life, the complexity of doctoral academic writing, self-efficacy, and academic career progression. Finally, this article presents key implications for practice, including the important role supervisors can play in supporting doctoral students' thesis writing progression as well as the value of peer learning groups in building self-efficacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE 'WICKED' PROBLEM OF ONLINE CONTRACT CHEATING PROVIDERS

Contract cheating is a pernicious and growing challenge for academics, universities, and governments worldwide. It presents a 'wicked' problem, in that it is "complex, involving multiple possible causes and internal dynamics that could not [be] assumed to be linear, and having very negative consequences for society if not addressed properly" (Peters, 2017, p. 385). Contract cheating is defined as "when a student submits work that has been completed for them by a third party, irrespective of the third party's relationship with the student, and whether they are paid or unpaid" (Harper et al., 2019, p. 1857), and it has clear negative consequences for both the integrity of the institution and the quality of graduates that subsequently enter the workforce (Thomas & Scott, 2016). In extreme cases of graduate unpreparedness due to contract cheating, there is a clear public risk in fields such as medicine, engineering and teaching. One of the most alarming examples surfaced in 2016, when several high-profile media articles exposed that over 1700 nursing students in the United Kingdom had cheated during their studies (Ali, 2016). Such actions significantly affect public confidence in the quality of nurses to provide care to patients and could lead to patient fatalities if these students did not complete their studies honestly. To address this wicked problem, researchers have been interested in contract cheating provided via websites since 2006 (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006). Recent studies have focused on quality and timeliness, indicating the complexity of the problem; for example, that the turnaround time for online purchases and quality of assignments provided can vary substantially (Sutherland-Smith & Dullaghan, 2019; Wallace & Newton, 2014).

While contract cheating is a serious challenge and breach of integrity for institutions, students struggling to meet the demands of academic study alongside other life commitments, may see these challenges in a different light, and may be more vulnerable to engaging with a third party to complete an assignment (Rowland et al., 2018). Brimble (2016) suggests that managing work and personal life while studying, increased performance pressure, and limited time to prioritise learning, all contribute to reasons why students cheat. In addition, individual characteristics such as moral values and motivation impact the likelihood of engaging in contract cheating (Rundle et al., 2019). The ways in which these cheating trends apply to doctoral students is still largely unknown, yet Aitchison and Mowbray (2015) argue that this market "appears to be growing rapidly" (p. 298) and that there is a "grey zone" (p. 290) of online third-party doctoral writing providers. This can encompass legitimate and appropriate editorial thesis support but also websites where doctoral students can purchase work from a third party.

THE DOCTORAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Writing a doctoral thesis is a rewarding yet complex, demanding, and anxiety-producing process. As Moate et al. (2019) eloquently pointed out, the doctoral student experience is "typified by a long and stressful journey where success is not guaranteed and with few assurances of immediate employment and security on completion" (Moate et al., 2019, p. 145). Some students do not reach the end of that journey; for instance, in the United States approximately 40% of doctoral students enrolled do not end up completing their degree (Fisher et al., 2020), with the completion rate in Australia only slightly

higher (Naylor et al., 2016). Multiple factors contribute to the extent to which writing a PhD thesis is experienced as challenging, including extended isolation and lack of socialization, institutional academic cultures, limited access to university writing support services, the quality of guidance and support provided by the supervisors, and the difficulty of building a career in academia (Gardner & Doore, 2020; Pretorius et al., 2019; Pyhältö et al., 2012). While each individual doctoral journey is indeed a unique process, there are also many similarities between the challenges associated with writing a doctoral thesis and studying at university generally.

Four of these challenges have been identified in this study as areas that may foster potential vulnerabilities to contract cheating. The first challenge is balancing work and personal life in order to have sufficient time to research and write. While personal characteristics such as motivation can be a good predictor of doctoral completion (Leijen et al., 2016), this alone is often not enough. Just as for coursework students, family and financial strains can directly impact the extent to which doctoral candidates are successful (McAlpine et al., 2012; O'Shea et al., 2017). For instance, in a recent study of 724 doctoral students, one of the most frequently reported motives for considering withdrawing from their program was finding a balance between work and personal life (Castello et al., 2017). The same study also observed that young, female and part-time students were more likely to consider dropping out, which was consistent with other studies into the doctoral student experience for select cohorts (Carter et al., 2013; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). In short, many doctoral students experience feelings of stress associated with balancing their time spent conducting PhD research with other life commitments. This could lead to dropping out and may make them vulnerable to considering purchasing a thesis from a contract cheating website.

The second challenge is the complexity of doctoral academic writing itself (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Huerta et al., 2017). This includes (but is not limited to) preparing a thesis proposal, completing a confirmation of candidature, conducting primary research, writing chapter drafts, undertaking an oral examination and proofreading the thesis for final submission. In Australia, for instance, doctoral candidates are required to take between three and four years to submit their thesis as a full-time student. The final thesis must be an extensive, original, highly researched and well-written piece of independent writing that must pass a rigorous review process by two to three academics in an examination process that may include both an assessment of the written thesis and an oral defence. This is no easy feat. As a student in one study reported, “the work is too complex for someone else to step into ... that is so hard” (Carter & Kumar, 2017, p. 71). In the Australian context, universities vary in the provision of writing support for doctoral students that is additional to the support provided by supervisors (Ma, 2019). There are obvious limitations to the writing support that doctoral supervisors can provide for a degree that requires significant independent work, and the complexity of the task may make doctoral students seek alternatives. For example, one positive self-help seeking behaviour may mean they purchase a ‘self-help’ book about writing a doctoral thesis (Aitchison, 2009), but more detrimentally, it may make them vulnerable to engaging with a doctoral writing contract cheating service.

The third challenge is building self-efficacy, defined as the perceived level of confidence in any given act or behaviour. Its importance in the doctoral degree is integral in achieving the Australian Qualification Framework Council specifications for the awarding of the doctoral degree, which states that completing PhD students should possess “intellectual independence ... with full responsibility and accountability for personal outputs” (2013, p. 64). Furthermore, self-efficacy is important in doctoral writing because the activity tends to be completed alone, and low levels of perceived abilities can interfere in both the thesis research and writing process (Huerta et al., 2017). In turn, without a belief in personal writing capabilities, students may be more susceptible to the appeal of websites that offer thesis writing services.

The fourth challenge is career progression; namely, developing an academic identity and path into meaningful employment. Socialization with peers contributes to the ways in which a doctoral student can visualize a career path and ‘feel’ like they belong in academia (Devos et al., 2017; Gardner &

Doore, 2020). This can be developed through mentorship by supervisors and other academic staff, as these affirmative relationships lead to positive student outcomes including students' confidence in personal abilities to make a meaningful contribution to their field of study (Curtin et al., 2016). However, doctoral students may also need to visualise wider future career options to avoid vulnerabilities during the doctoral journey. The Australian Council of Learned Academies' review of Australia's research training system identified a need for doctoral students to learn more industry-relevant transferable skills so that they might obtain better employment outcomes after graduation (McGagh et al., 2016). Without a clear career pathway after graduation, doctoral students may feel marginalised, isolated and low in confidence about the future. Tapping into vulnerabilities in a student's self-confidence about career prospects may be a powerful tool used by contract cheating websites to convince a doctoral student to consider purchasing a thesis.

METHOD

This exploratory study was conducted during February 2020 at a mid-size public university based in Western Australia, which has had a recent focus on academic integrity. As the institution widened its focus to pay closer attention to doctoral academic integrity, gathering further insights about doctoral contract cheating was warranted. Whilst its methodology replicates some of the methodological procedures of Aitchison and Mowbray (2015) and Rowland et al. (2018), this study uses textual analysis to examine websites targeting doctoral students and framed by themes about doctoral studies identified in the current literature. Such a theme-oriented textual analysis approach, Fürsich (2009, p. 241) argues, "allows the researcher to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text".

Textual analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Mills, 2010) was selected as the methodological approach for this study because it best reflected the study's social constructionist perspective whereby "our knowledge of the world, including our understanding of human beings, is a product of human thought rather than grounded in an observable, external reality" (Burr, 2015, p. 222). Thus, the meaning-making about the language used on doctoral contract cheating websites arises from the interaction of the doctoral students with the webpages rather than being inherent in the language or webpages themselves. This is reflective of Mills' (2019, p. 923) argument that "textual analysis focuses on the micro-level functions and processes that socially construct reality in and through texts". Though text analysis is often conflated with content analysis, particularly inductive content analysis (Kyngäs, 2020, p. 13), Mills (2019, p. 923) suggests that "content analysis sees text ... as expressions of content. In contrast, textual analysis ... treats texts ... as meaning potential out of which actual meanings in context arise". Thus, the meaning located in these websites led us to a textual analysis process of "analyzing how the language is used to promote specific viewpoints and how it renders these viewpoints legitimate and self-evident while simultaneously downplaying and marginalizing alternative ones" (Mills, 2010, p. 925).

The study takes a three-step approach in its textual analysis of the content and impact of doctoral writing contract cheating websites. Firstly, it identified contract cheating websites, adopting Aitchison and Mowbray's (2015, pp. 293-294) approach to identifying sites, key words on sites, and categories of service resulting in a specific focus on 27 contract cheating websites that target doctoral students. Secondly, this paper applies a top-down thematic approach (Urquhart, 2013, p.5) in its analysis of the doctoral education literature whereby themes related to student doctoral experiences that suggest potential vulnerabilities are identified through the literature review process in order to explore the impact of these websites on doctoral candidates. As a result, four key themes were identified in the literature (e.g., Huerta et al., 2017; Moate et al., 2019; Pyhältö et al., 2012). Thirdly, the resulting four themes were applied in a textual analysis (Fairclough, 2010) to interrogate the texts (websites). This paper gives a brief account of the resulting analysis of language in the identified contract cheating websites that may persuade doctoral student users in relation to these four areas of potential vulnerability.

STEP ONE

The intention of this step was to investigate what contract cheating websites were using language that targets doctoral student vulnerabilities. Data was gathered through internet searches using a university computer and network. The researcher used four search terms ('write my thesis for me', 'write my PhD for me', 'PhD writing help', and 'buy my PhD thesis') and two search engines (Google and Yahoo!), numbering eight searches completed in total. In each of these eight searches, only the top ten results were included due to the scope of the study. All searches were completed using Google Chrome as the internet browser, and the analysis was limited to the publicly available information on the specific webpage that appeared in these search engine results. It also did not include any advertised weblinks, as these varied when each search was duplicated. The website data collection process was repeated and confirmed correct as of February 2020, noting that it is not always possible to account for ongoing updates to website content and search engine results (Weare & Lin, 2000).

STEP TWO

In order to identify themes about the potential areas of vulnerability for doctoral students, a limited scoping review (Colquhoun et al, 2014) of doctoral education research was conducted, led by the research question: what are the distinct vulnerabilities of doctoral students according to the literature? In particular, the review sought insights about these distinct vulnerabilities that were identified in papers that had conducted qualitative research with students (e.g., Carter et al., 2013; Gardner & Doore, 2020; Pyältö et al., 2012) or that deeply explored unique aspects of the doctoral journey (e.g., Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017, on doctoral writing, and Devos et al., 2017, on doctoral attrition). Reviewed together, these literature sources informed the study's understanding of the distinct vulnerabilities that may be experienced by students throughout the doctoral journey, which provided four thematic frames for analysis of language on the websites.

STEP THREE

This step set out to answer the overall research question: what persuasive language features on doctoral contract cheating websites target the distinct vulnerabilities of doctoral students? All webpage text content from this search that specifically promoted the use and purported benefits of doctoral writing services were copied into a Microsoft Word document. This textual data – which totalled over 24,000 words – was then coded using NVivo, applying a top thematic coding approach (Urquhart, 2013), into four key themes found to be prominent in current research into the doctoral student experience: 'balancing work and personal life', 'the complexity of doctoral writing', 'self-efficacy' and 'academic career progression'. Word counts in NVivo included synonymized words and a minimum word length of four letters. The qualitative analysis only focused on content relevant to doctoral writing; it did not include any specific text that advertised coursework, Masters or Honors thesis writing services. No other content or persuasive website features were included in the analysis, such as delivery times or payment plan options.

The contract cheating websites offering doctoral writing services appearing in the Step 1 searches were recorded and ranked. Table 1 used the same scoring criteria by Rowland et al. (2018). The first website appearing in each search result from Google and Yahoo! was given a score of ten, and each subsequent website was given a score from nine to one based on its respective ranking in the search result list. A blank entry indicates it did not appear in either of the top ten search results for that search term. Once these websites were ranked, the top 27 websites were used as part of the analysis. The rank for each website was also used to identify the website numerically in the qualitative data. All websites appearing in the search results that did not provide contract cheating services were excluded.

A review of the literature revealed that there are common experiences associated with writing a doctoral thesis. Four of these commonalities were identified in the limited scoping review: (1) balancing

work and personal life; (2) the complexity of doctoral writing; (3) self-efficacy; and (4) academic career progression. A discussion of the literature related to these four themes can be found in the literature review section of this paper. The discussion section details how the language used on doctoral contract writing websites may target and foster potential vulnerabilities to contract cheating targets in these four areas.

RESULTS

Each website actively promoted options for purchasing doctoral theses and willingness to provide a thesis in a format and timeline that suited a range of different student needs. ‘Thesis’ (n=659) and ‘writing’ (n=452) were respectively the first and third most frequent words appearing in the text content. Purchasing theses was also presented in these websites as very common and normal choices, with examples of frequent phrases used including ‘many students come to us’ (Website 13) and ‘many students before you have just chosen to hire the most inexpensive website’ (Website 2). In the context of doctoral writing, another claimed that it had ‘been supporting and helping thousands of other students for several decades already’ (Website 27).

Table 1. Contract cheating websites offering doctoral writing services (February 2020)

Rank	Website	Search terms				Total Score
		<i>Write my thesis for me</i>	<i>Write my PhD for me</i>	<i>PhD writing help</i>	<i>Buy my PhD thesis</i>	
1	essayassist.com ¹		41		21	62
2	academized.com	18	19	6	16	59
3	expertwriting.org ²	13	3	24	11	51
4	thesisrush.com	18	7		10	35
5	essayassignmenthelp.com.au			10	8	18
6	myassignmenthelp.com			15	3	18
7	essayontime.com.au		5	9	4	18
8	australianhelp.com	3	6		9	18
9	writemypaperhub.com		16			16
10	allassignmenthelp.com			15		15
11	edusson.com	12				12
12	paperell.com	12				12
13	edubirdie.com	6	4			10
14	writepass.com			10		10
15	writersperhour.com	4	5			9
16	expertwritinghelp.com			9		9
17	myassignmentservices.com			7	2	9
18	australian-writing.com			2	6	8
19	expressuniversitydegree.com				8	8
20	thesiskeeper.com	6	1			7
21	theunitutor.com				6	6
22	phdresearch.net			6		6

Rank	Website	Search terms				Total Score
		<i>Write my thesis for me</i>	<i>Write my PhD for me</i>	<i>PhD writing help</i>	<i>Buy my PhD thesis</i>	
23	thesishelpers.com			5		5
24	essayerudite.com	5				5
25	aussicessaywriter.com.au				4	4
26	ukwritings.com			4		4
27	dissertationmasters.com				1	1

Notes:

1. On search duplication, clicking this search result also linked to *justdomyessay.com* and *essaygoaway.com*. This search result appeared in multiple website variations using Yahoo! but linked to the same three websites.
2. Like *essayassist.com*, clicking on multiple variations of search results (such as *thesiswritinghelpprha.com* and *writethesisstrgf.com*) linked to this same website.

Whilst these websites positioned purchasing a thesis as a completely normal act, they also suggested it is an act often undertaken by intelligent students, and the websites leveraged the notion of the doctoral candidate as likely to make intelligent choices. Website 2 proclaimed that deciding to purchase a thesis is a ‘legit, brilliant decision’ so that the student no longer needed to ‘sit up at night trying to re-search [a] thesis’. Similarly, two other providers from this study wrote on their respective websites that ‘clever students are choosing to pay’ (Website 8) and that it is a ‘wise move’ when describing the choices of doctoral students to purchase thesis writing services (Website 9).

Most analyzed websites offered doctoral writing services as a secondary product to undergraduate and coursework assignments. Only six websites appeared to specifically advertise and specialize in writing doctoral theses for students. However, Newton (2018) suggests that the total number of these websites is increasing. As Website 20 colorfully described, ‘there are dozens of websites’ offering thesis writing services and they are ‘popping up like hot cakes in the oven’. To advertise and legitimize its own services, another website suggested a different reason for limited options for purchasing a doctoral thesis online:

Most online writing services do not offer research and writing assistance to graduate students for one reason – they cannot find Ph.D. scholars to provide that kind of help. These writing services want to charge cheap prices for writing, and they know Ph.D.’s will not work for what they are willing to pay. Other companies claim to offer help with [a] doctorate dissertation or other graduate level papers and claim to have Ph.D.’s to provide that help. In fact, however, they do not. (Website 26)

Website 6 was more forthright in quantifying the doctoral expertise on offer, suggesting that ‘more than 2839 PhD experts’ were available for writing a thesis. Each of these examples made unsubstantiated claims about expertise which clearly worked as marketing tools to attract vulnerable students as customers, yet their inclusion on webpages highlights how contract cheating companies present themselves to doctoral students. In short, these messages suggested that students should trust their services because they have the expertise required for complex doctoral writing compared to other websites. The following discussion arranged in four sections, in accordance with the four themes identified in step two, addresses how websites appeal to distinct areas of the doctoral experience that pose potential vulnerabilities.

DISCUSSION

BALANCING WORK AND PERSONAL LIFE

Contract cheating websites prey upon research students who are struggling to balance the completion of their thesis alongside work, family and other life commitments. This is reflected in the language that was used to describe the doctoral writing services offered. As one website outlined, ‘the mere thought of having to compose a long, research-heavy piece of writing can wear you out’ and because of the time involved it can ‘be hard to plan and organize yourself’ (Website 23). Other common phrases used to describe the doctoral writing process were ‘exhausting’ and ‘stressful’. Many of these websites then used these situations to justify purchasing thesis writing services. ‘Our proficient writers can solve your dilemma’, Website 5 posited, particularly for doctoral students who ‘don’t have enough time to invest in the thesis’. These examples suggest that contract cheating is particularly attractive to students who have other major life responsibilities (such as work and family), which ultimately leaves less time to focus on thesis research and writing. It also suggests contract cheating would be more attractive to doctoral students who have not made regular progress on their thesis and have fallen behind. Consequently, one strategy to reduce the likelihood of doctoral contract cheating is to encourage regular progress and supervisor meetings in the early stages of candidature.

Indeed, lack of time was a common language feature frequently used by contract cheating websites to describe the doctoral writing experience. Time was one of the most mentioned words (n=124), especially in relation to balancing study with work, family and other life commitments. Two notable examples included ‘if it’s already too late ... then it’s a good time to start thinking about the option to buy a thesis online’ (Website 8) and ‘it is almost impossible to deal with a PhD ... and working with [a] writing company will help you out’ (Website 9). One website claimed that purchasing a thesis was a solution for doctoral students who were working and wanted to relax and enjoy life again. It attempted to reassure potential customers that:

Many students have to work alongside their studies and of course, students, like everyone else, need a bit of down time. Time to do the things they enjoy and switch their brains off from working for a while. (Website 2)

Another website claimed that ‘each and every minute counts’ because completing a doctorate ‘takes all the time and energy of a student’ (Website 11). The website’s message to students, then, was quite clear: purchasing a thesis grants them time to enjoy other aspects of life. While it is beyond the scope of this study, further research into the impact of limited time on students accessing contract cheating services would shed further light on the extent to which these websites’ claims are persuasive.

THE COMPLEXITY OF DOCTORAL ACADEMIC WRITING

Researching and writing a doctoral thesis can be considerably complex and challenging, and almost all contract cheating providers included in this study described this complexity in order to advertise their products. Almost all websites acknowledged that potential customers may have already started writing a thesis but subsequently felt overwhelmed and, as a result, the website could provide a range of different products. These include a thesis proposal, literature review, primary research, chapter drafts, or an entire thesis. This appears to be a somewhat unique feature of doctoral writing services, as websites could ‘help with any section or chapter’ (Website 26) rather than providing a complete assignment from scratch like those for typical coursework students. ‘You might have a lot of material to give us – or you may not’, Website 4 stated, reassuring potential customers that ‘we can accommodate your project either way’. This suggests that further scholarly work is needed to explore the different types of thesis writing services, including relative costs, turnaround times and the quality of writing that can be produced.

The thesis writing process was often framed as insurmountable in its complexity. Doctoral writing was regularly described in terms such as ‘overwhelming’, ‘impossible’, ‘extremely challenging’, ‘profoundly complex’ and ‘demanding’. Website 2 claimed that ‘there comes a moment when the sheer enormity of it hits you and you wonder how you will ever be able to pull this together’. To address this challenge, this website suggested that students have options to purchase parts of a thesis. Two examples of these options include purchasing the services of writers that ‘conduct thorough research’ (Website 5) and those who will produce work ‘tailored precisely your requirements’ (Website 21) by writing select chapters or sections of a thesis. Website 8 claimed that ‘writing a thesis is by no means easy, but our writers are so good, they make it look easy’. In other words, these websites tended to create a binary for choosing between the difficult task of doctoral writing and the ease in which a purchased thesis can be ordered. Purchasing a thesis would thereby become an attractive option if students are unaware of alternative methods of support that may be available. As a result, universities and their respective supervisors should regularly encourage students to engage and participate in relevant support services such as writing advisers and peer research groups.

SELF-EFFICACY

A disconcerting feature of the language used by contract cheating websites was the ways in which they targeted vulnerabilities about self-efficacy by encouraging students to question their competence to independently complete a thesis. In other words, to encourage the purchase of a thesis, websites suggested to potential customers that they were not good enough to succeed on their own. For students with low self-efficacy – a trait found by researchers to be common in doctoral students, particularly those that are susceptible to dropping out (Huerta et al., 2017) – this can be a persuasive language tool. Website 4 simply asked ‘are you knowledgeable enough?’, while Website 9 claimed that employing the service would mean ‘no harm to your image’ and students would ‘feel secure with us’. There was also one worrisome example that took it one step further:

A voice in your head that constantly tells you you’re not good enough. You can’t do it. The voice tells you you’ll never get ... [a] doctoral qualification ... You know what? That voice is lying. You can do this. But just because you can do something doesn’t necessarily mean you should. Wouldn’t you like to remove that giant ball of pressure from the pit of your stomach? That cloud of gloom that follows you everywhere? Wouldn’t you like to silence that voice once and for all? (Website 2)

Further down the same webpage, Website 2 then went on to claim that making a purchase would allay these questions, fears and worries. ‘You will no longer need to question if you [are] indeed an expert in your subject,’ it said, adding that ‘you’re in the reliable hands of the top-rated writers now ... all of your worries are a thing of the past’. Themes of fear and failure also featured on other websites. This highlights the need for supervisors to provide continued professional guidance and support to students throughout their candidature. Instilling the belief that candidates can succeed is crucial.

ACADEMIC CAREER PROGRESSION

Becoming part of the academic community and building a scholarly career was also a prominent theme of contract cheating websites offering doctoral services. Website 19 claimed that ‘buy[ing] a PhD from our company’ will lead to ‘unlimited career opportunities’, ‘the respect of your employers’, and an ‘array of advantages that will change your life and offer you a prosperous future’. Another claimed that a purchase will be ‘like a breath of fresh air’ to students who hire an expert to write ‘such an important project in their academic career’ (Website 23). This same website also argued that such a purchase was a way to ‘stand out from the fierce competition’. Interestingly, another website suggested that purchasing a doctoral thesis was an effective solution to the competitive graduate employment market as it freed time to publish elsewhere. It argued that, for students, such a purchase would effectively free up time to work on ‘an extra project useful for your future career’ (Website 9).

These claims speak to the broader pressures that candidates face when launching a career in academia, particularly in relation to establishing a substantial publication record during a short period of time. Student surveys and interviews across different countries and institutions would be highly beneficial in exploring this challenge further, particularly in relation to whether outsourcing part or all of their work was ever considered by students who participate in such studies.

It is evident that contract cheating websites used the allure of reputation and belonging in academia to attract doctoral students. In other words, descriptions of a PhD being important for reputation and prestige were quite common. As Website 2 claimed, customers will ‘appear to be an authority on [a] subject’. Using somewhat incredulous terms, another website described a PhD as ‘incredible’ because it will mean ‘you are respected and recognized as a qualified authority in your respective field.’ Purchasing a thesis grants potential doctoral student customers ‘a “licence to teach” ... [and] PhD holders are regarded as equals’ (Website 14). It is ‘a feather in your cap’, according to a different website, ‘which can boost your stature in the academic domain’ (Website 17). This same website went on to claim that a thesis written by their company ‘helps [bring] out the hidden scholar in you’. According to these websites, purchasing a thesis, in short, is a supposed pathway for earning respect in academia. Claims like those by Website 9 – which suggested purchasing a thesis would pave a way for students to ‘become a Napoleon of academic writing!’ and lead them toward ‘marvelous opportunities’ – were remarkably common.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The themes present in this study suggest several important implications for practice. The theme of balancing work and personal life highlights the need for supervisors to map out a completion timeline with students during the early stages of candidature, and consider one that complements the student’s unique circumstances, such as work commitments. As part of this planning activity, scheduling regular student-supervisor meetings and setting achievable milestones can help ensure that each PhD student stays on track and continues to make progress. Such planning enables students to manage the complexity of doctoral writing in smaller, manageable chunks with regular opportunities to discuss thesis writing challenges with supervisors. A study of 45 doctoral students by Caffarella and Barnett (2010), for instance, found that personalized face-to-face feedback with ongoing critique of writing by supervisors was the most influential element of understanding scholarly writing. Expanded access to drafts of student writing also provides supervisors with increased opportunities to assess progress and detect any possible academic misconduct.

Building self-efficacy and confidence in one’s own abilities is another critical element of supporting doctoral students to produce an authentic and high-quality thesis. Supervisory guidance and encouragement are undoubtedly critical in this regard, yet communicating and sharing challenges with other doctoral students can also provide additional support and build a shared sense of identity in scholarly development. While peer learning is an understudied and undervalued element of the doctoral experience (Meschitti, 2019), implementing formal doctoral student networks such as writing groups can support students with developing their own writing. In addition, this can contribute to academic career progression by building a sense of belonging in the scholarly community (Aitchison, 2009). Other doctoral peer groups, such as those focused on career readiness, can also assist in preparing PhD students for future employment both within and outside of academia. Implementing these types of peer networks at an institutional, national, or even international, level heeds the call by Bretag et al. (2019) for pedagogical approaches that “better reflect the realities of working in a highly connected and networked world in which sharing and collaboration are an increasing part of professional practice” (p. 1851). Such peer support networks may ultimately reduce the likelihood of doctoral students engaging in contract cheating because the persuasive website content explored in this article are likely to become less appealing if students have other support mechanisms in place.

Thinking more broadly, increasing awareness amongst supervisors about the prevalence and characteristics of these contract cheating services is another useful step in guiding students towards a successful and authentic doctoral thesis, particularly as the traditional focus of these services has been on coursework students. This can be coupled with building capacity for supervisors and examiners to detect possible signs of contract cheating in theses through training programs that aim to improve detection accuracy (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2019). For supervisors, ongoing reviews and discussions of the content written by students can provide some indication as to whether there may be concerns of possible contract cheating.

Adopting good practice principles of supervisory support will also help to reduce the likelihood of doctoral students seeking inappropriate external help with academic writing. Examples of these include demonstrating reliability through attending regular progress meetings, building confidence in the student's abilities using positive reinforcement, and providing well-directed feedback in writing drafts (Denicolo, 2004; Mainhard et al., 2009). Because the topic is infrequently discussed between staff and students (Harper et al., 2019), a final yet rather simple initiative is to discuss contract cheating openly and honestly with doctoral students during induction training and support programs. These websites demonstrably claim an 'easy' solution to the difficult task of thesis writing, and it is important that students are aware of, and understand, the risks to their own future and the community if they engage in these services.

CONCLUSION

Supporting doctoral students throughout the thesis writing process and responding to the wicked problem of contract cheating are ongoing challenges for higher education sectors globally. Highlighting the relationship between these two challenges, this article offers new perspectives on the ways in which contract cheating websites use intentional language to attract vulnerable doctoral students to purchase thesis writing services. More specifically, in an analysis of the textual content of these websites, the four key themes that emerged in the literature review were reflected in the language used on these websites ('balancing work and personal life', 'the complexity of doctoral academic writing', 'self-efficacy' and 'academic career progression') and align closely with the documented challenges that doctoral students face when writing a thesis. In exploring these themes and implications for practice, this article aims to provide support for future researchers, supervisors and institutions to further investigate contract cheating in the doctoral education space and to respond potently to these challenges.

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