Section: Ethics, Integrity and Artificial Intelligence

Commercialising academic dishonesty: analysis of contract cheating platforms in Spain*

Comercialização da desonestidade acadêmica: análise de plataformas de compra e venda de trabalhos acadêmicos na Espanha

Comercialización de la deshonestidad académica: análisis de plataformas de compraventa de trabajos académicos en España

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Abstract: This paper explores the structure, strategies, and ethical implications of contract cheating platforms in Spain, focusing on their advertising practices and digital infrastructures. Drawing on a mixed-methods analysis of 40 active websites and 643 associated advertisements, the study examines how these services present themselves as legitimate academic support. The findings reveal sophisticated marketing tactics, legal ambiguity, and a growing normalization of academic outsourcing. Platforms employ persuasive discourses of personalization, confidentiality, and success guarantees, often exploiting students' academic stress. Most services offer comprehensive writing, editing, and tutoring packages, mimicking institutional

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language while evading direct reference to misconduct. The analysis highlights the commodification of higher education and the need for regulatory and educational responses. This work contributes novel empirical data to the under-researched Spanish context and informs global academic integrity debates.

Keywords: Academic integrity. Contract cheating. Digital advertising. Higher Education. Academic outsourcing.

Resumo: Este artigo explora a estrutura, as estratégias e as implicações éticas das plataformas de compra e venda de trabalhos académicos em Espanha, com foco nas suas práticas publicitárias e nas infraestruturas digitais. Com base numa análise de métodos mistos de 40 sites ativos e 643 anúncios associados, o estudo examina como esses serviços se apresentam como apoio académico legítimo. Os resultados revelam táticas de marketing sofisticadas, ambiguidade legal e uma crescente normalização da terceirização académica. As plataformas utilizam discursos persuasivos de personalização, confidencialidade e garantias de sucesso, explorando frequentemente o stress académico dos estudantes. A maioria dos serviços oferece pacotes completos de redação, edição e tutoria, imitando a linguagem institucional enquanto evitam referência direta a condutas impróprias. A análise evidencia a mercantilização do ensino superior e a necessidade de respostas regulatórias e educativas. Este trabalho traz dados empíricos inéditos para o pouco explorado contexto espanhol e contribui para os debates globais sobre integridade académica.

Palavras-chave: Integridade académica. Compra e venda de trabalhos académicos. Publicidade digital. Ensino superior. Terceirização académica.

Resumen: Este artículo explora la estructura, las estrategias y las implicaciones éticas de las plataformas de compraventa de trabajos académicos en España, centrándose en sus prácticas publicitarias y sus infraestructuras digitales. A partir de un análisis de métodos mixtos de 40 sitios web activos y 643 anuncios asociados, el estudio examina cómo estos servicios se presentan como apoyo académico legítimo. Los resultados revelan tácticas de marketing sofisticadas, ambigüedad legal y una creciente normalización de la externalización académica. Las plataformas emplean discursos persuasivos de personalización, confidencialidad y garantías de éxito, aprovechando con frecuencia el estrés académico del alumnado. La mayoría de los servicios ofrecen paquetes completos de redacción, edición y tutoría, imitando el lenguaje institucional mientras evitan la referencia directa a conductas indebidas. El análisis pone de relieve la mercantilización de la educación superior y la necesidad de respuestas regulatorias y educativas. Este trabajo aporta datos empíricos novedosos al poco investigado contexto español y contribuye a los debates globales sobre integridad académica.

Palabras clave: Integridad académica. Compraventa de trabajos académicos. Publicidad digital. Educación superior. Externalización académica.

Introduction

The increasing concern over academic integrity breaches in higher education has brought contract cheating to the forefront of educational and ethical discussions (Rahimi et al., 2024). Contract cheating, defined as the outsourcing of academic work to third parties for submission as one's own (Awdry, 2020), has evolved in complexity and scale over the past two decades (Newton, 2018), leading to significant challenges for universities in maintaining the credibility of their assessment processes and academic qualifications (Hill et al., 2021). In the Spanish context, this phenomenon has grown markedly, underpinned by an emerging industry of digital platforms that openly offer academic ghost-writing services through sophisticated advertising and targeted marketing strategies (Comas-Forgas et al., 2021b). These platforms, which operate within a legal grey area (Tauginienė & Jurkevičius, 2017), have become key facilitators of academic dishonesty, contributing to the normalisation and institutionalisation of fraudulent academic behaviours.

Contract cheating presents distinctive characteristics that merit detailed examination. Unlike traditional forms of plagiarism, which involve copying existing texts without proper attribution (Pecorari, 2013), contract cheating is characterised by the deliberate commissioning of

bespoke assignments, usually for monetary compensation (Awdry, 2020). This makes detection especially difficult, as the purchased texts are original in the sense that they have not been published or submitted before, and thus escape conventional similarity-detection software (Krásničan, et al., 2022). Several studies point to a rising trend in the use of these services, particularly among university students facing academic pressure, time constraints, or difficulties with academic writing (Newton, 2018; Comas-Forgas et al., 2021b; Lancaster et al., 2025). In response, a growing body of research has sought to map the extent of the problem, explore its causes, and propose institutional responses, including the development of policies, prevention frameworks, and detection technologies (Xu & Li, 2023).

Recent scholarship has documented the sophistication of contract cheating platforms operating in Spain, many of which are formally registered as businesses and deploy aggressive advertising campaigns via search engines such as Google (Comas-Forgas et al., 2021a). In Spain, the context of this study, these platforms often appear among the top search results when keywords such as "TFG" [abbreviature of Bachelor thesis] or "trabajo fin de máster" [Master thesis] or "trabajo de fin de grado" [Bachelor thesis] are entered, indicating strategic investments in paid search engine optimisation (SEO) and digital marketing (Daly & Ryan, 2024). The services are usually marketed under the guise of "academic support," "personalised tutoring," or "editorial assistance," with websites emphasising discretion, originality, and adherence to institutional guidelines (Comas-Forgas et al., 2021b). Some even allow clients to choose the desired grade, reference style, and delivery timeframe, further reflecting their alignment with consumer expectations and market logic (Ellis et al., 2018).

The growth of these platforms cannot be examined in isolation from broader sociocultural and institutional factors. Academic dishonesty, including contract cheating, is often the result of a confluence of pressures and perceptions. Students may justify outsourcing their work due to a perceived lack of support from faculty, anxiety about academic performance, or an instrumental view of education as merely a means to a credential (Bretag et al., 2019; Guruge et al., 2025). Additionally, structural challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient feedback, and unclear academic integrity policies may inadvertently create environments conducive to dishonest practices (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021). In the Spanish context, such dynamics are exacerbated by the high demand for academic qualifications in a competitive labour market, where degrees are increasingly seen as gateways to social mobility (Hadfield & Summerby-Murray, 2016).

The Spanish case also reveals an underexplored dimension of the global contract cheating economy: the specific marketing tactics and digital infrastructures that support the visibility and accessibility of academic ghost-writing services. According to Comas-Forgas et al. (2021b), a significant proportion of traffic to these websites comes from paid advertising, surpassing the volume generated through organic search. This indicates not only a high level of investment by service providers but also a targeted strategy to reach students precisely at the moment when they are searching for academic help or assistance. The use of keywords such as "TFG urgente" [Urgent Bachelor thesis], "ayuda tesis" [Help with thesis] or "servicio redacción académica" [Academic writing services] shows a deliberate attempt to exploit moments of academic vulnerability and stress. This targeted advertising approach raises important ethical concerns about the manipulation of students' anxieties for commercial gain and the complicity of digital platforms in facilitating academic dishonesty (Dawson, 2020).

The business models of these Spanish platforms vary but share common traits that align them with the broader essay mill industry (Comas-Forgas et al., 2021a). Services typically include writing of bachelor's and master's theses, coursework, essays, and sometimes doctoral dissertations, with pricing structures based on urgency, length, and academic level. Many websites offer 24/7

customer service, secure payment options, and guarantees of originality and confidentiality. In some cases, users are allowed to communicate directly with ghostwriters, further blurring the line between legitimate tutoring and academic outsourcing. The emphasis on customer satisfaction and service quality mirrors that of other online commercial platforms, suggesting that contract cheating has become not only normalised but also embedded within digital consumer culture (Comas-Forgas et al., 2021b; Lancaster et al., 2025).

This commodification of academic work is not without significant implications. As research has shown, contract cheating undermines the educational process by allowing students to circumvent learning, distorts assessment practices, and poses risks to the legitimacy of qualifications (Quesnel & Stoesz, 2025; Guruge et al., 2025). Moreover, the use of such services can persist beyond university, especially if students develop habitual patterns of outsourcing tasks, which can affect their professional integrity and competence (Rettinger & Gallant, 2022). From an institutional perspective, the proliferation of contract cheating platforms compromises the credibility of academic programs and may result in reputational damage if cases are publicly exposed (Gamage et al, 2023). In this regard, universities have a vested interest in understanding the operational logic of these platforms, their appeal to students, and the vulnerabilities within their own systems that allow such practices to flourish (Xu & Li, 2023).

In response, various frameworks have been proposed to address contract cheating, combining elements of prevention, detection, and policy enforcement. One such model is the Three-Tier Framework (TTF), which includes awareness-raising activities, systematic monitoring, and rigorous evaluation processes (Guruge et al., 2025). The TTF places emphasis on proactive engagement with students and staff, encouraging a shared responsibility for academic integrity. It also underscores the need for institutional infrastructure, such as instructor dashboards and workload management tools, to facilitate timely and consistent responses to suspected misconduct. Other strategies include the implementation of authorship verification tools, stylometric analysis, and viva-style oral assessments to confirm students' familiarity with their written work (Quesnel & Stoesz, 2025). However, such approaches often face practical constraints, including resource limitations, scalability issues, and concerns about student anxiety and fairness.

At the policy level, scholars have highlighted the importance of clear definitions, transparent procedures, and consistent enforcement of academic integrity rules (Lancaster et al., 2025; Liyanagamage et al., 2025). In many institutions, however, the policies in place are insufficiently equipped to handle the complexity of contract cheating, particularly when it occurs through formally registered businesses or across international borders. Legal interventions have been proposed in some jurisdictions, aiming to criminalise the provision of ghost-writing services or penalise platforms that advertise them. Yet such measures are controversial, as they raise questions about freedom of speech, enforcement feasibility, and the responsibility of platform providers (Amigud & Dawson, 2019; Draper & Newton, 2017).

Research on contract cheating in Spain remains limited, particularly in comparison to English-speaking countries where the phenomenon has received greater scholarly and policy attention (Eaton & Dressler, 2020). Nonetheless, emerging studies, such as those by Comas-Forgas et al. (2021a/b), provide crucial insights into the marketing strategies, client acquisition tactics, and operational transparency of Spanish academic ghost-writing platforms. These findings suggest that Spain is not only a consumer market for such services but also a producer of contract cheating content, with implications for the broader Ibero-American academic landscape due to idiomatic reasons. Understanding the specific features of this national context is essential for designing locally appropriate interventions and for contributing to the global effort to preserve academic integrity.

This paper seeks to contribute to this growing body of literature by offering a comprehensive analysis of contract cheating platforms in Spain, focusing on their main features and characteristics. Drawing on recent empirical research and documentary evidence, the study examines how these platforms operate, how they market their services, and what strategies they use to appeal to students. It also considers the implications of their activities for educational institutions, policy development, and the broader discourse on academic ethics. By doing so, the paper aims to provide a basis for informed action by universities, policymakers, and academic integrity advocates seeking to address one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary higher education.

Methodology

This study follows a mixed-methods approach with a descriptive and exploratory orientation, combining tools from both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The aim is to examine the formal, functional, and communicative characteristics of websites dedicated to the commercialisation of academic writing services and the analysis of the online advertisements published by these companies. The integration of both methodological approaches is widely supported in research on contract cheating, as it enables not only the identification of frequency patterns but also the interpretation of meaning, context, and ethical implications (Bretag et al., 2019; Lancaster & Clarke, 2016).

Sample selection and identification of Websites

This study employed a targeted sampling strategy to examine the characteristics of active Spanish-language websites offering academic ghost-writing services. A total of 40 websites were included, all of which had demonstrated recent commercial activity through the use of paid Google Ads campaigns within the 12 months preceding data collection (March 2024 – April 2025). This selection criterion ensured the inclusion of platforms currently engaged in customer acquisition efforts, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of the study (Schmuckler, 2001) and aligning with current methodological recommendations for investigating digital academic misconduct markets (Curtis & Clare, 2017; Rowland et al., 2018).

The identification of eligible websites was facilitated by SEMrush, a professional digital marketing and web analytics platform widely used for monitoring online visibility, search engine optimization (SEO), and pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns. While SEMrush has been increasingly adopted in diverse fields such as public health (Zenone et al., 2024) and digital extremism (Kozaric & Brekke, 2024), its application to academic integrity research remains emergent and methodologically innovative (Comas-Forgas et al., 2024). In this study, the tool's ad-tracking capabilities were leveraged to isolate websites with verified paid traffic. Spanish-language search terms (including, as example: "trabajos académicos por encargo" -custom academic papers-, "tesis a medida" -tailor-made theses-, and "compra de trabajos universitarios" -purchase of university assignments-) were used to filter relevant advertising activity. Only domains registered in Spain or hosted on Spanish servers were retained, ensuring jurisdictional consistency and contextual relevance.

This dynamic identification approach differs from prior methodologies based on static directories or user-reported lists, which risk including outdated or inactive services. Instead, the use of real-time digital metrics offers a more accurate representation of the current background of contract cheating platforms.

Sample selection and identification of online advertisements

The analysis of online marketing for academic ghost-writing platforms in Spain focused exclusively on paid advertisements inserted into search engines. To carry out this task, the SEMrush platform was used. SEMrush gathers data from sources such as Google Analytics, enabling the identification and examination of digital advertising strategies. Among its functions are the detection of sponsored search engine advertisements, keyword usage and grouping, cost-per-click analysis, and visibility tracking. This tool has previously been employed in empirical studies of online commercial practices, proving especially useful for research on digital advertising dynamics (Drivas et al., 2017; Gavilán et al., 2018).

For this study, all 40 websites previously selected and analysed in terms of their content and structure were screened using SEMrush. The tool allowed for the identification and extraction of historical and active advertisements associated with each platform (March 2024 to April 2025). As a result, a total of 643 search engine advertisements were identified and compiled for analysis. These advertisements represent the full sample for this part of the study and form the basis of the subsequent content analysis of advertising discourse.

This sample includes only those ads that appeared in search engines, excluding other forms of online promotion such as social media, affiliate marketing, or organic content. The focus on search engine advertising allows for a consistent and quantifiable dataset, offering insights into the commercial behaviour of these platforms and their investment in online visibility through paid channels.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To maintain methodological consistency and ensure the relevance of the sample, websites were required to meet all of the following criteria:

- Public availability and full functionality at the time of analysis.

- Verified engagement in Google Ads campaigns within the past 12 months, as documented by SEMrush.

- Clear offering of academic writing services, including theses, essays, dissertations, and similar products.

- Spanish-language content targeting a Spanish-speaking user base.

Websites were excluded if they:

- Were inactive, under maintenance, or temporarily inaccessible.

- Functioned as aggregators redirecting users to third-party services without offering original content.

- Offered solely ancillary materials, such as lecture notes or exam repositories, without bespoke writing services.

Data Collection and Coding Procedure

Based on a review of prior literature (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016; Bretag et al., 2019; Comas-Forgas et al., 2021b) and an initial exploratory assessment of the sample, the research team designed a structured analysis matrix. This matrix encompassed binary and ternary variables categorized into five thematic dimensions: legal transparency, service portfolio, legitimisation techniques, SEO and domain characteristics, and payment options.

The main coding categories were as follows:

• Legal and transparency indicators: presence of legal notices, privacy statements, and cookie policies.

• Services offered: custom writing, editing, translation, oral presentations support, urgent delivery.

• Legitimisation strategies: assurances of originality, confidentiality agreements.

• Domain characteristics and SEO: top-level domain (.com, .es, .org, etc.).

• Payment modalities: conventional (e.g., credit/debit cards, bank transfers) and alternative (e.g., PayPal, cryptocurrencies).

Each platform was manually assessed by two researchers. Discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved through consensus, acting the third researcher as external referee, to ensure inter-rater reliability. In addition to structured variable coding, qualitative annotations were compiled to document interpretative observations regarding the rhetorical and ethical framing of services, including how platforms articulate guarantees of originality or present ambiguous claims related to academic support.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis was conducted in two complementary phases:

Quantitative Descriptive Analysis:

Frequencies (absolute and relative) were computed for each categorical variable to profile the services, structures, and practices of the selected platforms.

Qualitative Interpretative Analysis:

To deepen understanding of how these websites present and justify their offerings, a thematic analysis was applied to selected textual content, particularly sections such as "About Us," "FAQ," and "Originality Policy". Following the inductive approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis identified discursive strategies, euphemisms, and omissions commonly used to legitimize potentially unethical services. This approach responds to calls in the literature for greater attention to the communicative and ethical dimensions of contract cheating (Draper & Newton, 2017), especially in digital environments where direct reference to academic misconduct is often obfuscated.

Ethical Considerations

As the study exclusively involved the analysis of publicly accessible data, no direct interaction with human participants occurred, and thus institutional ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the research adhered strictly to best practices in digital ethics and online research integrity (Stommel & Rijk, 2021). Specifically:

- No identifiable information (e.g., names, URLs) of the analysed websites is disclosed.

- The study refrains from any form of implicit or explicit promotion of the platforms.

- All data were collected, stored, and analysed solely for academic and non-commercial purposes.

In line with ethical research standards for digital environments, no private, sensitive, or individual-level data were accessed or collected. The researchers did not engage in covert data scraping or interact with the internal systems of any platform. The study's methodological and ethical framework prioritises transparency, respect for privacy, and a critical but responsible examination of contract cheating services. This ethical stance acknowledges the sensitive nature of contract cheating research and maintains a balance between critical inquiry and the respect for digital privacy. The approach also avoids coercive or deceptive data collection methods, aligning with current ethical standards for research involving online commercial content (Olteanu et al., 2019; May & Perry, 2022).

Results

This section presents the findings from the systematic content analysis of 40 active Spanish-language websites offering academic ghost-writing services. The analysis was conducted on publicly accessible content between March 2024 and April 2025. Coded data were organized into thematic categories, including legal and transparency elements, services offered, guarantees, economic conditions, and promotional strategies. These categories allowed the identification of recurring patterns, structural differences, and common commercial practices across the platforms.

General profile of the platforms

1) Naming strategies and linguistic framing of ghost-writing platforms

The analysis of the domain names used by the 40 Spanish-language ghost-writing platforms included in this study reveals important insights into the communicative and strategic choices underpinning their digital identities. Although the names of individual websites are not cited in this section for reasons of data protection, the collective patterns observed allow for a systematic examination of how these services construct legitimacy, attract clients, and obscure their association with academic misconduct.

A dominant feature among the platform names is the frequent reference to standardized academic outputs, such as undergraduate final projects, master's theses, and academic assignments. These references often appear in abbreviated or familiar formats, most notably "TFG" (Bachelor Thesis) and "TFM" (Master Thesis), indicating a direct alignment with institutional nomenclature. This approach serves to normalize the services by embedding them in the everyday language of

academia. By closely mirroring institutional terminology, the platforms present themselves not as extraneous or illegal actors, but as adjacent providers of academic support. In doing so, they facilitate search engine optimization (SEO), increase visibility among students, and reinforce the impression that their offerings are simply another form of educational assistance.

Alongside references to academic deliverables, many platforms incorporate personalization strategies into their names. These often include first-person possessive forms ("my" or "your") or imperative verbs that simulate user agency, such as "help," "do," or "complete." The resulting effect is the creation of a direct and informal connection between the platform and the user, which reframes the service as a personal solution rather than a commercial transaction or ethical violation. These linguistic constructions are designed to reduce the perceived distance between the student and the act of outsourcing academic work. In effect, they transform ghost-writing into an accessible and user-cantered service, diminishing its moral weight by integrating it into the vocabulary of everyday digital consumption.

Another prominent naming strategy involves the suggestion of guaranteed academic success. Several platform names evoke outcomes such as passing, excellence, or academic achievement. These terms serve a persuasive function, particularly appealing to students under pressure from deadlines, performance expectations, or academic difficulties. Through these names, the platforms position themselves as facilitators of student success, offering certainty in a context often marked by uncertainty and stress. This framing taps into performance anxieties and positions the platforms as problem-solvers, further distancing their services from the ethical implications of contract cheating. The emphasis on outcomes, rather than the integrity of the learning process, mirrors a broader trend toward instrumentalism in higher education.

Some platforms, by contrast, adopt a more neutral or institutional tone. Their names include terms such as "academic," "services," "projects," or "support," which confer an appearance of professionalism and legitimacy. This tactic allows the platforms to resemble legitimate educational consultancies or support services, thereby avoiding overt identification with contract cheating. By aligning their language with institutional values and educational support discourse, these platforms create ambiguity regarding the nature of their services. Such ambiguity is not incidental; rather, it appears to be a deliberate strategy to evade scrutiny by institutions, search engines, and potential legal enforcement bodies.

A subset of platform names reference time and deadlines, often emphasizing on-time delivery or urgency. These names appeal directly to students experiencing last-minute academic stress, highlighting the service's ability to respond quickly and efficiently to pressing demands. By framing ghost-writing as a timely solution, these platforms reinforce the commodification of academic work and repackage educational deliverables as products subject to turnaround times. This approach further trivializes the academic process and positions ghost-writing as a service akin to food delivery or e-commerce.

Although less common, some platform names adopt stylistic or branding conventions similar to those found in the EdTech sector. These include shortened or stylized names, hybrid constructions, or references to digital professionalism. These branding tactics align the platforms with the visual and linguistic aesthetics of educational technology, enhancing their perceived credibility and deflecting ethical concerns. In some cases, informal or pop-cultural references are also used, reinforcing relatability and approachability, particularly for younger users accustomed to casual digital communication.

2) Structural formality and legal transparency in academic ghost-writing platforms

The analysed websites show considerable variation in domain structure, legal formality, and visibility of compliance with legal norms. Regarding domain type, the most commonly used was the generic ".com," adopted by 25 platforms, followed by ".es," present in 13 cases. Only two platforms used other domain extensions, such as ".org" or ".net." This pattern indicates a preference for international or commercially recognizable domains, possibly reflecting a strategy aimed at global reach or enhancing legitimacy.

Concerning legal transparency, 39 out of the 40 platforms included a legal notice visible on their websites, indicating a widespread adherence to at least minimal digital service compliance regulations. This high rate of compliance may reflect a baseline formalization strategy intended to foster user trust.

Similarly, 33 platforms offered accessible privacy policies, while six did not, and one case was unclear. These results suggest that most platforms conform to fundamental data protection norms, although the quality and specificity of the content in these policies were not assessed.

Regarding cookie policies, 38 out of 40 websites displayed some form of compliance. This is the highest compliance rate among the legal indicators analysed. Given the visible nature of cookie pop-ups due to GDPR regulations, this result is consistent with expectations.

Terms and conditions were accessible on 35 websites, while five platforms either lacked them or did not make them readily visible. These documents are critical as they define the terms of the service agreement, responsibilities, and potential disclaimers. However, the level of detail and enforceability of these terms varied widely across the sample. Some platforms provided extensive legal disclaimers and refund clauses, while others offered vague or ambiguous content, lacking clearly defined rights and obligations for the user.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) were present on 22 websites. Conversely, 16 platforms lacked this section, and two provided no clear indication. The presence of FAQs may be interpreted as a proxy for customer service maturity and user experience design. Where present, FAQ sections typically addressed topics such as delivery times, guarantees, communication channels, and payment options.

In summary, while most platforms demonstrated a formal structure aligned with basic legal requirements, discrepancies remain, particularly in secondary transparency elements. This duality suggests a tension between legal conformity and commercial ambiguity. The platforms simultaneously adopt strategies of formal compliance and selective omission, possibly to optimize trust while maintaining operational flexibility. These mixed practices raise questions about the true level of legal and ethical responsibility assumed by service providers.

3) Services offered

The platforms presented a broad and diversified range of services. Beyond the delivery of complete academic works and assignments, various additional services were identified, often aimed at customizing or expanding the range of user demands.

Academic writing services were offered by 23 platforms, while three explicitly excluded this option (see examples of services offered in Table 1). Fourteen platforms provided no information on the matter. This ambiguity may reflect a marketing strategy to attract users with varied needs without explicitly committing to particular service types.

Proofreading services were the most frequently offered service among the value-added options. These were present on 31 websites. These services often include grammar, style, and formatting improvements, and may serve as a form of disguise for original authorship outsourcing.

Table 1 - Promotional language used by academic ghost-writing platforms (by service category)

Category	Promotional Phrases (in Spanish)	English Translation
Academic Writing Services	- "Creamos una solución personalizada para que acabes con éxito tu TFG o TFM."- "Redactamos tu trabajo desde cero, siguiendo tus indicaciones."- "Realizamos trabajos académicos adaptados a tus necesidades."	- "We create a personalized solution to help you successfully complete your Bachelor or Master thesis."- "We write your assignment from scratch, following your instructions."- "We produce academic papers tailored to your needs."
Partial Writing	- "¿Solo necesitas el marco teórico? También lo hacemos."- "Puedes encargar capítulos individuales según tu avance."- "Apoyo en redacción parcial: introducción, metodología, etc."	- "Only need the theoretical framework? We do that too."- "You can order individual chapters based on your progress."- "Partial writing support: introduction, methodology, etc."
Proofreading / Editing	- "Corrección gramatical y de estilo para trabajos académicos."- "Revisamos ortografía, formato APA y redacción."- "Pulimos tu trabajo para que brille."	- "Grammar and style correction for academic papers."- "We review spelling, APA formatting, and writing."- "We polish your work to make it shine."
Translation Services	- "Traducimos tu trabajo académico al inglés o al español."- "Traducción profesional con terminología académica."- "Revisión y adaptación lingüística de textos científicos."	- "We translate your academic paper into English or Spanish."- "Professional translation with academic terminology."- "Linguistic review and adaptation of scientific texts."
Oral Defense / Tutoring	- "Te ayudamos a preparar la defensa oral de tu trabajo."- "Simulamos la exposición ante el tribunal."- "Clases particulares para explicar tu TFG paso a paso."	- "We help you prepare the oral defence of your thesis."- "We simulate your presentation before the panel."- "Private tutoring to guide you through your final paper step by step."
Urgent Delivery	- "Entrega urgente en 48 horas."- "Trabajos exprés sin comprometer calidad."- "Servicio rápido para entregas inmediatas."	- "Urgent delivery in 48 hours."- "Express service without compromising quality."- "Fast service for immediate submissions."
Originality Guarantee	- "100% originales y libres de plagio."- "Incluimos informe antiplagio si lo solicitas."- "Revisión con software Turnitin o equivalente."	- "100% original and plagiarism-free."- "We include a plagiarism report upon request."- "Checked using Turnitin or equivalent software."
Confidentiality	- "Garantizamos confidencialidad absoluta."- "Tu identidad y tus datos están protegidos."- "Servicio privado y discreto."	- "We guarantee absolute confidentiality."- "Your identity and data are protected."- "Private and discreet service."
Payment Flexibility	- "Puedes pagar en varias cuotas."- "Reserva tu trabajo con una señal."- "Facilidades de pago personalizadas."	- "You can pay in several instalments."- "Reserve your paper with a deposit."- "Customized payment plans available."
Refund Policy	- "Devolución garantizada si no cumplimos."- "Política de reembolso por incumplimiento."- "Reembolso si no estás satisfecho."	- "Refund guaranteed if we fail to deliver."- "Refund policy in case of non-compliance."- "Money back if you're not satisfied."
Promotional Language	- "Éxito sin preocuparte lo más mínimo."- "Tu tranquilidad es nuestra prioridad."- "Resultados garantizados o te devolvemos el dinero."	- "Success without having to worry."- "Your peace of mind is our priority."- "Guaranteed results or your money back."
Customer Testimonials	- "Gracias a vosotros, aprobé sin problemas."- "Trabajo perfecto, volveré a contratar."- "Excelente atención y calidad."	- "Thanks to you, I passed without problems."- "Perfect work, I'll hire you again."- "Excellent service and quality."
Guidelines and tips	- "¿Qué es un TFG? Te lo explicamos en el blog."- "Consejos para elegir tema de TFM."- "Cómo hacer una bibliografía paso a paso."	- "What is a Bachelor thesis? We explain it in our blog."- "Tips for choosing your thesis topic."- "How to make a bibliography step by step."

Source: Research.

Translation services were less commonly offered, found in only 17 platforms. This limited presence likely reflects the linguistic homogeneity of the target market or the complexity and cost of providing high-quality academic translation. Support for oral defence/presentations or personalized tutoring was present in 26 cases. This indicates a trend toward more comprehensive academic assistance models, moving beyond text production toward process-oriented academic coaching.

Urgent work services were offered by 18 platforms. The lower frequency relative to other services may reflect the logistical challenges of expedited delivery or reluctance to guarantee quality under tight deadlines.

Additionally, the combination of services found on some platforms indicates an expansion beyond isolated assistance into full-cycle academic outsourcing. Several platforms promote comprehensive support packages, which include topic selection, bibliographic search, drafting, editing, and defence preparation. This service architecture is indicative of a transformation from single-task assistance to integrated academic coaching. The increasing personalization of services also shows an adaptation to student expectations and academic calendar constraints.

Overall, these data confirm that many platforms are changing into full academic assistance providers, offering tailored services beyond simple paper delivery. The trend toward diversified portfolios suggests a business model focused on capturing different segments of the student population, from those needing minor support to those seeking comprehensive delegation of academic responsibilities.

4) Guarantees and conditions

Platforms frequently included explicit guarantees as part of their promotional strategies. The most common was a promise of originality, stated on 33 platforms. In 7 cases, this guarantee was either not provided or not mentioned. Confidentiality clauses appeared in 37 websites. These clauses typically promise not to disclose client identities or project details and appear to address user concerns about privacy and academic consequences.

Disclaimers or responsibility waivers, typically phrases indicating that the platform is not responsible for how clients use delivered materials, were found in 33 platforms. Such passages aim to reduce potential liability in the event of academic misconduct claims. These statements are often embedded in legal notices or terms and conditions and serve as a legal buffer against institutional or student complaints. The presence of these waivers suggests that platforms anticipate potential conflicts and pre-emptively shift accountability to the client.

Other guarantees, such as on-time delivery or satisfaction assurances, were also occasionally mentioned, although inconsistently across the sample. In some cases, these promises were accompanied by vague language such as "we always try our best" or "results may vary", which limits their enforceability. The lack of standardization in the language of guarantees reflects differing degrees of professionalization among the providers.

5) Payment methods and economic conditions

Concerning payment options, traditional methods dominated. Bank cards were accepted in 33 platforms, bank transfers in 30, PayPal in 18, and alternative options (such as Bizum[1]) in 15. Only 3 websites accepted cryptocurrency. Regarding payment conditions, 11 platforms required an upfront deposit, 3 explicitly stated no advance was needed, and 26 provided no information. Instalment payments were allowed on 18 platforms, not permitted on 7, and not indicated in 15 cases.

Refund policies were declared by 28 platforms. However, 10 offered no information, and two explicitly excluded refunds. Even where refund policies existed, the terms were often vague or conditional.

A closer look at the refund conditions reveals significant variability. Some platforms offer partial refunds depending on the stage of progress or if plagiarism is detected, while others condition refunds on subjective criteria, such as the student failing the assignment. This inconsistency in refund terms undermines consumer protection and raises questions about transparency and dispute resolution mechanisms in the sector. In platforms that did not disclose any refund policy, users are left without recourse in the event of dissatisfaction or non-compliance.

6) Promotion and client acquisition strategies

Most platforms engaged in diverse promotional tactics. WhatsApp was offered as a primary communication channel by 34 platforms, while only 7 claimed to offer 24/7 support. This suggests that availability does not necessarily match the immediacy implied by messaging apps. Social media presence was identified in 23 platforms. Promotional language was common: 35 platforms used expressions like "100% guaranteed", "stress-free success", or "we write it for you".

Customer testimonials appeared in 24 platforms. However, very few included verifiable metadata. Only 7 websites provided access to sample work. By contrast, 34 platforms hosted blogs or news sections, suggesting a strategy of content marketing for search engine optimization (SEO) purposes.

These promotional strategies are carefully crafted to foster a sense of trust, immediacy, and user orientation. The presence of testimonials and personalized contact channels creates a simulation of transparency and customer satisfaction. Meanwhile, the use of blogs positions the platform as a legitimate educational service, despite its association with academically dishonest practices.

The lack of verifiable information in promotional content, including fabricated testimonials or vague case studies, limits the credibility of the services offered. Nonetheless, from a business perspective, these strategies appear effective in reaching their intended audience.

7) Advertising strategies of academic ghost-writing platforms

An analysis of 643 advertisements, published in Google Ads between March 2024 and April 2025, associated with academic ghost-writing platforms reveals a highly structured and market-

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[1] Bizum is a mobile payment service widely used in Spain that allows users to send and receive money instantly using just a mobile phone number without needing to know the recipient's bank account details. It has become the go-to method for peer-to-peer payments in Spain, especially among younger users.

oriented strategy, designed to appeal to students facing academic pressure. These promotional messages serve as a critical point of entry for potential clients and reflect how these services frame their legitimacy, utility, and safety.

The most frequently promoted services include undergraduate final papers (TFG) with 631 mentions, master's theses (TFM) with 450 mentions, and doctoral theses with 242 mentions. Many platforms also offer personalized writing (123 mentions) and general academic assistance (291 mentions), presenting themselves not only as content providers but as comprehensive support services. The tone of these advertisements is crafted to reduce ethical concerns by emphasizing adaptability and support. Phrases such as "Redacción completa de tu TFG, con calidad y originalidad garantizadas" [Complete writing of your thesis, with guaranteed quality and originality] or "Te ayudamos con tu TFM, adaptado a tus necesidades" [We help you with your master's thesis, tailored to your needs] are recurrent and reflect a deliberate effort to normalize the outsourcing of academic work.

Economic aspects are also central to the persuasive appeal. Advertisements often refer to prices ranging from €50 to €1,500, depending on the complexity and type of assignment. Emphasis is placed on "competitive pricing" and "the best quality-price ratio," suggesting accessibility to a wide range of clients. Payment flexibility is highlighted through phrases like "safe payment via PayPal or bank transfer" and "instalment payments available," which aim to reassure users and reduce transactional friction. However, few advertisements provide clear information about dispute resolution mechanisms or refund processes, which raises questions about the transparency and consumer protection practices of these platforms.

Some platforms also promote ancillary services, including exam assistance (18 mentions), the creation of PowerPoint presentations (9 mentions), and the completion of specific academic tasks such as practical exercises or statistical analyses (12 mentions). These offerings reflect a shift from pure ghost-writing to broader academic outsourcing, encompassing various stages of the academic process. For instance, the phrase "Te asistimos en tus exámenes online con garantía de éxito" [We assist you in your online exams with a guarantee of success] illustrates how some providers directly interfere with assessment procedures.

Although most ads avoid referencing specific institutions - likely to circumvent legal implications - there are indirect nods to institutional norms. Fourteen advertisements, for instance, use phrases such as "Adaptados a las guías de estilo de tu universidad" [Adapted to your university's style guide], and at least one mentions the UNED explicitly. This suggests a strategic attempt to appear aligned with institutional expectations without invoking specific affiliations that might attract legal scrutiny.

The subject areas highlighted in the ads confirm a specialization trend. Degrees in social sciences (including psychology, education, and law) are mentioned in 32 cases, followed by engineering (21), health sciences (15), and economics/business (18). This segmentation suggests that providers seek to match students' fields of study with writers who are perceived as domain experts.

Persuasive strategies are built around four main pillars: professionalism, personalization, safety, and speed. Professional credibility is established through references to "professores especializados" [specialized professors] (77 mentions) and "experts in your field" (42 mentions). Personalization is heavily emphasized with over 150 mentions of "a medida" [tailored], reinforcing the idea that these services are custom-made to fit individual academic and institutional needs. Guarantees of success and satisfaction are also common, with expressions such as "garantía de resultados" [guaranteed results] and "tu dinero de vuelta" [your money back] used to instil

confidence. Finally, the promise of rapid turnaround, "entrega en menos de 72 horas" [delivery in less than 72 hours], aims to attract students dealing with urgent deadlines.

Plagiarism control is another recurring marketing claim. Thirty-eight advertisements assert "100% originality," while 25 mention "unique writing," and 14 refer to plagiarism checks using tools like Turnitin. These references aim to pre-empt potential objections and further mitigate users' ethical concerns by implying academic compliance.

The portrayal of authors is carefully constructed to enhance trust. Seventy-seven ads claim the work is carried out by "specialized professors," and 29 reference experience exceeding five years. The repetition of these attributes helps construct a narrative of professional legitimacy and expertise, even though the actual qualifications and identities of these contributors are unverifiable in most cases.

Delivery time is also a significant selling point. Fourteen advertisements promise delivery within three days or less, while six stress deadline flexibility. These timelines are designed to accommodate students under pressure, framing the service as both reliable and reactive.

Discussion

The results of this study provide empirical evidence of the structure, strategies, and advertising tactics employed by academic ghost-writing platforms operating in Spain. The analysis of 40 active websites and 643 search engine advertisements offers a comprehensive overview of how these platforms present themselves, the services they offer, and the discursive resources used to legitimise their activities. The findings reflect not only the increasing normalisation of contract cheating but also the sophistication with which these services operate under the guise of academic support.

A key finding is the commercial positioning of these platforms. Most websites presented a high degree of formalisation, with legal disclaimers, cookie policies, and privacy notices suggesting efforts to project trust and legitimacy. While these features may initially indicate regulatory compliance, their function appears more aligned with marketing strategies than with ethical transparency. The use of institutional language, client testimonials, and claims of confidentiality reveals a dual strategy: distancing the service from accusations of fraud while exploiting the academic needs of students. This confirms prior studies (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016; Dawson, 2020) regarding the rhetorical ambiguity of such platforms.

The advertisements analysed reinforce this observation. Many ads highlight urgency, discretion, and academic success. Keywords like "urgent TFG," "custom thesis," or "guaranteed grade" demonstrate how commercial discourse is tailored to reach students during periods of academic stress. The marketing narrative tends to emphasise efficiency, personalisation, and risk-free service, downplaying the ethical implications of the transaction. This is consistent with literature on educational consumerism (Bretag et al., 2019) and the framing of students as clients within higher education markets (Bunce et al., 2017).

The large number of ads (n=643) and the diversity of keyword combinations also suggest a competitive, well-funded market. Platforms invest in SEO and PPC strategies to ensure visibility, often securing top positions in search engine results. This visibility, when combined with persuasive language and seemingly legitimate branding, creates a low-barrier entry point for students to engage in academic outsourcing. The capacity of these platforms to align their messaging with students' perceived needs is concerning, as it reveals a systemic vulnerability within the academic ecosystem.

Moreover, the study reveals a blurring of lines between legitimate tutoring and unethical ghost-writing. Several platforms offer editing, tutoring, and academic coaching alongside complete assignment writing, allowing them to maintain a legal and ethical grey area. This multiplicity of services complicates enforcement efforts and presents a challenge for policymakers and educational institutions attempting to regulate these activities.

These findings are situated within the broader global debate on contract cheating, echoing the concerns raised in other national contexts (Newton, 2018; Kaktiņš, 2018). However, the Spanish case presents distinctive features. The platforms operate within a national education system where high-stakes assessments such as final-year projects are prerequisites for graduation. The commodification of these deliverables reflects systemic pressures, including labour market competitiveness and institutional reputational stakes.

In sum, the results point to the emergence of a semi-legitimised academic outsourcing industry that operates at the intersection of legality, marketing, and educational fragility. These platforms do not simply exist due to student demand but thrive because of structural, cultural, and institutional vulnerabilities that are yet to be adequately addressed.

Limitations

While this study offers a novel and robust analysis of the academic ghost-writing industry in Spain, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the sample was restricted to 40 websites that were active and engaged in paid advertising campaigns at the time of data collection. While this approach ensured the inclusion of operationally relevant platforms, it may have excluded smaller providers or those relying solely on organic traffic, social media, or word-of-mouth. Consequently, the findings may not capture the full scope of the contract cheating ecosystem.

Second, the use of SEMrush, although a powerful digital marketing analytics tool, has its own limitations in terms of data availability and historical accuracy. Some advertisements may have been missed due to the tool's tracking constraints or changes in domain activity. Moreover, SEMrush does not access private advertising agreements or promotions outside mainstream search engines, limiting the comprehensiveness of the dataset.

Third, the analysis focused exclusively on search engine advertising, excluding other promotional formats such as influencer marketing, affiliate schemes, or institutional partnerships. Given the rise of multi-platform marketing strategies, future research would benefit from a more holistic approach that incorporates social media content, student testimonials, and other user-generated content.

Another limitation lies in the interpretive scope of content analysis. While the study employed structured coding procedures and inter-rater reliability checks, the qualitative categorisation of marketing language and rhetorical strategies remains partly subjective. Ambiguities in language, cultural nuances, and metaphorical expressions may lead to varying interpretations, especially when the goal of the advertisement is to obfuscate its true function.

The study also does not assess the effectiveness of the advertisements or the actual use of services by students. Although the ads provide insight into market strategies and intentions, they do not reveal how students interact with these platforms, what motivates their decisions, or the

long-term outcomes of engagement. Integrating survey or interview data from users would enrich the analysis and provide a fuller picture of the problem.

Furthermore, ethical considerations limit direct interaction with the companies studied. No impersonation or engagement with the services was performed, in order to adhere to academic integrity and avoid incentivising unethical business practices. This necessarily constrains the depth of insight into pricing structures, communication dynamics, or the production process of commissioned academic work.

Finally, while the research provides a national case study, generalisability to other contexts should be done cautiously. Cultural, legal, and educational variations mean that findings from the Spanish context may not fully apply to countries with different regulatory frameworks or academic structures. Comparative studies across jurisdictions would help establish broader patterns and inform cross-border policy efforts.

Conclusions

This study provides one of the most comprehensive empirical analyses to date of contract cheating platforms in the Spanish higher education context. By examining the architecture, legal structure, and advertising strategies of 40 active websites and 643 advertisements, it sheds light on a largely hidden commercial landscape that threatens academic integrity.

The findings demonstrate that academic ghost-writing platforms in Spain are highly professionalised operations. They rely on persuasive marketing, formal legal structures, and SEO investments to project legitimacy and attract clients. Their services are presented under euphemisms such as "academic support" or "custom tutoring," with promises of confidentiality, high grades, and urgent delivery. This combination of formalisation and ambiguity complicates enforcement efforts and allows the platforms to operate with minimal risk.

The analysis of advertisements reveals the strategic use of urgency, emotional appeal, and guarantees of success to reach students during vulnerable periods. This targeted advertising exploits systemic gaps in academic support and contributes to the normalisation of dishonest academic behaviour. Students are positioned as consumers in a market of solutions, which reinforces instrumental views of education and undermines institutional trust.

In addition to marketing strategies, the study shows that platforms offer a broad portfolio of services beyond contract cheating, including editing, coaching, and translation. This bundling further obscures the ethical boundaries of the services and enables a wider range of client engagement. Many platforms adopt the aesthetics and discourse of higher education institutions, further blurring the line between legitimate and illegitimate academic assistance.

From a regulatory perspective, the findings suggest a need for more precise legislation and coordinated institutional policies. Current legal frameworks in Spain do not explicitly prohibit the offering of academic ghost-writing services, creating a permissive environment. Institutions must strengthen their academic integrity systems, develop more robust detection methods, and engage in proactive student education campaigns.

At the pedagogical level, the data point to the necessity of rethinking assessment formats and support structures. Over-reliance on high-stakes, end-of-programme assignments such as bachelor or master's theses may inadvertently push students toward outsourcing. Diversified

assessment, formative feedback, and transparent integrity policies could mitigate the appeal of contract cheating.

In conclusion, contract cheating in Spain is not an isolated or marginal phenomenon. It is embedded within digital infrastructures and driven by both demand-side vulnerabilities and supply-side sophistication. Addressing it requires a coordinated response that includes regulation, education, platform accountability, and cultural change. Future research should continue to map this evolving landscape, integrate student perspectives, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at preserving academic integrity in an increasingly commercialised educational environment.

AI use declaration

The authors acknowledge that ChatGPT-4.0 was utilized for proofreading purposes in the preparation of this article. The AI assistance was limited to linguistic refinement, grammar correction, and clarity improvement, without altering the conceptual, analytical, or interpretative content of the manuscript.

All substantive content, including arguments, analyses, conclusions, and interpretations, remain solely the responsibility of the authors, who have thoroughly reviewed, validated, and approved the final version of the text. The use of AI does not imply any transfer of authorship or intellectual contribution beyond the stated scope.

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