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## Discursive Construction of Contract Cheating and Degradation of Higher Education: Comments on *The Daily Mail* Online

*Jasper Roe*

**Key words:**  
contract cheating;  
United Kingdom;  
media; discourse  
analysis; sociology  
of knowledge  
approach to  
discourse

**Abstract:** Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more attention has been paid to practices of academic integrity in higher education institutions (HEIs). Part of this focus has been on contract cheating, which involves the outsourcing of assessments to third parties. There is little research on how cases of contract cheating are represented by journalists in the media and how readers interact and exchange comments regarding this subject. In this article, I surveyed the online section of the UK's most popular news brand, *The Daily Mail*, and commentary from readers. Through *The Daily Mail's* online database, I compiled a corpus of 983 comments written in response to articles regarding contract cheating in the United Kingdom. The corpus was analyzed using techniques grounded in the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (KELLER, 2005). I found that there are repetitive practices which structure common patterns of comment and response, including overlapping discourses of populist orientation, othering of international and overseas students, self-positioning as expert, and other-positioning of current students as lacking integrity and moral strength. These themes relate to strategies to negotiate the apportionment of blame for contract cheating to historical political governance, generational difference, and societal degradation.

### Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction: The Structural Transformation of Academic Life in the UK](#)
- [2. Contract Cheating and Plagiarism in the Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Era](#)
- [3. Using SKAD to Explore Comment and Response Practices in \*The Daily Mail\*](#)
- [4. Causes of Contract Cheating in Comment Data: Historicity and Populism](#)
- [5. Understanding Self-Positioning and the Unspecified Past](#)
- [6. Understanding Positioning of the Other: The Snowflake Generation](#)
- [7. Conclusion: Reflecting on the Politicization of Contract Cheating and Future Directions](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

## 1. Introduction: The Structural Transformation of Academic Life in the UK

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions and their policies and practices featured heavily in mainstream media, with common topics including the viability of campus closures, refund procedures and student rights, and the maintenance of academic integrity. However, prior to this period universities had been no strangers to public scrutiny and underwent periodic episodes of crisis and transformation. To understand the higher education (HE) landscape in the UK, a brief description of one of these major changes is helpful in illuminating the sociohistorical-political context. [1]

The past six decades have seen universities in the UK transfer from a traditional knowledge-pursuit orientation to a greater focus on meeting the requirements of the labor market, which reflects a functionalist orientation of higher education as it responds to cultural trends and the economic development of the country (STEELE & RICKARDS, 2021). During the 1950s, the UK university system could be described as elitist, leading to the metaphorical representation of HE as an ivory tower, as only 20,000 degrees were awarded each year compared to over 500,000 today (MOSCARDINI, STRACHAN & VLASOVA, 2022). From the 1950s onwards, higher education increased in access and has undergone a process of mass growth based on the United Kingdom's governmental policies and objectives to increase access to those previously unable to engage in HE, in order to develop a skilled labor pool (GIANNAKIS & BULLIVANT, 2016). The Further and Higher Education Act 1992<sup>1</sup> also resulted in a status change of polytechnic institutions into universities, contributing to a tripling of institutions with university status in the UK from 1990-2019 (MOSCARDINI et al., 2022). These factors have contributed to making universities and HE all the more visible and accessible in UK society. As a result, universities have slowly transformed from the elitist, closed-off institutions of the 1950s (ibid.) to a more public and inextricable part of modern society (BARNETT, 2011). Furthermore, universities continue to play a role of growing importance, setting the pace in varying spheres of human life including technological development, economics, society, ecology, and governance (STEELE & RICKARDS, 2021). However, this has led to public scrutiny and speculation regarding the functioning and operation of HE institutions, as now universities are coming under increased criticism by stakeholders for their role in driving academic capitalism (ibid.) which refers to growing marketization, greater structures of management and governance or managerialism (DEEM, 2020) and inter-university competition (SCHULZE-CLEVEN, REITZ, MAESSE & ANGERMULLER, 2017). Simultaneously, DEEM (2022) has argued that the position of the academic worker is declining in status, and that academia has suffered as a viable career path resulting from growing instability and poorer working conditions. Despite the shift to a market-led orientation, there has also been a reported loss of degree value perception among employers as a result of grade inflation (MOSCARDINI et al., 2022), and

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1 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents> [Accessed: February 23, 2023].

there is some substantive evidence of grade inflation as found by BACHAN (2017). [2]

It is conceivable that there is a declining public sentiment regarding the status of higher education, given the pan-European and transatlantic populist epoch of modern society (BRUBAKER, 2017), as evidenced by the anti-intellectual perception in influencing responses to expert information on COVID-19 (MERKLEY & LOEWEN, 2021). Scientific credentials are not seen as tokens to signify expert status and authority as they once were, and research has shown that some areas of the British media have contributed to undermining the consensus of scientists on human-made climate change, leading readers to believe that expertise is "up-for-grabs" (COEN, MEREDITH, WOODS & FERNANDEZ, 2021, p.400). Particularly in the comments of online media sections in the UK, a variety of implicit strategies and tactics to claim expertise have been employed by readers to take control of this expertise (COEN et al., 2021). Against this background, it is an opportune time to analyze and understand the discursive practices of communities in online media in the United Kingdom regarding higher education, and more specifically as in the current study, discourses of academic integrity and contract cheating. This is made more relevant by the current era of post-truth politics in which political propaganda is accelerated by social media and current technology (SALGADO, 2018). [3]

Given the scarcity of research on this topic, a central aim in this investigation is to begin to understand specific discourses of online news communities in the United Kingdom regarding academic integrity and contract cheating. Digital, online news was chosen given its unprecedented rate of growth. Access to digital news has continued to expand in the UK throughout the pandemic, with more than 3 million new readers using digital news in 2020 compared to 2019, and 21.5 million people in the UK accessing digital news websites overall (TOBITT, 2022), indicating it is an important and rising arena of digital discourse production. After initial searches on a number of news brand websites, I decided to focus on a single news provider to give a specific focus on which future comparative discourse analysis could draw. I selected *The Daily Mail* for several reasons. Firstly, in 2020, *The Daily Mail* overtook *The Sun* after forty-two years to become the highest selling newspaper in the UK, with sales equivalent to 980,000 papers daily of *The Daily Mail* and 878,000 for the Sunday title, "Mail on Sunday" (SWENEY, 2020, p.1). COLLINS (2012, p.1) described *The Daily Mail* as the "most powerful" newspaper in Great Britain, which is positioned as defending British values and representative of the quiet majority of UK citizens. As a result, by understanding these specific discourses, further comparative analysis may be undertaken to gain greater insight into the social dynamics and changing relationship between public media discourse and the integrity of higher education institutions. Second, GOMEZ-JIMENEZ (2018) noted *The Daily Mail* as having a populist method of communication with its audience and is thus relevant to the current populist period of the late 2010s to present (BRUBAKER, 2017). I contend that while this study is narrow in scope and I cannot therefore identify discourses outside of this arena, this investigation lays the groundwork for future

expansion to investigate the larger competing societal discourses in other areas of social life. [4]

I will begin with a description of the current debate over academic integrity and the increasing focus on issues regarding cheating and integrity in academia globally during the COVID-19 pandemic (Section 2). Following this, I will introduce my theoretical perspective and methodological approach to analyzing comment data in the UK online newspaper *The Daily Mail* (Section 3). This will then be followed by a description of the key findings and a subsequent discussion of the implications of the research (Section 4, 5, 6) and a conclusion (Section 7). [5]

## **2. Contract Cheating and Plagiarism in the Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Era**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the already volatile subject of academic integrity became the further subject of debate in mass media and in academia. Reports of cheating had risen drastically during this time (DEY, 2021). In the realm of European politics, increased reports of high-profile government leaders being stripped of their PhD title as a result of plagiarism occurred, notably in Germany where over 20 politicians have been accused of plagiarizing academic work (KNIGHT, 2021). The ongoing relationship between academic misconduct and technology has equally been described as an arms-race, with new technologies to commit cheating and catch cheating continually developing against one another (ROE & PERKINS, 2022). The subject of the articles collected here regard contract cheating as a specific violation of academic integrity. Contract cheating is now commonly undertaken when students engage a formal business operating through the internet, before submitting the work as their own (WALKER & TOWNLEY, 2012), and cases of students admitting to contract cheating appear to have increased with time (NEWTON, 2018). The reasons for this growth are not fully clear, but increased internationalization of higher education with English as a medium of instruction (EMI) may play a role, given that there is a direct relationship between language ability and plagiarism (PERKINS, GEZGIN & ROE, 2018, 2020). BRETAG et al. (2019) claimed that the acceleration of contract cheating began in the 1990s as a result of commercialization of higher education and the development of a customer-provider relationship between academic institutions and students, leading to students taking the easiest route to obtaining their qualification. This has also been described as the "consumer attitude to education" (HILL, 2013, p.150). Although commercial operations of factories that produce materials to cheat (essay mills) date to the 1930s in the USA, and have been reported on by journalists in Canada since the 1970s (EATON, 2022), contract cheating continues to attract media attention (VEERAN-COLTON, SEFCIK & YORKE, 2022), and this has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as media headlines on contract cheating have stoked public debate (KRÁSNÍČAN, FOLTÝNEK & HENEK DLABOLOVÁ, 2022). [6]

Popular media have reported on the industry of contract cheating and businesses that operate abroad in Kenya and South Asia, often focusing on non-white individuals. This may redirect framing of the contract cheating industry as

something that is foreign rather than rooted in the pure and unspoiled Western education system (EATON, STOESZ & SEELAND, 2022). Increased media focus on such practices during the pandemic may mirror societal trends and attitudes, as there have been observed increases of cheating in universities during the COVID-19 period. WALSH et al. (2021) found that students perceived an increase in cheating during online assessment in COVID-19 induced distance-learning, and academics have noted an increase in cheating during this time (EATON, 2020). In the media it has been stated that cheating has ballooned and that numbers of cases of cheating rose sharply during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic (DEY, 2021). Such behaviors may capture journalists' and the public's imaginations, as academically dishonest behaviors may be linked with dishonesty in other domains later in life (GUERRERO-DIB, PORTALES & HEREDIA-ESCORZA, 2020) and contract cheating in particular can be a threat to community safety; BRETAG (2019) gave the example of doctors, engineers and other professionals who engage in highly consequential work being unable to fulfil their duties. Governments are also taking notice of this issue, and urgent calls of intervention to retain faith in the university system are not going unheeded. In Australia, contract cheating was made illegal in 2020, following the passing of the Prohibiting Academic Cheating Services Bill 2019<sup>2</sup> in Parliament, while recently in the UK, contract cheating providers (essay mills) have been made formally illegal by the government<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, less focus has been given to the increasing instrumentality of HE and its impact on creating stress and pressure for students to achieve recognition in the labor market (ROE, 2022). It is against this background that the current research is undertaken. [7]

### 3. Using SKAD to Explore Comment and Response Practices in *The Daily Mail*

The aim of this research is to understand the discursive practice of online commenters on articles relating to contract cheating in the online edition of *The Daily Mail* UK newspaper, heralded as the "most powerful" news brand in the country (COLLINS, 2012, p.1). By achieving this aim, a greater understanding of the public perception of academia in this social space can be realized, which can then form a basis for further comparative analysis in different discursive arenas. *The Daily Mail* is a right-wing tabloid paper (STOEGNER & WODAK, 2016) available in both print and online editions. It is highly popular and became the most circulated newspaper in the United Kingdom in 2020 (SWENEY, 2020). In a report from Ipsos<sup>4</sup>, the author stated that users spend the most time on *Mail Online* in comparison to other competitors' websites, making it the "UK's most engaged news brand"<sup>5</sup> and therefore a suitable subject of study, although results

2 <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/preventing-contract-cheating/legislation> [Accessed: January 1, 2023].

3 <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2022/04/28/essay-mills-are-now-illegal-skills-minister-calls-on-internet-service-providers-to-crack-down-on-advertising/> [Accessed: October 18, 2022].

4 Ipsos is a French multinational market research company, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/online-audience-measurement#:~:text=Ipsos%20iris%20is%20a%20hybrid.usage%20of%20websites%20and%20apps> [Accessed: April 28, 2023].

5 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9950857/MailOnline-UKs-engaged-news-brand.html> [Accessed: October 18, 2022].

cannot be generalized to the population at large. *The Daily Mail* also operates a U.S. and Australia sub-site from its UK homepage which is not clearly distinguished by domain name. [8]

The discourse of *The Daily Mail* has been a subject of research by others. In a study on maternity leave, discourse and relation to government policy change, GOMEZ-JIMENEZ (2018) identified that *The Daily Mail* communicates to its readers in a populist style and tends to identify the people as in struggle against elites who wield power over them. This populist style includes the identification of a single group of unified people, and populist performances which "involve strategies for widening the debate between the people and its adversaries" (p.107). Such performances have also been found in *The Daily Mail* regarding the delegitimization of the left through antisemitic stereotypes by STOEGNER and WODAK (2016), while IBRAHIM (2011) investigated the use of moral discourse to distract and reduce sensitivity to the conditions of immigration through processes of othering. In relation to online comments on *The Daily Mail Online*, TYALI (2017) used this approach effectively to analyze online comments using agenda-setting theory, while AWOBAMISE and JARRAR (2021) demonstrated that the inclusion of comments crucially has an effect on how credible and trustworthy news stories are viewed by readers. However, despite being owned by the same parent company, there have been disagreements surrounding varying positions and views described by *The Daily Mail* and *The Mail Online*, given their different editors. In addition, the website focuses more on quicker production of viral media which is suited towards a global audience than the print edition (LOWE, 2017). [9]

While no demographic data are available for *The Mail Online*, referring to print readership, demographics can give some insight into the audience. In 2014, the average age of readers surveyed for *The Daily Mail* was 58 years old, second only to the *Telegraph* (61) and higher than popular left-leaning titles such as *The Guardian* (44) (TAYLOR, 2014, p.1). 45% of the readership in this survey came in at above 65 years old, while only 14% were under 34 years old. *The Daily Mail* was also the only paper in the UK to have a majority female readership in this survey (p.1). 64% of the readership in the UK, according to the Publishers' Audience Measurement Company,<sup>6</sup> belonged to the ABC1 demographic of the National Readership Survey social grades (ranging from upper middle class to lower middle class), while 36% belonged to the C2DE demographic<sup>7</sup> (lower middle class, working class, and non-working). However, *The Mail Online's* readers were estimated by COLLINS (2012) to be more affluent and younger than the traditional paper reader. Despite the helpfulness of this contextual information, the approach taken to analysis was holistic and COLLINS did not attempt to draw conclusions relating to the stratification of readership, other than

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6 The Publishers' Audience Measurement Company (PAMCo) is in charge of the governance of audience measurement of published media in the United Kingdom. The data they provide can be found here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210407122153/https://pamco.co.uk/pamco-data/data-archive/> [Accessed: February 10, 2023].

7 The ABC1 demographic refers to the upper middle, middle, and lower middle classes in the UK. The C2DE demographic is commonly referred to in the UK as working class and is one of two major demographics used by the National Readership Survey (NRS) as explained by SMITH (2019).

that *The Daily Mail* is popular, powerful, and authors in the paper present a right-wing, populist style of communication (see also STOEGER & WODAK, 2016). [10]

To achieve the aim of understanding the discursive practices of commenters on articles of contract cheating in *The Daily Mail*, I chose an analytical framework based on KELLER's (2005, 2018) sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD). Sociological discourse analysis extends the horizons of linguistic discourse analysis to include wider focus on, among others, power and social structure (HERZOG, 2016). There are few English-language studies in which researchers have used this approach to examine discourse relating to higher education, although ELLIKER, COETZEE and KOTZE (2013) used SKAD effectively to examine the discourses of cultural difference in higher education settings in South Africa, in order to understand discourses of race and reproduction of discourse within a local context. I take the position that mass media discourses impact significantly upon society as explained by GOMEZ-JIMENEZ (2018), and that by critically examining newspaper discourses and the practices of actors engaged in reading and responding to newspaper articles, we can come to a deeper understanding of the underlying representations being adopted and propagated around particular issues in broad sectors of society at a particular time as described by WODAK (2015). [11]

SKAD is a method which allows researchers to focus on discursive fields or social arenas which are self-constituting and competitive (KELLER, 2018). Under this approach, actors both mobilize discourse and are mobilized themselves by discourses, which then develop systems of discursive production and dispositifs (ibid.). This leads to the creation of collective stocks of knowledge, which can appear in the form of artifacts, materialities, institutions, and many other forms (KELLER, 2005). Using SKAD approaches requires an interpretive qualitative method, involving close reading as the main component of the analysis using leading questions to investigate the content (SCHÜNEMANN, 2018), although other kinds of materiality have to be considered, and analysis should not only focus on texts (KELLER, 2007). In this sense, grounded theory researchers can be used to follow a bottom-up process for SKAD (KELLER, 2005). To achieve this, researchers conduct their study iteratively, using close reading of textual data directed towards the research questions and utilizing pre-sensitizing concepts to develop an understanding of the discourse (KELLER, 2018). During the reading part of the discourse analysis, the researcher uses questioning to identify main arguments, sub-arguments, interpretive schemes, narratives, classifications, and object/subject positionalities (SCHÜNEMANN, 2018). The main objective of this analysis is not for researchers to arrive at an objective truth claim, but to achieve sufficiently effective reasons for discourse analytical interpretations through self-reflexivity (KELLER, 2018). In this sense, authors conducting SKAD research generate discourse about discourses following their own rules of production. SKAD can enable researchers to achieve a "reasoned analysis where others could agree by argument with what is said about one single piece of data or the whole data corpus" (KELLER, 2011, p.63). [12]



Material gathered for analysis came from *The Mail Online's* website, using the search function for associated keywords including "plagiarism," "contract cheating," "academic misconduct" and "cheating." After I refined the results, nine articles were collected spanning from 2016-2022. Of these, four belonged to *The Daily Mail Australia*, and so were discarded. The remaining five articles contained a total of 983 comments distributed unevenly. Of the five, two articles accounted for 771 comments and 212 comments respectively, demonstrating a high level of engagement with the news stories in question. I decided to focus on the comments section for these two articles. The first article (A1) was entitled "EXCLUSIVE: We'll Write Your PhD Thesis ... For £6,173! British Students Cheat Their Way To Doctorates By Paying Companies To Write Their Dissertations" (WALLIS SIMONS, 2019a, p1). It was published online on 30 March 2019. [13]

In A1, WALLIS SIMONS described a case in which an investigative journalist for *The Mail Online* contacted an essay mill company and posed as a student. The journalist then described the conversations that he had with such essay mills, including the pricing of a doctoral dissertation, the qualifications of the proposed writer, the deadlines, and other accompanying details including confidentiality. The journalist then showed conversation excerpts through images which claimed that 25% of students at Oxford and Cambridge universities used the essay mills' services. Quotations from academic integrity experts and government officials were then used to contrast the findings and explain the size and value of the market, including its main geographical location in Kenya. [14]

The second article (A2) was entitled "EXCLUSIVE: Inside the African Essay Factories That Churn Out University Coursework for 115,000 Cheating British Students Every Year," published online by WALLIS SIMONS (2019b) on 23 August 2019 and had amassed 212 comments at the time of writing. A2 described a continuation of the theme of contract cheating, in which an investigative journalist went to Kenya and accessed the essay factories of Nairobi. The reporter described the affluent lifestyle of an entrepreneur who ran one of the factories, and the general structure and business practice by which the companies operated. The author detailed the entrepreneur's luxury cars, private chef, and luxury mansion in comparison to the poverty of much of Kenya's population. The journalist then listed the prices quoted from separate websites for PhD theses and other documents in relation to the salaries that the writers expected. Finally, a profile of a highly educated Kenyan writer is described, including the struggles of forming a business to produce such illegitimate work. [15]

Through inductive analysis and close reading of both articles, I posit that while the articles appear by nature to be descriptive, there is focus on the societal issues caused by contract cheating (repeated references to it being a cancer on higher education are given), and in A2 specifically, there is a contrast in the way that illegitimate wealth on behalf of contract cheating entrepreneurs is portrayed in comparison to the relative poverty of much of the population of Kenya. Furthermore, there is a presentation of contract cheating as an immediate and urgent issue that is a systemic threat to the education system and society. This has ramifications for the content to be found in the comments and how the

commenters relate to the article, as the comments must be viewed in relation to the text. [16]

Based on EYSENBACH and TILL's (2001) analysis of ethical issues in collecting online data, I concluded that comments of this nature are public rather than private communications, thus informed consent was not needed. Regardless, following the standards set by IVESON and FORMATO (2022), all name and location information, along with any identifiable information, was removed. Data were analyzed using MAXQDA software for assistance in coding. [17]

Throughout the analysis, the comments were treated as a whole and were not categorized according to the specific article to which they replied. This represents part of the deconstructing of the material for interpretation (KELLER, 2018). I located several knowledge claims which highlight a discourse that describes a state of societal decline. However, comments which counter this perspective of continual decline point out the long-standing history of academic cheating, but simultaneously resonate with the claim that it is a service used by elites to escape a meritocratic society and maintain a grip on power regardless of their intelligence and competency, mirroring the populist performance divisiveness found by GOMEZ-JIMENEZ (2018) in the analysis of representation of maternity leave. The discursive practices of commenters generally indicate a failure of younger generations to thrive and a growth in cheating as another strategy to deal with a lack of tenacity, grit, resilience, and moral fiber, commonly referred to as "snowflakes." Broadly speaking however, nested replies and comments generated heated debates and contesting truth-claims, particularly regarding doctoral education (likely a result of A1's focus on doctoral students). Many of these are pre-faced with a claimed expertise. "I have a PhD" or "I am a professor" are common examples, and refutation of the ease of paying for completion of a PhD are often linked back to oral defenses and vivas, claiming that the possibility of paying for a doctoral qualification produced by someone else is factually impossible. [18]

In the below detailed results and discussion sections, several aspects of SKAD are employed. Narrative structures are referenced as part of the common thread or story of the discourses, including their definable episodes which link to one another and create a coherent, portrayable and communicable discourse (KELLER, 2011), along with the ways in which classifications are employed. These are nested within a broader analysis using KELLER's (2018) phenomenal structure, which is used to frame and describe the discursive practices located in the corpus material. These can be understood in terms of four dimensions. The first dimension relates to causes. The meaning of this dimension is the practices used when discussing the reasoning behind an increase in contract cheating prevalence. The second dimension is the self-positioning of actors, and this relates to how commenters use unique practices to establish themselves as subjects and the attributes they ascribe to themselves. The third dimension, positioning of others, relates to how discursive practices are used to characterize an "other" as an adversary of the homogenous group described in the populist strategies of *The Daily Mail*, thus creating a gap between "us" and "them"

(GOMEZ-JIMENEZ, 2018). The final dimension is that of rules of speaker formation, which specifically focuses on the strategies used to "grab expertise" (COEN et al. 2021, p.400) and establish the subject position of an authority/expert in relating a comment replying to the article, or to another commenter. Throughout the results, single-comment extracts from the corpus are presented which are emblematic of the larger themes found in these discourses labelled with "C" and a corresponding number. [19]

#### **4. Causes of Contract Cheating in Comment Data: Historicity and Populism**

The first dimension of the discourse I identified is a narrative, that is to say a story of definable episodes, which explains the causes behind the increase in contract cheating perceived in the article. The major narrative theme that emerged is that these actions are largely attributable to ex-Prime Minister (1997-2007) and leader of the Labour Party UK (1994-2007) Tony BLAIR, and the Labour Party in general. Under this theme, speakers related stories of the perceived degradation of the university structure and rigor, along with the prestige of a university education, to the actions of Tony BLAIR's Labour Party during his tenure as Prime Minister. The following examples in Comment C1-C2 of the text are emblematic of the attribution of blame and the perceived reduction in degree education by the Labour government. Often the sarcastic expression of gratitude ("thanks Blair") was used to highlight agency and blame and participate in the shared historical narrative of a fall from greatness. Although further contextualization of these comments is difficult given their short nature, BLAIR's government took power at a time in which a shift from elite to mass HE had recently taken place, following the Dearing Report<sup>8</sup> set up by the Conservative government and with the consent of all three major UK political parties in 1997 (LUNT, 2008). On the other hand, LUNT contended that BLAIR's legacy is a highly marketized system of HE in the United Kingdom, and this may offer some explanation of the shared historical origin of the discursive practice found in this dimension. In relation to a narrative structure, such comments focused on creating a history in which a once effective system of HE has been devalued in the pursuit of credentialism, and in which equality and education for all is seen as adversarial to meritocracy.

C1: "Thanks Blair for creating idiots who use these idiots."

C2: "Well you can thank Blair for this. Everyone should have a degree at any cost."

C3: "Degrees at two a penny nowadays. Dumbed down by labour." [20]

However, this dimension of narrative which attributes cause to broad political policies and strategies of one party and one politician, is at odds with a further category under this dimension of phenomenal structure, which is related to the political and economic elitism as the overriding cause of contract cheating. The identification of those who run the country and the elite mirrors GOMEZ-JIMENEZ (2018), who also found a struggle between the people and the elite in positions of

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<sup>8</sup> See LUNT (2008) for a description of The Dearing Report.

power, although, in the present research, specific political parties are not implicated. The theme of populism matches the definition given in BRUBAKER's (2017) vertical dimension of populism, in which a moral, hardworking, and common-sense people struggle against an unfairly powerful, overeducated elite that creates such issues, while the bottom group of current students are represented as not deserving respect.

C4: "Dishonest students? Aren't most of our politicians university educated? I think I see a trend here."

C5: "To be fair look at the idiots who run the country, most of them had private education at top schools, but it did not make them clever or intelligent." [21]

From these examples, a clearer understanding of the multiple dimensions of discursive practice can be developed. Under the dimensions exemplified by C4-C5, there is a common implicit narrative that politicians are likely to have engaged in contract cheating behaviors and this explains their perceived incompetence, despite having attended elite institutions or attending highly ranked private schools. This practice served to reinforce the failures and lack of intelligence among the ruling elite and dissatisfaction by the people who constitute the discourse community. The final dimension of discursive practice under the subheading of causes of increased contract cheating relates to the economic incentive of universities to tolerate cheating to achieve financial gain. Under this dimension, increases in contract cheating are attributable to the institution's decision to allow it as a necessary step to benefit economically. In these cases, the impetus for universities to maximize revenue from tuition fees and will willingly disregard academic integrity violations to improve revenues. This is often related to a perceived lack of intelligence among applicants, or from "non-EU students," "overseas" or international students as tuition fees paid are higher. This discursive framing implies that the increased fees paid by non-EU students are in essence provided with a product and entry standards and academic integrity practices are ignored, and this suggests coherence with EATON et al.'s (2022) claim that in sensationalized media, foreigners or outsiders are a key cause of corruption of the Western education system. On a broader level, this can be related to a general sense of dissatisfaction with a perceived marketization of the formerly elite higher education system.

C6: "Top universities have been turning a blind eye for years by enrolling thick people and issuing them with Mickley mouse degrees."

C7: "And universities are fine dumbing down entry standards for non EU students because of those big fees they pay."

C8: "Universities aim to attract the largest number of students paying the highest fees, especially from overseas."

C9: "Even in the UK prestigious universities long ago became a commercial/business enterprise." [22]

Examples C6-C9 exemplify the narratives surrounding the cause of the availability of contract cheating services, and how a common communicable

discourse has formed regarding the relationship between declining values and the desire for greater institutional revenue for universities. There is a tendency to apportion blame to overseas or international students who are admitted on behalf of their increased tuition fees in exchange for reduced entry standards, and the profit motive of the prestigious universities to attract as much money as possible. However, the concept of "Mickey Mouse" (misspelled in the comment) degrees in C6 refers to a common shared metaphor that does not link to overseas students but does link to low intelligence and ability through the colloquial "thick," which recurs throughout the corpus. In understanding these dimensions of discursive practice in the comments collected, there are conflicting accounts of the increase in availability of contract cheating services. Broadly speaking, three frames are present: these are related to either an adversarial political party (the Labour party), the incompetence and unethical nature of the ruling elite (from a populist perspective), and the economic/profit incentive of universities at the expense of academic integrity. [23]

## 5. Understanding Self-Positioning and the Unspecified Past

In the above I have described the processes of narrative and framing of the causes of increased contract cheating in these discourses. However, the analysis of self-positioning of actors as part of a phenomenal structure can be used to provide further insight into the discursive practices found in this social arena. Under SKAD analysis the meaning of actors is those who produce statements by means available resources and rule-structures which form and reform discourse (KELLER, 2012). Actors employ language, symbolic and cultural devices, along with thematic references, in part of this process of social knowledge construction (ibid.). Through the analysis of comments, several dimensions of self-positioning of actors can be exposed. The first of these is a reference to a shared past, which is in keeping with the commonly repeated narrative of "dumbing down" under the Labour government found above. Under this dimension, there is a shared intertextual reference to a time at an unspecified point previously in which standards in several domains were higher than they are today. This is referred to as "the old days," "a time," "not that long ago," and "back then" among other, non-specific time references.

C10: "Not that long ago around 30% went to university; 25% went to a polytechnic and the rest did an apprenticeship and often gained qualifications appropriate to their employment through their employment ... those days are gone ... now around 50% go to university and devalue it for the others ... don't forget those capable ones still sometimes go but you can't easily tell them apart from the rest ..."

C11: "There was a time if someone, or an organisation cheated, it would be a stigma he or she would carry for the rest of their lives. How times have changed."

C12: "Yet another devaluing of degrees. I'm glad I did mine when they actually meant something."

C13: "Like a bottle of wine, the year will be noted." [24]

Self-positioning of actors in this practice firstly, in the example of C10, is related to those days where university education was reserved for the elite, thus cheating is a result of the admittance of incapable persons to universities. C11 refers to "a time" in the past (as indicated through past tense "was") in which the social consequences of cheating were more serious in contrast to today. Both C12 and C13 describe the importance of having completed university education at a time prior to this devaluation, when a degree held greater value than it does today. C13 specifically compared the value of university education with the value of wine, drawing a cultural metaphor that older is superior in market value. Summarizing this positioning practice can be described as elevating the self as having gained greater value from university education compared to those today. This is complemented by the devaluation of others in the other-positioning dimension described below. [25]

## 6. Understanding Positioning of the Other: The Snowflake Generation

Other positioning is related to the idea of markers of identity, which can include the creation of a negative sense of the other versus a positive conception of the we (KELLER, 2012). This can relate to the concept of ideology as practice (HERZOG, 2021) which is materialized in discourse (KELLER, 2012). Through the interpretation of the corpus of comments, there are three broad practices which situated the "other" as those who use contract cheating services. These are also interrelated to self-positioning practice, as a dyadic relationship is constructed of "us" versus "them." [26]

In the analysis of the phenomenal structure of the discourse, self-positioning is used to refer to an unspecified age in the past, signifying an age-oriented approach to value of higher education. Similarly, references to a commonly shared metaphor of a "snowflake" generation, the typical "lazy student" archetype, and the "millennial" are commonly negatively evaluated.

C14: "Poor little snowflakes."

C15: "That's the snowflake millennial generation for you people, think on."

C16: "Are these the same students who arrogantly claim we are stealing their futures? I say it's the other way around and our younger generation are shaming us."

C17: "So that's how so many snowflakes pass with high grades." [27]

Use of the snowflake metaphor, along with the reference to an unspecified past may be seen as an example of the generational lens of discourse (FINN, INGRAM & ALLEN, 2021). The discursive construction of the millennial has been noted as self-contradictory, expressing a mixture of conflicting characteristics and circumstances such as financial and emotional instability combined with a keen sense of self-centeredness and an entitled attitude. FINN (2017) identified that "snowflakes" are overly emotional and fragile millennials who are unable to cope with differing opinions to their own. Additionally, millennials are often depicted through practices of decline, lacking in certain areas, and in terms of failure (FINN et al., 2021). In relation to contract cheating, the practices here, with use of

diminutives such as "poor little" relate to fragility, while the expression of shaming the older generation strongly relates to the concept of failure. Essentially, such practices strongly resonate with FINN et al.'s (2021) explanation of the representation of the "snowflake millennial" in the media. In this analysis, the "millennial snowflake" has a reduced capacity for resilience and personal strength, resulting in them passing with high grades through undertaking contract cheating. [28]

Given the times that the articles were published (2019 and 2021), characterizations of Brexit also feature heavily in the other-positioning dimension of the discourse. BREEZE (2018) found that in *The Daily Mail*, Remainers<sup>9</sup> were often represented as a homogenous group, negatively represented and seeing as being removed from the reality of the non-elite. Given that Remainers are characterized by writers as unscrupulous, self-centered and destructive in *The Daily Mail* (ibid.), it is unsurprising that the category is described in the comments regarding academic integrity. The below examples typify the discursive practice here that creates other-positioning.

C18: And these past cheats will be Remainers who call Leave voters unintelligent.

C19: Then they go on to work for the BBC and vote remain. [29]

There is a high degree of intertextual reference to a lack of intelligence, weakness, and failure in these discursive practices which create a sense of "us" and "them." Each article studied contains zero reference to Brexit and does not mention the term leave or remain, yet the dividing lines upon which an other is constructed lead to this political characterization of those who use contract cheating services. They are "Remainers," they are fragile, young, snowflake millennials. This, combined with the reference to a shared sense of past greatness and continual decline leads to further discussion about the credibility of science and expert knowledge. [30]

Within sub-nested comments, discussion and debate led to the defining of the discourse through refutation and the establishment of truth-claims based on first-hand or second-hand expertise. There is evidence to support that discursive strategies which lead to speaker rules of formation are based on an attempt to "grab expertise" (COEN et al. 2021, p.400). Expertise claims offer details regarding the realities of contract cheating.

C20: "Im an academic at a reputable U.K. University. I find it difficult to believe that someone who had not been closely involved in the original research / decisions underlying the original hypotheses could write a convincing thesis. As a supervisor, I would spot such a report immediately (one hopes)."

C21: "I worked for 5 hard years to get my PhD, I researched, and wrote every word. I would love to see these students at their viva. A good examiner would tear them apart, as it would become apparent very quickly that they had not written it!!!!"

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9 Those who voted to "remain" in the European Union, rather than "Brexiters/Brexiters" who voted to leave.

C22: "My son works at Leeds University and he told me about this last year and how wealthy family do this to ensures they get firsts so they can then go for the best jobs. As ever the priveleged use the system in their favour, disgusting they can get away with it."

C23: "I fail to understand this as a scientist. No way could anyone but me have written my 3 years of research up. My supervisor (lecturer) would instantly have known if someone else had attempted to do it." [31]

The above expertise claims, along with other examples not featured in this text, fall into four categories. The first is that of the lecturer/professor, while the second is of the PhD graduate. The third is a reference to a second party (child, spouse, or relative) who is engaged in one of these occupations, and another is the "scientist" or professional researcher. Each of these are used as a rule to validate the speaker's authority on the subject. This aspect of the discourse is diametrical to that of the populist over-educated elite found in the initial results section. [32]

In summarizing the results of the analysis, the goal of this research was to start a process of investigation into the relationship between discursive practices in the comments section of a UK newspaper and the public understanding and relationship to a quickly changing landscape of higher education. Using the UK's most popular news brand, in a growing digital medium, gives a broad insight into some of this relationship. [33]

Through the analysis I find that there are several overlapping discourses. Firstly, there is a discourse of historical degradation. That is to say, that there is a strong negative relationship between time and the value of higher education, progressing from an unspecified peak in the past to the poor state in present day. This is operationalized through the use of shared discursive resources such as narrative and framing devices. A second finding is that there is a discourse of suspicion of universities using economic incentive to attract lower-quality international students, indicating a populist discourse related to BRUBAKER's (2017) vertical dimension of populism, in which the elites are placed above and the inferior students are placed below the commenter, and overlaps with the conception of "them," presented as weak, "snowflake" students, often from abroad, who take advantage of an economically-motivated higher education system which provides worthless qualifications. On the other hand, references are often made to such qualifications when engaging in expertise claims or assuming the subject position of an expert commentator, in some cases indirectly (e.g., through referring to a spouse or child). As an initial investigation, this analysis has generated insights into the discourses in this specific discourse community. Further analysis in similar publications and in politically and demographically dimetric outlets will provide a broader picture of the relationship between discourses of contract cheating among media readers in the UK, the growth of contract cheating and the structural changes of the HE system in the UK and worldwide. [34]



## 7. Conclusion: Reflecting on the Politicization of Contract Cheating and Future Directions

I began this article by describing the historical and social changes that have recently occurred to UK HE, and the subsequent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in brief to contextualize research on a corpus of online comments taken from one of the "most powerful" (COLLINS, 2012, p.1) newspapers in the United Kingdom, as a first attempt to unpack the relationship between UK society and the ongoing systemic changes in HE. As comments on digital media are a unique and developing social arena, and internet posting enables the interplay of multiple voices (EYSENBACH & TILL, 2001), studying comments on contract cheating in *The Mail Online* portal offers new insights into the discursive practice of the outlet's readership. Overall, my analysis focused on understanding the use of narratives, framing, and overall phenomenal structure that guides the production of comments on the contract cheating articles contained in the corpus. Multiple overlapping discourses were identified, which included discourses of historical degradation and populist positioning of the overeducated elite as likely to have benefited from cheating services, as a result of their immoral and unethical orientation, along with the below-positioning of current university students as undesirables. Other shared references belonged to a discourse of pro-Brexit (or anti-Remainer) sentiment, which may relate to the political affiliations of the readership of the paper. Self-positioning practices indicate that higher education is in a state of linear decline from an unspecified peak and causes of increased contract cheating are attributable to the Labour government and Tony BLAIR's educational policies in the 1994-2007 period, as explained by LUNT (2008). These policies are described as instituted by the elites who wield power over the "people," and directly led to the generational weakness of those currently at university, along with overseas students who benefit from the UK's education while simultaneously deconstructing it through receiving qualifications in exchange for high fees. Actors in this discursive field elevate their own qualifications while simultaneously positioning modern-day students as snowflakes who are fragile and display a decreased intelligence and capacity for resilience. This intersects with other identity-claims and positioning of those who use contract cheating services as "Remainers" or individuals who voted for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union. The employment of such terms to construct the identity of those who use contract cheating services suggests agreement with BREEZE's (2018) assertion that "Remainers" are seen as lacking in integrity, while confirming MEREDITH and RICHARDSON's (2019) claim that the categories of "Brexiters" and "Remainer" constitute new identities which require further work to define. Finally, in order to engage in disputing the truth-claims of either the article or the comments of another actor, it can be seen that claims of authority are an essential self-positioning practice in claiming up-for-grabs expertise. Such claims focus on first-hand experience or second-hand experience from a friend or family member. [35]

Overall, I demonstrate through this study that there are several different practices which contribute to the right-of-center discourses surrounding higher education, contract cheating and academic integrity in the United Kingdom. As a result of

these findings, I suggest that there is evidence of larger discourses which cannot be reconstructed from this sample alone, although the findings are likely to be manifestations of these discourses, given that they contain populist features similar to those discussed by BRUBAKER (2017). Further research is required to better understand the ramifications of contract cheating in public mass media and to explore how such discourses may be present in different spheres of life, while comparative research in other media outlets and in a variety of media (for example print, audio, and televisual) would further benefit the investigation of this topic of growing importance. [36]

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