Academic Resource Sharing platforms: Undergraduate business school students' perspectives on file sharing, value exchange, and community

by

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Declaration of Committee

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Abstract

Academic Resource Sharing (ARS) platforms invite students to upload and download course materials. Most research has examined them through the lens of academic integrity, rarely investigating what students do with them and why. I conducted a convergent mixed methods study with a qualitative priority at the business school of a Canadian university, combining a descriptive survey with semi-structured interviews. Students used the platforms substitutively, primarily for practice examinations and worked solutions, and their usage decreased where instructors provided practice material. Payment was avoided almost universally. None could describe a clear institutional policy; those that exist govern copyright, not pedagogy. Into that gap they brought a consistent ethic: practice material is fair, the live assessment is not. No participant formed relationships through the platforms; the personal, reciprocal sharing happened elsewhere. The opportunity is one of learning support, a need currently filled by ARS platforms and, increasingly, generative AI.

Keywords: business education; educational technology; two-sided markets; academic integrity; contract cheating; homework-help websites

Dedication

To my exceptionally loving and supportive family, Aidan, Kiyan and Zahra Somani. You are the most important. And this research, along with many other concurrent professional and personal undertakings, would not have been possible without you.

Love you, forever.

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Statement of Ethics Approval

Research Ethics approval was obtained from the SFU Research Ethics Board, Simon Fraser University, Principal Investigator: Professor Kevin O'Neill, Co-Investigator: Professor Yumiko Murai, Student Lead: Professor Amyn Somani, Project title: Exploring how undergraduate business school students utilize Academic Resource Sharing platforms (#30003500).

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Some educators first realize that Academic Resource Sharing (ARS) platforms exist when they learn that their own course materials have appeared on one through a web search, from a colleague or via a student. The websites in question, of which Chegg, Course Hero, Course Sidekick and Studocu are prominent examples, invite students to upload course documents such as lecture notes, past examinations, assignments, and worked solutions, and to download the documents other students have uploaded.

Access is typically gated: a student reaches the material behind the paywall either by paying a subscription or by contributing documents of their own. In this thesis I refer to these websites collectively as ARS platforms, a label that describes what students principally do with them while remaining neutral, at the outset, about whether that activity is best understood as collaborating, learning, or something else altogether.

However the activity is ultimately judged, its scale is no longer easy to dismiss, and its trajectory has become dramatic. Chegg, one of the earliest platforms in the space, grew its proprietary study service from approximately 464,000 subscribers in 2013 to 7.8 million subscribers across its subscription services and US$776 million in total revenue by 2021 (Chegg Inc., 2014, 2022). Traffic to Chegg rose by nearly 200% in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021), and a recent international survey found that roughly one third of students reported using such websites (Slade et al., 2024). The years since have added a second act: with the arrival of generative artificial intelligence tools, Chegg's subscribers and revenue have fallen steeply, a reversal the company itself attributes to students obtaining from general-purpose chatbots what they once obtained from it (Chegg Inc., 2026). Whether rising or falling, ARS platforms have been, throughout the period this study examines, a routine, large-scale characteristic of how many undergraduate students obtain study materials.

The scholarly response to that growth has been substantial but uneven. Most research to date has approached these platforms through the lens of academic integrity, asking how they enable contract cheating and unauthorized sharing, how much

misconduct flows through them, and how institutions might detect or deter it. That work matters, and this thesis draws on it. But it leaves the platforms' primary constituency largely unheard. As Slade et al. (2024) observe, the literature has rarely examined students' perspectives directly: why they use these websites, what they actually do in their interactions with them, and how they themselves perceive those behaviours. The gap has, if anything, widened since. As research attention has pivoted sharply toward students' use of generative artificial intelligence, it has left the established resource-sharing platforms relatively unexamined even as students continue to use them. What is missing is an account of these platforms from the student's side: not an audit of misconduct, but an understanding of use.

This thesis provides such an account for one setting that has particular reason to want it: an undergraduate business school. Business students are heavy consumers of the quantitative, problem-based coursework for which worked solutions and practice examinations, the platforms' stock in trade, are most useful. And business schools sit close to the disciplines in which questions of value creation, value capture, and platform strategy are studied. The same platforms that concern a business school as a matter of pedagogy are, from another of its own vantage points, two-sided markets executing a recognizable business model on its students. That double relevance shapes the study's two research questions:

- Research question 1: How does the design of ARS platforms, including their policies and technology, provide value to students or receive value from them?

- Research question 2: What is the nature of the relationships and interactions that students develop through ARS platforms?

To answer these questions, I conducted a convergent mixed methods study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) with a qualitative priority at the Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Canada. A descriptive survey of undergraduate students (nineteen responses, of which thirteen met the study's eligibility criteria) provided a quantitative strand and the sampling frame from which five students were selected for detailed semi-structured interviews; the samples are nested, with the interviewees drawn from the survey participants. The interviews were analyzed inductively, using the constant comparative method within a qualitative content analysis,

and the two strands were then merged, with points of convergence and divergence between them stated explicitly. The design, its rationale, and its limitations are set out in full in the Methods chapter, including my own position in relation to the topic: I teach at the institution where the study was conducted, and my interest in these platforms began when my own course materials appeared on one.

The study's contribution is threefold. Empirically, it offers a close account of how a small group of undergraduate business students actually use ARS platforms: what they take from them, what the platforms attempt to take in return, how routinely students circumvent that exchange, and what relationships, if any, form along the way. Practically, its findings speak to three audiences in a position to act on them. Instructors will find evidence that the demand these platforms serve is shaped, in meaningful part, by decisions about how much practice material a course provides. Institutional leaders will find that the policy the University already has governs copyright rather than pedagogy and so leaves untouched the need that drives students to these platforms: practice material their courses did not supply. They will also find that students have, in the meantime, been governing their own use by a strikingly consistent ethic of their own. Platform operators, finally, will find a user's-eye view of how their value-capture designs perform in practice, including the ways those designs undermine the credibility of the very content they exist to accumulate. Conceptually, the study extends the conversation about these platforms beyond academic integrity, connecting it to the literatures on two-sided markets and online communities, and it surfaces an emergent question, the substitution of generative artificial intelligence for platform use, that the field will need to take up.

Some boundaries of this study’s contribution should be stated at the outset. This is a small, single-site study, and it claims no statistical generalization; its findings are offered for readers to weigh against their own settings, in the manner of naturalistic generalizations. Its participants are undergraduate business students at SFU, recruited in ways described in the Methods chapter, and its survey strand is descriptive only. Within those boundaries, the study aims for depth rather than breadth: five interviews, closely analyzed, verified against audio and raw transcripts, and integrated with the survey record of the thirteen eligible participants.

The remainder of this thesis proceeds as follows. The Literature Review situates the study in the research on ARS platforms, academic integrity, platform business models, and online communities, and specifies the gap the study addresses. The Methods chapter describes the convergent mixed methods design, the participants and their recruitment, the instruments, the procedures for preparing and analyzing the data, the steps taken to ensure the findings are trustworthy, and the ethical safeguards under which the research was conducted. The Findings chapter presents the six themes that emerged from the analysis, each with the survey evidence that converges with or diverges from it. The Discussion interprets those themes together, answers the two research questions, sets out implications for instructors, institutions, and platform designers, acknowledges the study's limitations, and identifies directions for future research.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

This chapter reviews the research relevant to how undergraduate students use ARS platforms. It proceeds in five parts. The first traces the platforms' growth and the academic integrity tradition through which they have most often been studied. The second turns to what is known and unknown about student perspectives and motivations. The third examines the governance and copyright questions the platforms raise for institutions. The fourth situates the platforms within the literature on platform business models and two-sided markets, a lens rarely applied to them. The fifth considers the literatures on online communities and, briefly, the generative artificial intelligence tools now reshaping the field. The chapter closes by drawing these strands together to describe the gap this study addresses.

I use the term “ARS platforms" to refer to the websites, such as Chegg, Course Hero, and Studocu, on which students upload and download course materials. The literature has no settled term for them: they are variously called file-sharing sites, homework-help websites, and study-help sites, and each label carries an emphasis. I adopt the more neutral "Academic Resource Sharing" for reasons given in the Introduction, while recognizing that much of the research reviewed here was framed, and described, in relation to academic integrity.

2.1. The growth of ARS platforms and the academic integrity tradition

Contract cheating, the practice of a student outsourcing assessed work to a third party, was named and defined by Clarke and Lancaster (2006), whose early study identified the problem of students using online sites to obtain completed assignments. Newton (2018), in a systematic review of 71 samples dating back to 1978, found that contract cheating was self-reported by a historic average of 3.52% of students, but that the figure rose to 15.7% in samples from 2014 onward (a level he suggested might reflect a general increase in self-reporting rather than a specific rise in contract cheating). The largest single study, a survey of 14,086 students across eight Australian

universities, reported that a smaller share, on the order of a few percent, had engaged in the strict commercial form of contract cheating while also identifying dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment as one of the factors associated with it (Bretag et al., 2019). That last finding, that cheating tracks the quality of the educational experience rather than mere student disposition, recurs across the tradition and is one to which this thesis will return.

The ARS platforms at the centre of this study occupy a different position from essay mills. Rather than producing academic work to order, they host a library of user-uploaded documents including lecture notes, past examinations, assignments, and worked solutions, to which access is sold by subscription or earned by uploading. Their scale is now considerable and their trajectory volatile. Chegg, the largest and the only publicly traded example, grew its proprietary study service from approximately 464,000 subscribers in 2013 to 7.8 million subscribers across its services by 2021, with revenue peaking near US$776 million annually (Chegg Inc., 2014, 2022). Student questions posted to Chegg rose by nearly 200% in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as assessment moved online (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021). A recent audit of one platform's use within an Australian engineering school found that questions posted to the site were answered quickly, with half receiving a response within roughly one and a half hours, and that a majority of the audited course units had content on the site, underscoring how readily the platforms can be used during timed assessments (Pickering & Schuller, 2025).

Within this tradition the ARS platforms are studied primarily as enablers of academic misconduct: how they are used to cheat, how prevalent that use is, and how institutions might detect or deter it. That framing is well justified by the evidence, and it informs this study. But it is a partial view, in two senses that matter here: it examines the platforms primarily at the moment of assessment misuse, and it tends to treat the student as a potential offender rather than as a user with reasons and motivations. The sections that follow take up what that emphasis leaves unexamined.

2.2. Student perspectives and motivations

While the academic integrity tradition establishes that students increasingly use ARS platforms, and sometimes cheat with them, it has been relatively quiet on why they

use them and what they believe they are doing. The point is made directly by the most relevant recent study. In an international survey of 1,000 students paired with a follow-up survey and an analysis of social media posts, Slade et al. (2024) observe that little was known about how students use these websites, what motivates that use, or whether students appreciate the associated risks. They set out to address these gaps in the literature. Their findings are the closest point of comparison to the present study. Students reported using the sites mainly to obtain material with which to study for or complete assessments, and they exchanged materials for altruistic and reciprocal reasons as well as for personal benefit. Slade et al. (2024) raise the possibility that such use reflects a developing generational norm of online sharing rather than only a response to unmet need, an interpretation the Findings chapter engages directly.

What motivates use, where it has been studied, appears to be a mix of pressure and opportunity rather than simple dishonesty. Amigud and Lancaster (2019), analyzing the reasons students themselves gave for seeking to outsource work, catalogued a wide range dominated by academic pressures, workload and time constraints, and perceived difficulty, rather than a straightforward preference for cheating. Earlier work in the same vein had mapped the forms that internet-enabled academic dishonesty takes and the conditions associated with it, distinguishing several categories of behaviour and linking them to situational factors (Akbulut et al., 2008). The consistent theme is that use is occasioned; it responds to circumstances, a point that becomes central in the Findings chapter.

A small but important strand of research has begun to listen to how students themselves frame these behaviours morally, and its findings anticipate one of this study's own. Drawing on the open-text responses of the same large Australian dataset, Harper and Prentice (2024) found that students judged such behaviours primarily by intention rather than by the behaviour itself: where the purpose was to help one another, to learn, or to clarify a task, respondents overwhelmingly did not regard the conduct as cheating. The authors conclude that students recognize their own ethical norms do not always align with those of the academics who teach them and call for clearer articulation of where the line falls. A similar divergence appears in a different national setting by Harrison et al. (2021), surveying more than four thousand students and thirteen hundred faculty members at a large American university. The findings indicted that students perceived the use of study helper websites quite differently from the way they perceived

contract cheating, and differently again from the way their faculty perceived it. Such use, the researchers argued, is better understood as a form of collaborative cheating than as an extension of the essay mill, and reflects wider shifts in how sharing has come to be understood online. That students operate a coherent ethic of their own, distinct from institutional definitions, is a finding the present study corroborates and extends from the specific vantage of ARS platforms.

Aside from the studies just described, perspectives from the student viewpoint remain limited in the literature. Most of what is known comes from surveys with fixed-response items, which capture incidence and broad motivation but not the nature of use: what students actually do on the ARS platforms, how they decide what is acceptable, what they get and give, and what, if anything, they experience as a community. Slade et al. (2024) took an important step by adding qualitative social media analysis to a survey, and the moral-framing work cited above worked from open text, but neither centred on sustained, direct accounts from users. That is the space this study occupies.

2.3. Governance, policy, and copyright

For institutions, the ARS platforms pose a governance problem that is both about academic integrity and about property. On the academic integrity side, the challenge is that the same document, a past examination or a set of worked solutions, may serve as a legitimate study aid or the instrument of misconduct depending on how it is used. This makes blanket rules difficult to frame and to justify. Bretag et al.'s (2019) finding that contract cheating is associated with a poor teaching and learning environment points institutions toward pedagogical rather than purely punitive responses. Meanwhile, the staff-facing companion to that survey found teaching staff themselves inclined toward educative approaches while identifying workload and support constraints as barriers (Harper et al., 2019).

On the property side, a distinct and smaller literature has begun to examine copyright as a lever. Because much of what students upload, particularly examination papers and assignment briefs, is the intellectual property of instructors or institutions, its posting can constitute infringement independent of any question of cheating, and takedown procedures grounded in copyright offer institutions a route to removing content from the platforms that does not depend on proving student misconduct. Seeland, Eaton,

and Stoesz (2022) examined copyright as a mechanism for enhancing academic integrity, framing academic file-sharing as a copyright issue as well as an integrity violation. They noted that where legislation does not address contract cheating specifically, copyright and intellectual property law may offer institutions a legal route. A subsequent explorative study at a large Australian university investigated the practicalities of that route, seeking to remove copyrighted material from two widely used platforms and reporting a suite of institutional initiatives that followed (Slade et al., 2025). This literature matters to the present study because the institution it studies has exactly such a policy and office. It matters, too, for what a copyright rule can and cannot do. Copyright gives an institution a lever over what students upload, and, as the Findings chapter shows, even that rule was barely recognized by the students it governs. What copyright does not address is what students go to these platforms to obtain, and it is that need, rather than any question of ownership, that drives the behaviour documented in this study. Rogerson (2022), approaching the problem from the other direction, argued that institutions should openly discuss and clarify with students what should be shared online, how, and with whom. The legal framing of the platforms has also been examined more broadly, including proposals to treat the provision of cheating services as itself unlawful (Draper & Newton, 2017).

The common thread of this literature is that governance is hard not because institutions lack authority but because the ARS platforms sit across the boundaries of several institutional domains (academic integrity, copyright, and pedagogy), and not a single university department or function typically contains all three. It is worth noting which of those domains the literature has favoured. The copyright route is well described, and the integrity route is described at length, while the pedagogical question, of why students needed the material at all, sits mostly outside the frame. How students perceive and respond to that governance, as opposed to how institutions construct it, has received little attention, and is a question this study takes up directly.

2.4. Platform business models and two-sided markets

Almost absent from the literature on ARS platforms is the observation that they are businesses executing a recognizable strategy. The relevant economic concept is the two-sided, or multi-sided, market: a platform that creates value by enabling exchange between two distinct groups whose participation is mutually reinforcing, such that the

platform must attract both and often subsidizes one to attract the other (Rochet & Tirole, 2003). Eisenmann, Parker, and Van Alstyne (2006) translated this idea for a management readership, describing how such platforms price, grow through network effects, and compete. Applied to ARS platforms, the framework is illuminating and, in one respect, peculiar. The two sides (contributors of documents and consumers of documents) are in large part the same students at different moments, and the platform's pay-or-upload gate is the device that converts a consumer into a contributor. The network effects are real: more users produce more uploaded content, which attracts more users.

The academic integrity literature has occasionally approached the ARS platforms as businesses, most directly in an analysis of the business processes and models of custom-writing sites (Ellis et al., 2018), but it has not connected that analysis to the two-sided-market tradition or examined how the model is experienced by the students on both of its sides. The commercial record itself invites such attention. Chegg's growth to a multi-billion-dollar valuation was followed, after 2021, by a steep decline that the company attributes to students substituting generative artificial intelligence tools for its services, and, notably, by the company's own statement that it acquires most of its subscribers through students' internet searches (Chegg Inc., 2025, 2026). How the ARS platforms create and capture value, and how students respond to the mechanisms of capture, is the economic question this study's first research question poses, and it is one the existing literature leaves substantially open.

2.5. Online communities, anonymity, and generative artificial intelligence

The ARS platforms present themselves, in their design and their marketing, as communities of students helping students. That self-description invites examination through the literature on online communities, which has long distinguished active contributors from the far larger number of participants who read without posting. Preece et al. (2004), in a foundational study of such non-public participation, found that reading without contributing is the majority behaviour in many online communities and is frequently a considered choice rather than a failure of engagement, with participants seeking answers to their questions without ever posting. That pattern, and the anonymity that typically accompanies participation on ARS platforms, bears directly on this study's

second research question, concerning the relationships students form through the platforms. Rogerson (2023) has argued that file-sharing sites operate under the guise of student support communities, a framing this study is positioned to test against students' actual experience of them.

Finally, the ground beneath this literature is shifting. Since roughly 2023, research attention has moved sharply toward students' use of generative artificial intelligence, with studies examining how students perceive and adopt these tools for study and assessment (Chan & Hu, 2023). The relevance to ARS platforms is twofold. Substantively, a general-purpose tool that can generate worked explanations on demand competes directly with the platforms' central offering, a dynamic illustrated by Chegg's commercial decline and, as the Findings chapter shows, aligned with detailed student accounts of usage. The pivot has meant that the established ARS platforms, still in heavy use, have received diminishing scholarly attention at precisely the moment their position is being disrupted. This study addresses platforms that the literature is beginning to look past even as students continue to rely on them.

2.6. The gap

Taken together, the literature establishes that ARS platforms are large, that students use them and sometimes cheat with them, that use is occasioned by pressure and opportunity, and that institutions struggle to govern them. It leaves four matters substantially unexamined, and this study is designed around these. First, and most broadly, the student's perspective: sustained, direct accounts of how students use ARS platforms, what they take them to be, and how they judge their own behaviour, which the field itself has identified as missing (Slade et al., 2024). Second, the value exchange: the ARS platforms have rarely been analyzed as two-sided markets, and the student experience of their value-capture mechanisms, and of circumventing them, is essentially undocumented. Third, the relational question: whether the community the ARS platforms claim to be is one that students actually experience, a question the online-communities literature frames but has not been applied to answer. Fourth, the durability of the picture: the field's pivot to generative artificial intelligence has left the established ARS platforms under-examined just as their standing shifts. This study addresses the first three directly and speaks to the fourth, through a close, student-centred study of undergraduate business students, an especially apt population because the platforms are

simultaneously an academic integrity concern for a business school and an instance of the two-sided-market strategy such schools study. The two research questions that frame the study follow from this gap: how the design of these ARS platforms provides value to students or receives value from them, and the nature of the relationships and interactions that students develop through them.

Chapter 3.

Methods

This chapter describes how the study was designed and carried out: the overall research design and its rationale, the participants and how they were recruited and screened, the instruments, the procedures for collecting and preparing the data, the analytic approach, and the steps taken to make the findings trustworthy. It closes with a statement of my own position in relation to the topic and the ethical safeguards under which the research was conducted.

3.1. Research design

The study employs a convergent mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) with a qualitative priority. Its purpose was to understand, from the student's side, how undergraduate business students actually use ARS platforms. The two research questions reflect that purpose:

1. How does the design of ARS platforms, including their policies and technology, provide value to students or receive value from them?

2. What is the nature of the relationships and interactions that students develop through ARS platforms?

Questions of this kind, concerning how people use a technology, what purpose they employ it for, and the practices they build around it, are best answered by asking users to share their thoughts in an open-ended fashion, and analyzing what they say. The core of the study is therefore a set of semi-structured interviews, analyzed inductively.

A short descriptive survey preceded the interviews and served two purposes: it provided the sampling frame from which interview participants were selected, and it supplied a quantitative strand against which the interview findings could be compared. The design is convergent mixed methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011): the two strands address the same phenomenon, were analyzed independently, and are merged

in the Findings chapter, where survey results are set beside interview findings and I state explicitly whether the strands converge or diverge. Within the design, priority rests with the qualitative strand. The survey strand is small (n = 13 eligible participants) and descriptive, no statistical inference is drawn from it at any point, and the interview data carry the analytic weight. The samples are nested in the sense described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), with the five interviewees drawn from the thirteen survey participants, which is what permits the within-person comparisons reported in the Findings chapter. The purposes of combining the strands are triangulation and complementarity in the sense described by Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989), and the integration follows the joint display logic described by Fetters, Curry, and Creswell (2013).

The analytic technique applied to the interview data is the constant comparative method of Glaser and Strauss (1967), used here as an analytic technique within a conventional inductive qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012) rather than as part of a grounded theory study. The distinction matters. Grounded theory is a full methodology aimed at generating theory through theoretical sampling to saturation; this study did not carry out all of these procedures. What it borrows from grounded theory, however, is the comparative discipline: incidents are compared with incidents, incidents with categories, and categories with one another, so that categories are refined against the data rather than imposed on it. Fram (2013) and Boeije (2002) both describe and defend this use of constant comparison outside grounded theory, and their procedures informed mine. Consistent with the inductive stance, the coding frame was developed from the data rather than from a prior theoretical framework, and engagement with the literature was deliberately held back until the themes were settled, so that the findings could truly be described as emerging from the data.

3.2. Instruments

I personally developed both instruments to suit the research subject matter and approach. The survey (Appendix A) collected program information, the eligibility screens described above, platform use (frequency, recency, time spent, platforms used, activities performed), and attitude items on usefulness, contribution to academic goals, policy clarity, payment, and content quality. The semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B) covered seven areas: introduction and consent; verification of basic information from the

participant's survey response; ARS usage; relationships and interactions on the platforms; monetary exchange and other consideration; school and other resources, including other collaboration channels such as messaging platforms; and school policies. Both instruments were edited by my two thesis supervisors, one of whom is the study's official Principal Investigator, as required by the research ethics board for graduate student led research.

Two features of the interview guide deserve note because they bear on the findings. The interviews probed relationships directly: every participant was asked whether and how they interacted with other student users on the ARS platforms. The near absence of interaction reported in Theme 6 is therefore not an artifact of the questions never being asked, but rather a clear finding based on negative responses. Also, interview questions asked directly about other collaboration channels (for example, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Discord), so the off-platform sharing described in Theme 6 was elicited by design rather than arising incidentally.

3.3. Participants and eligibility

The study was conducted at the Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University. Three eligibility criteria applied, and the online survey enforced them by branching. First, only undergraduate students of the business school were eligible. Second, students enrolled in, or planning to enrol in, the Innovation and Entrepreneurship concentration or certificate were excluded; this exclusion was required for research ethics reasons, to remove the possibility of a conflict of interest arising from the research team's connection to that program (see Positionality below). The screening item confirmed that no such students entered the sample. Third, participants needed to have used an ARS platform in the twelve months before the survey.

Nineteen students responded to the survey. Three were screened out at the program criterion (two students of other faculties and one business minor) and three at the usage criterion, leaving thirteen eligible participants. All survey results reported in this thesis are descriptive and are reported against those thirteen participants. The five interview participants were drawn from the same thirteen participants, as described below.

Slightly more than half of the eligible participants (seven of the thirteen) were in their first year, and the selected or intended concentrations they reported leaned heavily toward the quantitative side of the curriculum: accounting (seven) and finance (three) together accounted for ten of the thirteen, with operations management, human resource management, and management information systems (one each) making up the remainder. The survey did not collect gender or age data. Table 1 summarizes the respondents and the eligible sample.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents and Eligible Participants

Characteristic	Category	n
Program of study (n = 19)	Business program	16
	Other faculty	2
	Business minor	1
Year of program (n = 13)	First year	7
	Second year	1
	Third year	2
	Fourth year or later	3
Intended concentration (n = 13)	Accounting	7
	Finance	3
	Operations management	1
	Human resource management	1
	Management information systems	1

Two features of this composition matter for interpretation, and both are taken up in the Limitations section. The sample skews toward first-year students, whose reliance on the platforms the interviews suggest is at its heaviest. The sample also skews toward accounting and finance concentrations, the very quantitative coursework in which Theme 1 finds the platforms most useful. The patterns reported in the Findings chapter should be read with that composition in mind.

3.3.1. Recruitment

Recruitment ran through two channels that pointed to the same destination: posters on campus, and announcements by instructors to their business school classes. Ten undergraduate business instructors, teaching courses from first to fourth year, were approached with a description of the study and a request to share the material with their

classes by an in-class announcement, a message to students, or both. Nine out of ten agreed and were provided with the recruiting materials; one instructor did not respond. Because first-year courses are often largest in enrollment (sometimes exceeding one hundred students), this channel plausibly contributed to the first-year weighting of the sample noted in the Findings chapter. The poster and the announcement materials carried the same QR code and link, which led to a survey hosted on the university's private-cloud Microsoft Forms instance.

Two incentives were offered. Survey respondents could enter a random draw for one of five $20 gift cards to a café or restaurant on campus. Students who were invited to and completed an interview received a $30 honorarium by e-transfer.

The research ethics board approved the study on January 30, 2026 (REB Study #30003500). Poster advertising began on February 2, 2026; materials went to willing instructors between February 5 and February 24; and the final survey response was received on March 1, 2026. Posters remained up until the end of March, but no responses arrived after the instructor announcements ended, which suggests the instructor channel did most of the recruiting work. Interviews were conducted between March 18 and 24, 2026.

3.3.2. Selection of interview participants

Interview participants were selected purposively from the thirteen eligible survey respondents. Selection prioritized heavier users of ARS platforms, users of more than one platform, and, where possible, coverage of each major platform named in the survey. The realized set of five interviewees nonetheless spans the sample's range rather than only its heavy end: it includes the sample's most frequent and most enthusiastic user and two of its lightest and most skeptical; students in first year and in fourth; and concentrations on both the quantitative and qualitative sides of the business program. That spread proved analytically useful, since several findings turn on contrasts between heavier and lighter users.

3.4. Data collection

The survey was open from February 2 to March 31, 2026, and consent was documented by an online consent form at its start, in compliance with Article 3.1 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022). All five interviews were conducted over Zoom video call between March 18 and 24, 2026, lasted thirty to forty-five minutes, and began with a verbal consent script, the consent requirement TCPS 2 provides for interviews conducted remotely. Zoom's built-in transcription was enabled in each interview only after the participant consented to it; all five consented. As interviewer, I ran the same consent and confidentiality preamble in every interview, including the assurances that responses would be de-identified, that only the Principal Investigator and I would ever see identified data, and that nothing a participant said would be identifiably discussed with any other faculty member.

Because the interviews were semi-structured, coverage varied deliberately with what each participant's experience made most worth pursuing. The consent script, the platform comparison questions, the benefit questions, the monetary and credit questions, the school-resources questions, and both policy questions were asked in all five interviews. The direct question about interaction with other users was likewise asked in all five interviews. Deeper relationship probes in the interviews, on friendships, trust, and repeated encounters, were rendered moot in every interview by the uniform reports of non-interaction and were not pursued. One coverage gap is worth recording for transparency: the question about other collaboration channels was asked of four of the five participants, so the fifth participant's absence from the off-platform findings in Theme 6 reflects question coverage rather than a negative report.

3.5. Data preparation

Zoom's automated transcription produced the working transcripts, and its limitations shaped two preparation methods. First, the transcription frequently garbled nouns, most visibly the platform names themselves: Studocu appeared in the transcripts in more than half a dozen misrendered forms, and Course Hero and Chegg in several. In all reported prose and quotations, platform names have been standardized to their correct spellings. Every platform mentioned in the coded data was checked in context, and none was ambiguous; a variant table is provided in Appendix C for transparency.

The standardization was purely for spelling correction and affected no code counts, since all tallies were computed from codes and participant identifiers rather than from platform names as given in the transcripts.

Second, quotations reproduced in this thesis are lightly edited for readability: filler words are trimmed, omissions are marked with ellipses, clarifying insertions appear in square brackets, and preserved colloquialisms and slang are marked with [sic] where the usage could otherwise read as an error. Where the transcription itself was clearly wrong and the intended word was unambiguous, the error was corrected in the raw data with no further notation. All quotations used in the findings were verified against the original audio recordings, not the automated transcripts alone.

De-identification of participants for this report proceeded in two layers: I first employed automated substitution through Microsoft Visual Studio Code, replacing names with participant codes and generic terms. I then did a manual verification of the transcripts for residual direct and indirect identifiers (including ones due to the garbled noun issue mentioned above), which were then remediated. Participants are identified throughout by codes (P06, P09, P13, P16, P18) that link each interview to its survey record.

3.6. Data analysis

I was the sole coder of the data. Interview transcripts were coded in NVivo 14 using a coding frame developed inductively from the data, and recorded in a codebook of primary codes and subcodes with definitions (Appendix D). My two thesis supervisors reviewed the codebook and provided feedback on its initial drafts and on the subsequent, progressively more detailed versions that were produced as coding advanced. The codebook was versioned as the frame was refined, and the final version reflects decisions made during analysis, including the definition of one code added when the data required it. The final frame comprised thirty-nine codes, of which thirty-two carried coded references. Of the seven that did not, five were structural parent codes under which data were coded at the subcode level, and one was a memo code I used to flag possible directions for future research rather than to code participant speech. The seventh recorded the use of real names on the platforms; it was retained rather than removed, because its emptiness is itself reported as a finding in the Findings chapter.

The unit of analysis was the coded reference: an excerpt of transcript assigned to a code. The amount of text coded was dependent on how much of the text was required to illustrate the point being made; in some cases, a sentence or two sufficed, in others, one or more paragraphs were needed. The coded corpus comprised 104 references across 32 active codes. Analysis then proceeded through constant comparison in the manner described by Boeije (2002) and Fram (2013).

As the data analysis progressed, the coded data within each code were iteratively compared with one another to confirm and refine what the code meant and to check internal coherence. Codes were then compared across the frame for conceptual overlap and relation and grouped into higher-order categories. Some categories overlapped in the data, as when payment mechanics, uploading behaviour, and payment avoidance all spoke to the overarching research question of value-exchange. Candidate themes were constructed by comparing these categories against the two research questions and back against the data, iteratively, until core themes were finalized. Absent and negative cases were treated as informative throughout: an empty code and a dominant negative code together ground one of the study's findings, and one participant who diverged from an otherwise uniform survey pattern is analyzed in the findings as a negative case rather than ignored.

Each theme in the Findings chapter opens with a table showing which participants' data informed it. These tables reflect my full reading of the transcripts. Where a participant's brief remark spoke to a theme but had not been captured in the initial coding, and was identified during the auditing phase (which included audio review of quotations and a complete re-reading of the transcripts), the contribution was counted while the integrity of the original coding was maintained. In that next step, I checked every quotation verbatim, reviewed the uncoded portions of the transcripts for material bearing on each theme, sought contradictions to every claim I considered making about the data, and confirmed that no quotation changed meaning when read in its surrounding context. Adjustments arising from that audit were then incorporated into the findings.

Consistent with the convergent design, the survey strand was analyzed independently of the interviews and descriptively: frequencies and cross-tabulations only, reported against the thirteen eligible participants, with no inferential statistics.

Integration with the interview findings took the form of a joint display in the working analysis, following Guetterman, Fetters, and Creswell (2015), and appears in the Findings chapter as explicit statements of convergence or divergence at each point where the survey speaks to a theme, including within-person comparisons for the five interviewees, whose survey responses were examined against their interview responses.

3.6.1. Trustworthiness

Several practices support the trustworthiness of the findings. All quotations were verified against audio. The complete analysis, from data intake through the final audit, was recorded in a research log that documented each procedure, decision, and correction in order, providing an audit trail (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A full verification audit against the raw transcripts, described above, was conducted after the themes were drafted and before they were finalized for this report. Negative and absent cases were retained and analyzed rather than discarded. The interview guide's direct probing of the relationship questions protects the study's near-null relational finding from the objection that the topic was simply never raised.

Member checking was not conducted. It was not provided for in the research ethics approval or in the consent participants gave, and the Principal Investigator advised against adding it. The retention of the master coding list for a short period after the defence, as described under Ethics, exists to permit clarification of data if needed and is distinct from member checking.

Two limitations of my analytical process are acknowledged here rather than hidden. First, I was the sole coder, so no intercoder reliability statistic can be computed; the compensating factors were supervisor review of the codebook across its successive versions, the constant comparative procedure itself, and the post-hoc transcript audit. Second, the sample skews toward first-year students and quantitative concentrations, a composition consistent with the recruitment channels; its interpretive consequences are taken up in the Limitations section.

3.7. Positionality

I teach in the business school where this study was conducted, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. My interest in the topic began one morning in December of 2024, when a Google Alert informed me that my own name and copyrighted course materials had appeared on Course Hero. Curiosity about how the materials got there, and about why students were using such platforms, developed over time into the questions this study addresses. The discovery that my course materials had been uploaded to Course Hero coincided with my search for a thesis topic, and a review of the literature showed that (1) students were increasingly using ARS platforms, and (2) the area had been studied mostly through the lens of academic integrity, leaving the student experience of these platforms largely unexamined.

I acknowledge that this history gives me a personal stake in the subject of the thesis, and I have tried to manage it openly rather than deny it. Two safeguards bear directly on it. Students in the program area I teach within (Innovation & Entrepreneurship) were not permitted to participate in the study, removing the possibility that a student would be required by their program to take a course only taught by me; and therefore, have no choice but to face me in class after potentially having told me about their platform use. Such a situation would clearly cause a conflict of interest and should be avoided.

The study guarantees confidentiality precisely because, as the interviews themselves confirmed, students fear being identified as platform users; several findings in this thesis, including students' reluctance to raise the topic with faculty at all, underline how real that concern is. As an instructor studying a practice that instructors are often assumed to condemn, I framed the research to participants as neutral and policy-informing rather than enforcement-oriented, and the interview preamble in every session stated that no identifying data would be shared with any other faculty member. Where my interpretations enter the findings, they are marked as mine.

3.8. Ethics

The study was approved by the university's research ethics board on January 30, 2026 (REB Study #30003500) and conducted in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy

Statement (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022). Consent was documented in compliance with Article 3.1: by online consent form at the start of the survey, and by verbal consent script at the start of each Zoom interview, with written consent forms prepared for any face-to-face interview (none were conducted face-to-face). Participants could decline any question, stop an interview at any time, and withdraw their data at any point before publication of the research.

Participation was confidential rather than anonymous, and this thesis states it that way deliberately: because interviewees were selected from survey respondents and honoraria were delivered individually, all true identities of the participants were known to me. The master coding list linking participant codes to identities is accessible only by the Principal Investigator and me, is stored on an encrypted and password-protected local drive and will be deleted within thirty days of a successful thesis defence. A de-identified copy of the data will be retained on the university's private Microsoft OneDrive instance for five years following the conclusion of the study. All reporting uses participant codes, and the de-identification and quotation conventions described under Data Preparation govern every quotation in this thesis.

Chapter 4.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study. The analysis produced six themes, developed inductively from the five interviews through constant comparison and organized here in an order that builds a coherent account:

1. what value students take from ARS platforms
2. what the platforms ask in return and how students avoid giving it
3. how students distinguish among the platforms
4. the policy environment in which all of this occurs
5. the costs that accompany the value
6. the relationships students do and do not form along the way

The first five themes speak, in different ways, to the first research question, concerning how the design of these platforms provides value to students or receives value from them. The sixth theme addresses the second research question, concerning the relationships and interactions students develop through the platforms.

My description of each theme opens with a table indicating which participants' interview data informed it. Each theme is presented using the participants' own words carrying as much of the account as possible. Where the survey data also speak to a theme, those results are presented alongside the interview evidence, and I note explicitly whether the two strands converge or diverge.

Survey results are reported descriptively throughout: the sample is described against the thirteen eligible participants, with the screening funnel from the nineteen responses received reported below. The conventions governing quotation, transcription, and coding are described in the Methods chapter.

4.1. Overall patterns of use

Use of the ARS platforms, in aggregate, was light and episodic. Most participants spent under fifteen minutes a week on the platforms, and seven of the thirteen had not visited one at all in the seven days before the survey (see Figures 1 and 2 in Theme 1). Studocu was by far the most commonly used platform, named by twelve of the thirteen participants (see Figure 4 in Theme 3),[1] and the activities they reported were dominated by reviewing materials for current and prospective courses, with the social and collaborative uses being the least common (see Figure 8 in Theme 6).

The five interview participants (P06, P09, P13, P16, and P18) were drawn from these thirteen users. Their individual survey responses are drawn into the themes where the comparison is informative.

4.2. Theme 1: Platform value creation and substitutive instructional materials

Of the six themes, this one covered more of the data than any other. The benefit to be derived from ARS platforms was the only category every participant spoke to, and when the five students described what the ARS platforms were for, their accounts converged on a single purpose: preparing for assessment. The platforms were not, generally, where students went to learn course content for the first time. They were where students went to prepare for exams and to find worked solutions to problems that the course instructor had withheld. Secondarily, students were also using the platforms to scout courses ahead of them or that they were considering taking. Table 2 explains which participant data informed this theme.

[1] The sole selection of Course Sidekick in the survey was disclaimed in interview: the participant stated she had not in fact used that platform and was unsure why she had selected it. Self-reported platform lists appear noisy at the margins, a point taken up in the Limitations section; the dominance of Studocu is unaffected.

Table 2. **Participants Whose Interview Data Informed Theme 1**

Participant	Data Touches Theme
P06	x
P09	x
P13	x
P16	x
P18	x

The clearest account of the benefits of ARS platforms came from P09, who was the heaviest user in the sample. She described studying for a first-year mathematics final from practice papers she had pulled off Studocu:

> *I saw some more recent ones from around 2024 or so, and I grinded those out … and then I finally did my [MATH] 157 final, and it was almost identical. Obviously not exactly identical, but the question's format was very similar to the one that I had taken from 2024, and so that significantly helped. It's the same thing for my BUS 272 class as well.*

She estimated the value clearly: "an 8 out of 10 in terms of how [worthwhile] it is for me. It's super annoying, but … the payoff that I get for getting an exam in the past that people have already done before … it's very, very helpful." P06 described the same practice in more precise terms. He downloaded sample exams and practiced on them in typical examination conditions by himself: cutting off "all my access to the internet or electricity, and just only [having] my calculator, paper, and pencil", to drill on past papers "out of desperation" when no other form of exam practice was available. For P16, the rationale was simple: "even just doing a little bit of practice problems is going to give me a big edge."

Alongside exam preparation sat a closely related use: finding solutions where the course instructor had supplied none. P16 turned to the platforms when "there's no solution" to a textbook problem, where " I just use, like, a Google search... often there's different [solutions] that come up... I don't have a solution key for [these textbook problems] which I really wish profs just provided to us ... "; P13 described the same

practice from her high school years, when she would work "backwards from the answer that was provided on Chegg by other students" for assigned even-numbered problems whose answers the textbook did not include. The habit predated university, even if her reasons for using the platforms have since changed.

What gives this theme its clarity is not the activities that students are using ARS materials for, but the conditions under which students reached for them. The value was substitutive: across the interviews, students turned to ARS platforms precisely where they felt the university's provided resources fell short of their needs; and they said so directly. P09 located the problem at the source: professors might supply "one really good practice midterm," but "one good practice exam, especially for something as significant as a final, is just simply not enough practice," and what was provided was often "very outdated." That shortfall, in her account, was the reason "a lot of students tend to go towards getting external sources from Studocu, or Course Hero."

P16 made the dependency explicit and conditional:

My preference really is that the prof provides enough materials for me to study on and practice on, and they provide the answer key to those problems.

The platforms, he added, were "really just something I use if I don't have that." He then traced how their usefulness rose and fell based on what professors themselves provided: instructors who "provide more practice problems than you could ever hope to do" left him needing the platforms much less, while those offering "very, very limited practice problems" pushed him toward "trying to find other resources online." P18 located the same gap by discipline rather than by instructor, observing that sample exams were something she had "only … had … for [computer science] professors," never in business. Read together, these accounts position the platforms less as a shortcut than as a compensatory infrastructure: a place students go to obtain what their institution has not given them to address their learning needs.

Two structural boundaries emerged around the usefulness of the platforms to students. The first was applicability to the type of course the student was taking. It

became clear that value to the users was not evenly distributed across all courses. By the students' own accounts it concentrated in quantitative, objectively-marked coursework. P16 found the platforms "definitely more applicable for my quant courses … accounting, [finance] … ones that have more number-base, where the solution is the same," and markedly less so in "qualitative courses, like your organizational theory courses," where assessment was "more memorization and less practice problems." P13, who studied human resources and international business later in her undergraduate program, drew the same line from the other side: because her marking had become "more subjective", a matter of being "able to justify your answer" rather than arriving at a determinate one, she judged that few students at her stage still used the platforms. P06's use likewise sat in "intro … calculus classes," "not really business courses." The ARS platforms, in short, were most valuable to these students in courses where they needed to do a lot of practice problems in order to gain mastery of the problem-solving that would be tested on exams.

A second boundary was temporal. Use of ARSs was heaviest during their early undergraduate studies and thinned later, partly because instructors tended to provide better study resources in the upper years, and partly because the coursework itself grew less amenable to practice. P16 observed that his reliance "changed … throughout my education": the platforms were more useful early on, when he "felt like a lot of profs didn't understand" students' appetite for practice, and less so later, since "upper-year profs … understand that students want a lot of practice problems." P13 similarly recalled a stronger pull toward ARSs in high school, under "a strict deadline," than she felt as an upper-year student. The substitutive value thus had a life-cycle, linked jointly to the adequacy of the practice materials that instructors provided and to how much the curriculum lent itself to practice.

The survey data corroborated the broad shape of this account, while complicating one detail. Usage was light and episodic: most users spent under fifteen minutes a week on the platforms, and seven of the thirteen had not visited at all in the preceding seven days (see figures 1 and 2).

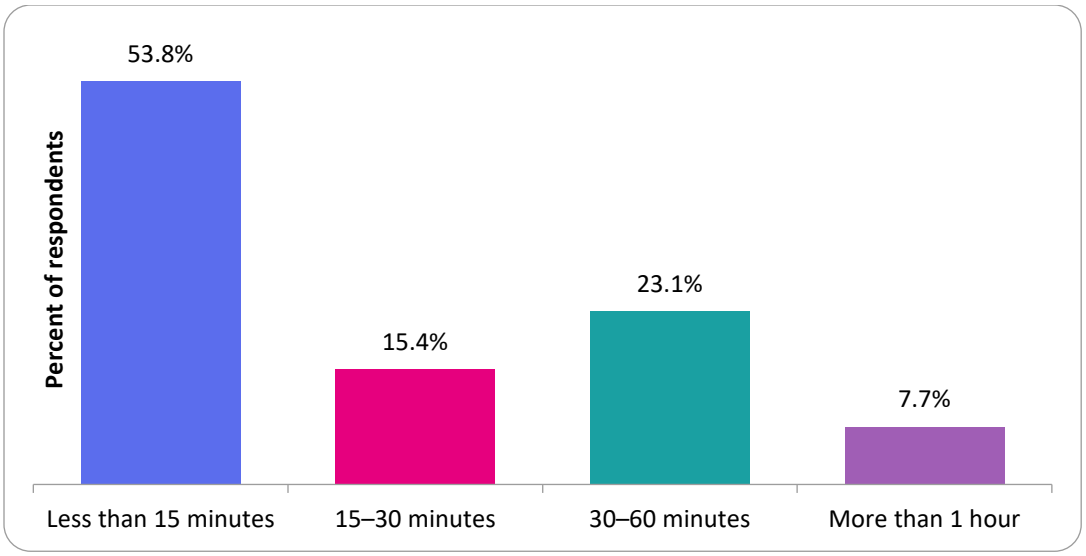

Figure 1. Survey responses result: How much time do you spend per week using ARS platforms?

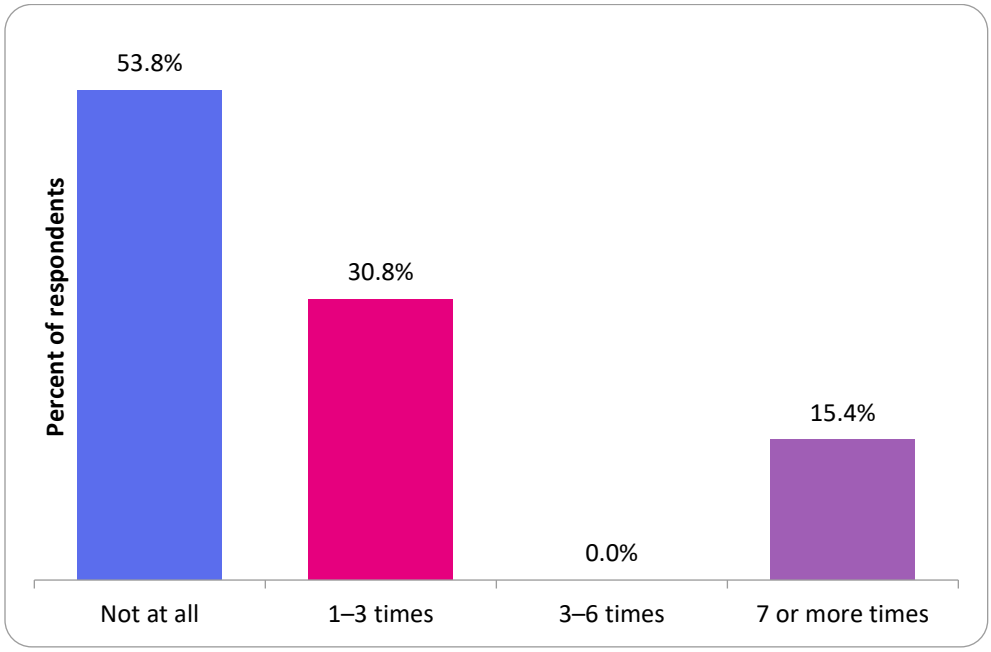

Figure 2. How many times in the most recent 7 days did you visit an ARS platform or use their app?

This pattern is consistent with the bursts of effort that exam preparation implies. Students' most commonly reported activities centred on reviewing materials for courses they were actively taking (twelve of thirteen participants). This finding within the survey data is generally consistent with findings from the interview data. Also consistent is finding that the second most prevalent platform usage by the students is the

reconnaissance for courses they were considering enrolling in (eight of thirteen), the latter echoing the syllabus scouting that P13 and P16 described, in which the platforms served to gauge "the type of workload I can expect" before committing to an elective course.

There is one important proviso that should be stated: the survey's fixed activity list captured exam preparation only weakly even though it dominated the interviews (the survey captured it as a subset of the activity of reviewing materials for a course being taken). However, in my view this reflects the lack of granularity of the instrument rather than a genuine divergence between the two data sources.

The value that students seemed to derive from ARS platforms was real, then, but not universal; a qualification the later themes develop. The two lightest users, P13 and P18, rated the platforms only "moderately" or "slightly" useful and disagreed that they helped them meet their academic goals, a division the survey makes plain and that Theme 5 confronts directly. On its own terms, though, the finding is clear: for these students, ARS platforms functioned primarily as a compensatory examination-preparation resource. They were most valuable where subject matter dictated determinate problems, but institutions supplied too little practice. And this value declined wherever subject matter resisted rehearsal through practice, or institutional provision of practice material was generous.

4.3. Theme 2: Platform value-capture models and their routine circumvention

While the first theme concerned what value students received from ARS platforms, this theme concerns what the platforms ask in return, and how readily students avoid giving it. Table 3 explains which participant data informed this theme.

Table 3. Participants Whose Interview Data Informed Theme 2

Participant	Data Touches Theme
P06	x
P09	x
P13	x
P16	x
P18	x

The platforms in this study provide students with two options to reach the material behind a paywall: either the student must pay a subscription fee or contribute content of their own[2] to the platform that (in principle) would enhance its value to other users. P09 explained the choice clearly. To obtain "a bunch of these free materials, you have to either pay, like Course Hero … or you have to upload a bunch of your own documents."[2] The contribution route is metered. On Studocu, as P09 described it, "you have to submit 10 … documents to get 5 unlocks, and these unlocks can be used for any of the … documents that you want"; P18 reported a comparable currency on the platforms she used, where you "receive 5 days of premium per published document." The design of the platform is therefore self-supplying as well as self-funding: the same mechanism that monetizes access also crowdsources the library that users want to access.

What stands out in the interviews is how rarely students actually pay, and how systematically they avoid it. Four key payment avoidance techniques appeared in the interview data: serial free trials, quota-padding uploads, shared accounts, and preview-scraping. Across all five interviews, payment was the exception rather than the rule. P18, asked whether she had ever paid cash for any platform's functionality, answered simply, "No. No." P06 took the same line. He had "seen that there are some things behind paywalls," but had "not really bothered to pay for them, so I just … use what's free to me." P16, for whom the paywall was "the most frustrating thing about it," had likewise "not paid." Behind these statements lay a shared arsenal of workarounds, and they were elaborate.

[2] References to a student uploading their “own” content does not imply authorship in this thesis. Rather, the student’s “own” content is content they are in possession of whether they own the rights to the information (such as their personal homework and class notes), or whether the educational institution or instructor owns the rights to the information (such as lecture notes and other instructional materials).

The most common strategy was free-trial cycling. P09 gave the fullest account, describing a routine she ran each term:

I sign up for Studocu's free trial per semester, and I download everything that I can within that one month of me having a free trial, and then I cancel it, and I usually just move on to my next Gmail account, and I repeat the process.

P06 described the same manoeuvre in almost the same words: making "a few different accounts with different emails," doing "the [free] trial, cancel it, and then just quickly create another Gmail." A second tactic was to satisfy the contribution requirement without really contributing, by uploading material that met the quota but little else. P18 was candid about it: "if you upload … documents as well, you can get … an unlocked version of other documents, so I'll just … upload random documents, to get access," (a point that we will be coming back to later in this study). A third tactic was collective. P09 and her friends pooled their evasion efforts: "we all take turns taking a free trial, so we all just ask, can you download this document, or can you download this document?" And where none of these was necessary, students simply took what the preview offered. P16 found that "usually the paywall, I can get around," because the site "will show you … snippets of it … part of the answer," and "typically, I can get enough from the preview to … figure it out."

The survey data corroborated how routine the avoidance of payment was. Twelve of the thirteen ARS users reported that they had never been charged money to use a platform (see Figure 3). This is consistent with the interview accounts, in which paying was treated as a last resort to be engineered around rather than a normal cost of use.

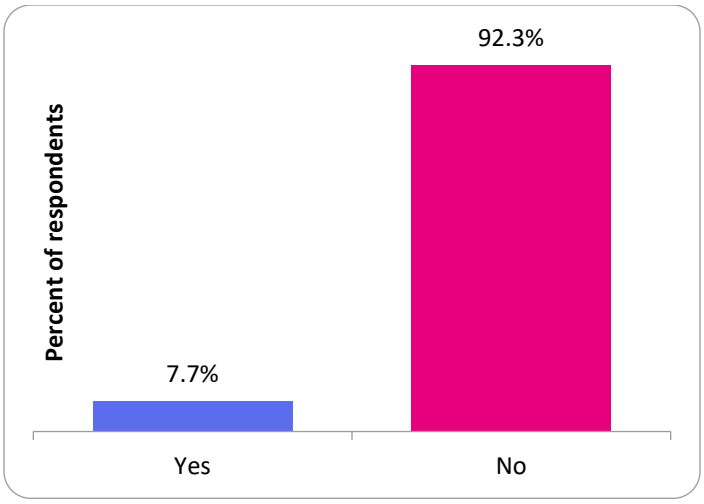

Figure 3. **Have you been charged money for your use/membership/plan by any ARS platform?**

The single exception among the interviewees is worth dwelling on, because it is informative rather than merely anomalous. P09 was the one user who reported having been charged a fee on her survey, yet she was also the heaviest user and the one with the most practised payment avoidance routine. The two facts are, I believe, connected: it is the instance of being charged, which I surmise occurred when a free trial ended before it was cancelled, that gives us the one and only instance of monetary payment to an ARS platform. The negative case does not weaken the pattern so much as reveal the mechanism that motivates it.

Circumventing payment carried a cost that the students themselves noticed, and it points ahead to Theme 5. When access is purchased by uploading whatever will satisfy a quota, the library fills with potentially irrelevant material contributed for credit rather than for use. P18's blunt judgement that "the overall information from all the sites in general are … not very good," and P16's habit of treating even "the official solution keys with a grain of salt, because even those are sometimes wrong," describe the downstream result of a contribution system that rewards volume over quality. The same behaviour that lets students extract value while withholding payment also erodes the value of the resource they are extracting from.

A final feature of the exchange is that its contribution side went largely unmet, even by students who endorsed it in principle. P13 stated the reciprocal norm clearly: "if I'm benefiting from people uploading their … notes or syllabus … I should probably do

the same, so other people can benefit." Yet by her own account, she did not act on this principle. "I personally don't do that. I don't know why I haven't done that." What uploading she had done had been done in high school, when "a strict deadline" compelled it; absent that pressure, she no longer felt "incentivized to do those things." The platforms thus rely on contributions that most users (on this evidence), would rather receive than make. This helps explain both why payment persists as the platforms' fallback, and why so much of the contributed material is of poor quality.

Taken together, these accounts show students treating the platforms' value-capture models as obstacles to be managed rather than terms to be accepted. Through serial free trials, quota-padding uploads, shared accounts, and preview-scraping, they had normalized non-payment and reduced their valuable contributions to a minimum, securing the substitutive value documented in Theme 1 at the least possible cost to themselves. That these strategies were so widely, and even cooperatively, practised suggests it was less a matter of individual opportunism than a settled collective response to the way these platforms are designed.

4.4. Theme 3: Platform differentiation and the AI frontier

This theme centers on how students perceive the differences between the platforms and how artificial intelligence had arisen in their description of studying techniques. Table 4 explains which participant data informed this theme.

Table 4. Participants Whose Interview Data Informed Theme 3

Participant	Data Touches Theme
P06	x
P09	x
P13	
P16	x
P18	x

The interview data suggest that most students did not treat the ARS platforms as interchangeable. Three of the five interviewees (P18, P09, and P06) distinguished sharply among them, and they did so on the basis of their designs. In particular, the distinctions they drew concerned how far the paywall could be penetrated, how strictly each site vetted what users uploaded, and what signals the platform offered for

distinguishing good material from bad. P13, whose upper-year, subjectively-marked coursework gave her little reason to use the platforms, did not speak to these distinctions. The fourth user, P16, related to the platforms differently again: he drew few distinctions among them, for reasons that are themselves revealing of how the platforms reach students, and he was beginning to look past ARS platforms altogether, toward generative AI as an alternative source of the answers he had been seeking.

The clearest axis of differentiation was the permeability of each site's paywall: that is, how much of a platform's content a student could reach without paying. P18 placed Chegg at the closed end, describing it as "more like [that] of a question and answering service" whose answers she "couldn't see … because it was paywall blocked" when she looked for help in MATH 157. P09 drew the sharpest contrast between the two platforms she knew best. Course Hero, she explained, set "the standard's a lot higher" and imposed "document requirements [that] are a lot more stricter [sic] than Studocu's," and it "doesn't have a free trial, so you have to upload." Studocu, by contrast, was both more open (through a monthly free trial) and less discriminating about what it accepted. That combination was precisely why she and P18, preferred it. P18 used Studocu "the most" because "the other … ones … are completely paywall blocked, but for this one, if you upload … documents … you can get … an unlocked version."

Permeability came at a cost in quality, but the platform's design also offered a partial remedy. Because Studocu was "not really good at detecting what counts as a document," P09 encountered "AI slop" on it, much of it (she observed) the very "random documents that people use to hit that document count for the free trial" described in Theme 2. Yet she found this "really easy to just filter out," because Studocu layered a quality signal over the clutter: "a rating system … on a scale of 1 to 5 stars," where the four- and five-star documents "are very reliable, and past students have used them," while the unrated ones were the padding.

Based on this evidence, the choice between ARS platforms was not simply a hunt for the most open site. It was a calculated trade, in which students accepted a more permeable, lightly-vetted platform and then relied on its rating mechanism to manage the resulting noise. P06's preference ran the other way for the same underlying reason: he had tried another site but found "it didn't have as many resources compared to Course Hero," valuing breadth of holdings over ease of access. P16's indifference to these

distinctions was not inattention; it reflected a different mode of access. He described arriving at the platforms almost entirely through a search engine rather than by choosing among them: "I don't go into a platform being like, I'm now gonna look at Course Hero and look what they have. For me, it's more like I just use, like, a Google search." Once searching, "I almost barely notice what I'm on … It's genuinely just, like, just jump in and just click the first link and go." His only stated preferences were faint ones: Studocu was "usually … a bit better" for finding syllabi, and Course Hero was the site he landed on "a bit more than the others." In my reading, this is a design finding in its own right. For a search-first user, the individual platforms function as interchangeable middleware behind a search results page, which suggests the competition among platforms documented above may matter less to some students than the platforms' collective visibility to a search engine.

Against this settled picture sat one emergent signal that, while resting on a single voice, points to where the ground may be shifting under ARS platforms. P16 reported that "recently … I've been leaning more towards … AI for help," and described a hybrid practice of locating a question on an ARS platform and then "trying to use ChatGPT to … get the answer."

I note that only one participant raised the use of AI in the interview, and I did not design the survey to address the use of AI. Still, if a generative model can supply the worked solutions that were documented in Theme 1 to be the ARS platforms' central draw, then the substitutive value these students prize is no longer something that only an ARS platform can provide. This is a thread the study returns to when considering future research.

The survey data corroborated the broad pattern of platform use. Studocu was by far the most commonly used platform, named by twelve of the thirteen users, ahead of Course Hero (seven), with Chegg and Course Sidekick named by very few (see Figure 4). These data are consistent with the interview accounts, in which Studocu's permeability made it the default while the more heavily paywalled sites were used less or set aside. The survey is necessarily silent on comparison with AI, which lies outside its scope. However, in my view this gap is worth noting for the design of future research.

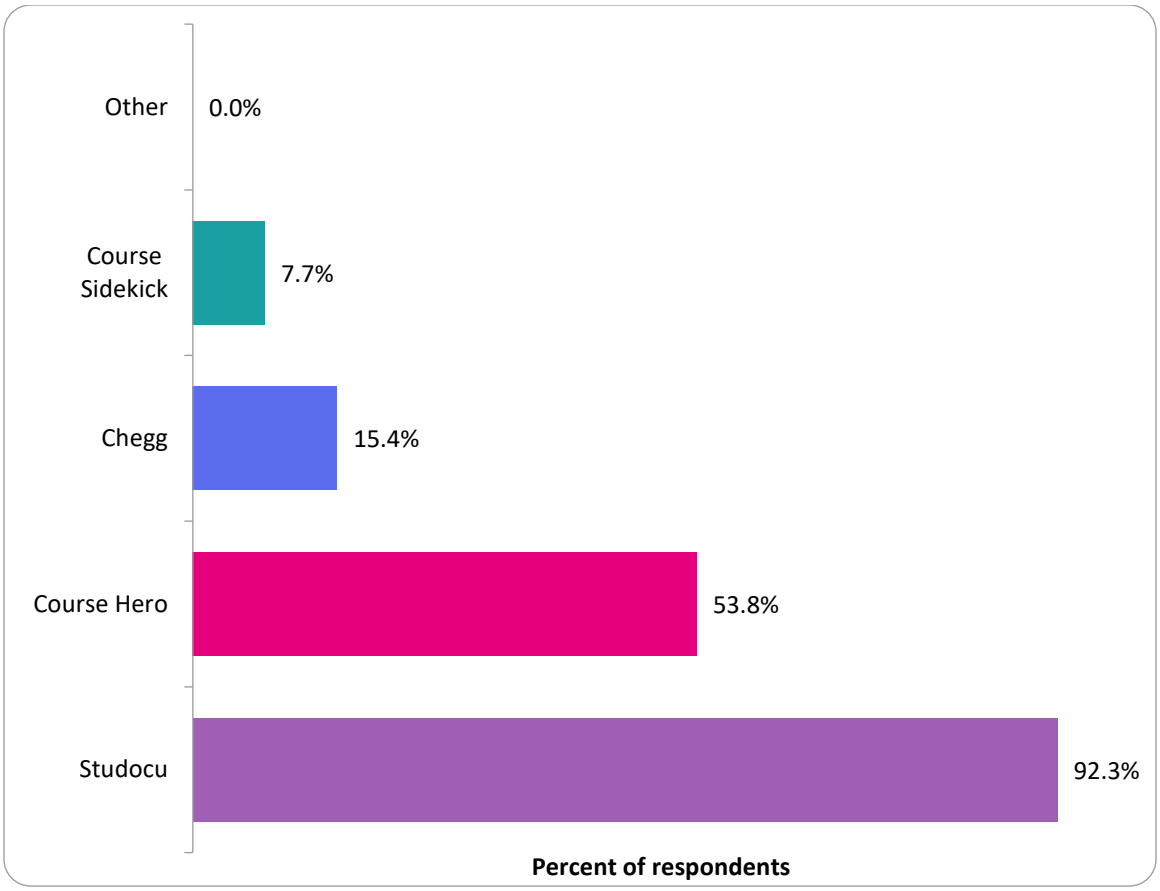

Figure 4. Survey response result: Which ARS platforms do you use most frequently?

In summary, these students were discerning consumers of platform design. They realized the differences among ARS platforms in terms of how easily value could be extracted and how reliably it could be trusted, and they chose and combined platforms accordingly. That one student was already substituting the platforms with AI to some degree suggests the competition documented here may soon be a competition with something other than another ARS platform.

4.5. Theme 4: A governance vacuum and a student ethic of legitimate use

While the first three themes have involved the value exchange related to ARS platforms, and students' perceptions of the differences between platforms, this theme explores the students' responses to questions about school policies surrounding the use of ARS platforms. Table 5 explains which participant data informed this theme.

Table 5. Participants Whose Interview Data Informed Theme 4

Participant	Data Touches Theme
P06	x
P09	x
P13	x
P16	x
P18	x

The interview data indicate that these students used ARS platforms without any policy they could recognize as clear, consistent, or coherently communicated, and that into this vacuum they had brought a coherent ethic of their own about what counted as legitimate use. All five interviewees spoke to the question of institutional policy, and two patterns stood out: how little institutional guidance they could identify, and how consistent the moral line was that they drew in its place. A third pattern, clearest in one articulate account, concerned what students thought the governance of ARS platform use ought to look like.

The first and most basic finding is that, for these students, no clear and consistently communicated institutional policy on ARS use appeared to exist, and their experiences of what policy there was differed markedly. P13 said plainly, "I haven't heard anything around these platforms specifically," and P06 drew a pointed contrast with the one area where guidance had arrived: "it's only just been about, like, AI platforms, how to use them, not really stuff like Course Hero." That contrast is itself telling. The institution had begun to speak to generative AI while remaining silent on the resource-sharing platforms students had used for years. Where instruction did touch upon the use of ARS platforms, it concerned not their use but the uploading of particular materials. P18's business-ethics professor "explicitly says … make sure you don't upload my slides anywhere, or share it with your friends," yet P18 had "not necessarily seen anything [from a policy perspective] around not using these platforms."

Notably, even this narrow rule met the same circumvention logic documented in Theme 2: rather than upload the prohibited slides, P18 would "just upload … [a] document that's not really related to the content, just so I'm not violating any policies." P16's account was different again, and it complicates any picture of simple institutional silence. In his experience, entry-level courses "put a lot of emphasis on the fact that [these] platforms, pretty much under any circumstance, are not allowed"; as he

understood it, "the school outright bans it," a stance he considered "too extreme." He described one professor "passing along school policy" in a way that made clear "they also very much agree with the policy." Upper-year instructors, by contrast, practised what he called a "don't tell me, I won't tell them, kind of thing": they "may know it's the school policy," but "they understand that students are doing what they can to learn, and they don't want to place a restriction on it," and so they "don't advertise their dissentiment towards it." Policy, in P16's telling, was not absent so much as incoherent: a blanket prohibition announced early, unevenly believed by the instructors announcing it, and tacitly unenforced later. Set beside the silence that P13, P06, and P18 described, the picture that emerges is not of no policy at all, but of no policy that students could recognize as clear, consistent, or coherently communicated.

The survey reflected the same finding. Not one of the thirteen ARS users described their school's policy as clear: six reported no clear policy and seven that it depended on the context (see Figure 5).

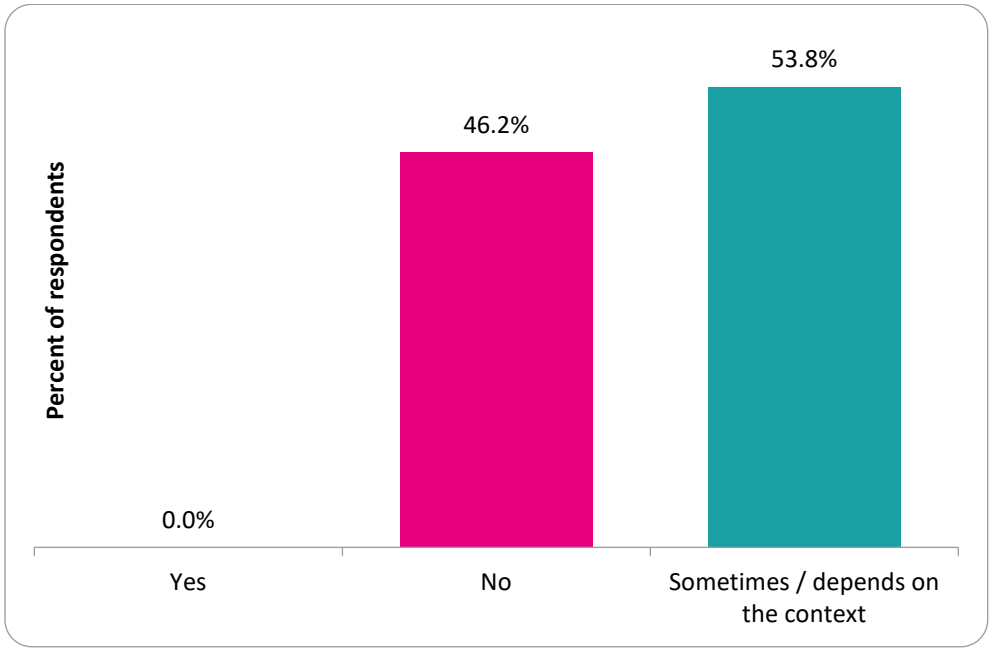

Figure 5. Survey response result: Do you feel your school has a clear policy on the use of ARS platforms?

There is an irony in this vacuum worth drawing out, because it connects back to Theme 1. One professor, P13 reported, "wouldn't upload their slides onto Canvas due to copyright issues," which is exactly the kind of institutional under-provision that, in Theme

1, sent students to ARS platforms in the first place, to find the materials they had not been given. The instructor's own caution helped generate the demand that the institution’s absent policy did not govern.

Into this void of clear policy guidance, the students brought a strikingly consistent ethic. Across four of the five interviews, students drew the same line: practice materials, past practice examinations, solution keys, and lecture notes were legitimate to share and use, while the live, current examination was not. P18 put it simply: it was "fair to have … sample exams that professors have provided in the past … but maybe not … the actual exam itself," which would be "unfair to … others."

P06 reasoned from the nature of the content. Students "should be allowed to freely upload whatever course material they want," he held, "because it's … just … knowledge, that's not … the exact actual exam questions," adding that "it's on the professor's duty to … change the questions each year." P16 drew the boundary in almost regulatory terms, holding that the institution "definitely should ban sharing of exams, like, major assessments," which were "very detrimental to the education," while it should "encourage students to use these resources, similar to, like, ChatGPT [sic]" for practice problems and for "solution keys when they're not provided." This was not bare self-justification. P16 framed his own use of the ARS platforms as a matter of learning rather than advantage: it was "not … a big deal of cheating," he argued, because "my goal is really to learn the material, and if seeing a solution key is important for learning … it only advances my learning."

The line these students policed was, in effect, the same practice-versus-assessment distinction that organized the value documented in Theme 1: the practice that legitimately substitutes for thin institutional provision on one side, the assessment that must remain off-limits on the other. The participants enforced a boundary that their institution had not drawn.

When the interviews turned from what was legitimate to what the institution should do, two convictions recurred. The first was that prohibition would not work. P13 was certain that "regardless of the policy that the University states … students are always gonna [sic] find a way to work their way around it," and pointed to the Discord servers, with their "different subheadings where … people can post their assignments, or

… lecture notes," that already moved such material outside any platform a policy might name. P09 was more blunt: "even if it got prohibited, people will still find a way to use it." The second conviction, developed most fully by P16, was that the constructive alternative was engagement modelled on the institution's emerging approach to AI. ARS policy, he suggested, "can be aligned in a similar way" to AI policy: ban the sharing of live assessments, but otherwise permit and even encourage use, because permissive use "is no loss to the university, and all it does is encourage students to engage." Rather than "all-out ban" the platforms, faculty "should be involved in the discussion" and should ask students "what … they want their education to look like."

The interviews also contained a working example of what governed sharing can look like. P18 described an exam bank run by the computer-science student society: a Discord server and, alongside it, a physical collection kept in the student lounge, opened by a society executive, where "you can't take any pictures, you can take notes," and which contains "previous exams taken by students." What distinguishes this arrangement from the ARS platforms is its standing with faculty: "professors know of this, and they're okay with it." Here, in miniature, is the arrangement P16 was arguing for: sharing that is curated, access-controlled, and faculty-acquiesced rather than prohibited. It rests on a single account, and it belongs to a neighbouring faculty rather than the business school, so I note it as an existence proof rather than a finding. But it does show that the choice facing an institution is not only between banning these platforms and ignoring them.

The same student identified the key obstacle to providing input to their institution and instructors. P16, by his own description "a very outspoken person," nonetheless said he "would never approach a faculty person, because I would be very worried about how it would impact how they perceive me, and how credible they perceive me." The engagement these students wanted was foreclosed by a perceived risk of judgement and reputational damage.

The governance of ARS use, for these students, was therefore not institutional but self-generated. A shared ethic distinguishing practice-support from assessment-compromise did the regulating work that no clear institutional policy performed, and the students did not want that ethic to be met with bans (which they regarded as futile), but with engagement of the kind that institutions had begun to extend to AI.

In my reading, the obstacle to dialogue with students was not unwillingness on either side, but rather a risk perceived by the student around initiating such a conversation. For a business school weighing its response to ARS platforms, this is a most interesting finding: several students with no pre-existing relationship seem to have a profoundly consistent view of what policy their institution should have around an emergent education-related technology. Later in this study, this finding will be discussed as a future potential research direction.

4.6. Theme 5: The double-edged sword

While each of the preceding themes examined a particular facet of ARS use (its substitutive value, the exchange that secures it, the differences among platforms, and the policy that fails to govern it), this theme draws together a thread that runs through all of the data. Table 6 explains which participant data informed this theme.

Table 6. Participants Whose Interview Data Informed Theme 5

Participant	Data Touches Theme
P06	x
P09	x
P13	x
P16	x
P18	x

The interviews reflect the fact that the value these students described was never unmixed. It came shadowed by costs, and the students were themselves aware that the resources that helped them carried a darker side. P09 named the tension precisely. Reflecting on the practice exams she relied on, she observed that there was a "kind of copyright situation," since one is not "really supposed to be uploading … past exams to these websites":

> *So, it's kind of a double-edged sword, where, yes, we know that what we're doing might be … wrong in some way, where maybe we're distributing … an exam that's not supposed to be distributed. But also, at the same time, it genuinely really does help students.*

The detrimental effects to the students via usage of the platforms took three forms in the data: harm to learning itself, the unreliability of the material, and the cost in time and effort of obtaining it.

The most serious detriment was to learning, and it was realized when use crossed the very line the students had drawn in Theme 4. P06 was explicit that the harm was conditional: the platforms had benefited him, but "depending on how you use or abuse it, it could … hurt you." His example was a group of friends who had found, on Course Hero, "one-of-one copies" of a reused exam. Having the actual assessment in hand, "it kind of puts you in a mindset where you don't feel the need to … study or go to lectures," and so, he judged, "it sort of hurt them." The mechanism he described was a substitution of memorization for understanding: his friends would "search for professor, whatever their name is, exam," find the link, and "memorize the questions [and answers] rather than learning the material," with the result that "come exam time, if the question has changed, then you're not going to remember anything [useful]."

P13 reached the same conclusion. Much as she would "love the feature of having previous assignments available," she knew that if she had it, "I would personally get no learning done"; the work would become "getting my assignment done for the sake of … getting the marks." She extended the worry to attendance: with "constant … access to lecture notes," she thought, "a lot of students wouldn't end up showing to classes."

What makes the creation of harm to learning a possibility rather than a conclusion is that the same students often held the benefit and the harm together, actively making judgements and balancing usage. P09, who used the platforms more than anyone, was confident they had not "pushed back any of my learning," precisely "because … I strictly only use it for past exams." P06, who described the harm his friends experienced in detail, maintained that "for me, personally … it's benefited me," provided "you aren't overly reliant on it." The harm, in other words, lived in the same feature as the value: open access to past materials rewarded the disciplined student and tempted the undisciplined. The survey data also registered some ambivalence on this issue. P06's own two accounts of himself sharpen the point: on the survey he had rated the platforms extremely useful and strongly agreed that they helped him achieve his academic goals, yet in interview he judged their benefit to him to have been only slight. I

read this not as carelessness but as ambivalence, with the answer depending on whether the benefit or the cost was foremost in his mind at the time of asking. Asked whether the platforms helped them achieve their academic goals, the thirteen ARS users split almost evenly: five disagreed, while six agreed or strongly agreed and two were neutral (see Figure 6). This was not a population divided into enthusiasts and skeptics, but rather a set of individuals each weighing a genuine benefit against a real cost.

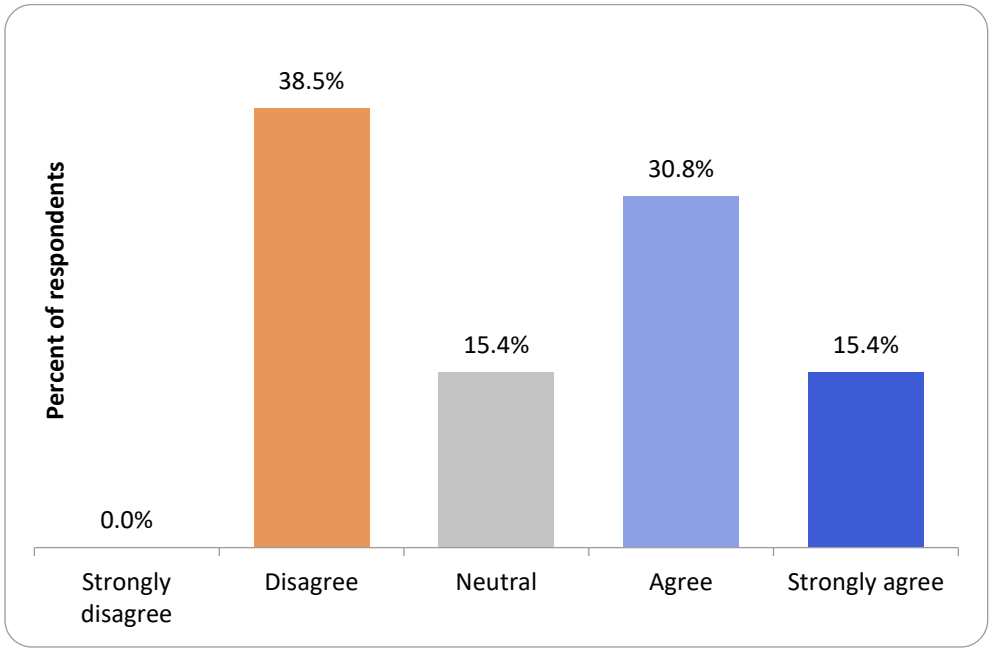

Figure 6. Survey response result: ARS platforms help me achieve my academic goals.

The second detriment was the unreliability of the material itself – a cost borne even by students who used the platforms exactly as intended. P18's verdict was flat: "the overall information from all the sites in general are … not very good." P16 catalogued the specific failures. Syllabi were often out of date, in one case showing a course "year 2026, but it's actually year 2022," and they were hard to sort, so the information generally had to be taken "with a grain of salt." His caution extended even to authoritative-looking material: he treated "the official solution keys with a grain of salt, because even those are sometimes wrong." The problem was compounded by mislabelling, which P18 had encountered directly, where a document would "say … it's a sample exam, but when you click onto the document, it's … someone's notes." The survey data also reflected this mixed picture. While six of the thirteen users reported no experience of misleading or poor-quality information on the platforms, three said they

had encountered it and a further four were unsure (see Figure 7). That distribution matches the cautionary posture the interviews described, in which students neither quite trust the material nor quite dismiss it. This unreliability is the downstream face of dynamics traced earlier: the quota-padding uploads of Theme 2 and the lightly-vetted, permeable platforms of Theme 3 are precisely what fill the library with poor-quality material that must afterwards be filtered.

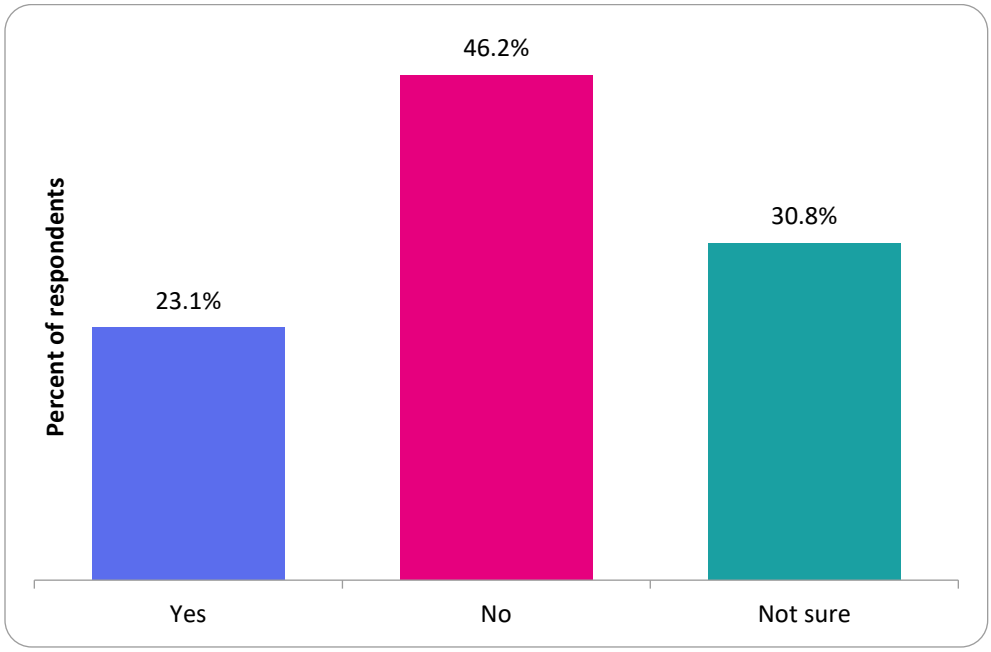

Figure 7. Survey response result: Have you ever received misleading or poor-quality information from an ARS platform?

The third and final detriment to the students was the cost of the effort itself. Even when the material was sound and used well, obtaining it took time away from the very studying it was meant to support. P09 noted that "uploading the documents every time is also really time-consuming." P16 felt the burden most acutely, describing how "it hurts the quality of my studying, because … you have to spend so much more effort": he had "to go find these problems, and then … look, are they applicable," and "then … try to get around these paywalls." The platforms, on this account, did not simply hand over value. They demanded labour in return, and that labour competed with the learning it was meant to serve.

Taken together, these detriments give the theme its shape. The value documented in Theme 1 was real and, for several students, considerable, but it was

double-edged at every turn: it could erode the learning it was meant to support, it came mixed with unreliable material, and it had to be paid for in time and effort. This is why the survey respondents were so divided on the platforms' worth, and why that division ran through individual students as much as between them. In my reading, the most accurate summary of these students' experience is not that ARS platforms were good or bad for them, but that they were both at once, and that the students knew it. It is this ambivalence, more than any single benefit or cost, that draws the preceding themes together.

4.7. Theme 6: Resource sharing without relationships

The first five themes addressed the value students drew from ARS platforms, the exchange that secured this value, the differences among platforms, the university policy that failed to govern the use of the platforms, and the costs that offset the value of the platforms. All of these themes speak, in one way or another, to the first research question, about how the design of the platforms creates and captures value. This final theme turns to the second research question, which asks about the nature of the relationships and interactions that students develop through ARS platforms. It is one of the most definitive themes in the study, supported by all five of the interviews, and the finding is largely negative. Table 7 explains which participant data informed this theme.

Table 7. Participants Whose Interview Data Informed Theme 6

Participant	Data Touches Theme
P06	x
P09	x
P13	x
P16	x
P18	x

The interview data indicate that, through the ARS platforms themselves, students developed almost no personal relationships with other users and had very little direct interaction with them. The platforms were experienced not as communities, but as repositories: places to obtain documents, not places to meet people. P09 drew the contrast with social media directly. The platforms were "not social media," she explained, "in the sense where there's … not really any comments or … threads. It's just the document and then the rating for the document." Where the platforms did offer

opportunities for interaction, they went unused or ran in only one direction. P18 knew that a question-and-answer feature existed on one of the platforms but had "not used that at all," in part because on the platform she had in mind, "almost everything … is paywall blocked." P16 had never posted in a forum, though he did read others' posts: "I've never … engaged in a forum," he said, "but I have looked at other people's forums," where "sometimes people will actually talk about a particular solution" and he could see "how they got to … the answer." His participation was purely that of a lurker, not a contributor. He took explanations from strangers without ever entering into anything that resembled a conversation.

The anonymity of platform users both reflected and reinforced the tendency to lurk. Asked who the people behind the uploaded documents were, P16 said that "most of the time I encounter stuff, it's usually [a] fake alias." No interviewee described knowing, or wishing to know, the identity of the students whose materials they used, and not a single instance of real-name interaction was recorded in the data. The ARS platforms were primarily brokers of document exchange between anonymous parties. They were not experienced by participants as facilitators or enablers of relationship development. As was apparent from P06, the whole potential of such interaction was often being avoided altogether.

> I know there is a place on the website where you can interact with others, but honestly, I haven't really used that part yet. I've just used the part where I could download sample exams and tests.

The survey data pointed the same way. Of the activities users reported, the collaborative and social ones were the least common: only three of the thirteen respondents reported having used the platforms for "sharing notes with classmates," and just one for "participating in study or interest groups" (see Figure 8), far less than the solitary activities of reviewing materials and preparing for assessments documented in Theme 1.

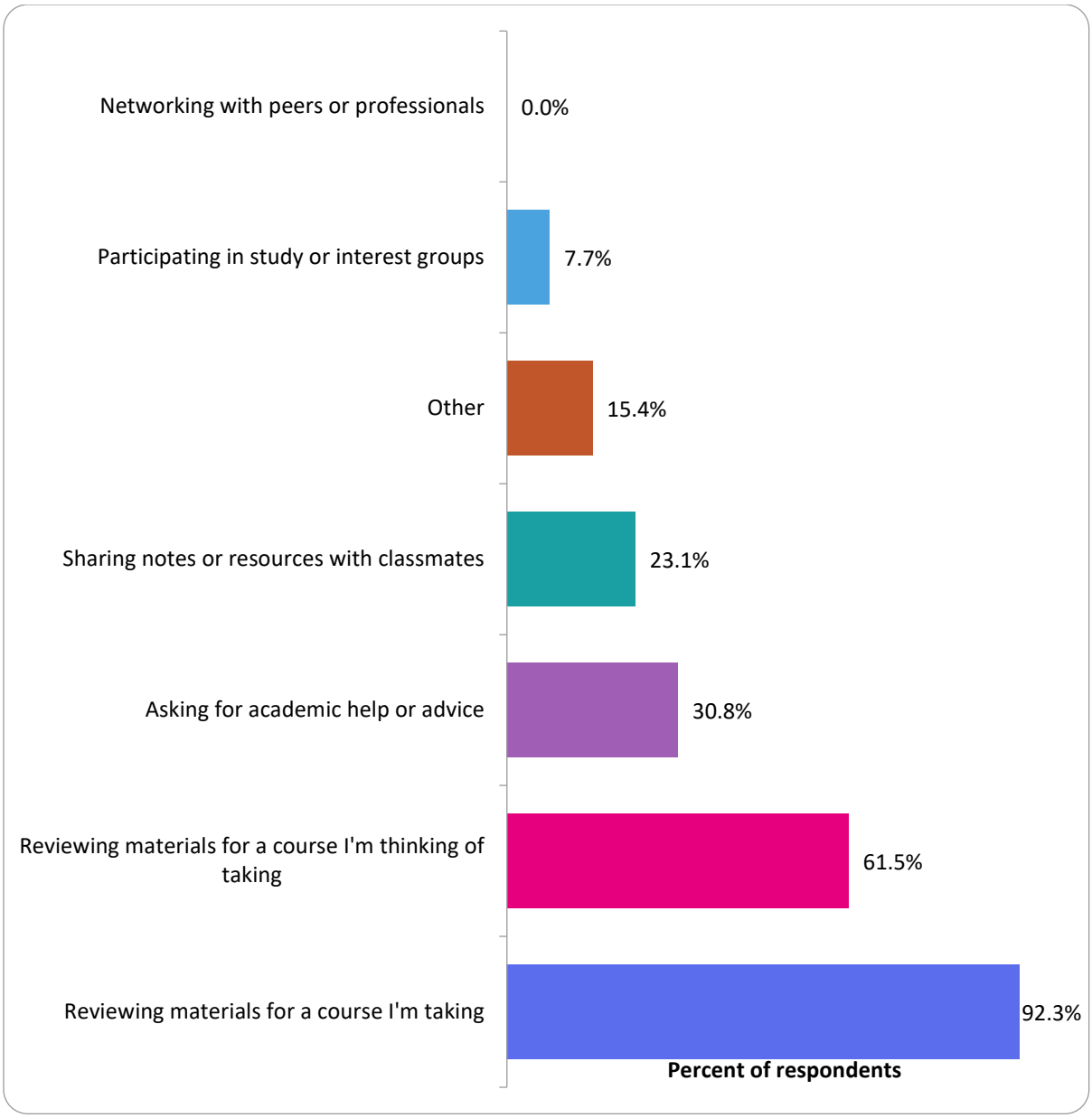

Figure 8. Survey response result: What kinds of study-related activities do you use ARS platforms for?

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that academic resource sharing was, for these students, a solitary activity without relationships. The relationships were there; they had simply formed elsewhere. The genuinely social sharing happened not on the ARS platforms themselves but in students' own private networks, alongside and around them. P13 described the Discord servers that, "especially for … 100 level or 200 level classes," carried "quite a lot of communication," organized into "different subheadings where … people can post their assignments, or … people can post … their lecture notes." P09, as

noted in Theme 2, coordinated with friends in a group chat to "take turns taking a free trial," downloading documents for one another on request. The pattern extended beyond those two accounts. P18 swapped notes with classmates through private messages rather than through any platform: "if we miss a lecture, or … someone takes better notes than the other, I'll just message them on … WhatsApp or Instagram to see if we can swap notes." P16 went further, deliberately cultivating one-on-one study partnerships: "I'll … work with another student," dividing up practice problems ("hey, you do this practice problem, I do this practice problem") and comparing results, because working with one other person builds "a much … deeper connection" and offers the chance "to teach other people" and "to learn from another person." Notably, he valued these partnerships for precisely what both the ARS platforms and the larger group chats lacked. In a mass chat, he said, "you don't get that … personal connection, and you don't get … that one-on-one mentoring teaching experience." In these spaces the sharing was personal, reciprocal, and identified, while on the ARS platforms it was the exact opposite. Thus, the ARS platform served as an impersonal source of documentation, while the peer relationships that surrounded academic sharing lived in the private channels that students already inhabited.

This gives the second research question an answer with an unexpected shape. Students developed essentially no relationships through the ARS platforms, which functioned for them as anonymous, transactional utilities rather than as communities. But the relational dimension of academic resource sharing had not vanished; it had eluded the platforms and lived in existing peer networks, where it took the reciprocal, personal form the platforms lacked. Given this research focused on the ARS platforms and not student relationships outside of the platforms, I hold the finding lightly. It is a pattern that warrants further study rather than a settled conclusion. Nonetheless, the finding is thought-provoking as it complicates an implication built into the very name of these "sharing" platforms: that a resource-sharing service is also a place where a community of sharers forms. For my participants, at least, it was not. The sharing was real, but the community was elsewhere.

Chapter 5.

Discussion

This study having explored ARS platform usage by undergraduate students in a business school setting, this chapter now interprets the findings, situates them in the literature, and draws out possible implications for practice and policy.

The six themes reported in the Findings chapter each stand on their own; however, in my view they are best understood together through a vivid image one participant supplied, calling the platforms a “double-edged sword.” The phrase turns out to describe not just the participant’s own experience, but the study's central pattern: at every point where these platforms delivered value to students, that value arrived entangled with a harm (this is further elaborated later in this chapter). The discussion that follows uses that pattern as its common thread. I first answer the two research questions in turn, and then consider what the findings mean for instructors, for institutions and for the platforms themselves. Following this I acknowledge the study's limitations and the multi-faceted research it invites.

5.1. The value exchange: answering the first research question

The first research question asked how the design of ARS platforms, including their policies and technology, provides value to students or receives value from them. The answer the data support is an exchange with three components: platforms supply substitutive instructional materials, they attempt to capture payment or content in return, and students largely defeat that capture while absorbing costs of a different kind.

On the supply side, the value was substitutive and exam-centred. Students turned to the platforms chiefly for practice examinations, worked solutions, and course-planning materials, and they did so precisely where their instructors had under-provided for their perceived needs. This finding converges closely with the largest recent survey in the area: Slade et al. (2024) found that students mainly sought test and exam answers and previous assignments from these websites rather than general study materials. Where my findings extend theirs is in the condition attached. The interview data indicate

that students' demand is not free-floating; it rises and falls with instructor provision, concentrates in quantitative and objectively marked coursework, and thins in upper years as provision improves and assessment becomes more subjective.

Slade et al. (2024) also raise the possibility that platform use reflects a developing generational norm of online sharing rather than unmet need, and these two explanations are not mutually exclusive. My participants' histories show both: use typically began in high school and arrived at university as an established habit. Yet, the same participants described their university use in explicitly conditional terms, as something reached for when the course did not supply enough practice. Therefore, a perfect storm of sorts arises. The norm, of students already being ready and primed for use of the platforms from their prior experiences creates a readiness factor, while a provision gap (from the students' perspectives) provides an impetus for usage. Using ARS platforms under these circumstances appears to be a logical choice, and one these students had, in effect, already made.

On the value capture side, the platforms' design is recognizably that of a two-sided market, in which a platform must attract and monetize two groups, the content suppliers and the content consumers, whose participation feeds one another (Eisenmann et al., 2006; Rochet & Tirole, 2003). ARS platforms are an unusual variant in which the two sides are largely the same students at different moments: the reader of documents is also the intended supplier of documents, and the pay-or-upload gate is the mechanism that converts consumption into either revenue or inventory. The Findings chapter shows what this design meets in practice. Payment was nearly universally avoided by my participants, through serial free trials, quota-padding uploads, shared accounts, and preview-scraping, and these forms of avoidance were so widely and cooperatively practised that I read it as a settled collective response rather than individual opportunism.

Two consequences of that response strike me as the study's most useful contribution to how these platforms are understood. The first consequence concerns the growth story told in the literature. Usage of ARS platforms has grown dramatically over the past decade, an expansion documented in both traffic and subscription figures (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021; Slade et al., 2024). The network effects behind that growth are real: more users mean more uploaded content, and more content attracts more

users. But my interviews reveal a counter-loop inside the growth loop. When access is purchased by uploading whatever satisfies a quota, the library fills with what one participant called “slop”, and the platform's core asset, credible study material, is eroded by the very mechanism that builds it. The rating systems students rely on to sift good documents from slop are, in effect, the platforms' attempt to partially repair a wound their own value-capture design inflicts. I believe that this tension between content volume and content credibility is a structural outcome of the current design of platforms that pay for inventory with access credits. This mechanism is detailed further under the section below on implications for practice.

The second consequence of students’ response to ARS paywalls concerns where the competition among platforms actually happens. Three of the five interviewees in my study differentiated sharply among platforms on design grounds, but the fourth arrived at documents almost entirely through a search engine and barely registered which platform he was on. For a search-first user, individual platforms function as interchangeable middleware behind a results page. This suggests that some of the competition between these platforms is less for student loyalty than for search visibility. If that is right, then institutional responses aimed at particular platforms may end up lagging behaviour, because the student's relationship is with the search bar, not a particular site. Recent events lend this reading striking support: Chegg has stated publicly that it gains most of its subscribers through students' Google searches, and attributes part of its decline to search results now answering those questions before students ever reach its site (Chegg Inc., 2025).

Finally, the value that survives capture by the student is not free. The Findings chapter documents three recurring costs (whether to the interviewees themselves or those that they observed with their colleagues): harm to learning when use crosses from practice into assessment, unreliable and mislabelled content, and the time consumed by the workarounds that students use to circumvent ARS paywalls. The double edge is sharpest within individual students. The same participants who rated the platforms most useful were among those who described the potential damage caused by the platforms most precisely, and one participant's survey and interview answers diverged on the platforms' benefit to him. I suspect that this ambivalence, rather than any split between ARS enthusiasts and skeptics, is the accurate picture of how these platforms sit in

students' lives, and it explains why the survey population divided almost evenly on whether the platforms help them achieve their academic goals.

5.2. Sharing without community: answering the second research question

The second research question asked about the nature of the relationships and interactions that students develop through ARS platforms. The answer, delivered consistently by all five interviewees, is: almost none. The platforms were experienced as repositories rather than communities, places where, as one participant put it, there is just the document and the rating. The student-to-student interaction features of the platforms went unused, or were used in one direction only, and the people behind the documents remained anonymous, typically behind aliases.

This finding lands close to an observation already in the literature: Rogerson (2023) describes file-sharing sites as operating under the guise of student support communities. My data give that phrase empirical support from the student's side. The “community” framing is not merely a marketing veneer that critics see through; the students themselves do not experience community there, and do not appear to want it there. The one participant who engaged with the platforms' social features at all did so as what the online-communities literature calls a “lurker”, reading others' exchanges without ever posting. The behaviour matches that literature closely: lurkers characteristically seek answers to questions without participating publicly, and their silence is often a considered choice rather than a failure of the community (Preece et al., 2004). In this case the choice was explicit, and elsewhere in the interview, a possible reason was supplied: material posted under a fake alias impedes credibility.

What makes the finding more than a null result is where the relational activity turned out to live. The sharing that is personal, reciprocal, and identified happens off the ARS platforms, in Discord servers, class group chats, private messages between friends, and, for one participant, deliberately cultivated one-on-one study partnerships valued for exactly the personal connection the ARS platforms lack. I hold this pattern cautiously, since the study was designed to examine the platforms rather than the ecology around them; but its shape is suggestive: the platforms carry the impersonal, transactional layer of academic sharing, while the relational layer operates where

relationships already exist. Whether the platforms ever hosted that relational layer is a question this study cannot answer; no participant described relational exchange on the platforms at any point, past or present. Slade et al. (2024) report altruism and reciprocation among students' motivations for sharing; my data suggest those motives were real among my participants, but are exercised largely within students' own existing networks. At the same time, the reciprocity the platforms depend upon often goes unmet. as evidenced where one participant endorsed uploading in principle, and then admitted she never does it.

5.3. A copyright answer to a pedagogical problem

The findings on governance gain their significance from a fact recorded in this thesis's introduction: the University does have a policy relating to the use of ARS platforms. Sharing instructional materials without the creator's permission is prohibited, and a Copyright Office stands ready to pursue takedowns. That policy, however, answers a different question from the one these students were asking. It governs copyright and the institutional risk attached to it. It does not address what a student should do when a course provides no practice exam and the textbook offers no worked solution.

The findings in this study make the mismatch precise. Not one of the thirteen surveyed users called their school's policy clear. Interviewees reported silence, a narrow upload rule, or, in one account, an early-course blanket prohibition later softened by what he called a "don't-tell" tacit tolerance among senior-course instructors. The policy vacuum is therefore also a communication vacuum. I do not believe, however, that better communication alone would change much. The policy governs uploading, which these students did reluctantly and largely to satisfy a quota. What drove them to the platforms was the need to download. An institution could communicate its copyright rules perfectly and still leave that need untouched.

Two major components of the findings make this mismatch consequential rather than merely untidy. The first component is that students filled the gap themselves, with a strikingly consistent ethic: practice materials and past practice exams are fair game to share, while the live current assessment is not. That line happens to track the point at which, in the students' own accounts, use of materials on an ARS platform turns from

help into harm. Where students crossed this line (e.g. memorizing leaked exams instead of learning), the damage was understood to be real, and they named it.

The second component is the barrier to closing the gap. The study's most articulate advocate of engagement-based governance said he would never raise the subject of ARS use with a faculty member for fear of how it would affect his credibility. Relatedly, Slade et al. (2024) found that over 80% of students who use these sites worry about being accused of misconduct because of it. The silence, I believe, is mutual among students and faculty. This makes it self-reinforcing: students do not ask, because asking marks them as users, and institutions do not tell because the platforms sit in an awkward space between issues of copyright, academic integrity, and pedagogy that no single office within the University “owns.” One participant's account of a neighbouring faculty's student society, which runs a professor-known exam bank with controlled access, shows that the silence is not inevitable; governed sharing already exists on campus, in miniature.

What these students described, then, is not principally a policy problem. It is a provision problem with a policy problem beside it. The materials they went looking for, being practice examinations, worked solutions, and information about courses before enrolment, are materials an institution can supply. Where instructors supplied them, the interviews indicate that platform use fell away. The institutional opportunity these findings point to is therefore one of learning support, and it sits closer to the curriculum than to the copyright office.

5.4. Implications for practice and policy

The pattern running through these findings is of a technology that no stakeholder currently manages: the platforms optimize for growth, the institution's limited policy goes uncommunicated, and students govern their own use by an ethic self-administered. The implications that follow are therefore addressed to the three audiences in a position to change that, and I take each in turn: instructors, whose provision decisions shape the demand the platforms serve; the institution, whose partial policy exists on paper but does not reach the students it governs; and the platforms themselves, whose value-capture designs manufacture the quality problems their users then navigate.

5.4.1. For instructors and course design

The most direct implication of Theme 1 is also the cheapest to act on: the demand these platforms serve is, in meaningful part, manufactured by instructors' under-provision of study materials. Participants were explicit that generous practice materials and posted solution keys reduce their reliance on the platforms to little or nothing. Instructors who provide ample practice problems, past practice examinations, and worked solutions are not merely being generous; they are competing, successfully, with the platforms for their own students' attention. The findings also carry an assessment-hygiene implication. The clearest harm documented in this study occurred where examinations were reused year over year, so that leaked papers rewarded memorization over mastery of course concepts and skills. Rotating and updating assessment content does not stop leakage, but it converts a leaked exam from an answer key into what students treat past papers as anyway, which is an opportunity for practice.

5.4.2. For institutional policy and governance

The first task for institutions who wish to respond to the findings of a study like this is not to write or publicize policy. It is to look closely at what students are going elsewhere to obtain. The materials named in these interviews, being practice examinations, worked solutions, and information about courses before enrolment, are within an institution's power to provide, and where they were provided, students reported needing the platforms less. Treating ARS use as a signal about provision, rather than only as a compliance matter, turns an enforcement problem into a curriculum one. The exam bank run by a neighbouring faculty's student society shows that a sanctioned alternative is workable at low cost.

Communication remains a task, but a narrower one than it first appears. The policy that exists governs copyright, so communicating it more clearly would tell students what they must not upload without addressing what they came looking for. The distinction worth communicating is the one students already honour: practice support is legitimate, while compromising the validity of a live assessment is not. That line is pedagogical rather than legal, and an institution would need to state it deliberately because copyright rules do not typically imply it.

A third task is to lower the cost of the conversation. Students in this study wanted engagement and predicted, plausibly, that if the institution were to prohibit the use of ARS platforms, students would flout the policy. Some interviewees pointed to the institution's emerging posture toward generative AI as a better model: permissive use inside stated limits. That posture is worth extending deliberately, because the same students are already turning to AI tools for the same purposes, and an institution that governs one while ignoring the other will find its policy overtaken. Creating channels where the subject of ARS use can be raised without self-incrimination, through anonymous consultation, course-level statements, or student-association intermediaries such as the exam-bank model mentioned above, addresses the reputational barrier directly. A further possibility, involving negotiated institutional relationships with the platforms themselves, cannot be recommended based on this study's data, but I raise it as a question worth institutional attention.

5.4.3. For platform designers

The findings describe a value-capture design in ARS platforms that manufactures its own quality problem. Quota-based contribution requirements fill libraries with slop, which the rating systems then only partially filter. At least some students respond to the degraded credibility of the resources on a platform by drifting toward alternatives, including generative AI. The finding that students' access to ARS platforms is increasingly mediated by general web search cuts the same way; if students barely notice which platform they are on, brand loyalty will not save a library that cannot be trusted.

Overall, one can argue that ARS platforms have implemented the wisdom from the two-sided-market literature's emphasis on getting both sides on board in the value creation model (Rochet & Tirole, 2003). However, the unique situation of ARS platform users making up both sides of the market (supply and demand) through essentially the same students serving in different roles at different times, combined with the current platform designs, erodes the credibility of the very library it builds. A platform that wants durable student value would treat content credibility as a key asset: verification of uploads, weighting access credit by document quality rather than document count, and surfacing provenance would each attack the slop loop at its source.

Two further possibilities follow from the same logic, though both sit beyond what this study's data can support. The first is that respect of copyright, and cooperation with course designers, instructors, and institutions, could be a source of significant untapped potential. The second concerns the technology itself. The need these students described, for worked solutions and practice material available on demand, is not tied to any particular technology. It was met by document libraries, and it is increasingly met by generative AI. Platforms holding large archives of course-specific material, and the usage data that accompanies them, are well positioned to meet that need directly rather than to watch it migrate. A generative model grounded in those archives could, for example, produce worked solutions to problems a textbook leaves unanswered, generate practice questions in the style of a course's past examinations, or explain a solution step-by-step rather than simply supplying it. Whether students would gravitate towards such a service from these providers is a question this study cannot answer. I raise it because the alternative appears to be a slow substitution already visible in one participant's account and in the commercial record.

5.5. Limitations

The study's limitations should be stated plainly. This study was designed as convergent mixed methods research, conducted at a single business school, with thirteen eligible survey participants and five interviewees. As such, it makes no claim to statistical generalization. I offer the findings instead as naturalistic generalizations, whose applicability elsewhere is for readers to judge against their own settings (Stake & Trumbull, 1982).

A few notes may be valuable to inform readers' use of the study findings. The sample reported on here skews toward first-year students and quantitative concentrations. This composition is a product of the recruitment channels described in the Methods chapter, and the skew plausibly inflated the visibility of the very coursework where the platforms are most useful. The quantitative-course boundary condition reported in Theme 1 should be read with that in mind. Self-reported platform lists proved noisy at the margins, as the Findings chapter's within-person comparisons show, and the survey's fixed activity list under-captured examination preparation relative to the interviews. One interview coverage gap is recorded in the Methods chapter: the question about other collaboration channels was not asked of one participant, so the off-platform

pattern rests on four voices by design rather than five. Finally, participation was confidential rather than anonymous, and the interviewer teaches at the institution where the data were collected; despite the safeguards described under Positionality, some social pressure on a topic students associate with misconduct cannot be ruled out, and if anything, it suggests the candour documented here understates the behaviours rather than overstating them.

5.6. Future research

Five potential directions follow directly from this study:

1. The AI frontier: one participant had already begun routing around the ARS platforms toward generative AI for worked solutions, and the wider literature shows students pivoting sharply toward adoption of AI tools (Chan & Hu, 2023). If a general-purpose AI model can supply on demand the practice explanations that are the ARS platforms' central draw, the substitutive value documented in Theme 1 loses its exclusivity, and the competitive question becomes whether ARS platforms retain any advantage beyond their archives of institution-specific past papers. A study designed around that comparison, rather than catching it incidentally as this one did, is a natural next step.

2. Longitudinal ARS platform usage: the growth estimates in the literature splice together studies from different countries and populations, and, as noted in the proposal stage of this research, no study appears to have baselined usage in one national context and returned to it; the same gap remains open. As identified in this study, researching the mechanics of how students initiate searches for study material (search engines, specific platforms, AI platforms, etc.) would enhance current knowledge.

3. ARS platform impact analysis: To further current understanding in this area following this exploratory research, a large-scale quantitative analysis of ARS platform usage by students to better understand impacts, both positive and negative, could generate new and useful insights. Associating results to the program/field of study as well as level of courses (e.g., undergraduate lower level, undergraduate upper level, graduate, etc.) would be beneficial.

4. Off-platform ecology: this study glimpsed, but was not designed to examine the use of Discord servers, group chats, and sanctioned exam banks where the relational layer of academic sharing actually lives, and where, on the evidence of this study, most of the genuinely communal exchange occurs.

5. Faculty perspectives: the tacit tolerance of ARS usage by faculty that one participant described, and the mutual silence analyzed above, are claims about instructors made from students' accounts. Independently and directly researching faculty perspectives could generate immensely important insights. This would be an important factor for any institution contemplating the engagement-based governance these students asked for.

5.7. Conclusion

The students in this study were neither the “cheats” typifying the academic-integrity-focused literature's worst examples, nor the altruistic community of sharers that ARS platforms' branding implies. They were pragmatic, lightly ambivalent consumers of a resource they built workarounds to obtain, whose value they doubted even as they used it, and whose governance they supplied for themselves in the absence of any they could recognize from their institution. The double-edged sword naming provided by one student is, in the end, a description of an unmanaged technology: the benefits and the harms arrive together because no stakeholder (not the platforms, not the institution, and only partly the students themselves), is currently governing the line between them. The most useful finding of this thesis, though, is not about governance at all. These students went to ARS platforms for practice material their courses had not supplied, and they are

now beginning to go to generative AI for the same reason. That demand is a standing signal about what students need in order to learn, and it is legible to any institution willing to read it. What remains is for institutions to treat that signal as an opportunity for learning support, and to take steps to communicate, collaborate, and define a future path around how these platforms can be used to support students and their achievement of learning goals.

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Appendix A.

Survey Form

The questions below were presented through an online survey using Microsoft Forms.

Section 1 – Background Information

1. What is your current program of study?

   ☐ Beedie student (BBA)

   ☐ Non-Beedie student

   ☐ Other (please specify): _____

2. What year of your program are you in?

   ☐ 1st year

   ☐ 2nd year

   ☐ 3rd year

   ☐ 4th year or higher

   ☐ Graduate student

3. What is your selected or intended concentration at the Beedie School of Business? (Select all that apply)

   ☐ Accounting

   ☐ Innovation & Entrepreneurship

   ☐ Finance

   ☐ Human Resource Management

   ☐ International Business

   ☐ Management Information Systems

   ☐ Marketing

   ☐ Operations Management

   ☐ Strategic Analysis

4. Are you either enrolled in, or plan to enroll in, the Beedie Certificate in Innovation & Entrepreneurship?

   ☐ Yes or possibly

   ☐ No, definitely not

5. Have you used an Academic Resource Sharing Platform in the past 12 months? (e.g., Chegg, Course Hero, Course Sidekick, Studocu)

   ☐ Yes

   ☐ No

Section 2 – Academic Resource Sharing Platforms

6. How often do you use an ARS platform for course-related purposes (e.g., finding study resources, discussing assignments, asking questions, etc.)?

   ☐ Never

   ☐ Rarely

   ☐ Sometimes

   ☐ Often

   ☐ Very often

7. How many times in the most recent 30-days did you visit an ARS platform or use their app?

   ☐ Not at all

   ☐ 1-3 times

   ☐ 3-6 times

   ☐ 7 or more times

8. How many times in the most recent 7-days did you visit an ARS platform or use their app

   ☐ Not at all

   ☐ 1-3 times

   ☐ 3-6 times

   ☐ 7 or more times

9. Which platforms do you use most frequently for study-related activities? (Select up to 3)

   ☐ Chegg

   ☐ Course Hero

   ☐ Course Sidekick

   ☐ Studocu

   ☐ Other (please list): _____

10. What kinds of study-related activities do you typically use such platforms for? (Select all that apply)

    ☐ Reviewing materials for a course I'm taking

    ☐ Reviewing materials for a course I'm thinking of taking

    ☐ Sharing notes or resources with classmates

    ☐ Asking for academic help or advice

    ☐ Networking with peers or professionals

    ☐ Participating in study or interest groups

    ☐ Other: _____

11. How useful do you find ARS platforms for supporting your academic success?

    ☐ Not at all useful

    ☐ Slightly useful

    ☐ Moderately useful

    ☐ Very useful

    ☐ Extremely useful

12. Have you ever received misleading or poor-quality information from an ARS platform that affected your studies?

    ☐ Yes

    ☐ No

    ☐ Not sure

Section 3 – Usage and Perceptions

13. How much time do you spend per week using ARS platforms?

☐ Less than 15 minutes

☐ 15–30 minutes

☐ 30–60 minutes

☐ More than 1 hour

14. Do you feel your school has a clear policy on the use of ARS platforms?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Sometimes / depends on the context

15. Have you been charged money for your use/membership/plan by any ARS platform?

☐ Yes

☐ No

16. To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
"ARS platforms help me achieve my academic goals."

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Neutral

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly agree

Section 4 – Interview Interest (Screening for Qualitative Follow-up)

17. Each survey participant will be entered into a draw for one of five gift cards. Would like to be entered in this? The randomly selected winners will receive a $20 Biercraft, Starbucks, Tim Hortons, or other SFU food services gift card.

☐ Yes

☐ No

18. Would you be willing to take part in a confidential short (30–45 minutes) follow-up interview via Zoom about your use of ARS platforms? All selected recipients will receive a $30 honorarium payment via e-transfer.

    ☐ Yes

    ☐ No

19. If you said yes to the draw or yes to the follow-up interview (or both) please let us know how to contact you.

    (This information will be stored securely and only shared with the Lead and the Principle Investigator)

Name: _____

Email: _____

Submission

20. Do you consent to submitting your completed survey responses?
    Note: you may not withdraw your data after submitting.

    ☐ Yes

    ☐ No (if you select this option, your entire response will be deleted)

Appendix B.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1 – Introduction and Consent

Introduction: Confirm purpose of the interview. Thank participant.

Consent: Run through the verbal consent script (separate attachment).

Confidentiality: Assure of confidentiality around responses. Remind that only the Principal Investigator will see the full data. Co-investigators will only see deidentified data and carefully edited quotes.

2 – Basic Information

Interviewer: Verify key information about the interviewee from their survey response:

- Program of study
- Year of program student is currently in
- Selected or intended concentration(s)
- Certificates enrolled or planned (whether SFU or otherwise)

3 – Usage

1. Can you tell me about how you initially began using ARS platforms?
2. Which ones have you tried?
3. Do you find any one platform is better than the others?
4. What do you most like about _____ (favoured platform) and how does it benefit your studies?
5. What kinds of limitations or issues have you found when using the platform?
6. Which features and functions in the platform are you using the most often? Why?
7. Which features and functions do you use the least often? Why?

4 – Relationships

1. Can you tell me about how you interact with others on the platform including students, professionals, or moderators?
2. How are individuals referring to one another on the platform, including usernames and avatars?
3. How do you know which academic institution another platform user is from?
4. How often do you find you are interacting with the same person repeatedly?
5. Do you believe you would you know if you encountered a student or staff member from SFU or Beedie on the platform?
6. How many individuals are using real names or identifies? Why?
7. Do you belong to groups or communities within the platform? How do you use this functionality?

5 – Monetary Exchange or Other Consideration

1. What forms of payment have you been asked for, or paid, to a platform?
2. What information or tasks does the platform ask you for? How are these tracked, or credited and debited?
3. How do you feel about the value you receive versus the effort or payment you provide the platform?

6 – School and Other Resources

1. Does your school provide any tools or information similar to the ARS platforms?
2. Why do you choose to use one option versus another (school resources vs. ARS platform)?
3. What discussion platforms have you been a part of for collaboration with or students or groups in your classes (WhatsApp, IG, Slack, etc.)?
4. When do you choose to use an ARS platform over other platforms? Why?
5. What tools or information sharing resources, similar to ARS platforms, have you heard that other departments or schools provide, that may provide more functionality than you currently receive in your program?

7 – School Policies

1. Has your school or department provided you with policies around the use of technology tools and collaboration platforms?
2. If yes, in what ways has this communicated to you?
3. What do those policies currently say about ARS platforms?
4. What do you think policies should say about student use of ARS platforms moving forward?

8 – Closing

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your participation is very valuable to me.

Confirm that the email address the e-transfer will be sent to will be the same on as input on the original survey form.

Appendix C.

Variant Table

The interviews were transcribed automatically, and the transcription software frequently mis-rendered the platform names, which are proper nouns for which it had no dictionary. In all quotations reported in this thesis, platform names have been standardized to their canonical spellings. Table C1 below details every form the transcripts actually produced, so that the standardization can be verified.

Table C1 Platform variations created by transcription software

Canonical name	Forms produced by the transcription software	Mentions
Course Hero	Course Hero (35); Chorus Hero; CoreCo; Course Heroes; Courseio; Force Hero	40
Studocu	Studoku (9); Studocu (6); Stu Docu (3); Sudoku (3); Stu Doc (2); Studio (2); Doku; Institute OQ; Pseudoku; pseudo-Q; Skudoku; Studio Cube; StudioQ; Studoc; Studyoki	34
Chegg	Chegg (14); Check (2); Czech (2); Cheg; Shag	20
Course Sidekick	Course Sidekick (2) — no variant forms occurred	2

Counts are surface mentions across all five transcripts; where no count is shown, the form occurred once. Every mention was read in context and mapped to one of the four platforms, and no case was left in doubt. Two instances of “check” used in its ordinary English sense were excluded, as was every other similar occurrence. Garbled forms appear in the interviewer's speech as well as the participants', which confirms them as artifacts of transcription rather than uncertainty on any speaker's part. The standardization is purely orthographic: it alters no meaning, and it affects no counts reported in this thesis, since all tallies were computed from codes and participant identifiers rather than from platform names. Course Sidekick was named by one survey respondent, who confirmed in interview that she had not in fact used it; the two mentions recorded here are references to that survey response rather than accounts of use.

Appendix D.

Codebook

Table D1 Codebook

Code	Description	Example
ACTIVITIES	Parent code. Activities and usage of ARS platforms by students.	*No references coded*
ACT-FIND	Finding Applicable Content	"I don't go into a platform being like, I'm now gonna look at Course Hero and look what they have. For me, it's more like I just use … a Google search." (P16)
ACT-INTERACT	Interacting with other users	"It's not social media in the sense where there's … not really any comments or … threads. It's just the document and then the rating for the document." (P09)
ACT-NO-INTERACT	Mentions not interacting with other users on the platforms	"I've never … engaged in a forum … but I have looked at other people's forums." (P16)
ACT-NOTES	Activities and Usage – Finding or Reviewing Lecture Notes	"There'll be some people that have uploaded their lecture notes … and then sometimes I'll … go through the lecture notes." (P13)
ACT-SOLN	Activities and Usage – Finding Answers to Questions	"If, let's say, I'm working on a particular textbook problem, and I notice there's no solution on it … often there's different ones that come up from different students." (P16)
ACT-SYLLABUS	Activities and Usage - Course Selection	"I personally use Course Hero and Studocu more for when I'm course planning … searching up syllabus[es], examples of the courses that I want to take, and … the type of workload I can expect." (P13)
ACT-TEST	Downloading Tests	"I never use any of those websites for lecture material, because I already have that, so it's only mainly practice, or old tests." (P09)
ACT-UPLOAD	Activities and Usage – Uploading of documents	"If I'm benefiting from people uploading their previous … notes or syllabus as well … I should probably do the same, so other people can benefit." (P13)

Code	Description	Example
APPLICATIONS	Applicability of Platforms to Topics/Subjects	“Definitely more applicable for my quant courses, and … my accounting, little bit finance courses, too … ones that have more number base, where the solution is the same.” (P16)
APP-BUS	Applicability to Business Studies	“Now that I'm in business, I feel like the topics are more subjective.” (P13)
APP-HS	Applicability to High School Studies	“Back when I was in high school, I think I felt more of a need to use those crediting systems, because I had a strict deadline.” (P13)
BENEFITS	Benefits of Use	“Academically, I say it's been super good so far, I can't lie … some of … the style of practice questions was also very similar to what was on the final exam, so I think it helped me significantly.” (P09)
DISADVANTAGES	Parent code. Disadvantages of use.	*No references coded*
DIS-INCOR	Disadvantages of Use is Misclassified, Mislabeled or otherwise Incorrect	“It'll say, like, oh, it's a sample exam, but when you click onto the document, it's, like, someone's notes.” (P18)
DIS-QUAL	Disadvantages of Use is Low Quality of Documents	“The overall information from all the sites in general are … not very good.” (P18)
DIS-TIME	Disadvantages of Use is Time Consumption	“Uploading the documents every time is also really time-consuming.” (P09)
DODGE	Payment Avoidance and Dodging Techniques by Student	“Me and my friends maybe have a group chat, and we all take turns taking a free trial, so we all just ask, can you download this document?” (P09)
HARM-L	Harms of Use to Learning	“For me personally, it's been slightly [beneficial], but I think depending on how you use or abuse it, it could [hurt you].” (P06)
INIT-HS	INITIAL USE HIGH-SCHOOL	“I believe I initially started when I was in high school.” (P13)
INIT-U	Initial Use in Undergraduate Studies	“I don't think anyone told me specifically, I just searched up online [MATH] 157 practice exams, and then I'd see a bunch of links, and then that's how I got to know about it.” (P09)
MON	Money, Payment, or Credit Scheme of Platform	“I think it's because Course Hero doesn't have a free trial, so you have to upload the documents.” (P09)

Code	Description	Example
OPPS	Improvement Opportunities for Schools	“When possible, I always reach out to the prof for the solution key, because I think that's really the best case scenario. This is really just something I use if I don't have that.” (P16)
PERC	Perception around Fairness or Morality of Use	“[I do] not [see it] as a big deal of cheating, because it's … worth, like, 0.1%. Like, my goal is really to learn the material.” (P16)
PLAT	Parent code. Platform choice, differences, and substitutes.	*No references coded*
PLAT-AI	Platform Substitution by AI	“I'm usually trying to use ChatGPT to try to help me … get the answer.” (P16)
PLAT-CHOICE	Platform Choice and Rationale	“Studocu … I use this one the most, just because … the other few ones, they're completely, like, paywall blocked, but for this one, if you upload … documents as well, you can get … an unlocked version of other documents.” (P18)
PLAT-DIFF	Platform Differences	“Studocu is not really good at detecting what counts as a document or not.” (P09)
POL-INFO	School Policies on ARS and related info	“Some professors, for example … I'm taking business ethics right now, and she … explicitly says … make sure you don't upload my slides anywhere, or share it with your friends.” (P18)
POL-KNOW	School Policies on ARS known	“They're kind of, like, passing along school policy, but … you definitely can tell that they also very much agree with the policy.” (P16)
POL-OPINION	Mentions the students opinion of what ARS related policies should be	“I think it's fair to have, like, sample exams that professors have provided in the past to their students, but maybe not, like, the actual exam itself.” (P18)
POL-UNKNOW	School Policies on ARS unknown	“I haven't heard anything around these platforms specifically.” (P13)
PROF	Parent code. Professor actions and communications.	*No references coded*
PROF-ACT	Professor Actions or Warnings	“The professor said that they wouldn't upload their slides onto Canvas due to copyright issues.” (P13)
REAS-ATT	Underlying Reason to Use is Not Paying Attention	“Sometimes in class, I don't believe I would pay attention too well. And then … when it came to understanding the course concepts, I would have a little bit of a harder time.” (P13)

Code	Description	Example
USER	Parent code. Identity of other users encountered on the platforms.	*No references coded*
USER-FAKE	Users with fake names	“Most of the time I encounter stuff, it's usually [a] fake alias … so you don't know who's who, which definitely … impedes credibility.” (P16)
USER-REAL	Users with real names	*No references coded*
Z-FUTURE-RESEARCH	Researchers memo code. Marks passages suggesting possible directions for future research.	*No references coded*

The final coding comprised 39 codes, of which 32 carried coded references. Of the seven that did not, five are structural parent codes (ACTIVITIES, DISADVANTAGES, PLAT, PROF, and USER) under which data were coded at the subcode level, and one (Z-FUTURE-RESEARCH) is memo code I used to flag possible directions for future research rather than to code participant speech. The seventh, USER-REAL, records the use of real names on the platforms; it was retained rather than removed because its emptiness is itself reported as a finding in the Findings chapter. Examples are drawn from the interview transcripts and are edited lightly for readability in accordance with the conventions described in the Methods chapter, with omissions marked by ellipses, clarifying insertions in square brackets, and platform names standardized.