THE CULTURE OF DIGITAL ACADEMIC COMMISSIONS: AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Academic integrity is one of the transmitted values in the education process. However, due to the impact of unstoppable growing technology, accompanied by the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic to education processes, digital paid academic services became popular among students. This study aimed to explore the culture of paid digital academic services using the principles of covert observation utilizing the cyberethnographic design of qualitative research. The culture of paid academic services in Facebook groups was subjected to this study by analyzing the posts in the group pages. The observations are the following: (1) Academic servants are from different spectrums of educational qualifications, (2) services offered vary, (3) requests of potential clients are (a) to prepare common school requirements, (b) proxy to quizzes or performance tasks, (c) partial or full aids to their thesis, and (d) some notable observations. It was also observed that there are scamming schemes in the group. In the digital era, it is difficult to control paid academic services. Thus, ethically acceptable paid academic services must be clearly defined. Teachers and school administrators are advised to devise a policy for their classes/schools relative to pressing concerns of paid digital academic services.

Keywords: Education, Academic Services, Covert Observation, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Different sectors of each country were affected by the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of these is the academic sector which forced them to shift from the traditional face-to-face scenario to distance learning (Mpungose, 2020).This paradigm shift in the education system brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic led to several problems Özüdoğru (2021). Some of these problems are focused on faculty – lack of communication, skills, and feedback mechanism – while some are focused on the students – inability to focus, being not accustomed to the system, and being passive.

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While other problems are the technicality and technology – connectivity, video and sounds problem, and appropriateness of software. One of the emerging problems with distance learning is the culture of online academic services. Sarwar, Idris and Ali (2018) defined academic services as a practice in which students appoint someone else to produce scholarly works such as research papers and reports, assignments, and the like.

Although paid academic services was existing before the COVID-19 pandemic which was then called "academic ghostwriting" (Zhen and Cheng, 2015), it becomes amplified due to the availability of social media. Moreover, some "ghost writers" were affected financially by the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic and this is what they have taught to help them seek additional sources of income (Magsambol, 2021). Although this academic "ghostwriting" becomes the common scenery online, it is still considered unethical (Fisher, McLeo, Savage and Simkin, 2016) even majority of those who availed of the services are receiving high grades (Lines, 2016). Academic ghostwriting is more popular in higher education (Draper, Ibezim, and Newton, 2017) where most of the output is facing issues like literary theft (Starovoytova (2017). Students in higher education pay for such services due to pressure such as deadlines, assessment criteria (Molinary, 2014), lack of time, language barrier, and expertise (Nanda, 2022).

Due to this academic commission dubbed as "ghostwriting services", academic integrity becomes a challenge in the academic sector. Academic integrity is described as "honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage " (ICAI, 2021). Tainting academic integrity may result in negative branding that worst case scenario may affect the name of the academic institution.

This study explores the culture of digital academic commissions happening in different Facebook groups. Paid academic commission to be investigated in this study is focused on those scenarios of asking someone to answer quizzes, create research, or any academic matter on behalf of the clients with monetary payment for the service. The paid academic commission is different from tutorial services, which is not the focus of this study, wherein they pay professionals to re-discuss topics that clients have difficulty understanding, and yet clients will be the ones to accomplish their academic requirements.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Due to the increasing popularity of academic commissions in the digital world, this study would like to describe its culture. Specifically, this study would like to determine the range of academic servants, the services offered, the variety of clients, and their requests.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a cyberethnographic design of research. Cyberethnographic research design is an ethnographic research of online material (Marzano, 2021) which utilizes a qualitative descriptive of the culture of digital academic commission. This study is focused on observations to answer who, what, where, when, and how of a specific phenomenon rather than checking the relationships and association of identified variables (Kim, et al, 2017). The source of data came from different Facebook groups relative to academic commissioning as each research member was assigned one specific Facebook group to avoid overlapping of the source of data to be examined. To gain the purest sense of what is happening in the mentioned Facebook groups, this study opts to utilize covert observation as the data-gathering procedure. In this procedure, the researchers under-covered to understand the culture of

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digital academic commission in its purest sense as data may instinctually change once the observation was announced (Allen, 2018).

All the gathered data of each researcher were analyzed individually. A schedule to convene all researchers was done to collect and present their data. Thematic analysis was done on the presentation to create the themes generated grounded from the data (Kiger &Varpio, 2020).

Ethical Consideration. There is a debate relative to the ethical consideration of utilizing covert observation as a data-gathering strategy. The concern rises in terms of informed consent and seems to involve deception since the researchers are in undercover mode members of Facebook groups that were observed are not aware that research relative to the paid digital academic commission is ongoing. But there are reasons why covert observation is the best-suited data gathering procedure in this study (Marzano, 2021) due to the following reasons:

1. *Impracticality of obtaining consent to participate*

Obtaining prior consent to participate is impractical for this study due to (a) by knowing that the Facebook group will be subjected to a study, researchers may be kicked out of the group thus data collection will be stopped, and (b) posts may be deleted by either the Facebook group administrators or the accounts who posted it and thus will nullify the investigation in this study.

2. *Risk of causing harm is very limited*

Utilizing covert observation in this study does not mean any harm to the owner of the group nor the owners of accounts posting in the Facebook groups. The research also considers Data Privacy Act of 2012 where names and identities of people involved were not included in the study. The lens of the observation conducted is focused on the culture and not on the people themselves.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Academic commissions, or more familiar with the term "paid ghostwriting", become more evident in social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. This exploratory study aimed to investigate its culture by utilizing covert observation in different Facebook groups associated with the mentioned culture. Data that were analyzed in this study are posts from varying time frames as previous posts can still be viewed even right after joining the targeted FB group. The finding of the study are enumerated in this section.

1. Academic servants are from different spectrum of academic qualifications

It is observed in the study that those who are offering academic services vary in terms of their academic qualifications. There are junior high school students, senior high school students, college students, and professionals (whether with, or without units or graduate in either a masteral or doctoral degree). It is noted in that majority of academic commissioners who fall into the professional category came from the education sector. This might be alarming since academic commissions are considered unethical (Fisher, McLeo, Savage and Simkin, 2016) and yet teachers were among the academic commissioners. Although educators are aware that this is unethical, this may be rooted in the fact that these educators who opt in receiving academic commissions needed more funds for their reason (Tamayo, 2022).

2. Academic commissioners offer a variety of services

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Academic services offered by the commissioners vary – selling of different academic software (cracked versions), writing essays, creating digital arts, aiding in researching whether partial or full paper, and selling of ready-made thesis. In this case, the commissioners are posting the services that they may offer to potential clients. As some posts of these offers do not receive any comments or reactions from people within the group but some have lots of comments and reactions. There seems to be a "favorite" commissioner as their output was superior to other commissioners thus gaining trust within the Facebook group. Other notable observations suited to this theme are the academic commissioners who are discrediting other commissioners to further gain the trust of their clients.

3. Potential client requests

There were numerous posts from potential clients who are requesting specific work from academic commissioners. Potential clients are from different strata of education – junior and senior high school, college, master and doctorate. The following request is listed below:

3.1. Prepare common school requirement

These are simple essays, poems, citing examples of particular phenomena, building plans, and speech materials. These requests will only take some time to accomplish although some requirements require an ample amount of time to accomplish which includes video editing, and digital arts. It is observed that clients who request these types of services are either high school or college.

3.2. Proxy to examination or performance tasks

One of the disturbing requests from potential clients is asking commissioners to become their proxy in their academic requirements. One client request was to ask a professional to proxy in their timed quizzes. This means that the academic commissioners will log in to the account of the student and take the examination on their behalf. Another proxy service is asking the commissioners to take a video of themselves doing routine activities in Physical Education. Criteria of physical features of commissioners were posted by the clients to suit their physical features as well. Same as discussed in the previous category, clients under this category are from high school and college.

3.3. Partial or full aids to their thesis

This category was the most sought-after request from high school to doctorate. Partial aids to thesis writing involve statistical treatment, recruitment of sources of data, grammarian services, unlocking software accounts related to research like Grammarly and Turnitin, and searching for articles to be included in related literature and studies. Full aid to thesis writing is asking the commissioner either to write the whole thesis or to give them a ready-made thesis. The partial aids to thesis services are notable to high school to doctorate clients while the full aids to thesis is only notable to high school and college students.

3.4. Other notable observations

There were two notable requests from anonymous accounts in two different Facebook groups. First is the student requesting to copy the signature of his/her teachers and sign his/her clearance form. As indicated in the post, it may be cheaper rather than hiring academic commissioners to finish the requirements per

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teacher. It was noted in the comment section that all academic commissioners are highlighting the limitations of accepting commissions. There was no indicator in the comment section that there was an academic commissioner who accepted the request. Another notable request was asking someone to proxy as the guardian of the student. In the Facebook post, the client is requesting someone to proxy as his guardian since his teacher wanted to talk to his guardian online. The post does not accept any comments and observers do not have any idea whether someone accepted this request or not.

4. Scamming scheme

It also observed the two-way scamming incidents in the group – clients scamming commissioners and commissioners scamming clients. In terms of clients scamming commissioners, both parties will agree that the payment will be given by the client to hired commissioners after giving the request to the client. However, scamming scheme starts after the commissioner submitted the documents that the client will no longer be active in the social media and thus will not pay the commissioner. Meanwhile, in the commissioner scamming client scheme, the commissioner will ask for payment first from the client, after giving the payment, the commissioner will either give substandard outputs or will no longer be contacted in social media.

CONCLUSION

The culture of paid academic services becomes more and more rampant in social media. The Strata of clients and commissioners is very diverse from students to professionals. Some educators themselves resort to academic commissioning probably due to financial needs even if they are considered as stewards of academic integrity. Students, on the other hand, resulted to hiring commissioners because of their reason as well. Nevertheless, the academic community may offer long-term solutions to this concern. This study could not offer any solution to this pressing concern in the academic community as this concern is beyond the control of researchers. Another pressing concern in this matter if this is already ethically acceptable or not at this present time, if it is, up to what extent it is ethically acceptable?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since this phenomenon cannot be fully controlled by the academic community, some solutions that are hereby recommended are (1) quizzes and examinations can be done face-to-face to eliminate the proxy system of academic commissions, (2) using programs to check the validity and reliability of the submitted output must be utilized, and having a strong school policy to decrease this instances. Other researchers may also check whether these instances were already ethically acceptable or not, and the limitations if it is ethically acceptable.

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